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# **Connecting to Make a Difference**

Social learning and radical collective change  
in prefigurative online communities

by Dorian Cavé

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

University of Lancaster

Initiative for Leadership and Sustainability, University of Cumbria

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## **Connecting to Make a Difference.**

### **Social learning and radical collective change in prefigurative online communities**

By Dorian Lewis Felix Cavé

#### **Abstract**

In view of the current global social and ecological predicament, what might constitute relevant forms of radical collective change? What role can processes of social learning play in facilitating such change? And to what extent are online networks able to support the unfolding of such processes?

This thesis addresses these questions. I first present the results of two participatory action research projects, taking place in two different prefigurative online communities attempting to bring about very different forms of collective change. The first focuses on building a transnational, decentralised grassroots economic system as an alternative to global capitalism, but struggles to shake free from the toxic influence of global financial markets, and from unhelpful ways of relating and organising. The second aims to foster self-organisation and new forms of relationality between humans and with the rest of the living world, but struggles to address the heritage of historical violence and injustice, or to bring about visible political change. With the help of the Wenger-Trayner social learning theory and evaluation framework, I consider what processes of social learning have been taking place (or not) in these networks, and their outcomes; and what other social change efforts may learn from these experiments and their limitations.

Finally, I present a reflexive account of my own process of learning and unlearning through my involvement with these projects and others, with regards to the question of what may constitute radical collective change. This critical assessment of my own thinking and aspirations leads me to argue in favour of decolonial approaches to social change as potentially relevant responses to the global predicament.

This thesis contributes to the understanding of social learning processes within prefigurative online communities, and to the practice of social change efforts in such contexts.

## ***Author's Declaration***

This thesis results entirely from my own work and has not been offered previously for any other degree or diploma.

The word count of this thesis submitted for examination on March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2023 (excluding references, prefix, and appendices) was 78,962 and did not exceed the maximum of 80,000 set by the Lancaster University Manual of Academic Regulations and Procedures 2022-23.

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# 1 Setting the scene

*Qu'y puis-je ?*

*Il faut bien commencer.*

*Commencer quoi ?*

*La seule chose au monde qu'il vaille la peine de commencer :*

*La Fin du monde parbleu.<sup>1</sup>*

- Aimé Césaire (2008, p. 32)

The human species is arguably living through a period of existential challenges unparalleled in history. The planet Earth is undergoing rapid and widespread changes – caused by humanity itself – which have been referred to as an “age of environmental breakdown” (Laybourn-Langton, Rankin and Baxter, 2019), the “Sixth Mass Extinction” (Ceballos *et al.*, 2015) and termed an episode of “biological annihilation” (Ceballos, Ehrlich and Dirzo, 2017). Among other factors, scientists are observing a massive and accelerating extinction of species worldwide: up to 58,000 species are believed to be lost each year (Dirzo *et al.*, 2014), and wildlife populations have plummeted by 69% since 1970 (WWF, 2022). Of one million species that are facing extinction in the coming decades, half of them are insects – which play a critical role in ecosystems and in human food production (Cardoso *et al.*, 2020), particularly pollinating insects, on which an estimated 80% of plants depend for their reproduction (Ollerton, Winfree and Tarrant, 2011). Insect populations have declined by 75% over the past three decades in protected areas of Germany (Hallmann *et al.*, 2017), which has terrible implications for many other areas of the world.

---

1 “What can I do?  
I must begin.  
Begin what?  
The only thing in the world that’s worth beginning:  
The End of the World, no less.”  
- Translation by John Berger and Anna Bostock (Césaire, 2014)

This ecological catastrophe is compounded by global heating, as the planet is on track to reach 1.5°C degrees of warming by 2030 compared to the start of the industrial era (IPCC, 2022a), 2°C degrees Celsius by the early 2040s (Xu, Ramanathan and Victor, 2018), and possibly 6°C to 7°C degrees by the end of the century (CNRS, 2019). Most alarmingly, a recent study published in the journal *Science* (Armstrong McKay *et al.*, 2022) finds that five dangerous climate tipping points (out of 16 identified) may already have been passed due to global heating, and that at 1.5°C of heating, an additional five tipping points become possible, including the loss of almost all mountain glaciers. These, in turn, may trigger others, and lead to crossing a global tipping point, which would put the planet on a truly catastrophic ‘Hothouse Earth’ trajectory (Steffen *et al.*, 2018). The consequences of this on both the biosphere and humanity are very nearly unimaginable – for example, just 2°C of global warming could expose up to one quarter of the human population to land aridification (Park *et al.*, 2018); researchers consider 4°C degrees of heating as a significant threat to civilisation (Anderson, 2012), and even predict that the carrying capacity of the earth at such temperatures might be no more than a billion human beings (Climate Action Centre, 2011).

Crucially, these catastrophic impacts are already affecting the most vulnerable populations, whose footprint on the earth is the lightest, and will continue doing so (Samson *et al.*, 2011). Of the 2 million people who died from weather, climate and water-related disasters between 1970 and 2019, over 91% of these deaths occurred in countries of the Global South (World Meteorological Organization, 2021). Modelling the impacts of diminishing water quality, coastal hazards, and decreased crop pollination, researchers find that “by 2050, up to 5 billion people may be at risk from diminishing ecosystem services, particularly in Africa and South Asia” (Chaplin-Kramer *et al.*, 2019). According to the IPCC, by the end of this century, extreme heat and humidity could expose 50 to 75% of the global population to “life-threatening climatic conditions” (Chandrasekhar *et al.*, 2022).

Another set of impacts from global heating is the acidification of oceans, as they absorb much of the excess carbon dioxide emitted by human activities. Oceans have grown 26% more acidic since the start of the industrial revolution, which has already had tragic consequences on many marine ecosystems and biodiversity (IGBP, IOC, SCOR, 2013), and by the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, they may have become more acidic than in the past

14 million years (Sosdian *et al.*, 2018). And from the sheer heat of oceanic water alone, over 99% of coral reefs are expected to be lost with a global increase of 2°C (IPCC, 2022b), which would have critical consequences for marine ecosystems and fisheries.

And yet, in spite of increasingly strident calls to action from the scientific community – including an open letter signed by 11,258 scientists from 153 nations, on the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first world climate conference (Ripple *et al.*, 2019) – global political efforts aiming at rising to this predicament seem scattered, piecemeal, and orders of magnitude below what would be needed. For example, current pledges and targets made in the wake of the 2015 Paris Agreement would still bring up to 2.5°C of warming by 2100 if they were followed; but current policies are not on track, and we can therefore expect a warming range of at least 2.2°C to 3.4°C by the end of this century (Climate Action Tracker, 2022). In fact, 4°C increases are in the “very likely” range within the IPCC’s most recent Working Group I report (Masson-Delmotte *et al.*, 2021), and its worst-case scenario for greenhouse gas emissions remains the best match for cumulative emissions between 2005 and 2020 (Schwalm, Glendon and Duffy, 2020).

One possible set of reasons for the lack of meaningful climate action is the extreme inequality in people’s access to wealth and political agency in the world. In 2017, eight men owned the same wealth as the poorest half of the world (Oxfam, 2017) – and between 2020 and 2023, 1% of the global population captured two-thirds of all wealth created in the world (Elliott, 2023). The average investments from one of these billionaires, alone, emit *more than a million times* more carbon than the average person (Dabi *et al.*, 2022). At the level of nation-states, research has shown that historically, the G8 nations (the USA, EU-28, Russia, Japan, and Canada) were together responsible for 85% of excess global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (Hickel, 2020), as a direct result of colonialism and plunder (Abimbola *et al.*, 2021). Today, high-income countries continue to drain resources from the Global South, and to enrich themselves through “imperial forms of appropriation to sustain their high levels of income and consumption” (Hickel, Sullivan and Zoomkawala, 2021, p. 1). In other words, the people who are most exposed to the immediate consequences of the ecological crisis continue to be exploited by those least exposed. This is compounded by failing national and global governance processes, which do little to keep in check offshore tax evasion and limit wealth accumulation (Garside, 2017; Eisinger, Ernsthausen and Kiel, 2021), or to prevent entanglements

between public and private sector allowing corporations to bring about legislation more effectively than a country's inhabitants (Crouch, 2004).

It is becoming painfully evident that the modern industrial civilisation, which requires economic growth to sustain itself as a result of the debt-based monetary system at its core (Arnsperger, Bendell and Slater, 2021), is unjust and unsustainable. And yet, dominant policy responses to this dire state of affairs continue to be about maintaining current structures in spite of the magnitude of the challenges. For example, the “green growth” theory asserts that “continued economic expansion is compatible with our planet’s ecology, as technological change and substitution will allow us to absolutely decouple GDP growth from resource use and carbon emissions,” even though empirical research shows that this is likely not achievable (Hickel and Kallis, 2019, p. 1). As for “Green New Deals” – policies advocating for a system-wide transition away from fossil fuels and a massive expansion of renewable power resources, in response to the climate crisis – they would require a huge increase in the extraction of key minerals, such as lithium, graphite, nickel, and rare-earth metals. This increase in demand appears both impossible to meet for the whole world in a short enough time frame to respond to deadly global heating (IEA, 2021), and the social and ecological impacts of delivering that level of supply would be enormous, particularly for Indigenous and marginalised peoples and the ecosystems they steward (Zografos and Robbins, 2020). Indigenous peoples play a critical role in conserving around 21 percent of all land on Earth, far more than states do through national parks (ICCA Consortium, 2021), and are already over-represented among human rights defenders killed around the world (Front Line Defenders, 2021).

Ripple and colleagues, in their “World’s Scientists Warning of a Climate Emergency” (2022), warn of being at “code red” on planet Earth, and of the “rapidly growing” scale of “untold human suffering” caused by the “major climate crisis and global catastrophe.” Other scientists point to the necessity of exploring much more thoroughly the possibility of “cascading global climate failure” due to climate inaction (Kemp *et al.*, 2022), as well as “plausible” scenarios of global or localised societal collapse (Steel, DesRoches and Mintz-Woo, 2022). Even the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, in a report endorsed by UN Secretary-General Guterres himself, evokes the increasing probability of global civilisational collapse, as a result of escalating synergies

between disasters, economic vulnerabilities and ecosystem failures (UNDRR, 2022). A “catastrophic collapse in human population” seems more than likely to occur if resource consumption and widespread deforestation continue unchecked (Bologna and Aquino, 2020, p. 8). In fact, for some scientists, the damage visited on the entire biosphere may even compromise the long-term survival of the human species (Kareiva and Carranza, 2018)...

From the above, I cannot but agree that “we are in the accelerating phase of the Great Unravelling of the web of life” (Kelly and Macy, 2021, p. 199), and that a global societal collapse appears to be the most likely outcome of climate change and ecological disruptions if current trends continue (Servigne and Stevens, 2020).

## ***1 What can I do?***

There is something obscene about going through this (by no means comprehensive) list of scientific references about the unfolding calamities of the world in the purest academic style. As I write these lines, I simultaneously experience the cold satisfaction that comes to me from oh-so-patiently and systematically piecing information together with my reference management software, which creates a reassuring distance between myself and what I am writing about; as well as the deep horror, disgust, anger and grief evoked by these “data points,” materialising as a painful knot in my stomach, tears at the corners of my eyes, and an urge to scream out at the top of my lungs. And I wonder, for the umpteenth time since I embarked on this PhD research: “What’s the point of all this? Don’t I have better things to do than write a thesis in this time of collapse, this time of great dying?!”

I also realise that my younger self, the *me* from when I received my previous degree about 14 years ago, would have been quite incredulous and perhaps even appalled to learn that I would eventually decide to go back to a “manipulative institution” like the schooling system (Illich, 2003). How did I come to make this choice?

I expect the reader may benefit from more information as to how this thesis came to be written. So I will sketch a brief outline of the journey that led me here.



## 1.1 A wake-up call

On November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016, Donald Trump was elected president of the United States. By some strange coincidence, this also happened to be the day of my thirty-first birthday. I felt like the universe had delivered me a very mysterious gift. Alone, sleepless and depressed in an old hotel room in Fukuoka, Japan, I contemplated the sorry state of the world. It dawned on me that I could no longer keep on looking the other way.

I obtained my Masters degree in sustainable policymaking in 2009, and worked for some years at a small French consulting firm. But eventually I started doubting the usefulness of our activities, and of sustainability consulting as a whole, and left the company. For a few years, I organised concerts and film screenings at an independent art centre in Beijing which I co-founded with a few friends, and made a living as a freelance translator. This now seemed very self-indulgent. Global heating was continuing unchecked – the limitations of the so-called “historic” Paris Agreement were plain to see – and a climate change denier was now in control of the world’s military superpower and its climate-destructive economy. Species were being decimated at an unprecedented rate. The Dark Mountain Manifesto (Kingsnorth and Hine, 2009) haunted me. It did seem that we were “in a time of social, economic, and ecological unravelling.” How could translating obscure academic prose be helpful to anyone? What could I do that might be more relevant?<sup>2</sup>

I decided to set off on a journey of discovery, and to find what role I might play in the vast mess we were in. Over the following months, I lived a quasi-monastic life, holed up in a tiny room and reading as much as I could on various aspects of the global social and ecological predicament. Occasionally, I wrote lengthy blog posts summarising my insights, which I doubt anyone except close family members ever read.

As I explain in one of these texts (Cavé, 2017), in my search for the most meaningful role I could take on, I drew inspiration from systems thinking, and in particular from the “iceberg model” (Figure 1).

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2 The irony that I have gone, several years later, from *translating* to actually *producing* obscure academic prose is not lost on me.

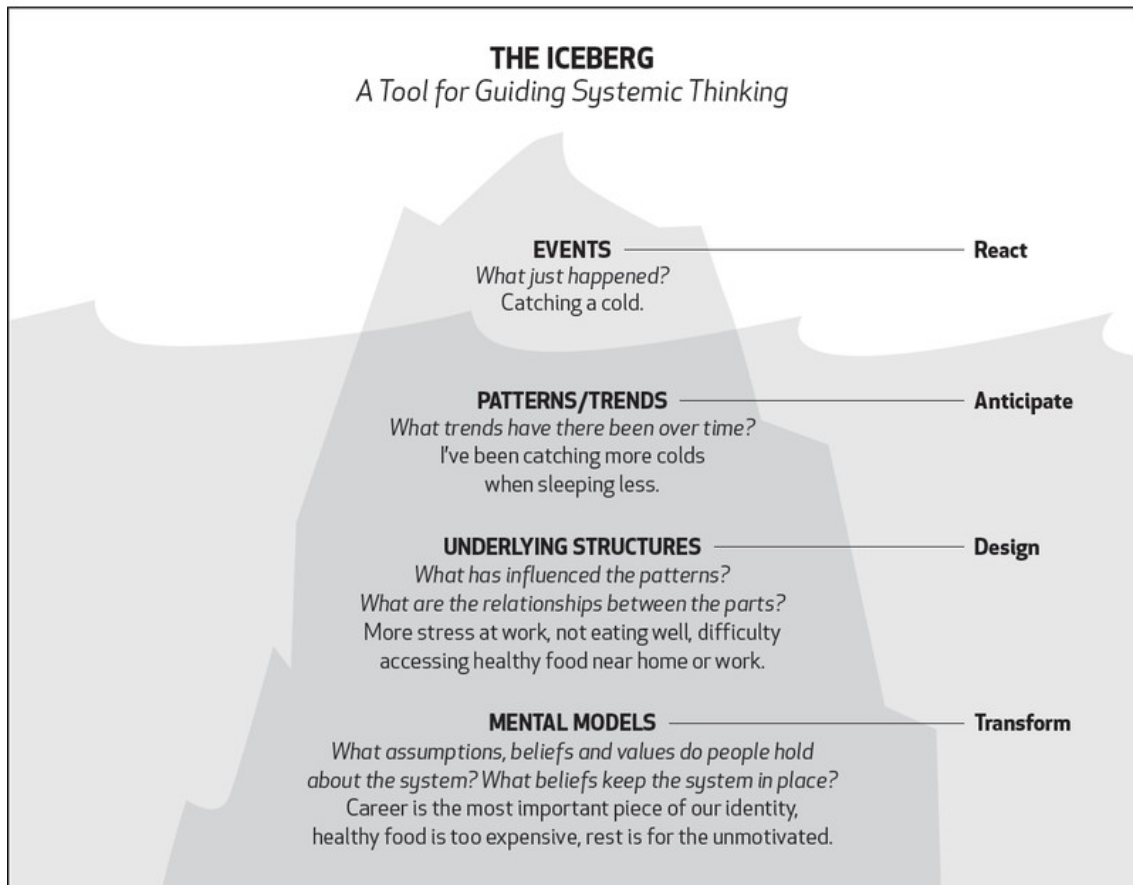


Figure 1: The Iceberg Model (Ecochallenge.org, no date)

The model felt like a useful tool to reflect on the global social and ecological crises I was witnessing. It pointed to *destructive mindsets* as the root cause of these crises – and thus, as the most powerful locus of change. I found confirmation of this in the writings of Donella Meadows (1999), who spoke of *paradigm changes* as the most potent leverage points for social change.

## 1.2 The need for radical education

Zen poet Thich Nhat Hanh was asked, “What do we most need to do to save our world?” His questioners expected him to identify the best strategies to pursue in social and environmental action, but Thich Nhat Hanh’s answer was this: “What we most need to do is to hear within us the sounds of the Earth crying.” (Macy, 2007, p. 95)

How to transform these harmful mindsets which, embedded in the culture of industrial civilisation, were driving the human and other-than-human world to the abyss? How to enact the spiritual and cultural transformation called for by Thích Nhất Hạnh?

This seemed to be a matter of education. I had heard of “education for sustainability” curricula being introduced in certain schools, which could have been a promising track. However, I felt a deep distrust towards mainstream educational systems. This was a result of my own experience with the French schooling system, which I had keenly felt was explicitly valuing certain forms of knowledge and skills – especially those related to the “hard sciences” – over arts or the humanities, as well as certain forms of intelligence – especially the capacity for logic and rationality – over others. I also remembered how the courses I had followed, during my sustainability policymaking degree, had mostly been promoting rather tame and business-as-usual approaches to “sustainability issues,” instead of encouraging the more imaginative and radical explorations that I now felt the global predicament truly required.

Reading Ivan Illich’s *Deschooling Society* (1971) gave substance to my dissatisfaction. He showed, convincingly in my view, how schools reproduced social inequalities and the consumerist mindset; how they were an instrument of social control; and how the obligatory schooling system had established a unjust monopoly, within industrial society, as *the institution specialised in education*, at the expense of any other contexts (such as workplaces) in which people had been learning the most essential things in life since time immemorial. Illich called for a disestablishment of this monopoly that “legally combines prejudice with discrimination” (p.11), and for a recognition that “most learning is not the result of instruction. It is rather the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting” (p.39). He argued that “a radical alternative to a schooled society requires not only new formal mechanisms for the formal acquisition of skills and their educational use. *A deschooled society implies a new approach to incidental or informal education*” (p.22 – my emphasis).

This felt intriguing and exciting. What might such a new approach to informal education look like? Could it help change hearts and minds in a relevant way, in view of the gravity of the global predicament?

One idea of Illich's, in particular, appeared both prescient and fascinating to me. In this same book, he advocated for the development of "educational webs" as means to support self-directed education through intentional social relations, "for each one to transform each moment of his living into one of learning, sharing, and caring" (p.xix-xx). In a rather visionary way, Illich even foresaw the potential of computers in creating decentralized "peer-matching networks" (p.93) to enhance autonomous forms of learning in society.

Finally, as I was pondering these questions, a new wave of social movements was exploding onto the public scene in response to climate inaction – most prominently Extinction Rebellion, and the School Strike for Climate movements. I saw that the non-violent, direct actions of Extinction Rebellion (XR), which aims at applying pressure on governments worldwide to take action on the climate and ecological crisis, were supported by dozens of academics and public personalities, and thousands of ordinary people willing to risk arrest (Taylor and Gayle, 2018; The Guardian, 2018). And I was impressed with how XR activists in the UK cleverly used online tools to coordinate their actions in the UK, but also to liaise with local activists in dozens of countries (Taylor, 2019), and thereby secured much media attention (Townsend, 2019). Largely in response to the actions of such movements, the UK Parliament declared a "climate emergency" in May 2019 (Turney, 2019), soon followed by over a thousand local and national governments (*Climate Emergency*, 2020).

XR actions were shown to have raised environmental consciousness in the UK to an "all-time high" (Smith, 2019). And I wondered: How are these social movement networks enabling the activists, themselves, to learn and change as they are taking part in these movements? Could these networks of action become something akin to the convivial "educational webs" that Illich had written about?

One day, I heard about the opportunity to enrol in a PhD programme at the Initiative for Leadership and Sustainability, University of Cumbria. I felt a great reluctance to step back into the neoliberal academic system, which seemed to hold very little potential for the deep social change that was so urgently needed. However, I was also conscious that this programme might help me adopt a more structured approach to my investigation, instead of staying buried in my books. And because the University was supportive of

professional learning and action research, I would be able to study an area that I was practising in, as I was getting involved professionally in online networks. Finally, I came across a modest inheritance that allowed me to pay the tuition fees! So after much soul-searching, I decided that this was a sign from the universe, and enrolled in the programme.

Since then, the research question I set upon exploring has been the following: **“How may online networks enable radical collective change through social learning?”**

In the remainder of this introduction, I will say more about the perspective from which I undertook this investigation. But first, I need to say more about the dark side of technology.

### **1.3 Tools of emancipation, or tools of alienation?**

People with whom I discussed this research were often surprised to learn that I was not at all active on any major social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or YouTube. But while I have long been curious about the potential for socio-technical networks to enable radical forms of collective change, I am also extremely suspicious about these technologies. I certainly don't think they are *necessarily* a force for generative change. In fact, there appears to be much more evidence to the contrary.

First of all, the physical impact of information and communication technologies (ICT) on the biosphere and on human beings is vast, and increasing. In 2019, the use of ICT alone caused around 4% of global greenhouse gas emissions, and their energy footprint is increasing by around 9% per year (The Shift Project, 2019). By 2025, the IT industry could use 20% of all electricity produced in the world, and emit up to 5.5% of global carbon emissions (Jones, 2018). And while Big Tech giants attempt to present themselves as environmentally conscious, they are not at all committed to reducing emissions originating from their value-chain (Day *et al.*, 2022), and generally only act to reduce a tiny part of their carbon footprint (Diab, 2022). Besides, increasingly sophisticated digital technologies require the use of metals with very specific properties, which are becoming increasingly rare and whose extraction is a cause of environmental disasters (Tréguer and Trouvé, 2017; Katwala, 2018) and egregious labour exploitation, often involving children (Lee, 2022; U.S. Department of Labor, no date). In 2019, only

17.4% of all e-waste in the world was actually collected and recycled, and it is estimated that the sheer mass of new e-waste generated per year will have doubled by 2030 compared to 2014 (Forti, 2020). The toxic substances contained in this waste are very harmful to habitats, people, and wildlife, and also contribute directly to global heating (ibid). Finally, like minerals extraction, both the assembly and the recycling of ICT involve ruthless exploitation of labour (Condliffe, 2018; Albergotti, 2019; KnowTheChain, 2020; WHO, 2021).

Besides, mainstream social media platforms, and the devices that enable them, also bring about many harmful social and political impacts, which seem to hinder social learning and generative change in the face of the global predicament.

Digital platforms and their revenue-maximising algorithms have been decried for impacting public discourse through increased political polarisation (Lorenz-Spreen *et al.*, 2021). One of the key ways social media recommendation algorithms have found to keep users “hooked” has been to deliver increasingly edgier versions of whatever the user was reading or watching, regardless of the credibility of the content source, which has favoured the spread of conspiracy theories (Tufekci, 2018). A side-effect of this proliferation of narratives has been increased mistrust and doubt (Tufekci, 2018; Sacasas, 2020a), which arguably weakens the capacity for collective sense-making and action, to the advantage of established power structures (King, Janulewicz and Arcostanzo, 2022). Furthermore, this ceaseless consumption of digital content appears to prevent many individuals from nurturing meaningful connections with the world beyond their screens, and thus from truly experiencing the gravity of the global social and ecological catastrophe that is unfolding – likely an obstacle to any forms of radical collective change taking place (Hétier and Wallenhorst, 2022).

According to the philosopher of technology L. M. Sacasas (2020b, 2022a), the internet has generated a “superabundance of information” which has contributed to widespread epistemic fragmentation. He suggests that digital media have brought an end to the “age of consensus” created by print and mass media, and introduced “digitized realms incapable by their nature and design of generating a broadly shared experience of reality.” Similarly, Zygmunt Bauman (2011) points to an “information deluge” (p.7) as a key characteristic of “liquid modernity,” which leads people to seek to protect

themselves from the overwhelming level of noise, thus leading to a fractured common sense. As a result, for Sharon Stein (2021), “many people are increasingly encased within their own personalised knowledge bubbles... whether or not one agrees that consensus is a desirable goal, today it appears to be an increasingly impossible one” (p.484). This is surely another issue with regards to the possibility of collectively addressing our global social and ecological predicament.

Not only do social media hamper meaningful dialogue from taking place between groups with different visions of reality – they appear to encourage animosity and group loyalty manifesting as sectarianism. Indeed, social media platforms amplify ongoing “culture wars,” as every user is primed to always want to be seen as playing for the right “team” – or at least, will fear being perceived as playing for the wrong one (Haidt, 2022; Sacasas, 2022b). This favours the expression of hate speech and toxic communication (Brady *et al.*, 2017; Munn, 2020; Rathje, Van Bavel and van der Linden, 2021), which is certainly not conducive to mutual learning.

Finally, although the internet and online social networks have been hailed as tools enhancing people’s ability to take part in collective action within social movements (Castells, 2000, 2012; Shirky, 2008), their actual role in creating political change is very uncertain. Studies have found that social media may be “less useful as a mobilizing tool than a marketing tool” (Lewis, Gray and Meierhenrich, 2014). More worrying, research has shown that these tools are also extremely effective in the hands of authoritarian regimes, who can use them to suppress free speech, hone their surveillance techniques, and disseminate propaganda (Morozov, 2012; Tufekci, 2018). Indeed, the spread of digital devices into every space of people’s daily lives has been accompanied with a corresponding increase in big data collection, storage, and analysis, on behalf of private companies as well as public bureaucracies, which establish partnerships for purposes of surveillance and communications censorship, without barely any democratic oversight (Zuboff, 2019). We now live in an age of “digital authoritarianism” (Fisher, 2022), in which governments are successfully preventing social movements from achieving a critical mass of support by sowing doubt, division, or detached cynicism within their ranks. Perhaps as a result, the usefulness of protest appears to have decreased as a means of political change (Chenoweth, 2017).

In summary, these tools appear to play an instrumental role as part of the social, political and ecological woes of our time. Far from paving the way to a more sustainable, caring, and democratic society, they are destructive, exploitative, addictive, and divisive, as well as primary means of control and repression. Considering the above, I was not surprised to face incredulity in many people, upon mentioning my interest in the emancipatory potential of online networks: “Do you really believe that these technologies can make the world a better place?” And yet, had I not been trusting in the existence of this potential, I would not have undertaken this PhD research. What kept me going?

A simple answer is that I consider it a grave mistake to reduce the internet – and ICT as a whole – to the socially and ecologically harmful tools provided by the mega-corporations referred to above. Indeed, thousands of “hacktivists” worldwide have long been developing and promoting free and open-source software that offers powerful alternatives to mainstream social media, and which are often oriented towards radical collective change. For instance, decentralised social media gathered in the “Fediverse,” such as Mastodon, do not turn their users into objects of surveillance and value extraction (Rozenshtein, 2022). One of these platforms, Mobilizon, is an “emancipatory tool” that provides an “ethical alternative to Facebook events, groups and pages,” allowing people to “gather, organise and mobilise” for social change (Framasoft, no date).

Such platforms bring together fewer users, largely due to the difficulty of competing against the financial capabilities of commercial platforms, which can afford to hire thousands of designers to make their products more attractive and addictive. Yet these alternatives do exist. And in spite of the dominance of exploitative Big Tech, and the alliances they forge with repressive state actors, I trust that “hacktivists” will always find ways of using means of online communications to federate the energy and intentions of rebellious minds and hearts around the world.

For better or worse, digital devices and platforms have become part of our everyday lives. I believe that it is possible for humans to build meaningful relationships using these tools, to turn them into the conduits for mutual learning that Ivan Illich envisioned, and to wield them as a force for generative social change – although this



certainly requires us to relinquish naivety, to keep honing our tech literacy and critical discernment, and to fully acknowledge and address the many harmful aspects that are embodied in the very material infrastructure of the internet. The aim of my research has been to investigate this possibility.

## 2 *Research approach and thesis outline*

### 2.1 *An activist-scholar in training*

I view myself as an activist-scholar in training. As such, I want to try and pay close attention to the historical geometries of power involved in the production of knowledge when academics such as myself engage with the outside world, and to my “location in an elite, dominant institution that is enrolled in the process of reproducing a particular social order” – i.e. the university (Duncan *et al.*, 2021, p. 880). This has led me to embrace a participatory methodology (see **Chapter 3**), and to carry out an ongoing critical reflection on my own practice, assumptions and beliefs (**Chapter 3, Chapter 6**).

I embarked on this research project with the intention to generate practical knowledge with regards to generating radical forms of collective change in the context of online networks and the communities they support. My wish is that the content of this thesis, and the other outcomes of this research, may be of practical use to anyone wishing to address the fundamental issues of our time.

For this reason, this study can be viewed as an attempt at producing “movement-relevant theory” – or scholarship which prioritises the relevance of research to social movements themselves, following the definition offered by Bevington and Dixon (2005). As a researcher, I do not pretend to know more than activists deeply involved in their practice and learning from it, nor do I pretend to be better able to generate theory. However, I hope to aid and celebrate the ongoing learning taking place in prefigurative groups and social movements, by contributing my time and access to potentially useful scholarly literature, and helping to produce scholarship that can be of use to those seeking social change. This does not imply an uncritical stance with regards to the assumptions or practice of these groups, however: “it is in the interests of that movement to get the best available information, even if those findings don’t fit

expectations” (Bevington & Dixon, 2005, p.191). I seek to adopt the stance of the “radical intellectual” theorised by David Graeber (2004):

to look at those who are creating viable alternatives, try to figure out what might be the larger implications of what they are (already) doing, and then offer those ideas back, not as prescriptions, but as contributions, possibilities—as gifts.  
(p.12)

Furthermore, throughout this project, I have also become increasingly conscious of the need to remain aware of the need for me, as a researcher, to “build radical, intersectional, and transformative research practices against the exploitative and extractive traditions of academe” (Luchies, 2015, p. 523) and therefore to “actively [take] part in naming and dismantling oppression and exploitation” (ibid, p.524) – including imperialism, heterosexism, ableism, capitalism, and cis-/male and white supremacy.

## 2.2 Messiness and emergence

I also want to acknowledge the non-linear, mycelial nature of this research project.

Considering the immensity of the global predicament, and the complexity of addressing it in meaningful ways, I did not wish to remain wedded to any particular theory, but sought an open-ended, emergent and flexible approach that would allow me to carry out social learning experiments, and to keep reflecting on their outcomes. This led me to use Action Research (**Chapter 3**), and to rely on structuring metaphors (**Chapter 5**, **Chapter 6**) to account for my evolving perspective.

As a result, my inquiry has led me to investigate a variety of fields of knowledge and methodologies, to go down multiple research tracks, and to bring together conflicting and diverse perspectives. Like a fungus, this participatory project has fed on a variety of more or less nutritive substances, and formed an anarchic whole that may appear rather “messy” and difficult to delineate. Witness, the many annexes I am appending to the main body of this thesis.

What I have found, like other action researchers before me (e.g. Cook, 2009) is that “messiness” may better enable inquirers to engage with multiple forms of knowing – as I do in **Chapter 6**. In their *extended epistemology*, John Heron and Peter Reason

theorise four different forms of knowledges, including: *experiential* (knowing through empathy and attunement with present experience); *presentational* (a form of knowledge construction expressed in graphic, plastic, moving, musical, and verbal art forms); *propositional* (knowing expressed in the form of formal language); and *practical* knowledge (the ability to change things through action) (Heron, 1996; Heron and Reason, 2008). While this thesis largely foregrounds propositional knowing, I believe it also contains nuggets of each other form of knowledge from this list. It is my hope that together, these “kaleidoscopic views” and “multi-faced reflections on practice” may “provide opportunities for new ways of seeing, thinking and theorising” (Cook, 2009, p.280) – and thereby offer a variety of paths for the study and enactment of collective change. Indeed, embracing a “messy turn”

can be professionally and personally uncomfortable but vital to research that seeks to engage in contesting knowledge leading to changes in practice. (ibid, p.285)

## 2.3 An outline of my journey

Journeys are not the tame servants that bear you from one point to another. Journeys are how things become different. How things, like wispy trails of fairy dust, touch themselves in ecstatic delight and explode into unsayable colors. Every mooring spot, every banal point, is a thought experiment, replete with monsters and tricksters and halos and sphinxes and riddles and puzzles and strange dalliances. Every truth is a dare. To travel is therefore not merely to move through space and time, it is to be reconfigured, it is to bend space-time, it is to revoke the past and remember the future. It is to be changed. No one arrives intact. (Akomolafe, 2017, p. 250)

As with any true journey, my point of arrival is quite different from my point of departure – and I have been changed and reconfigured by this investigation. I started off looking for ways in which online networks and communities may enable their participants to *learn more* about important social issues, and to *take action* to address them. I explored this question using diagnostic processes and social learning evaluation.

However, the reader will notice a shift toward a more critical perspective at the end of **Chapter 5** and into **Chapter 6**. This instance of “messiness” reflects my own journey of learning and change. Through my engagement with decolonial discussion spaces and literature, I came to the conclusion that generative social change is not just a matter of *learning how to organise better*, but also (and more importantly) about *gaining awareness of the toxic cultural patterns of being, knowing, and doing* that have brought about the global predicament, and how these are unconsciously reproduced by anyone within modern-colonial societies, including by activists in social movements. From this perspective, it is important to consider one’s own implication in these less generative patterns in order to try and “compost” them through a process of *unlearning*, for radical forms of change to emerge. By “radical collective change,” I refer here to forms of collective change that would constitute a relevant response to contemporary socio-ecological crises. I will explore this notion more deeply in **Chapter 6**.

This led me to pay more attention to my own positionality within the context of the online communities introduced here, and in my knowledge production. For instance, I come from a White, Western, middle-class background; I can fluently express myself in English, and in other globally dominant languages; and I am heterosexual, male, able-bodied, and a PhD researcher, which are all dimensions that grant me power and privilege. And as most participants in the online communities described in my case studies (**Chapter 4** and **5**), too, were from the Global North, these chapters will likely be most useful to readers hailing from backgrounds of similar privilege – and who could be viewed as involved in “low-intensity struggles” (GTDF, 2020d)<sup>3</sup>. Overall, I view my own journey of (un)learning as offering food for thought to researchers who find themselves on a path akin to mine as I began my investigation, and who may want to bring more reflexivity to their approach.

In the following chapters, I situate this thesis within relevant fields of study, with a particular focus on those of informal and social learning, online communities, prefiguration, and decolonial studies (**Chapter 2**). Then, I introduce the methodology that I followed, and which was centred on the use of first- and second-person Action Research, and on two forms of participatory social learning evaluation (**Chapter 3**). The

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<sup>3</sup> This refers to communities who have benefited the most from and still enjoy the protections of modern-colonial systems, in contrast to those involved in “high-intensity struggles,” whose lives have been and remain threatened in order to build and sustain these very systems (ibid).

next two chapters present the results of two case studies, each carried out within a particular online community: FairCoop (**Chapter 4**), and the Deep Adaptation Forum (**Chapter 5**). Reflecting on these results, and on other aspects of my personal journey of (un)learning, allows me to refine my own notion of “*generative* radical collective change,” and to suggest conditions that may allow this to happen within the context of prefigurative online communities (**Chapter 6**). In conclusion, I summarise the answers I have found to my research question, and consider areas for future research (**Chapter 7**).

Additional information for Chapters 3, 4, and 5 is provided in annexes. Here is a list of these annexes, along with a brief description of each. Please see Figure 2 for a simplified “road map” of these chapters and annexes.

### **Chapter 3:**

- Annex 3.1 presents the online information sheets I have used to introduce this research project in FairCoop (FC) and the Deep Adaptation Forum (DAF).
- Annex 3.2 gives more details about the methodology followed for the case study presented in Chapter 4 (on FC).
- Annex 3.3 gives more details about the methodology followed for the case study presented in Chapter 5 (on DAF).

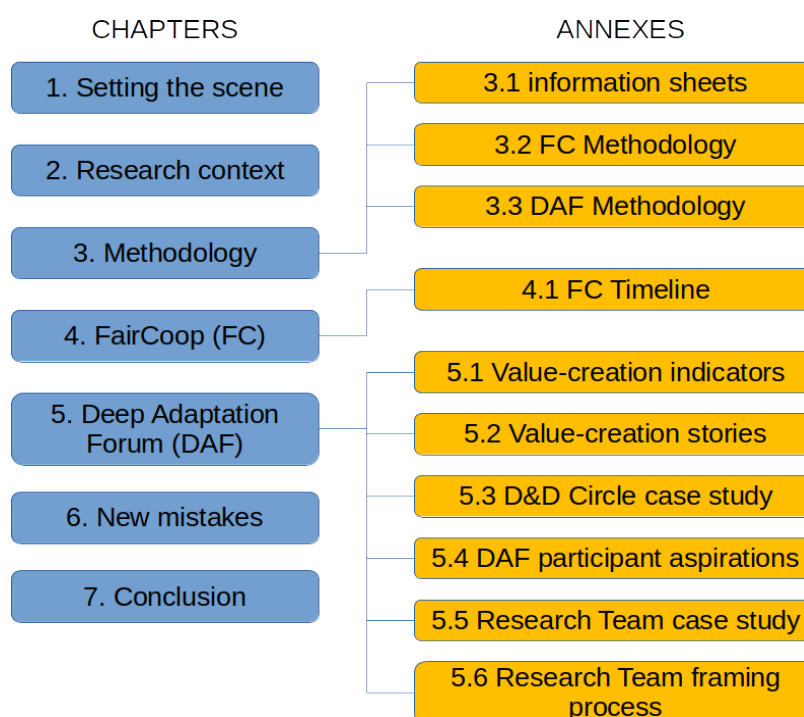
### **Chapter 4:**

- Annex 4.1 is a timeline of the development of FC.

### **Chapter 5:**

- Annex 5.1 shows the value-creation indicators compiled for the social learning evaluation in DAF.
- Annex 5.2 shows the list of value-creation stories compiled as part of this same evaluation.
- Annex 5.3 presents a detailed evaluation of social learning processes within the DAF Diversity and Decolonising Circle (D&D).

- Annex 5.4 is a discussion of the main aspirations voiced by DAF participants with regards to their involvement in the network.
- Annex 5.5 presents a detailed evaluation of social learning processes that occurred within the DAF Research Team, and as a result of its activities.
- Annex 5.6 shows the research framing process that was carried out by the DAF Research Team as part of its self-evaluation.



*Figure 2: Thesis chapters and annexes*

## 2 Research context: Locating this study in the existing literature

### 1 *Informal learning and social learning evaluation*

In this research, following insights from *situated learning* theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991), I have focused on learning as more than an individual act of cognition, but also as "a process that takes place through social action in particular contexts" (Duguid, Mündel and Schugurensky, 2013, p. 24). The learning processes I investigated took place outside formal or non-formal education settings<sup>4</sup>, which have "a set curriculum whose attainment can be identified and evaluated" (ibid, p.25). Such processes have been studied within the field of *informal learning*.

Hager (2012) shows that early theories of informal learning were largely focused on psychological changes within individuals viewed as rational beings, and studied in workplace settings. Later, from the 1990s, socio-cultural theories of informal learning, shaped by sociology and social anthropology, rejected many of these assumptions. These theories bring considerably more attention to social dimensions of learning, as they conceptualise learning as an ongoing process of participation in social practices and activities. They emphasise learning as an embodied process that integrates more human attributes than just rationality; and view contextual factors (be they social, organisational, cultural, or otherwise) as a key causal background for the learning. From this standpoint, learning is a central feature of human existence.<sup>5</sup>

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4 "Non-formal education refers to all organized educational programs that take place outside the formal school system, and are usually short-term and voluntary" (Schugurensky, 2000, p. 2).

5 Studies have confirmed the importance of informal learning in people's lives. Coffield (2000) stresses that informal learning is critical to the acquisition of knowledges, practices, values and norms that a person needs to live in society. Besides, in quantitative terms, the time one spends in formal learning settings is comparatively much lower: "in their school years children spend less than a fifth of their 16 waking hours engaged in formal learning, university students only spend 5–7% of their days in formal study, and throughout the years of adulthood around 90% of most people's daily learning is informal, with short, intermittent periods of non-normal or formal study for personal or job-related purposes" (Latchem, 2016, p. 181).

The theoretical background of this thesis is particularly informed by one of these theories: the social learning theory that originated in the seminal work on situated learning by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991), and which was later developed by Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner *et al.*, 2015; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2020). In **Chapter 3**, I will return to this theory and its main components, and explain why I found it useful to my research.

Considering my interest in processes of informal and social learning that may be relevant to the issue of radical collective change, especially within social movement organisations and online communities, I will review how such processes have been assessed and evaluated.

First of all, it is important to note, following Duguid, Mündel and Schugurensky (2013), that "informal learning from experience is seldom given the same prestige as learning that is acquired (and accredited) through either formal or non-formal systems," and that "informal learning has been under-theorized and under-researched, largely because it is more difficult to uncover and analyse than formal or non-formal educational activities that have a set curriculum and objectives whose attainment can be identified and evaluated" (p.25).

One reason for this difficulty is that, according to Schugurensky (2000, 2013), a variety of processes can be categorised as informal learning – including *self-directed learning* (intentional and conscious), *incidental learning* (unintentional but conscious), and *socialisation* or *tacit learning* (unintentional and unconscious); and in their literature review on the subject, Duguid and colleagues (2013) point out that “most informal learning tends to be tacit” (p.26), and thus, unconscious. It is therefore particularly challenging to study.

Besides, Jeong and colleagues (2018) argue that there is a lack of methodologies that are able to assess the broad scope of activities and the multi-dimensional nature that characterise informal learning, which occurs in individual, interpersonal, or collaborative contexts. This makes the Wenger-Trayner social learning evaluation framework (**Chapter 3**), particularly interesting, as a sophisticated instrument to assess learning processes within communities of practice and social learning spaces.



Finally, while informal learning – especially at the group level, which is my focus here – has frequently been studied and theorised within the context of the workplace (Eraut, 2004; Lohman, 2006; Marsick, 2009; McNally, Blake and Reid, 2009; Thompson, 2010; e.g. Choi and Jacobs, 2011; Schürmann and Beausaert, 2016; Jeong *et al.*, 2018), comparatively fewer studies have taken as their object small groups dedicated to creating social change, especially online.

I will present an overview of studies investigating processes of informal learning, or social learning – following the tradition of situated learning – within two main contexts:

- online activities of social movement organisations; and
- prefigurative online communities.

## 1.1 Online activities of social movement organisations

David Snow and colleagues define social movements as “collectivities acting with some degree of organization, and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based, in the group, organization, society, culture or world order of which they are a part.” (2018, p. 10)

A social movement organisation (SMO), following McCarthy and Zald’s classic definition, is “a complex, or formal organization which identifies its preferences with a social movement, or a counter-movement and attempts to implement those goals” (1977, p. 1218). According to Zald and Ash (1966), SMOs “differ from ‘full-blown’ bureaucratic organizations... they have goals aimed at changing the society and its members; they wish to restructure society or individuals, not to provide it or them with a regular service” (p.329).

The first of my case studies examines the informal learning that took place within the online spaces established by an SMO – FairCoop (**Chapter 4**). What similar studies have been carried out in the past?

According to Klutetz, Walker and Walter (2020), “the learning aspects associated with belonging to, and learning from, social movements have historically been underexplored” (p.50). Discussions on adult learning processes within social

movements began in the late 1980s, with authors considering the potential of “New” social movements as learning sites (Finger, 1989). Later, in his landmark work *Learning in Social Action*, Foley (1999) further explored the importance of incidental learning taking place in various social struggles. His work provided insights into the theorising and knowledge production in activist settings, and into the complicated and contradictory nature of these incidental processes. Drawing from Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development theory and Melucci’s new social movement theory, Kilgore (1999) set the foundation for a systematic theory of collective learning, located in the identity formation of activists. And Hall and Clover (2005) provided a useful overview of noteworthy scholarship in the field of *social movement learning*, within which they include both “learning by persons who are part of any social movement,” and “learning by persons outside of a social movement as a result of the actions taken or simply by the existence of social movements” (p.1). In both settings, the learning may be related to the informal and incidental acquisition of knowledge and organisational skills, or to more intentional educational activities organised by or within the movement itself.

Since then, interest in this field of study - and in particular, attention to informal learning as part of effecting social change - has increased considerably. This has included studies on situated learning taking place among lifelong or circumstantial activists (Ollis, 2011); public pedagogy strategies enacted within social movements (Walter and Earl, 2017); popular and radical adult education (Crowther, Galloway and Martin, 2005; Jesson and Newman, 2020); or the reflexivity of activists who compare and adapt their practices in encounters with other activists (Choudry, 2015; Earl, 2018). A useful framework developed by Scandrett and colleagues (2010) conceptualises informal learning processes potentially taking place at the micro, meso, and macro levels within social movements – from individual-interactive learning (micro) to reframing or reorientation within groups (meso), and cultural-ideological change (macro) (Kluttz and Walter, 2018). And Rogers and Haggerty (2013) have analysed multiple ways in which collective action within a Mexican social movement produced collective learning both within the movement, and in connection with other movements. ICT, and social networks in particular, have come to play a fundamental role within social movements and SMOs (Murthy, 2018). However, very few studies consider the

extent to which socio-technical networks enable learning processes to take place within or among SMOs.

For instance, Fotopoulou (2017), in her study of feminist activism taking place on digital networks, examines the “embodied, material practices of knowledge production, mutual learning and self-experimentation with digital media and smart technologies” (p.26) that take place in feminist activist networks, for example on topics such as reproductive technologies. Although she mentions mutual learning taking place within online communities of practice (p.112-3), learning processes are not explored in depth. Similarly, Irving and English (2011) study the role of feminist websites in promoting community-based learning through information dissemination, but do not consider social learning processes within the organisations running these websites. As for Schroeder and colleagues (2020), or Mercea and Yilmaz (2018), they study the extent to which transformative or social learning may take place among social movement participants active on Facebook or Twitter, but their studies do not involve any specific SMOs.

The only studies I have found that explicitly investigate informal or social learning enabled by ICTs or social media within SMOs were carried out by Crowther et al. (2008), and Hemmi and Crowther (2013). The former provides insights into the cognitive learning that occurred through ICTs for SMO participants, and the latter discusses processes of learning around the notion of activist identity. Neither of these articles investigate other dimensions of informal or social learning, such as relational dimensions.

Therefore, this thesis aims to fill this gap in knowledge with regards to the role of ICT-enabled informal social learning within SMOs.

## 1.2 Prefigurative online communities

The two social entities considered in this study (FairCoop and the Deep Adaptation Forum) both have ties to certain social movements, which I will describe below (**Chapters 4 and 5**). And both of them rely strongly on ICTs to structure their transnational activities. However, they cannot fully be characterised as SMOs. Rather, I will argue that they can also be viewed as prefigurative online communities.

### 1.2.1 Prefiguration

According to Miettunen (2015, p.19), “prefigurative groups seek to embody in the political practise itself those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture and human experience that are ultimately desired for the whole society.” In his seminal work on prefiguration, Boggs (1978) presents prefigurative thought as primarily concerned with: opposing hierarchical relations of authority; criticising political organisations that reproduce this hierarchy; and a commitment to democratisation through local, collective structures that anticipate a future, liberated society (Miettunen, 2015, p. 19).

Prefiguration has been featured prominently in contemporary social movement activities and analysis, for example in the alter-globalisation movement (Maeckelbergh, 2011); the Occupy movement (Graeber, 2013; Reinecke, 2018); feminist organising (Siltanen, Klodawsky and Andrew, 2015); or the anti-austerity movement in Spain (Simsa and Totter, 2017). According to Yates (2015, p. 2) prefiguration appears conceptually “embedded in the political orientation common to what have been called ‘new social movements’ and is directly implicated in wider paradigmatic debates in social movement studies about strategy and culture.” For Monticelli (2021), “prefiguration largely aims to challenge and transcend the culture and structures of contemporary capitalism, the capitalist state and representative democracy by embodying a different type of society within the old one” (p.107).

Discussions of prefiguration have also taken place beyond the field of contentious politics (Yates, 2021; Fians, 2022). For instance, Schlosberg and Craven (2019) describe as “prefigurative” the practices of environmental groups promoting more sustainable practices in everyday life – be it through new food systems, community-based renewable energy projects, or even sustainable fashion; Monticelli (2021) refers to ecological villages and intentional communities; and Laamanen and colleagues (Laamanen and den Hond, 2015; Laamanen, Bor and den Hond, 2019) examine through a prefiguration lens the organisational practices of a local time bank. In such cases, the emphasis is placed on the building of alternative activities, projects or institutions, that are experimental and experiential, and which strive to represent distant goals directly (“here and now”) through everyday practices that have longer-term political goals (Franks, 2003; van de Sande, 2015). This will be my perspective in this thesis, as the online groups I have studied are less directly concerned about participation in protest

activities and directly confronting dominant power structures than about experimenting with new alternatives.

However, it is important to point out that prefigurative groups have often been criticised precisely for failing to pose a meaningful challenge to dominant institutions. For example, Soborski (2019, p. 81) argues that “some prefigurative movements end up celebrating themselves in an inward and narcissistic fashion rather than trying to have any impact on the world outside activist spaces”; and that while prefiguration may have a “transformative impact” on its participants, it “leaves the rest of the world unchanged.” In a systematic review of critiques, Yates (2021) shows that “detractors have persistently contrasted prefiguration with strategy and effectiveness” (p.1034). According to such critics, prefiguration is either:

1. “too localised, small-scale and focused on the present, and too easily co-opted by existing actors”; or leads to
2. “fetishising process, alienating newcomers” and over-emphasising “identity and self-expression” (Yates, 2021, p.1042).

Yates then goes on to address these criticisms. He recommends more attention to how prefiguration can productively inform certain practices and processes of social movement activity, such as the reproduction of resources, the mobilisation of these resources, and the coordination of various activities toward political goals.

Prefigurative politics have been studied within online contexts, mainly in relation to the role of social media in enabling protest events run by SMOs (Castells, 2009; Mercea, 2012). Other examples have focused on libertarian activism on the Dark Web (Maddox *et al.*, 2016), and blockchain projects (Husain, Franklin and Roep, 2020). Online communities of activist software developers producing new forms of ownership, ethics, and aesthetics (Coleman, 2013), as well as free software enabling more democratic communication and the pursuit of social justice (Milberry, 2012), can also be considered prefigurative. However, there is only limited scholarship on prefigurative practices in the context of online communities, and their potential for radical collective change. My research thus aims at addressing this gap in knowledge.

### 1.2.2 Online communities

According to Townshend, Benoit and Davies (2020), the term “community” refers to “a group of people that have something in common among them” (p.344). These common features – be they relative to a similar ethnicity, religion, kinship, shared interests, or location - may create a sense of belonging due to the interpersonal relationships that stem from them. The authors emphasise that the term carries strong positive connotations: communities tend to be seen as a source of empathy, well-being, as an antidote to isolation, and even as the embodiment of a better life. This can lead to ignoring the potentially coercive nature of communities, for example when group norms are imposed on their members (Thompson, 2011). Therefore, communities shouldn’t be viewed as homogeneous units, “but as inherently pluralistic, conflictive, and inclusive of diverse value systems, interests, and behaviors” (Townshend, Benoit and Davies, 2020, p. 344).

Scholars (Preece and Maloney-Krichmar, 2003; Porter, 2004; Thompson, 2011; Angouri, 2015) have noted the difficulty of defining *online communities* beyond focusing on the general characteristics of cohesion and belonging mentioned above, as displayed by groups of people communicating via the internet. This difficulty is compounded by how communities manifest themselves in different ways, reflecting changes in socioeconomic and technological environments (Angouri, 2015).

A very broad and consensual definition of online communities could be: “an Internet-connected collective of people who interact over time around a shared purpose, interest or need” (Preece, 2000; Ren, Kraut and Kiesler, 2007; Ågerfalk, Edenius and Hrastinski, 2008). Further, Susan Herring (2004, p. 355), summarising insights from the literature on virtual or online communities, identifies six sets of criteria (or *component behaviours*) that help distinguish a community from other kinds of online assemblages:

- 1) active, self-sustained participation; a core of regular participants;
- 2) shared history, purpose, culture, norms, and values;
- 3) solidarity, support, reciprocity;
- 4) criticism, conflict, means of conflict resolution;
- 5) self-awareness of group as an entity distinct from other groups;

6) emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance, rituals.

These criteria do highlight important characteristics of the interactions I have observed in the online groups within which (and with whom) I carried out this research.

Finally, scholars also point out that some online communities may interact purely online, while others also engage in offline interaction (Andrews, 2002; Ågerfalk, Edenius and Hrastinski, 2008). The communities I examined in both of my case studies were predominantly interacting online, but members occasionally took part in offline activities.

Online communities are often objects of studies focusing on how to design online spaces - with a focus on the technical infrastructure (Komlodi et al., 2007; Hanrahan et al., 2011; à Campo et al., 2019). This seems particularly true of evaluation-focused studies. These studies often use social network analysis to evaluate how these communities function, and how they can be "improved" (e.g. Yang and Chen, 2019). Indicators leading to the "success" of such communities tend to be based on quantifiable metrics (Malinen and Ojala, 2011; Chebil, Chaari and Cerri, 2017). Such methodologies do not form a good fit with the constructivist, participatory approach that I embrace here (**Chapter 3**).

Fewer studies go beyond technological usability factors, which have to do with software changes, and focus instead on evaluating the sociability – or the social interactions of the members, and the policies that guide them (Preece, 2000) – characterising an online community. An example of such a study is that carried out by Preece, Abras and Maloney-Krishmar (2004). It argues for online community designers making use of a participatory community-centred development model, which involves consulting community members and involving them in the design of the online space from the start. This leads the authors to develop a set of community-centred heuristics for evaluating the success of online health communities. However, while this evaluation involves consulting online community members about the design of the community, the researchers did not invite them to reflect on what they were learning thanks to this community.

Therefore, my research aims at addressing this gap in the field of knowledge and practice of participatory informal and social learning evaluation within online communities.

### 1.2.3 Communities of practice

In **Chapter 5**, I mobilise the social learning theory developed by E. and B. Wenger-Trayner (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner *et al.*, 2015; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2020) to investigate social learning processes taking place within communities of practice. As I will discuss in more detail in **Chapter 3**, this theory is centred on an analysis of learning as the production of social structure, involving dynamic processes of personal participation in social activities such as conversations or reflections, intertwined with the production of artefacts (reification) such as concepts, stories, methods or documents. Over time, these processes create a social history of learning that combines individual and collective aspects, giving rise to *communities of practice* - that is,

groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn to do it better as they interact regularly (E. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015a, p. 2).

Since it was coined by Lave and Wenger (1991), the concept has been explored and applied in a variety of fields, including academe, business, government, education, health, and the civil sector (Wenger, 2010), and has become “one of the most widely cited and influential conceptions of social learning to date” (Smith, Hayes and Shea, 2017, p. 211). It has also been critiqued in various ways, in particular:

- for not placing enough emphasis on issues of power and conflict (e.g. Fox, 2000; Barton and Tusting, 2005; Roberts, 2006);
- for overly relying on the concept of *community*, perceived as “quaint” or “anachronistic” (Wenger, 2010, p.189) in an era of networks (e.g. Brown and Duguid, 2000; Fox, 2005; Jewson, 2007);
- for not clarifying the actual relationship between the terms *community* and *practice* – with some theorists arguing that the former produces the latter, instead of the other way around (Nicolini, 2012; Angouri, 2015).



These challenges, and others, have led to ongoing clarifications and developments of the theory (Duarte, 2020, p. 13). One that is worth mentioning here, given my focus on community processes happening online, is the invitation to consider *networks* and *communities* as complementary processes, instead of as distinct structures (Wenger, 2010; Wenger, Trayner and De Laat, 2011):

Community emphasizes identity and network emphasizes connectivity. The two usually coexist. Certainly communities of practice are networks in the sense that they involve connections among members; but there is also identification with a domain and commitment to a learning partnership, which are not necessarily present in a network. More generally, I find it more productive to think of community and network as combined in the same social structures—but with more or less salience. So the question is not whether a given group is a network or a community, but how the two aspects coexist as structuring processes. (Wenger, 2010, p.189)

Wenger (ibid) goes on to argue that “network and community processes have complementary strengths and weaknesses” with regards to enhancing the learning capability of a group: fostering connectivity and “networking energy” can allow an ossified community to “open its boundaries” and engage in new avenues of social learning; and conversely, through community processes, an overly fragmented network may become endowed with more collective intention and develop learning partnerships. I find this an important insight with regards to considering social learning processes within online communities, and how to steer such processes in order to bring about radical collective change.

Over time, this social learning theory has been increasingly used within the study of online communities of practice, with a particular emphasis on professional and educational settings (e.g. Gray, 2004; Fontainha and Gannon-Leary, 2008; Vavasseur and MacGregor, 2008; Hara, Shachaf and Stoerger, 2009; Smith, 2011; Booth and Kellogg, 2015; Lejealle, Castellano and Khelladi, 2021). However, I am not aware of any research deploying this theory and framework to consider learning processes within online communities of practice dedicated to social change.

In order to do so within the case study presented in **Chapter 5**, I rely on the value-creation framework developed by Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner (Wenger-Trayner *et al.*, 2019; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2020). This analysis and evaluation methodology allows for a rigorous and fine-grained assessment of the value that participants in communities of practice gain from their participation, which is an under-researched issue (Guldborg *et al.*, 2021). This framework “embodies both a theory of change regarding how social learning can make a difference in the world and a rigorous method for assessing learning in a community” (ibid, p.97).

The value-creation framework has been used previously within various contexts, including a transnational community of practice in autism education (Guldborg *et al.*, 2021), a cross-border learning network (Clarke *et al.*, 2021), communities of sports coaches (Bertram, Culver and Gilbert, 2017; Duarte, 2020; Bowles and O’Dwyer, 2021; Vinson, Huckle and Cale, 2021), sustainable dairy farming (Triste *et al.*, 2018), and an online community for educators (Booth and Kellogg, 2015). My study appears to be the first recorded instance of its use within online communities that are clearly prefigurative.

## 2 *Decolonial studies*

### 2.1 *History and key theoretical components*

Finally, in **Chapter 6**, I present a reflexive account of how my own aspirations unexpectedly evolved with regards to the topic of radical collective change itself, over the course of this research. The chapter allows for a fuller presentation of insights from the first-person inquiry that was an essential complement to the whole research project (as explained in **Chapter 3**). An important insight for me was the critical usefulness of decolonial perspectives as part of any effort aiming at creating collective change, including through prefigurative online communities. Although such theoretical frameworks did not explicitly shape the doctoral research, they increasingly influenced my process of analysis and write-up. Therefore, I will briefly outline some key theoretical elements from this field that have been most relevant to my reflection.

Postcolonial studies are “a body of thought that critically evaluates colonialism, colonial legacies, and imperialism, frequently with a focus on representations and discourses” (Murray, 2020, p. 315). Scholars such as Frantz Fanon (1961), Edward Said (1979), or Gayatri Spivak (1988) have called for a relinquishment of Eurocentrism in knowledge production, and to open space for the formerly colonised or those beyond the West. In particular, Spivak’s seminal writings have foregrounded an ethical imperative of *unlearning one’s privilege*. This can be summarised as a commitment, particularly by persons originating from a more privileged background and who intend to engage meaningfully with the struggles of more marginalised (subaltern) people, to actively relinquish one’s self-image as better or fitter (and therefore, uniquely positioned to “save” the other); to question one’s assumptions and deconstruct one’s prejudices (including those of racism, sexism, classism, or ethnocentrism); and to show solidarity including in ways that may go against one’s own material or reputational interests (Andreotti, 2007). These are all themes that have become important to me, given the complexity of pursuing both knowledge production and radical collective change from my position as a white Franco-British scholar.

In the 1990s, researchers from Latin America and beyond – such as Aníbal Quijano, Walter Dignolo, Enrique Dussel, Catherine Walsh, or Edgardo Lander – initiated what is commonly regarded as *the decolonial turn*, that is “an epistemic critique of the colonial fracture... a critique of the categories of those worldviews that were imposed upon the Americas by colonization” (Ferdinand, 2021, p. 176). This movement can be viewed as the continuation of a series of critiques going back far longer in history (Maldonado-Torres, 2011).

Aníbal Quijano introduced the concept of *coloniality* to refer to social, political, epistemic, and territorial forms of domination that have remained in the world, as a result of Euro-American colonisation and the patterns of knowledge production and meaning this process brought with it, even after colonialism itself ended as an explicit political order (Quijano, 2007). For decolonial scholars – who have explored dimensions including the coloniality of power (Quijano, 2000), of knowledge (Lander, 2000), of being (Maldonado-Torres, 2010), or of gender (Lugones, 2016) – coloniality is the “other side” of modernity: there can be no modern technological advancements, industrial capitalism, or conspicuous consumption, without coloniality or the hegemonic

ordering logic of the *colonial matrix of power* (Murray, 2020, p. 322). To highlight this mutually constitutive relation, Walter Mignolo (2000) introduced the compound expression *modernity/coloniality*<sup>6</sup>.

As a result of these analyses, these scholars have focused on *epistemic decolonisation* as a critical domain of struggle and transformation of the world, and to further the enterprise of decentring Eurocentric thought by foregrounding non-European perspectives (Escobar, 2014). According to Ramón Grosfoguel (2008), the Cartesian philosophy that emerged from the European Enlightenment era, and which was forcefully imposed through colonisation and genocide, led to an elimination of other knowledge systems (epistemicides). This highlights the fact that knowledge production, such as that which I am attempting through this thesis, is never innocent, natural, or unproblematic, but inherently political. Such an awareness has important implications with regards to the very act of carrying out research, especially considering my wish to enable radical collective change by this means.

In **Chapter 6**, I will return to decolonial approaches and will highlight some of the main criticisms that have been addressed to them. In what follows, I first need to say more about one particular strand of decolonial research that has influenced my study.

## 2.2 The Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures collective

Through my involvement in the Diversity and Decolonising Circle, a self-organised group convened within the Deep Adaptation Forum (**Annex 5.3**), I have been particularly influenced by the work of the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures (GTDF) collective - “a group of researchers, artists, educators, students, and activists involved in research, artistic, and pedagogical experiments in education” (Stein, V. Andreotti, *et al.*, 2020, p. 45). The collective brings together participants from both Global North and Global South contexts, including representatives of several Indigenous collectives.

Their work has been helpful to my reflection in that it openly engages with the possibility that modern-colonial social structures (and the habit-of-being they created)

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6 This term is also hyphenated as *modernity-coloniality*, which I find more readable.

are inherently “beyond reform,” and therefore, that decolonial thinking should be used to consider how to “hospice” these structures as they begin to crumble (ibid, p.51). The GTDF gestures “toward alternative possibilities for knowing, being, and relating” (Stein, V. de O. Andreotti, *et al.*, 2020, p. 1). As a result, they encourage a radical reconsideration of socio-historical legacies, and how these socio-cultural constructs may be reshaped in order for modern humans to live into new stories, and to become healthy elders and good ancestors for all relations (Machado de Oliveira, 2021).

An important theoretical foundation of the work of GTDF is a set of four *constitutive denials*, which lay at the heart of the story of modernity (GTDF, 2019; Machado de Oliveira, 2021; Suša *et al.*, 2021). These denials stand for “what we need to (be made to) forget in order to believe what modernity/coloniality wants us to believe in, and to desire what modernity/coloniality wants us to desire” (Machado de Oliveira, 2021, p.51). These denials “severely restrict our capacity to sense, relate, and imagine otherwise” (ibid.). They include:

- “the denial of systemic, historical, and ongoing violence and of complicity in harm (the fact that our comforts, securities, and enjoyments are subsidized by expropriation and exploitation elsewhere);
- “the denial of the limits of the planet and of the unsustainability of modernity/coloniality (the fact that the finite earth-metabolism cannot sustain exponential growth, consumption, extraction, exploitation, and expropriation indefinitely);
- “the denial of entanglement (our insistence in seeing ourselves as separate from each other and the land, rather than ‘entangled’ within a wider living metabolism that is bio-intelligent); and
- “the denial of the magnitude and complexity of the problems we need to face together (the tendency to look for simplistic solutions that make us feel and look good and that may address symptoms, but not the root causes, of our collective complex predicament).” (ibid.)

This typology, which synthesises a number of insights from the broader field of decolonial studies, strikes me as particularly useful to reflect on what radical collective change might look and feel like. I will return to it in **Chapter 6**.

GTDF have also paid special attention to what epistemic decolonisation and hospicing modernity might entail within educational contexts, at a time of “the end of the world as we know it” (Stein *et al.*, 2022). This is also helpful to me, considering the focus of this research on informal and social learning. In particular, I will return in **Chapter 6** to the idea of *unlearning*, and how it may be relevant to my own experience in the course of this research.

In the next chapter, I will introduce the methodology I have followed over the course of this doctoral research.

# 3 Methodology

*If I am not in the world simply to adapt to it, but rather transform it,  
and if it is not possible to change the world without a certain dream or vision for it,  
I must make use of every possibility there is not only to speak about my utopia,  
but also to engage in practices consistent with it.*

- Paulo Freire (2004, p. 7)

## 1 A pragmatic and constructivist approach

This is a qualitative research project, which I have carried out from a pragmatic perspective, and with a constructivist epistemology.

An important characteristic of pragmatism as a philosophy is that claims to knowledge are made as a result of engaging with the world, and that “truth is found in what works” (McCaslin, 2008, p. 672). Truth is thus situated and relative, and “what works” or not in practice must be tested in practice through experimentation and reflection, and involve a collectively constructed experience - a perspective that corresponds well with my first-person and second-person Action Research inquiry methodology, and with the participatory ethos I have embraced (see below). Ultimately, for the pragmatist, “truth is co-created by way of intersubjective relationships” (ibid, p.673).

As my research unfolded, my stance took on an increasingly “critical pragmatic” angle, in that I have come to pay closer attention to social processes of inequality reproduction, such as stigmatisation, othering, or marginalisation, and grew more comfortable in taking on an activist role of citizen-scholar (Vannini, 2008).

I have adopted a constructivist epistemology, particularly throughout my case study analyses. The main reason for this is that one of the central concepts in my research, the notion of *radical collective change*, is one whose definition may completely vary from one person to the next, and in keeping with the aspirations stated above, I did not wish to impose my own (evolving) understanding thereof within the various research

activities I convened or took part in (see below). Constructivism considers that “there exist multiple, socially constructed realities ungoverned by natural laws, causal or otherwise” (Guba and Lincoln, 1989, p. 86), devised by individuals as they make sense of their experience, and more or less commonly assented to by others. Thus, from a constructivist perspective, what counts as desirable change may differ from person to person, and be redefined continually in the light of new experience. This process is necessarily a function of the values embraced by the person. Therefore, from this perspective, aspirations for social change should remain open to contestation, conflict, and negotiation; diverse voices should be brought into dialogue; and attention should be brought to issues of power and social stratification in the course of these discussions.

## 2 Action Research

The guiding research methodology for this thesis is Action Research (AR). AR enables me to link together different localised approaches to the data under a consistent and coherent framework for analysis. In this chapter I will first establish the principles of AR and its relevance to the thesis, before detailing how it was used as an overarching approach to the specific data collection for each of the areas of study.

### 2.1 Key characteristics of AR

#### 2.1.1 A holistic, embodied approach

AR is an approach that pays attention equally to various forms of knowledge (or learning), and to action. I see this methodology as relevant to my research precisely because I want to explore the interface of learning and action.

Indeed, AR is an approach to inquiry based on experimental action: it is about generating *knowledge* (research), while at the same time supporting *positive change* (action):

Action research is a participatory process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more



generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. (Reason and Bradbury, 2008, p. 4)

Fundamentally, AR is a cyclical process of trial and error, where people observe existing practices, reflect on them, then find ways to improve them.

AR researchers (e.g. Heron and Reason, 2008) point out that doing this meaningfully requires making sense of reality — including social systems — in a *holistic* way: not simply through an analytical process taking place after an event has been observed, but via a relational and experiential process taking place as things are happening. Burns (2007, p. 3) emphasises that AR is a process of *coming to know*, by using all one's faculties and senses. This is another important factor for me in choosing AR as a methodology, as the learning I am interested in goes beyond the cognitive field – I am especially keen to explore its relational dimensions (Bradbury *et al.*, 2019), as I will explain in the next section.

### **2.1.2 A participatory process**

In the words of Greenwood and Levin (1998, p. 93), AR is

a cogeneration process through which professional researchers and interested members of a local organization, community or specially created organization collaborate to research, understand and resolve problems of mutual interest.

Because online networks are fundamentally participatory, this focus on participation is another reason for me to choose AR. As Reason and Bradbury (2008, p. 8) point out,

In AR, 'participation' is more than a technique, epistemological principle, or political tenet. An attitude of inquiry includes developing an understanding that we are embodied beings part of a social and ecological order, and radically interconnected with all other beings.

Therefore, the practice of AR is rooted in the realisation that we are not bounded individuals experiencing the world in isolation: we are all interconnected, participants in a whole, "part-of and not apart-from." (Reason and Bradbury, 2008, p. 8). AR is fundamentally about transcending the idea that each of us is a separate, disconnected entity. This "story of separation," a central component of the modern-colonial world, is

largely to blame for the global social and ecological predicament – as I will argue in **Chapter 6**.

### **2.1.3 A democratic, emancipatory ethos**

Practitioners view AR as a way of carrying out research and acting in the world that has an explicitly egalitarian and democratic ethos, which resonates with the socially just aims of the networks involved in this study:

AR is a social process in which professional knowledge, local knowledge, process skills, and democratic values are the basis for co-created knowledge and social change. (Greenwood and Levin, 1998, p. 93)

The primary purpose of action research is .... to liberate the human body, mind and spirit in the search for a better, freer world. (Reason and Bradbury, 2008, p. 5)

Therefore, a direct link can often be observed between AR and social change: indeed, “AR explicitly seems to disrupt existing power relations for the purpose of democratising society.” (Greenwood and Levin, 1998, p.88)

AR is thus a particularly relevant approach as it is fundamentally sympathetic to the forms for generating social and political change through democratic principles.

### **2.1.4 An emergent process**

AR is not a predetermined process, ruled by rigid and immutable guidelines. Instead, it is an *emergent* process, in the sense that it changes and develops as the people engaged in the research deepen their understanding of what they are studying, and become better at it both individually and collectively (Reason and Bradbury, 2008, p.4). This aspects makes AR particularly relevant to the study of emergent, organically developing networks.

In order to be useful and relevant (and therefore, create understanding and change), an AR research process must remain flexible, and adapt to fluid settings. Part of this flexibility comes from relying on repeated cycles of inquiry. It is therefore a process that alternates action and critical reflection. I have tried to embed this reflexive cycle into all aspects of this research.

## 2.2 Applying AR

In order to answer my research question, I have initiated AR projects within two distinct online networks and communities (see below). Simultaneously, I have also strived to be mindful of my own learning, changes, and assumptions, as I participated in these research efforts with others. Therefore, I have applied AR in two different ways: second-person, and first-action.

### 2.2.1 Second-person AR

Second-person AR refers to

action research approaches that involve two or more people inquiring together about questions of mutual concern. In this form of research, the researchers and the research subjects are one and the same. Co-inquirers work together to identify and formulate inquiry questions, to determine the ways in which information will be gathered, to make sense of it and to act on their conclusions. Groups are small enough to have some significant relationship with each other, traditionally meeting face-to-face, although use is increasingly being made of online and virtual inquiry groups. (Coleman, 2014, p. 698)

It is a form of AR that centres the commitments to collaboration, mutual respect, and collective emancipation that I have introduced above, and is strongly informed by “the idea of research *with* people rather than *on* them” (ibid). An important reason for doing so is that it constitutes a form of resistance against the tendency for academic elites to claim knowledge of others, and thus exercise a right to speak and categorise their everyday reality on their behalf, thus perpetuating unjust power structures. On the contrary, “since the act of recognizing and naming one’s own experience in collaboration with others is an affirmation of individuality and autonomy, this in turn can contribute to the political emancipation of those involved” (ibid, p.699).

Researchers have long pointed out the many practical and ethical quandaries that afflict participatory research projects, and place severe constraints to the possibility of achieving such equality, or emancipatory outcomes (e.g. Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995; Bergold and Thomas, 2012; Beebejaun *et al.*, 2014). In the case of this research, for example, obvious obstacles emerged from its very nature as an academic endeavour,

which imposes a particular time frame, and requires that a final research output be authored by me, the PhD researcher, alone.

I have tried to remain aware of these limitations and to reduce their impact as much as possible. This has led me to rely on ways to co-produce knowledge in forms more accessible to non-academic participants, such as videos and storytelling (Little and Froggett, 2010). And in both communities, I have strived to leave as much space as possible, given the constraints above, for participants to flexibly engage in the research process, at the depth they felt most comfortable with – from a role of informer or consultant to that of co-researcher (Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1992) – while being transparent with them as regards the conditions of our collaboration stemming from its academic context. Such conditions, along with other critical information, were presented in the Participant Information Sheets that I prepared for each network (**Annex 3.1**), and which I asked every participant to read and consent to before becoming involved.

Finally, in keeping with the emergent and participatory aspects of this research, I refrained from planning the whole research in more detail from the outset. Instead, the participants who wished to be more deeply engaged in the project co-designed the research process iteratively with me, following the experiential learning cycle referred to above.

In the next sections, I present in more detail the ways in which I have brought second-person AR into the groups with whom I carried out the participatory aspects of this research. But first, I will say a few words about another form of AR I have put into practice.

### **2.2.2 First-Person AR**

I combined Second-Person AR with First-Person AR, which is “an approach undertaken by researchers as an inquiry into their own actions, giving conscious attention to their intentions, strategies and behaviour and the effects of their action on themselves and their situation” (Adams, 2014).

An important way in which I have been undertaking this reflective and self-critical process – all the way to the writing of this thesis – is by holding a research journal, in

which I have been collecting thick descriptions of my personal and interpersonal experience of this research. I have been regularly returning to it in order to study the evolution of my thinking and reflect on my assumptions. Besides, I have also made sure to explicitly link these descriptions to my conversations, data collection and analyses, literature study, and other key processes of my research, thus creating layered accounts (Charmaz, 1988). This multi-layered text has helped me keep track of the simultaneous unfolding of my data collection and analysis processes, and to reveal how this research has been as much a “source of questions and comparisons” as anything approaching a “measure of truth” (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011).

This journal has been particularly useful to my writing the reflections presented in **Chapter 6**, in which I use excerpts to discuss my evolving ideas of what may constitute necessary forms of radical collective changes, as a result of the social learning I have been experiencing through this research. It has also facilitated the reflective process carried out with my co-researcher Wendy Freeman about the work of our research team in DAF (**Annexes 5.5 and 5.6**).

I will now provide more details about my research process for each of the two online communities in which and with whom it has taken place.

## **3 FairCoop**

The research process in FairCoop (FC) unfolded between June 2020 and October 2021. The following is a summary of this process, which is presented in more detail in **Annex 3.2**.

### **3.1 First AR cycles: Deciding on a methodology**

My original intention was to invite participants in FC projects to form a participatory research group, which would explore the kinds of social learning taking place within FC. But among the participants I contacted, no one had any motivation to do so. Several of them said the community was “dormant” or that it had “failed,” and that it was deeply divided as a result of intractable conflict.

Consequently, I shifted my approach to a diagnostic/evaluation stance. Out of these first conversations, four Research Questions (RQ) emerged which seemed to speak to the

interests of the participants I interviewed while corresponding with the overall intention underlying my PhD research:

- 1 What has been the trajectory of FC in time?
- 2 How to explain FC's current level of activity and usefulness?
- 3 What were the main outcomes of participants' involvement with FC, in terms of cognitive, relational, and experiential or affective dimensions of social learning?
- 4 What can social change-makers learn from this project? In particular, what can be learned about the...
  - "Ways of doing" that are most closely related to FC's impact in the world?
  - "Ways of being" and worldviews, and how these have played into the life of FC?

I decided that RQ #1 and #3, being more straightforward, could be studied by conducting semi-structured interviews followed by a thematic analysis. RQ #2 and #4, however, called for a more rigorous evaluation methodology, which would give equal weight to a variety of perspectives, and encourage participants to learn from one another.

However, it rapidly emerged that most interviewees were unwilling to engage in any evaluation otherwise than through individual, private conversations with me, for lack of time, and due to the lasting impacts of deep-seated conflict. I thus decided to base the evaluation process, needed to answer Research Questions #2 and #4, on the use of Convergent Interviewing.

## **3.2 Convergent Interviewing (CI)**

CI is a flexible data collection process, based on an in-depth interview procedure characterised by a structured process and initially-unstructured content (Dick, 2017). CI is also emergent and data-driven, has a cyclic nature, makes use of a dialectic process,

and can be used effectively in community change programs as part of a diagnosis or evaluation project (Dick, 2002, 2014, 2017).

Overall, the CI process can be outlined as follows (Driedger *et al.*, 2006; Jepsen and Rodwell, 2008; Dick, 2017):

1. Entry and contracting;
2. Preparing a maximum-diversity sample;
3. Carrying out initially open-ended interviews, from which an evaluation develops gradually and inductively;
4. By comparing interview results, developing probe questions to deepen one's understanding of the emerging theory.

CI is based on a constant comparative reflexive process (Driedger *et al.*, 2006). The cyclic nature of this process “allows the refinement of both questions and answers, and even the method, over a series of interviews or successive approximations” (Riege and Nair, 2004, p. 75). This builds rigour in the continuous refinement of the research content and process, while providing flexibility, which is useful in an Action Research context.

### **3.3 Interview process – June 2020 to January 2021**

In the early stages of my interviewing process, I invited several of my FC contacts to form a group of co-researchers with me. However, it appeared that this was not possible for any of them at the time. Therefore, I pursued the research process on my own.

#### **3.3.1 Forming a sample**

In order to form a sample, I asked my initial contacts to recommend other participants in the FC network who would have different backgrounds and points of view from them, while still being representative of the network. I then contacted the persons they recommended. When these responded positively to my request (which was the case about 50% of the time), I had an open-ended discussion with them, and then asked them to recommend another person I could speak to, with the same criteria as previously. In this way, a modified snowball sample of 15 participants emerged.

Interviewees were all persons who were deeply involved in FC as a project, ranging from 1.5 to over 4 years of participation (average: 3 years) at the time of first interview. They included persons identifying with either (or none) of two broad and opposing factions that seem to have formed within FC, and hailed from 8 different countries. I deemed this sample diverse enough for the purposes of understanding the history and dynamics at play within FC.

### **3.3.2 Obtaining formal consent**

Ahead of interviewing anyone, I asked them to express their consent to take part in this research, by sending me an electronic message containing the copy and pasted paragraph titled “Consent email” from the online information sheet (see **Annex 3.2**). This was usually achieved by sending prospective interviewees an instant message containing this text, and asking them to reply to this message saying “I agree.” For those with whom I communicated in Spanish, I translated this paragraph into Spanish.

### **3.3.3 Communications**

All my initial communications with FC participants happened over the instant messaging software Telegram. 6 interviewees agreed to be interviewed over video-conference calls, and 9 via private Telegram text and recorded voice messages. 11 discussions took place in English, and 4 in Spanish.

In the case of video calls, taking place over videoconference, I took extensive notes during the interview. In the case of Telegram voice messages, I transcribed the messages I received. I translated into English notes and text messages that were in Spanish to facilitate the analytical process, and analysed all text using the thematic analysis software Quirkos.

Interviews happening over video calls were clearly bounded in time, and took one to two hours. Interviews carried out over instant text messages or voice messages were more continuous, as they allowed the interviewee to respond whenever they had time. This enabled several “interviews” to be taking place simultaneously, which made the process more dynamic – as I was, in effect, able to rapidly test for agreement or disagreement when a new issue was raised by someone.



I regularly summarised my understanding of what interviewees were sharing with me and submitted these summaries to them, to confirm I understood them correctly.

### **3.3.4 Identifying convergent issues**

In order to explore the two closely related research questions (RQ #2 and #4) that called for the use of CI, I began by asking the interviewees to tell me more about their experience of FC. In particular, I asked them what they considered had been the main challenges that FC had faced or was facing as a project, as a “general probe” question (Dick, 2017, p.7).

By comparing my notes from each interview to my corpus of previous interviews, I then gradually began building an emergent theory about the general categories of challenges that appeared to have been present in FC (ibid, p.13). In effect, I carried out an inductive thematic analysis, building on the method of Template Analysis (TA), as presented by King (2004, 2012) and Brooks and colleagues (2015).

Through this process, by updating the emerging template iteratively after each interview, I gradually came to build the following template of themes, corresponding to organisational issues experienced in FC by interviewees:

- Objectives and strategy
  - FC’s twin strategic goals
  - FairCoin
- Ways of doing
  - Governance
  - Tools
  - Membership
- Ways of being
  - Mutual care, civility and trust
  - Conflict and factions
  - Cultural and linguistic issues

For each sub-theme, I devised probe questions testing for agreement on the relevance of each issue identified. In a spreadsheet, I kept track of the agreements, disagreements, or “no opinion” voiced by interviewees for each issue.

In the Case Report (see next section), I included issues that appeared significant to at least three interviewees, and attempted to systematically point out the degree of agreement or disagreement for each issue.

### **3.3.5 Other research questions**

Answers to the research questions that weren’t directly connected to the evaluation process (i.e. RQ #1 and #3) were also included in the convergent interviewing process, although more lightly. This was due to the broad agreement on the history or trajectory of FC as a project (RQ #1), and to similar replies to the questions that had to do with the positive and negative outcomes that interviewees voiced with regards to their participation in FC (RQ #3). Nonetheless, particularly concerning the latter, interesting answers from one person would help me develop probe questions to ask other people.

In the case of RQ #1, I triangulated the information I received from interviewees with several media reports and studies on FC.

## **3.4 Sharing findings and collecting feedback**

In order to test my understanding of what the interviewees had shared with me, and invite constructive feedback and criticism, I decided to summarise my findings into a Case Report.

This was an iterative process which took place from January 31 to October 1, 2021. Over this period of time, I shared three successive draft versions of this report with interviewees, before sharing the final version on October 1.

The drafts were shared using the online platform OnlyOffice, and could only be read by viewers receiving the secret URLs leading to them. The final report was shared as a PDF.

I wrote the drafts and the final report in English, and translated each of these versions entirely into Spanish to share them with the interviewees with whom I was interacting in this language.

The 40-page report presented the study and the methodology, and answers that had emerged for me to the four Research Questions – first as an executive summary, then in more detail. I quoted at length from the interviewees, whom I anonymised.

I used the drafts to collect feedback, by inviting study participants to comment directly and anonymously on the online documents in the language of their choice. To overcome the language barrier, I translated all comments posted from English to Spanish or vice-versa, and posted the translated comment at the appropriate location on the other version of the document.

This methodology allowed me to receive many useful comments, and to nuance several parts of the text. These draft reports also enabled me to query interviewees' wishes and feelings with regards to the publication of the final report, in order to cause as little harm as possible. I viewed this as necessary, considering the community's conflictual history, and the negative opinions voiced by most interviewees about the FC founder.

Eventually, following a deliberative process, it appeared acceptable to publish the final report while anonymising the community and its founder – and to inform study participants that this information would be revealed in the present thesis. I published the report on October 1, 2021, under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

I will now turn to the second online community in which this research took place.

## ***4 The Deep Adaptation Forum***

When I decided to undertake part of my research within the Deep Adaptation Forum (DAF), in January 2020, I had already been deeply involved in this network for nearly a year, as part of its core team. This made my position as a researcher very different from the one I had with respect to FairCoop, in which I was merely an external sympathiser. In DAF, I had much easier access to a great diversity of participants.

Besides, while FC was at a standstill, DAF was in full expansion. This allowed me to more directly address the fundamental questions that had moved me to undertake this PhD research in the first place. In particular, I was most curious to explore the learning

processes taking place within online networks, and to consider the extent to which they enable participants to take action collectively on social issues of common concern.

Originally, I articulated (to myself and others) this twin concern for learning and action by stating that I wanted to:

1. understand to what extent a network enables its participants to learn about the social issues they care most about, and to act on those issues;
2. find out if participants consider these functions to be important to them (i.e. whether these functions of learning and acting are among the main reasons for their joining this network in the first place);
3. consider whether they find the network wholly satisfactory in these terms;
4. and if it isn't, how these functions could be improved.

I was unsure what theoretical framework might allow me to bring equal attention to learning and action within networks and online communities. I found a way forward in discovering the social learning theory developed by Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner (Wenger, 1998, 2009; Wenger-Trayner *et al.*, 2015), and the practical frameworks they have put forth to assess and foster social learning within – offline or online – communities of practice (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002; Wenger, White and Smith, 2009), and social learning spaces (Wenger, Trayner and De Laat, 2011; Wenger-Trayner *et al.*, 2019; Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2020).

In particular, the social learning evaluation framework developed by E. and B. Wenger-Trayner (2020), and which is based on iterative cycles of action and reflection, is very AR-compatible. It empowers participants to decide what counts as valuable learning; it is open to change and evolution, which is useful within an iterative (experiential) research project; and it is meant to bring a direct improvement to the situation researched, which is also the aim of Action Research as a whole. More broadly, the Wenger-Trayner social learning theory is a good fit with my onto-epistemological perspective. Indeed, it is built from a pragmatic perspective, assuming that “what counts as value is what achieves a desirable end” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p.52), and that because the world is in a state of constant change, there can be no “timeless list of what is good or bad, or of ends to be achieved or avoided for their own

sake” but rather, criteria of value judgments should be “legitimate objects of inquiry” (ibid, p.52-53). This theory also accounts for how learning and value-creation are embedded in “the complexities of identity, community, and society” and so this perspective “embraces the multiple perspectives and interpretations created by different human experiences and social contexts” (ibid, p.53).

I will now present a brief summary of these key theoretical components, which became the key building blocks for the research I carried out in DAF.

## 4.1 The Wenger-Trayner social learning theory and framework

### 4.1.1 Communities of practice

The Wenger-Trayner learning theory is about “thinking about learning in its social dimensions” instead of learning as a biological, cognitive, psychological, or historical process: “It is a perspective that locates learning, not in the head or outside it, but in the relationship between the person and the world, which for human beings is a social person in a social world” (Wenger, 2010, p. 179). Learning can be viewed as the production of social structure, involving dynamic processes of personal participation in social activities such as conversations or reflections, intertwined with the production of artefacts (reification) such as concepts, stories, methods or documents. Over time, these processes create a social history of learning that combines individual and collective aspects, giving rise to *communities of practice* - that is,

groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn to do it better as they interact regularly (E. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015a, p. 2).

A community of practice is thus determined by a *membership*, comprised of people who build relationships in the course of regular interactions; a *practice*, made of “a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems” (ibid); and a shared *domain* of interest, to whom members are committed and with regards to which they develop a shared competence distinguishing them from other people.

Communities of practice show that learning is also the production of identity: by engaging with the shared repertoire of resources within various communities of practice, in all spheres of one's life, one is recognised by other members of these communities as more or less *competent* with respect to the community's domain, which becomes a crucial aspect of one's identity. "Learning in a community of practice is a claim to competence" (E. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015b, p. 14): members of a community are ceaselessly called to redefine their *regime of competence* whenever new members join them, while the experience of newcomers is simultaneously shaped by this regime.

Another important aspect of communities of practice is that they tend to form part of complex and political *landscapes of practice*, involving other communities, which are brought together by a common body of knowledge (Wenger-Trayner *et al.*, 2015). Learning can be seen as taking place not only within each community of practice, but also in relation to this broader landscape. In this way, much learning may happen at the boundaries between communities, as different practices and perspectives come into contact and friction, leading to conflict or mutual exchanges and to increased knowledgeability in participants about the whole landscape (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2016).

But how to cultivate the *social learning capability* of these social systems? According to Wenger (2009, 2010), this requires special attention to issues of *governance* – that is, to the balance between an emphasis on stewardship versus emergence, with regards to directions and priorities for learning; and to issues of *power*, which require a fruitful interplay between vertical and horizontal accountability processes. Finally, cultivating social learning capability is also a matter of personal responsibility: the ethics of how every participant invest their identity as they travel through the landscape – their *learning citizenship* – is another critical side of the social discipline of learning.

I will pay special attention to these aspects and others in **Chapter 5**, as I consider the factors that appear to be most supportive of social learning processes within DAF.

#### 4.1.2 Social learning spaces

While the early stages of the theory (Wenger, 1998) already conceptualise personal and collective action as fundamental to these dynamics of learning (through the emphasis on

practice), the link between action and learning is particularly obvious in latest developments. Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner (2020) introduce *social learning spaces* as referring to a particular experience of mutual engagement taking place among people in pursuit of learning to make a difference – be it in their inner worlds, in their personal lives, or in the world at large.

Such spaces are not characterised by their geographical location or their physicality, but structured by social relationships: a conversation between two strangers can be a social learning space, and so can a series of interactions within a team confronted to a novel problem. Social interactions and relationships in those spaces are primarily “structured by a desire to push a joint inquiry together” – they bring about “mutual engagement at the edge of participants’ knowing” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner 2020, p.13). Fundamentally, in social learning spaces such as those that online networks may provide, participants...

1. *care to make a difference*: their participation is not perfunctory or compliant, but driven by a need to get better at making that difference, whatever it is – from refining an idea to perfecting a practice or creating political change;
2. *engage their uncertainty*: they participate from a place where their knowledge of how to make that difference tapers off, whether this knowing is descriptive or embodied, instead of a place of certainty;
3. *pay attention* to the responses they receive to the engagement of their uncertainty – including personal reactions and emotions in themselves and others, questions and comments, critiques, and beyond, observations on what seems to be working or not in practice.

Social learning spaces *create value* for participants to the extent that the latter view engaging uncertainty and paying attention as contributing to their ability to make a difference they care to make (and this value can be positive, negative, or null). The human experience of agency and meaningfulness is thus at the heart of this learning theory.

Value can be created within and across eight different *value-creation cycles* (Immediate, Potential, Applied, Realised, Enabling, Strategic, Orienting, and Transformative), in a

non-linear and unpredictable fashion. **Annex 3.3** provides more details about value-creation in social learning spaces, and on how to evaluate it.

I will now explain how I have been using this theoretical framework within DAF.

## 4.2 DAF research questions

### 4.2.1 Evolving questions

As I pointed out at the beginning of this section, my primary concern in starting to investigate social learning processes within DAF had to do with understanding the interplay between *learning* (which I conceptualised as a largely cognitive process) and *action* (which I viewed as “doing things in the world”).

However, the Wenger-Trayner social learning theory enabled me to consider learning and action as one and the same thing: any new insight, skill, inspiration, action, or personal transformation can be viewed as entangled within a ceaseless flow of social becoming, fostered by our participation in various communities of practice and social learning spaces, and the various *modes of identification* (Wenger, 2010, pp. 4–5) through which we negotiate our participation in landscapes of practice.

This evolving understanding, and the conversations that occurred as a result with my co-researcher Wendy Freeman, led to a gradual evolution of the research questions that I/we investigated.

The main research question we aimed to answer can be expressed as follows:

***To what extent can social learning (and unlearning) taking place in DAF be considered relevant, in terms of the radical collective change required to face our global predicament?***

This question was first broken down into the following sub-questions:

#### **1. Subjects and actors of learning:**

- a) What have we been (un)learning in DAF?
- b) Who did this happen for?
- c) What aspirations do we bring into DAF spaces?



## 2. Circumstances and social learning capability:

- a) In what social learning spaces did this (un)learning take place?
- b) On what occasions?
- c) What were the conditions that allowed this to happen?
- d) Who enabled this learning?

## 3. Impacts and results:

- a) What changes happened as a result? What learning loops were formed?
- b) How deep or transformational were these changes?

Gradually, these questions evolved into the following:

If radical collective change (i.e. change as (un)learning that seems relevant, given the global predicament) is happening in DAF, then...

- a) Who is being affected by these changes?
- b) What conditions enable these changes to happen, or prevent them from happening?
- c) What kind of learning leadership helps to facilitate these changes?

However, it soon became clear that it was very difficult to assess whether any of the social learning taking place in DAF could be categorised as “radical collective change,” and who was taking part in these changes – if only because it would have required placing more emphasis on the research team’s perspective rather than that of regular participants, which felt contrary to the ethos of the Wenger-Trayner evaluation framework. Therefore, I decided to dedicate a separate chapter of this thesis to my own evolving idea of radical collective change (**Chapter 6**).

Besides, the relative complexity of the Wenger-Trayner social learning theory and evaluation framework did not seem very conducive to presenting results in a way accessible to non-academics – which is one of the objectives of this research project. Consequently, I decided to use a gardening metaphor in order to structure, within **Chapter 5**, the presentation of the results from these evaluation processes, and to focus on answering the following questions:

1. ***What are the main “seeds of change” that are being cultivated within DAF social learning spaces?*** This refers to forms of social learning that appear most relevant to DAF participants, in view of the global predicament. These were mostly found within the “Potential,” “Realised” and “Transformative” value-creation cycles in the Wenger-Trayner framework.
2. ***What are the conditions – or the “soil” - enabling these changes to happen, or preventing them from happening?*** This refers to the social and material conditions that may help these seeds to grow. These appeared most clearly within the “Immediate” and “Enabling” value-creation cycles. This question also enables me to examine various dimensions of a social system’s *learning capability*.
3. ***Who are the “sowers” helping to nurture the soil and to sow the seeds, and what forms of leadership do they enact in doing so?*** This brings the attention to the persons who enact the clearest forms of leadership in creating the conditions for social learning to deepen, within a given learning space and beyond. Their influence and action can most easily be spotted within the “Applied,” “Strategic,” and “Orienting” value-creation cycles, which reveal important aspects of *learning citizenship*.

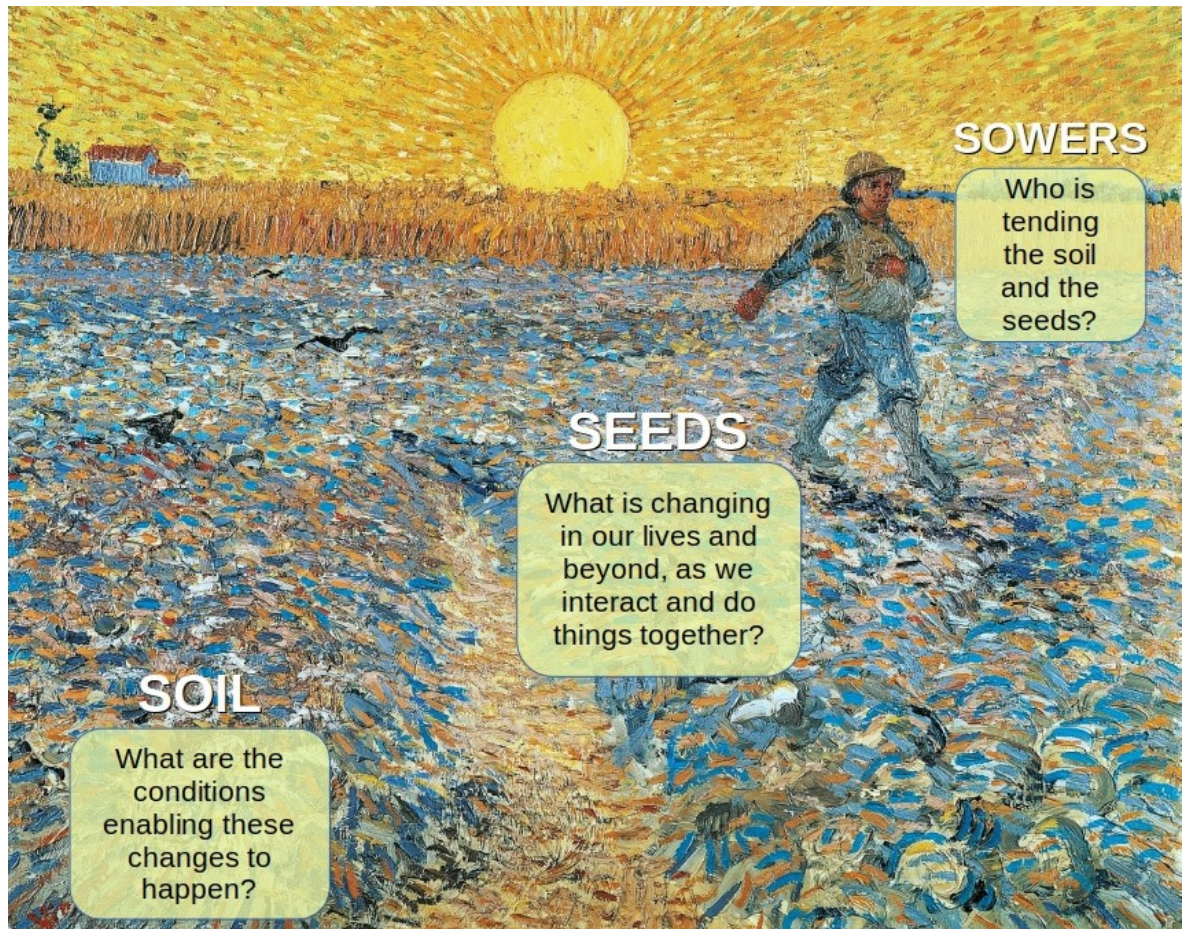


Figure 3: *Seeds, Soil, and Sowers: Cycles of value-creation*. Based on Vincent Van Gogh, "The Sower at Sunset" - Arles, June 1888. Image source: Wikipedia

#### 4.2.2 An impressionistic framework

Importantly, just like the painting in Figure 3, these three categories are impressionistic: it is not always possible to neatly categorise value creation as constituting “seeds,” “the soil,” or the action of a “sower.” It can be all of those at once.

This is largely because, as noted by other researchers making use of this value-creation framework (e.g. Bertram *et al.*, 2014; Bertram, Culver and Gilbert, 2017), it can be challenging to assign a particular comment or activity to one value-creation cycle or to another. For example, a remark stating that one has gained new understanding may be categorised as a sign of Potential, Realised, or even Transformative value-creation.

Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020, p.123) acknowledge the difficulty:

Social learning does not necessarily involve distinct phases for each cycle. More than one cycle may be involved in any given activity. The creation of value for different cycles may be intertwined and at times indistinguishable.

Nonetheless, in line with the model's pragmatist perspective, they argue (ibid.) that

the distinctions are useful theoretically as a more refined model for social learning processes viewed as value creation. In practice the distinction is useful for being more intentional about improving learning capability at each value cycle.

Therefore, my understanding is that while each cycle can be generally characterised by certain dimensions of positive or negative value that it tends to create, and by certain ways of producing this value (ibid, p.76), there is no “cut-and-dried” list of criteria for assigning part of a given story to a certain cycle, and that this categorisation largely rests on the value detective's understanding of this part of the story *within the wider context of the entire story, and of the speaker's stated aspirations*. I discuss these issues more at length in **Annex 3.3**.

For this reason, I view the soil, the seeds, and the sowers as relationally and theoretically entangled with one another. I found these images formed a useful heuristics, as a threefold set of *perspectives* from which to tell stories about the social learning that has unfolded in DAF.

I will now present an overview of the evaluation processes carried out within DAF using the theory and framework introduced above.

## 4.3 Evaluation processes in DAF

### 4.3.1 First interviews

This action research project in DAF began in January 2020. Members of the DAF Core Team, including myself, collaborated with DAF volunteers to create a survey that would be disseminated across the network: the DAF 2020 User Survey. This survey had the twin objective of assessing the usefulness of DAF platforms, and the learning and changes taking place for participants thanks to these platforms. Please refer to Cavé (2022b) for an in-depth analysis of the survey results.

There were 168 survey respondents. In early April 2020, using simple random sampling, I selected 10 of those who had indicated in their response that they would be willing to be contacted by a member of the research team. I reached out to each of them to arrange for one-hour interviews. These interviews allowed me to start gathering *contextual narratives*, and the outlines of *value-creation stories*. See **Annex 3.3** for details on this interview and analysis process.

### 4.3.2 Participating in a research team

This study unfolded over two different time periods:

- From January 2020 to September 2020: I was the only researcher involved.
- From September 2020 to April 2022: I formed a research team with DAF volunteer Wendy Freeman.

From early 2020, I began discussing my research intentions with various DAF volunteers and core team members. While it elicited some interest, no one seemed able to commit to a time-consuming process as co-researchers. In September 2020, I was contacted by Wendy Freeman. We had met through our participation in the DAF Diversity and Decolonising Circle, and she had a special interest in social and transformative learning, on which she had written her Masters' dissertation (Freeman, 2016). We decided to form a research team.

I shared with Wendy the content of the interviews I had carried out already, for those interviewees who agreed to this. Some of them asked me to keep certain details confidential.

Wendy and I decided to meet every second week over videoconference to reflect on our research and agree on next steps.

A detailed account of our work, including the activities we launched, and a comprehensive evaluation of the social learning that occurred through the action of the research team, can be found in **Annex 5.5**. Here, I will only provide a broad overview of our activities.

## ***Interviews***

On the basis of the emerging indicators and value-creation stories that I had begun to assemble, the research team (RT) agreed on the DAF social learning spaces that appeared most interesting to investigate. One of us would contact a person, share the participant research sheet with them, and arrange for an interview. We discussed beforehand any particular questions we wanted to ask the person.

Following the interview, one of us created the transcript. I then analysed the transcript using the method presented in **Annex 3.3**, and shared my reflections with Wendy. We discussed any new indicators and emerging information, to decide on our next steps. We occasionally asked the same interviewee if they agreed to join a second interview, a few months later, to see how their participation and experience may have evolved.

In this way, 44 interviews were initiated by the research team, with 36 individuals. Two of these interviews were carried out by the two of us with one another. In this way, we co-created 28 value-creation stories together with DAF participants. Interviewees agreed for 16 of these stories to be made public, by being published on the Conscious Learning Blog, and/or in this thesis. These stories can be found in **Annex 5.2**.

## ***Surveys***

Following the initial DAF 2020 User Survey, mentioned above, the RT designed and disseminated five other research surveys in DAF social learning spaces. These surveys aimed at further exploring effect data created in these spaces, on the basis of the list of indicators we were monitoring.

These surveys were co-designed by the research team. We built them using the software Qualtrics, except for the first one, built on Google Forms. In each case, I analysed the results, and discussed them with Wendy. When it felt useful to write a report, I shared drafts with Wendy for feedback, before sharing them in DAF spaces and on the Conscious Learning Blog where required.

Please see Table 1 for a summary of these surveys and of their corresponding reports, including publication information where relevant.



*Table 1: Surveys disseminated in the Deep Adaptation Forum*

Survey title	Code	Survey dates	Respondents	Report title	Report publication
DAF 2020 User Survey	DUS	Jan. 2 to Feb. 25, 2020	168	“DAF 2020 User Survey Report”	Preliminary results were shared on the IFLAS blog on June 8, 2020 (Bendell and Cavé, 2020). The full report was published on June 17, 2022 (Cavé, 2022a).
DAF Dismantling Racism Training survey	DRT	Nov. 19-30, 2020	17	“DAF ‘Dismantling Racism’ training Final Survey Results: Your feedback”	The report was shared on Feb.17, 2021, with all participants in the Dismantling Racism course. It was decided not to make it public immediately, but that it could be published together with this thesis. The report can be read here: <a href="https://bit.ly/42PYC7D">https://bit.ly/42PYC7D</a> (Cavé, 2021)
Why did you leave the Professions’ Network?	N/A	Sept. 15-30, 2021	9	N/A	No report was written, as there were too few respondents. The responses received helped inform <b>Section 2.3.2 of Chapter 5.</b>
DAF Collapse Awareness and Community survey	CAS	June 1, 2021 to Jan.22, 2022	58	“DAF Collapse Awareness and Community Survey Report”	The report was published on Feb.28, 2022 (Cavé, 2022b).
Group Reflections survey	GRS	Nov.16, 2021 to Feb.15, 2022	17	“Views on Unlearning and Radical Collective Change in the Deep Adaptation Forum”	The results of the GRS and RCS surveys were combined into a single report, published on Sept.20, 2022 (Cavé, 2022d)
Radical Change survey	RCS	Feb.8, 2022 to Mar. 22, 2022	15		

### ***Conscious Learning Festival***

Between July and October 2021, the RT initiated the first DAF Conscious Learning Festival, a series of online activities advertised in DAF as “an invitation to all participants in the Forum, to pay closer attention to what changes may be arising, and what learning may be occurring for us, as a result of participating in Deep Adaptation events, groups and spaces” (Cavé and Freeman, 2021). The various activities organised

as part of this Festival aimed at publicly surfacing more of the social learning taking place in DAF, in the hope of fostering more social learning inside and outside the network; and at encouraging DAF participants to become more self-aware of their own learning, in the hope of facilitating deeper personal transformations.

Another important goal of the Festival was to call attention to and celebrate the contributions of volunteers, groups, and other DAF participants to the collective learning taking place in the network.

As part of the Festival, we convened a series of live group calls, open to any participant in and outside DAF. These calls were recorded, and designed to function as spaces for collaborative inquiry and mutual learning. Anyone in DAF was also explicitly invited to offer to host their own webinar or live event, as part of the Festival, which led to two volunteers deciding to do so.

From October to December 2022, we co-organised a second edition of the Conscious Learning Festival, following the same modalities as the first edition (Cavé and Freeman, 2022).

### ***Conscious Learning Blog***

The start of the Conscious Learning Festival was accompanied by the launch of the Deep Adaptation Conscious Learning Blog<sup>7</sup>, curated by the RT and hosted on the DAF web server. This website aimed to offer insights into the social learning taking place in the various DAF groups, platforms, and regular events, in the hope of fostering more social learning inside and outside the network. An important assumption in doing so was that this information might encourage more self-awareness in DAF participants – and thereby facilitate deeper personal transformations.

The blog enabled anyone to create an account and post content onto it, or comment on existing posts – although any new content needed to be approved by the admin (me). New content could also be published by first being sent over to Wendy or myself over email, or to me via the website's contact form.

When we heard DAF participants mention interesting insights or resources, we also invited them to publish these on the blog, and offered to help them do it. Recordings of

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<sup>7</sup> <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/about/>



the Conscious Learning Festival webinars were published as new video resources on the blog, with the consent of all participants. Any new research reports we authored were also published there.

At the time of writing, 78 blog posts had been published on the Conscious Learning Blog, by 17 authors.

### ***Other collective processes***

Wendy and I also convened a variety of group conversations within DAF, which participants agreed could be used as part of the data analysed in this research. At the time of writing, this notably included:

- 12 Conscious Learning Festival webinars (**Annex 5.5**);
- 20 Diversity and Decolonising Learning Circles (**Annex 5.3**); and
- 1 feedback call with DAF volunteers who participated in the 2021 Transition US Summit.

We convened each of these calls as social learning spaces, encouraging our own uncertainty within them and encouraging all participants to do the same.

### **4.3.3 How I approached this case study**

As I undertook this research in DAF, I decided to bring in extra reflexivity, in the hope of becoming as aware as possible of the effects of my position in this community - both as a member of the Core Team, and as a PhD researcher – in terms of my knowledge production. As I reflected on this, I sensed that my investment in DAF activities affected my value judgements in multiple ways, for instance:

- Because I had held a senior role in DAF since its inception, and thus enjoyed easy access to people as well as a wealth of documents, it would be easy for me to lack humility with regards to any assumptions, hypotheses or theories regarding the network;
- Because I believed in the mission of DAF and invested much time and effort into it, I might pay more attention to what validated my participation, and conversely, lack sensitivity to its shortcomings or to questions about its purpose and relevance, or the worldviews of its participants;

- And because my own socio-economic and demographic positionality was very similar to that of most other participants in DAF, I may lack understanding of how this collective identity (along with forms of discourse or belief systems associated with it) may come across to people from other social contexts.

I also ran the risk of other research participants seeking to confirm – consciously or not – what they believed I might want to hear, particularly with regards to positive assessments of the role of DAF and/or decisions made by the Core Team.

I tried to manage these biases in several ways, without any illusions as to my (in)ability to be impartial.

First, in my regular journaling (**Section 2.2.2** above), I strived to remain curious about my perspectives, assumptions, and behaviour, by reviewing my notes regularly and adding reflective comments to them. I tried to hold any emergent sense-making as provisional and with suspicion, particularly when it appeared to confirm what I wanted to believe. Following Marshall (2016), in my journaling as in my conversations with my co-researcher Wendy and others, I took up the practice of regularly *scanning inner and outer arcs of attention*<sup>8</sup>, which “offer me opportunities, and challenge me to make what I do, think, feel and experience experimental in some way” (p.54) – without pretending that I have pure access to my own stream of consciousness, which is impossible.

I also tried to be as conscious as possible to issues of power (particularly with regards to decision-making, or the management of meaning) in how they played out in my research, be it in the RT (see **Annex 5.6**) or beyond. For instance, I tried to make space for mutuality and inclusion of my co-researcher’s ideas and intentions, and for regular reviews and accounting for choices made in the RT. I also shared draft versions of my thesis – and especially of Chapter 5 – with Wendy and other DAF participants for feedback and critique.

I actively sought out voices and accounts of experience that contradicted my understanding of DAF as a “force for good.” I opened up any research conversations

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<sup>8</sup> *Inner arcs of attention* refer to hyper-self-reflexivity in practice, such as noticing oneself perceiving, framing issues, interpreting, or making choices about action; glimpsing assumptions and purposes; being curious about potential patterns, repetitions and themes; noticing one’s feelings and energy and how these shift; etc. As for *outer arcs*, they are about ways of acting and sensing outside oneself: raising questions with others for mutual exploration, taking experimental action, and seeking to test out any emerging interpretations in order to hold these lightly (Marshall, 2016).

with very open-ended questions about people's experience within DAF, without orienting the conversation only towards “positive” aspects of their participation. When uncomfortable experiences or less positive views on DAF were mentioned, I tried to probe them fully. I also initiated interviews with all the individuals I knew who were once involved in DAF and then left, in order to better understand their issues with the network. As a result, several value-creation stories (**Annex 5.2**) feature less positive comments on DAF and/or the DAF leadership or other aspects, which are summarised in **Section 2.3.2** of **Chapter 5**.

Finally, I convened several conversations with DAF colleagues specifically to share with them results from my research and literature review that challenged the dominant stories and perceptions we had regarding our work (e.g. **Section 4.5** of **Annex 5.3**, regarding the D&D Circle). I saw this both a way to receive their feedback, and as constructive prompts for us to collectively reflect on and question our assumptions.

In the next chapter, I will present the results of the first case study I carried out as part of this research: FairCoop. I will return to the Deep Adaptation Forum in **Chapter 5**.

## 4 Learning from our failures: Lessons from FairCoop

*Not everything that is faced can be changed.  
But nothing can be changed until it is faced.*

- James Baldwin (1962)

In this chapter, I will describe the research and diagnostic process I carried out with several participants in FairCoop, and which led me to focus on the factors that appear to have interrupted the social learning that was taking place, leading to the near-breakdown of this community. These factors have to do with certain *ways of doing* (operations, strategy, etc.) and with *ways of being* (culture, mutual care, approaches to conflict, etc.). Arguments in this chapter will mainly draw from the literature on democratic and emergent forms of organising.

### 1 Introduction

I had been keenly interested in FairCoop since I first learned about its existence, in 2017 – and of its success: in its heyday, this community brought together thousands of activists in its online working groups, and in over 50 local groups around the world, focused on creating social change from the bottom up.

The key missions of this community, which I found articulated on the landing page of its website, resonated with my views as regards the radical collective change that I believed was needed on the global level, in the face of our predicament. I am referring in particular to the call for an “integral revolution”:

A deep and comprehensive transformation of all parts of society, including its values and structure. The new, self-managed society is based on autonomy and the abolition of all forms of domination: the state, capitalism, patriarchy, and all other forms that affect human relationships and with the natural environment.

Conscious and strategic actions are needed to compost the obsolescent structures and recover those values and qualities that enable us to live a life in common. As the most promising entry point for the collective change we see a new economic system. This is giving people the opportunity to finally exit the vicious circle of capitalistic enslavement and its side effects, to find space for new ideas without boundaries and make possible the switch to a healthy life in balance with nature. (FairCoop, 2021)

The other principles in the “What really moves us” section of that page – about disobedience, open cooperativism, decentralisation, and a stateless democracy – equally spoke to me. Indeed, I believed that shifting to a new economic and political paradigm, away from various forms of domination, was critical to the survival of humanity on this planet – and to the survival of millions of other species.

Another aspect of FairCoop that called out to me, due to my interest in alternative exchange systems, was the cryptocurrency FairCoin. Based on an innovative “proof of cooperation” technical infrastructure, this electronic currency was a keystone of the FairCoop community. Contrary to Bitcoin and its energy-consuming proof-of-work algorithm, FairCoin had a negligible environmental impact, and was designed specifically to empower communities in a fair and decentralised way (König *et al.*, 2018). This felt like a revolutionary technology to me.

My interest in FairCoop deepened while I lived in Athens, Greece, between July 2018 and March 2019. During that time, I lived in the neighbourhood of Exarcheia, a famous hotbed of rebellious, anarchist spirit. I was able to visit FairSpot, a shop which worked as a meeting place for FairCoop activists hailing from various local nodes around Greece and abroad, and in which a variety of local products could be bought using faircoins stored on an electronic wallet. These encounters gave a very concrete feel to the words of FairCoop’s integral revolution manifesto. I also heard stories about the bravery of FC founder Enric Duran, who stole half a million euros from commercial banks in protest against the corruption of the financial system, invested all of these funds into cooperative projects like FairCoop, and started living underground to escape from the Spanish judicial system (Duran, 2008; Annex 4.1).

Inspired and full of admiration, I decided to carry out a case study on FairCoop as part of my research on radical social change.

## 1.1 An ambitious project

FairCoop (FC) was an offshoot of the Catalan Integral Cooperative (CIC). The CIC was a project founded in Spain in 2010, which officially stopped functioning in mid-2019.

Building on the tradition of cooperativist and anarchist organising in Catalonia, and drawing strength from the 15-M (Indignados) anti-austerity movement from 2011, the CIC was “a transitional initiative for social transformation from below through self-organisation” which “worked towards a so-called ‘integral’ revolution, which aims to create the conditions, while also supporting all the necessary social and economic elements for a transition towards a post-capitalist society” (Balaguer Rasillo, 2021, p. 4). It gave rise to many groups and initiatives that were still active at the time of writing, including a network of a dozen independent and autonomous Catalan social currencies: the Ecoxarxes.

FC can be viewed and defined in different ways, depending on one’s focus. This is how FC introduced itself on its Wiki (FairCoop, no date b):

FairCoop is a global movement of people who are in the process of setting up a self-managed, cooperative, supportive, ecological, and autonomous socioeconomic ecosystem for the transition to alternative models of organization based on justice and equity. [...]

FairCoop supports the values of cooperatives and put most of them also into practice but FairCoop itself doesn’t have the legal status at all and goes even beyond that traditional approaches of a Coops [sic]. FairCoop has also some characters of a platform cooperative but also here goes beyond that definition due to its diversity of tools and apps. It has traits of a grassroots movement but as its also fueled from the global level and aims to create an alternative and parallel system to the existing one instead of changing the system itself this definition doesn't completely fit neither. What FairCoop is definitely not is an NGO or a company, and certainly also not for profit.

Therefore, FairCoop could be defined with the bulky term “alternative cooperative ecosystem movement” until we find a better terminology.

Balaguer Rasillo (2021, p.6) views FC as a “grassroots organisation,” “a network of cooperatives,” and as “a self-managed financial ecosystem for a transition towards postcapitalism.” In contrast, Dallyn and Frenzel (2021, p. 2) frame FC as “an international movement... seeking to expand and scale up the radical communal anarchist ideals and practices of the Catalan Integral Cooperative (CIC) in Catalonia” and as “a radical/postcapitalist commons alternative.”

As for me, I will study FC as a *social movement organisation*, and as a network bringing together a *grassroots prefigurative community*, both online and offline. My focus will be on FC’s online component, as my research question concerns the possibility for online networks to bring about radical collective change.

## 1.2 An overview of FC subprojects

In the hope of further clarifying what FC's activities were, in terms of radical collective change, I will give an overview of the wide range of projects and activities that were gathered and connected online under the umbrella of FC.

FC's diverse sub-projects and tools were based around the cryptocurrency FairCoin (Figure 4). These included FreedomCoop, a European-scale cooperative providing individuals with a toolkit enabling self-employment independently of banks or state authorities; Bank of the Commons, a cooperative providing banking services and other financial tools supporting the needs of grassroots economic movements; but also FairMarket, an online marketplace in which goods and services could be bought and sold in faircoins.



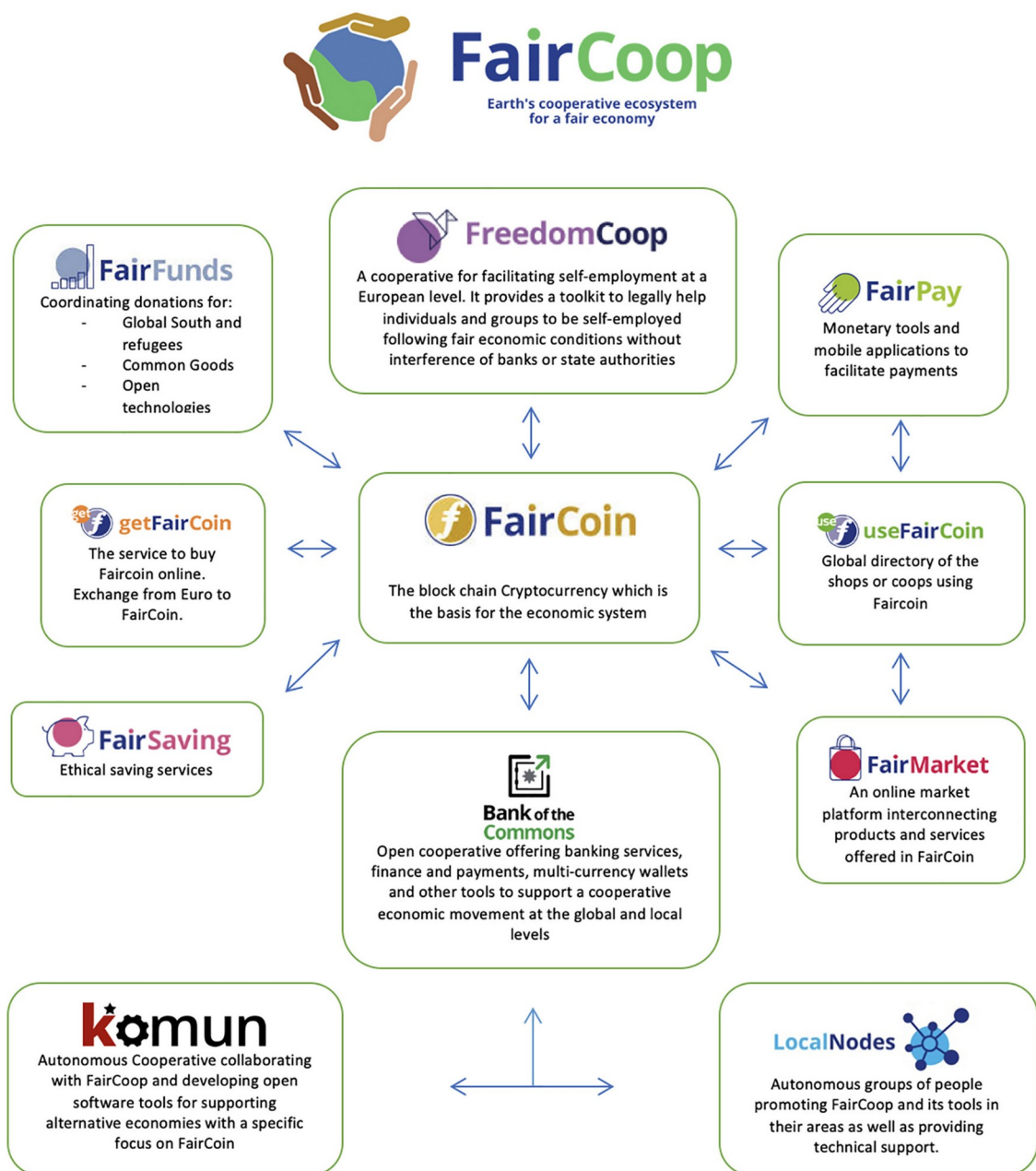


Figure 4: The decentralized economic system of FairCoop. Source: Balaguer Rasillo (2021)

An important goal underlying this ecosystem was that of creating a circular economy, defined as “an economy in which the participants are able to find each other and exchange products and services, without the need to go outside of the ecosystem and use Euro or other fiat currency to cover their needs” (FairCoop, no date a). Cooperation,

fairness and sustainability were focal points: this economy aimed at creating social change, by encouraging its participants to consider ethical criteria in selecting collaborators and suppliers, and to pay attention to various dimensions of sustainability, including working conditions, human rights, and environmental impacts.

The network also grew to encompass several dozen local nodes, which constituted the grassroots base of FC, in which strong relations of trust were cultivated at the local level. They also aimed to bridge the FC global ecosystem and the multitude of affiliated local projects, initiatives, individuals, and collectives. These nodes were present at one time or another from North and South America to Europe, with a few outliers in Africa, India, and even Syria (FairCoop, no date h; *LocalNodesPublishing* | *board.net*, no date). However, it was unclear how many were still active at the time of writing.

### 1.3 A community in crisis

During my visits to FairSpot, and reading messages in certain FC Telegram groups, I became aware of tensions in the community. However, as an outsider, I had little awareness of the depth of these tensions. It was only after I began my interviews in earnest that I realised that FC was in a state of crisis. While some interviewees put forth the activities of certain local groups and insisted that some key projects born from this community – most notably, FairCoin – were still going, most of them opined that overall activity was at an all-time low. For some, FC was simply “dormant”; for others, it was a “failed experiment.”

The public minutes of the monthly FC General Assemblies appeared to confirm this state of affairs. These assemblies were a key component of FC global governance, and were normally posted online every month (FairCoop, no date c). But while the minutes were kept and published comprehensively until the end of 2019, only one meeting was documented in 2020, and two in 2021. Furthermore, the attendance of these meetings appeared to have considerably decreased since early 2019, with only four participants attending the latest documented assembly (in March 2021).

This can be related to the notion of absolute doubt, which Dalmau and Dick (1991, p. 7) define as the ultimate stage of breakdown of a project or group:

When *absolute doubt* is present there is widespread cynicism and despair. The system is barely workable. It may even cease to function, although this is not always the case. An organisation or group can still continue to exist when there is widespread absolute doubt, but will be very ineffective and inefficient. Its members get no rewards for their participation and contribution to common goals. There is widespread breakdown of basic management principles and practices.

This realisation led to important changes in how I approached my research within FC.

## 1.4 How my research questions evolved

My original intention was to help convene and facilitate a participatory research group, composed of various active participants in FC, to explore the kinds of social learning taking place within FC projects. I was hoping that such a group might be willing to look into this question, and that together, we might better understand the dimensions of learning most closely associated with FC's impact in the world and in participants' lives. I sympathised with FC's aims and admired the breadth and sophistication of its projects. My goal was thus to offer my time as a researcher to help bring about collaborative action and understanding that may further the purposes of FC.

However, it soon became obvious that my interviewees didn't feel they were learning much at all in FC projects any longer, given the community's decline in energy and activity. To describe this situation using Etienne and Beverly Wenger-Trayner's (2020) social learning framework, the social containers – or *social learning spaces* – that once enabled interactions among participants had mostly become inoperative, and with them, the social learning capability of FC as a social system (Wenger, 2009). This rendered my original research question irrelevant to the people I spoke with.

This led me to sound out what research questions might be more interesting to the FC participants I was in contact with, in keeping with my commitment to carrying out *movement-relevant research* (**Chapter 1**), while still remaining faithful to my research's focus on generating practical insights on how to bring about radical collective change.

Eventually, my conversations led me to settle on the following research questions (RQ) for this chapter:

- 1 What has been the trajectory of FC in time?
- 2 How to explain FC's current level of activity and usefulness?
- 3 What were the main outcomes of participants' involvement with FC, in terms of cognitive, relational, experiential, and affective dimensions of social learning?
- 4 What can social change-makers learn from this project? In particular, what can be learned about the...
  - "Ways of doing" that were most closely related to FC's impact in the world?
  - "Ways of being" and worldviews, and how these have played into the life of FC?

As I explained (**Chapter 3**), these research questions led me to adopt a participatory evaluation approach, centred on a convergent interviewing process, and involving fifteen participants.

In the next sections, I will introduce the main answers this research produced to the four research questions above, and discuss their implications. I will conclude on some practical insights that I believe this study brought to the fore, which other social change-makers may wish to consider.

## ***2 Research findings***

In this section, I present the research findings as they appeared in the final report I shared with all interviewee participants (**Chapter 3**). The main difference with the final report is that this chapter includes a detailed discussion of the findings in view of the existing literature. I have also moved Section 2 ("A brief timeline of FairCoop") to **Annex 4.1**.

I will summarise the opinions on what interviewees considered to be the main issues that affected FC, in terms of:

- Objectives and strategy
- Ways of doing
- Ways of being

The final subsection reviews what the main outcomes have been for interviewees as a result of their participation in FC.

I try to point out areas of agreement and disagreement whenever possible. Quotes from interviewees are highlighted in grey. Interviewees are identified by a number, preceded with a hashtag (#).

Each subsection is followed by a discussion of these findings with regards to the existing scholarly and practitioner literature. For reasons of space, I will limit my discussion to those aspects which feel most salient to me, with regards to movement-relevant learning.

I summarise the key insights drawn from each of these subsections in the conclusion to this chapter.

## **2.1 Objectives and Strategy: Hacking the markets, or building an alternative grassroots economy?**

The interviews revealed a deep strategic and ideological divide within FC, focused on the use of FairCoin. In summary, interviewees spoke of two distinct objectives that were pursued within FC through the use of this cryptocurrency:

- 1 “hacking” global financial markets, to extract financial resources that could be fed into a alternative grassroots economy; and
- 2 encouraging more mutual help locally, and a flourishing “circular economy”.

Both aspects are mentioned in a statement by founder Enric Duran, published in September 2014, announcing the creation of FC (Duran, 2014) - but it could be argued that the first strategic aspect is more prominent in this announcement. On the FC website mission summary (FairCoop, 2021), these two objectives seem more closely interlinked and on an equal footing.

According to three respondents, a key challenge in FC was that of pursuing these two objectives simultaneously, in spite of the tension between these goals:

*“[FC] proposed to launch a cryptocurrency that would be for the [local] circular economy, while at the same time surfing speculative cryptomarkets, without having one of these objectives impact the other.” (#1)*

*“We wanted for FairCoin to become a kind of exchange, mutual credit, a social money, and that it also be traded in the currency market, with a fluctuating value. These two things were a big big big mistake, because they were completely incompatible.” (#2)*

However, another interviewee argued that both objectives had to go hand in hand: “hacking the crypto market” required a community first building trust in the cryptocurrency used for that purpose.

One respondent mentioned that FC was successful, for a while, at uniting activists from social circles that would rarely mingle ordinarily: “crypto-enthusiasts and social currency supporters” (or, in more familiar terms, “(cypher)punks” and “hippies”).

According to this respondent:

- “crypto-enthusiasts” were more strongly in favour of FC's avowed strategy of “hacking the speculative markets,” and therefore, were more focused on developing market strategies involving cryptocurrency exchange platforms;
- while “social currency supporters ... profoundly despised the crypto-exchanges and the speculation behind cryptos in general,” didn't want FairCoin to be traded online, and disassociated themselves from the “market activism” side of the FC strategy.

According to this same respondent, FC members from local groups, including local producers of goods and services sold on FairMarket, tended to be more supportive of social currencies, and thus were not well attuned to the FC market activism strategy, involving FairCoin being traded in online exchanges – or else they were not well informed about how the value of FairCoin could fluctuate; and this led to misunderstandings and grievances when the market value of FairCoin plummeted, and many local producers found themselves unable to exchange their accumulated faircoins for euros, contrary to what they had been promised by the FC general assembly.

Besides, as mentioned by Dallyn and Frenzen (2021, p.19) based on a FC participant's testimony:

*"at times merchants were brought into the ecosystem on the basis of the promise of FairCoin generating ever increasing returns in Euros on cryptocurrency markets."*

An interviewee agreed that arguments used to invite new merchants into the FC ecosystem were sometimes flawed, and therefore brought in participants who were moved by the wrong incentives:

*"I remember visiting a merchant that didn't even have the poster on the shop and didn't make any effort to spend the FairCoin into the economic circle we were creating. So, why was this person in our market? Why it was allowed to participate? It makes no sense. We should have been much more careful when inviting people to participate on the system. They should have been committed people (at least a bit). And yes, this was our fault. I've seen people 'selling' this more as an investment option than a social project." (#7)*

In other words, it seems that the alliance of these two camps was fragile, and built on a lack of shared commitment to (and/or understanding of) the market activism strategy - with the risks it carried. In particular, the risk of FairCoin's *assembly price* becoming divorced from its *market price* doesn't appear to have been widely mentioned when prospective merchants were brought onto FairMarket (see **Section 2.1.1** below).

However, while five interviewees expressed broad agreement with this interpretation, five others did not agree, or considered that these different ideological standpoints weren't at the root of the tensions in FC:

*"The main source of conflict was due on one hand to the too high difference between the market price of the FairCoin and the community price at which exchange was promised. There were big disagreements on the topic of the value of the FairCoin and also on the promise of exchange, that was not h[e]ld." (#3)*

*"Well there was more of an open debate on how to handle the issue of markets as regards hacking them, but that never ran contrary to the intention of constructing circular economies... [but] given the circumstances, in the end everything got mixed up because everything was interconnected." (#4)*

According to several respondents, a key strategic error was that of making promises (in private and in public) that FC would ensure that faircoins would always be exchangeable for euros at an assembly price which would only ever increase, and never decrease - meaning, in effect, that merchants having been paid in faircoins for their products for example would be able to trade these faircoins for euros. This worked fine at first, while the market value of FairCoin kept rising along with other cryptocurrencies; much less so after the “crypto crash” of early 2018. Now, various participants - including many merchants - were approaching FC asking to trade thousands of faircoins for euros, following the official community rate (i.e. 1.20 euro per FairCoin), which drained the FC coffers.

One interviewee argued that instead of ensuring that merchants would accept FairCoin, through the promise to exchange faircoins to euros, the first step for FC should have been to only allow basic goods and services to be paid for in faircoins, to slowly build up a grassroots circular economy.

Finally, three interviewees also mentioned that certain so-called “bad actors,” with a speculative mindset, purchased faircoins at the cheap market rate and then asked to trade these faircoins for euros at the official community rate, over ten times higher. These interviewees were referring to speculators who weren’t involved in any FC community projects, and suspected that “community members” were doing so too.

In contrast, one respondent said that two local FC-aligned groups making use of faircoins in their country never guaranteed local merchants the possibility to exchange faircoins back to fiat currencies; according to this respondent, this enabled these two groups to avoid the tensions that shook the FC ecosystem as a whole. Another interviewee spoke about similar prudence being exerted within a local group in a different country.

In the words of one interviewee:

*“A shared vision is extremely important for a cooperative network, as something to latch onto. This was a core challenge. There are all kinds of different personalities in FC - each member may have different visions entering this, and a different understanding of what it means to them. Fighting can occur when it seems that the vision*



*doesn't fit. ... Visions were unaligned. Solidarity and cooperation can mean very different things to different people.” (#5)*

On the topic of which another respondent commented:

*“It often seems to have depended on who spoke to the merchants as to how their expectations were managed. Some people promised the earth, others almost nothing.” (#10)*

### **2.1.1 FairCoin design and the crypto-markets**

In view of the above, it won't be surprising that all respondents spoke to the critical importance of FairCoin within FC - both in generating energy, excitement and commitment among very different people, especially social change activists (see above), but also as the Achilles' heel of FC as a project.

*"From the beginning, FC was very much focused on FairCoin, unfortunately - so it attracted lots of people into the space. There was a widespread belief in this fairytale: 'We have a cryptocurrency whose value will just keep on increasing.' ... When the value of FairCoin rose from 5 eurocents to 1.2 euros, in 2017, I grew scared - especially given FC's fixed exchange rate from FairCoin to Euros." (#6)*

*“FC was always dependent on the health of FairCoin... In the beginning, when many people were buying in FairMarket or on the exchanges... Everything was merrymaking and activity (because of the assurances of convertibility to euros, and the promises). Now that the euros are gone, and the markets paralysed... FC seems to be in a coma.” (#1)*

Indeed, the fall in value of the FairCoin (together with other cryptocurrencies traded on exchange platforms, such as Bitcoin) in early 2018 seems to have been a major blow to FC: a few months later, Duran announced at the FC Summer Camp that FC coffers were now empty of euros; Komun was officially launched, as a FC affinity group critical of Duran's leadership; conflict erupted, often violently; and by many accounts, most FC activities started unravelling.

Why did this happen? An important factor lies in the design of FairCoin - and in particular, the decision to grant it two independent values:

*“Because Bitcoin was on the rise, the project was growing increasingly famous, and the price of FairCoin kept rising together with that of Bitcoin, we decided to grant FairCoin a ‘stable’ value, an exchange value to manage exchanges to fiat currency. This was to make things more secure for the shops and productive projects that participated [in FC], to avoid the volatility of crypto[currencies] that was also impacting FairCoin at that time. We decided on a value of 1 euro, and later 1.20, following market fluctuations of the time.” (#4)*

Thus, FairCoin was granted two independent monetary values - one, the *official* or *assembly price*, a fixed value that was gradually raised to 1.2 euros (in late 2017), in step with the bullish cryptocurrency trends of the time; and another, the *market price*, which fluctuated based on the speculation happening in the exchange platform where FairCoin was listed.

But while FairCoin's market price was on a par with the assembly price in late 2017, this market value then crashed to less than a tenth of the official price in early 2018; and because FC guaranteed to merchants on FairMarket and elsewhere the convertibility of faircoins into euros, anyone could turn a profit from buying and reselling faircoins:

*“When [the value of FairCoin] started to decrease, decrease, decrease in the market, it was very absurd to offer products and services that could be paid in FairCoin, because anyone could just go 'outside' to the exchange, buy 'cheap' faircoins, and buy things at a higher price inside the community, and profit from this. Therefore, this point for me is what destroyed the community and the project, and the topic of FairCoin was very critical. That was also because there were great piles of faircoins [within the reach] of people who weren't involved in the project, and who were trying to enrich themselves. ...the internal assembly price completely killed the community.” (#2)*

This does not imply that anyone asking to trade their faircoins for euros after 2018 were necessarily trying to undermine the project; as mentioned above, it would seem that many merchants were unaware that by doing so they were in effect draining FC of its euros.

In this regard, two interviewees opined that many FC participants - notably merchants accepting FairCoin - lacked the understanding of how markets and economics work,

weren't told clearly about the risks posed by cryptocurrencies traded in exchange markets, or weren't interested:

*"[There was] a lack of knowledge about, and even a rejection of markets and economics by a large segment of the community. This ended up creating a bubble, and later a complete disillusion regarding FairCoin when its [market] price started to decrease. ... An official price should have been accompanied with market strategies, instead of labelling free markets and those moving in them 'capitalist' without understanding how they work." (#9)*

### 2.1.2 Resolving the double-pricing issue

A reasonable question to ask, in view of this situation, is: Why wasn't the assembly price of FairCoin lowered, in line with its decreasing market value?

One interviewee said there were two main reasons for this:

*"1) Lots of people thought that this was a decision that didn't make sense for a different number of reasons:*  
*- It was going against some past assembly consensus that the price would just go up.*  
*- It felt as if markets were driving our decisions, and some people thought - I would add, wrongly - that we were supposed to be independent of the markets.*  
*- Some people felt that this would affect negatively the merchants who had been accepting FairCoin at 1.2euros or the people who had bought FairCoin at 1.2eur.*  
*2) Duran didn't want to do it. I wrote 2) to emphasize the role of Duran. As if he would have wanted to do it, I guarantee you that it would have been done." (#10)*

This explanation encapsulates the answers provided by other interviewees, most of whom similarly stressed Duran's key role in preventing the price from being lowered, but also pointed to other reasons for this not happening, in spite of the destructive impact the double-pricing had on FC as a whole:

*"Most people wanted to change the [assembly] rate [of FairCoin], except Duran and one or two others. And because of the assembly-based consensus [rule], in which one person can block the decision, we were stuck in the status quo." (#6)*

### 2.1.3 The crypto exchanges

It also appears that FC's "market activist" strategy encountered difficulties due to power asymmetries between the FC project, and the crypto exchanges: one respondent explained that FairCoin was unlisted from the crypto-exchange platform Bittrex due to FC not being a company with a CEO.

*"We lost a lot of traction because we didn't fulfil the requirements for being listed on Bittrex - they insisted our 'company' had to have a CEO and we insisted we were not a company and therefore didn't have a CEO - they de-listed us and the price basically went to zero shortly after that. So although we were technically in the right, we didn't realise what a power asymmetry there is between exchanges and tokens (or can be)." (#8)*

According to another interviewee, the dependence of FairCoin on such exchanges was a major liability. When FairCoin was unlisted, speculators dumped their faircoins, which spelled "the beginning of the end for FairCoin."

### 2.1.4 FairCoin and conflict

Unsurprisingly, the crisis brought about by the crash in the market value of FairCoin was described by most respondents as a major source of tensions within the community. One person, involved since early on, mentioned the problem of not getting any value for their many faircoins, due to the impossibility of exchanging them back to euros or spending them anywhere:

*"I have loads of FairCoin, since the beginning of the project, I acquired a load of faircoins, and they aren't useful in the least to me right now!" (#2)*

Another describes Duran's announcement that FC coffers were empty of euros:

*"[During the 2018 FC Summer Camp] all of a sudden Duran announced that we had no funds left, and that those of us who were working [for FC] as well as the merchants would stop receiving euros. It was total chaos. There were many accusations, people blamed each other, many others got involved from outside the project and within, some with their own opinion, others misled by the 'critics/dissidents'..." (#4)*

### **2.1.5 Rescuing or replacing FairCoin**

Following the crash in the value of FairCoin, several innovative proposals were put forth as alternatives or complementary solutions to the ailing FairCoin: for example, FairCredit - a mutual credit system, which would have involved taking FairCoin off exchanges entirely; or the Fairo - a unit of measure for purchasing power, functioning together with FairCoin, and whose value was set to be one thousandth of the basic cost of living in a given region.

However, none of these solutions gained much steam, although the Fairo started to be experimented with locally. One respondent said this was a result of the blockage created by the need to pay off the merchants still waiting to exchange their faircoins into euros.

As of September 2021, some interviewees considered that FairCoin as a project could regain some momentum, as a result of strengthened operational budget thanks to one participant's investment. Discussions were also ongoing regarding a rebranding of this cryptocurrency. Hurdles still remained concerned technical development, on the one hand; and the need for more widespread support and faith in the project itself.

### **2.1.6 Discussion: Reviewing strategic and ideological orientations within FC**

From the early days of FC, FairCoin was at the heart of the project's activities. This innovative cryptocurrency helped to capture many people's attention, particularly in the era preceding the Bitcoin crash of early 2018.

Chohan (2017) shows how cryptocurrencies emerged from cryptoanarchism - itself an outgrowth of the 1990s Cypherpunk movement - and how these technologies embody in their architecture several central anarchist values (decentralization, egalitarianism and consensus decision-making, self-management and empowerment, freedom and autonomy, cooperative individualism, and addressing local needs). An important caveat to this is that certain aspects in which important cryptocurrencies work do induce centralising and oligarchic trends – for example, how Bitcoin is mined (Willms, 2020). Moreover, according to Husain, Franklin and Roep (2020), while blockchain projects can be considered as “prefigurative” technologies, “embody[ing] the politics and power structures which they are aiming for” (p.383), the political imaginaries that underlie

such projects are more closely related to right-wing libertarian politics than to anarchist thinking.

According to the white paper laying out its key characteristics (König *et al.*, 2018), FairCoin is designed to function as a “store of value for the solidarity economy, cooperatives and regional initiatives” (p2) and “is not made for speculators, but for participants on markets to trade real goods and services” (p8). However, the history of this cryptocurrency shows that its troubles largely came from being caught in speculative logics inherent to the global cryptocurrency market, due to the “double pricing” strategy that was pursued. And as the dominant political imaginaries in the cryptocurrency realm appear more in line with free-market, “anarcho-capitalist” mindsets than with the left-wing values advocated by FC and FairCoin (Husain, Franklin and Roep, 2020), it is plausible that the project attracted unwelcome attention from participants with more speculative mindsets – and that the rise in FairCoin’s market value led many FC participants to overlook the speculation that, for a time, raised FairCoin’s profile.

Reflecting on the failure of FairCoin as a tool meant to hack the cryptocurrency markets to build and sustain a post-capitalist commons, Dallyn and Frenzen (2021) argue that such a commons would have needed clearer boundaries and “filtering layers,” “so that capital can be filtered into the commons, while ‘capitalistic value extraction’ [is] prevented from seeping into the internal values and practices of the commons itself” (p14). They argue that this would have helped protect FairCoin from the encroaching values and practices of capital, and avoid diluting FC’s radical anarchist ideals.

In any case, this issue highlights the risks that a prefigurative community will face in trying to simultaneously participate in global financial markets, while building local economy initiatives – particularly if this community has no buffers in place against the fluctuations that affect global financial markets.

This aspect connects directly to the question of FC’s unclear membership, to which I will return below. Interviewees were divided on the importance of FC’s twin strategic orientation, but also on the question of whether FC suffered, strategically, from disagreements between two broad groups of participants – whom one participant referred to as “crypto-enthusiasts” and “social currency supporters.” Some considered

the FC strategy as self-contradicting, and described an uneasy relationship between these two broad cultural groups, while others did not consider this an issue.

The effect of boundary-spanning in SMOs, be it relative to issue and identity, organization, or tactics, is a topic of ongoing debate among social movement scholars (Wang, Piazza and Soule, 2018). For example, Olzak and Johnson (2018) make the case that a more specialised (or “single-issue”) SMO will:

- be recognised as a more coherent entity, which facilitates outsiders’ interpretations of its activities and thus secure better legitimacy;
- more easily attract new adherents who are truly committed to a particular cause, and maintain higher loyalty among its supporters;
- have a lower chance of dissolution due to having fewer cleavages – over divergent interests, politics, or loyalties - that may promote internal conflict;
- more easily acquire organisational capital (including members’ loyalty, commitment, and technical skills, along with organizational finances, internal solidarity, and external reputation).

These authors’ longitudinal study of multiple environmental SMOs revealed that those which adopted a relatively broad “issue frame” (spanning dissimilar issue areas) did not last as long as specialised SMOs. These findings, and particularly their emphasis on the issue of cleavages as a source of conflict, appear relevant to the case of FC.

However, other authors argue to the contrary. For example, Heaney and Rojas (2014) show that SMOs – for example, those involved in anti-war protest organising – often gain substantial advantages from forming hybrid identities that blend established organisational categories. Such organisations may act as important brokers between movements; help new supporters connect with a movement in ways that feel suit intersectional identities; and by helping to build inter-movement networks.

These findings can be usefully compared to the results of Leach’s (2009) investigation of the German Autonomen movement. She concludes that the longevity of this movement over many decades, and its ability to sustain a collectivist-democratic structure, is in fact largely due to deep contradictions running through its ideology and identity. This permanent tension has been a source of an ongoing dialectical process of

negotiation and reflection, which has paradoxically strengthened the movement and prevented it from becoming dogmatic or from dissolving completely.

FC can arguably be considered to have spanned at least two broad sets of issues and identities, along with two corresponding different tactical repertoires. Whether this was a strength or a liability overall remains unclear and requires further investigation. In any case, it appears that more could have been done to ensure all FC participants were aware of the implications of strategic decisions that were made – for example, in making FairCoin vulnerable to the fluctuations of speculative financial markets.

## 2.2 Ways of doing

What are some important lessons that can be drawn from FC's trajectory, in terms of governance, tools, and other strategic decisions?

### 2.2.1 Governance

Four respondents pointed to the unacknowledged power dynamics that operated within FC:

*“The FC origin story.... relied heavily on [Duran,] ended up giving him a de facto power within the group, which he would use when necessary and deny existed when it suited him, for example when people made him responsible for things which had gone wrong (sometimes wrongly, sometimes with good reason), he would say 'it's not about me, this is a decentralised cooperative' or similar. But then he also frequently used the power to force through decisions he wanted, and block others he didn't, all the while claiming there was no leader. Of course this requires others to also give up their own power.” (#8)*

Two respondents considered that the situation in FC was a classic case of the “tyranny of structurelessness.” While FC aspired to be a non-hierarchical and decentralised social structure, covert hierarchical patterns emerged in practice - for example, when deciding who to trust with passwords to important software infrastructure. And these patterns didn't only empower Duran:

*“Not all the power was concentrated in Duran, other community members' voices had weight, and towards the later stages often more*



*weight than that of Duran, because he had been somewhat discredited by how things had played out." (#8)*

This respondent blamed these covert power structures for much of the conflicts which happened. Indeed, members of the faction opposing Duran (see below) repeatedly mentioned Duran's central role in FC, and what they considered a lack of transparency, as a key incentive for them to form their dissident affinity group.

Corroborating elements regarding the lack of transparency in decision-making include a detailed FC dossier introducing various aspects of FC governance (FairCoop, 2018). While it states that decision-making in FC takes place through general assemblies, it doesn't mention actual rules of engagement within these assemblies. Similarly, on the FC Wiki, sections on "Decisions" and "Assemblies" were left empty (FairCoop, no date c) .

In practice, as two respondents have confirmed, major decisions could only be taken in the monthly FC general assemblies following strict principles of consensus, which made it impossible to adopt a motion if at least one person opposed it:

*"A key mistake... was to use Telegram-based assemblies as a decision-making process. But on top of this, there was also the use of a particular notion of consensus, in which one couldn't change any previous decision as long as a single person was against it. This suited Duran very well, as sometimes he was the only one who refused to reverse any old decision he took himself, even though other people agreed on reversing it. ... Consensus only concerned everyone participating in a given assembly - in English, on Telegram, at a given date and time. So you could be faced with decisions taken by a few people that were then impossible to change." (#9)*

Three respondents also mentioned that because there was no official membership system in place, it was problematic to know whether "everyone was there" (or at least, whether certain stakeholder groups were represented) during an assembly, which could affect the legitimacy of any decision that was taken. And the fact that reversing decisions was so difficult - as even a single person could block such a motion - made legitimacy an even thornier issue.

For example, I asked one interviewee whether the decision to adopt and develop OCP, one of the main sources of conflict in FC (see below), was done democratically. They replied:

*“Yes and No. Yes because we have discussed it in different assemblies and the consensus was to support it. No because the consensus was done by a small group of people in Telegram chat groups and Etherpads. The support of a major part of community was not really given but more or less supposed.” (#13)*

An interviewee opined that no decision to use OCP was ever taken in any FC general assembly.

And while Telegram-based assemblies allowed for non-participants to read the text messages shared for the occasion (see below), in practice some found this discouraging due to the sheer volume of text messages to catch up with. One interviewee also pointed to the lack of adequate and inclusive methods of coordination and decision-making, which could have ensured that different voices be heard and respected.

Once tensions came to a head, in the wake of the collapse of FairCoin's market value, conflict erupted in assemblies and decision-making grew all the more arduous:

*“Decisions were very difficult to make. Anyone could oppose the decisions, so there was a lot of fighting; as a result, people who might say no would abstain not to be attacked. Having anonymous voting would have helped.” (#5)*

Two interviewees spoke more generally of the problem of leadership in groups that are supposed to be horizontal and avoiding hierarchy:

*“The problem with flat structures is that everyone is waiting for someone to take the lead, and then when you do take the lead people feel think you're being an elitist, disregarding the collective. So there is a general tendency to just hang around, not feeling ok to take any leadership.... [In FC] it was always difficult to figure out how to make sure the structure could be both flat and functional.” (#3)*

## ***Duran's involvement in FC: a double-edged sword***

*“[Duran's] position has been influential in everything, because he was the focus of everything. And he is the one who, in the final analysis, takes all decisions and manages the funds.” (#4)*

Nearly all interviewees spoke about the key importance of Duran's involvement in FC - both as the leading figure who initiated the whole project, but also as someone bearing a heavy responsibility in the troubles that befell FC, which caused the decrease of activity in the project overall.

*“The origin story of Enric's 'action' was very helpful in getting us new members, but it had a downside: too much power invested in one person, in a community which was supposedly non-hierarchical.” (#8)*

*“Basically, Enric has treated FC as his own thing/project/company. And I understand why. He put so much work, enthusiasm, and even money into it. I think that probably FC wouldn't have ever existed if it wasn't because of him. Yet, if you wanna behave as a boss/owner, then you should made that clear from the beginning. He launched some sort of very ambitious, decentralized, radical movement, close to anarchist thought. He surrounded himself by these radical people. He made them think that they were all part of a radical team. But when things got worse he made it clear that he was the one in charge because he was the only one who had access to the money. He had a paternalistic and patronizing attitude towards the whole ecosystem, and that created lots of human problems. Because some people kept seeing him as some kind of leader.” (#10)*

Criticisms concerned various aspects of Duran's action and leadership style, especially:

- An inability to admit mistakes and take responsibility;
- Denying the existence or seriousness of the problems affecting the community; and
- An unwillingness or inability to listen to others or delegate.

Despite widespread criticism, two respondents did make a point of mentioning they felt it was unfair to blame all of FC's troubles on Duran:

*“I'm against that, that all the blame goes to one person and everybody is blaming Enric, and it's Enric's fault? No, we are sharing this responsibility, we are not children... it's always blaming,*

*and it's not me, I'm not capable to reflect or to take over my own responsibility... all of those people I love, they're amazing people, extraordinary individuals. But we as a group, as a movement as a community, we failed together. It's not like individual responsibility.” (#12)*

Here, I will focus on three particular criticisms that were recurrent in my interviews, and which have to do with the governance of FC. The first was widely shared; interviewees were more divided regarding the second and the third.

### **1 A lack of transparency in the management of FC funds, and concentration of political power**

Eight interviewees pointed out that Duran was the sole manager of the “common funds” in FC, which they described as being ultimately controlled by Duran alone from a bank account only he had access to; and that he never reported back on his management of these funds.

*“There wasn't much transparency on how many euros were 'in the box'. Everything was in Enric's hands, and when we asked him about this, he kept making excuses, saying he didn't have time to check. ... While FC was supposed to be built on principles of transparency, decentralisation, and openness, in practice the transparency and decentralisation aspects weren't so strong.” (#2)*

This concentration of the project's finances into Duran's hands seems to have occurred largely as a result of his raising these funds to initiate this project. Duran then retained a large degree of control over the financial infrastructure of FC:

*“In a way, 'the common funds' were his funds. Because after all, he donated millions of faircoins to FC, and all the euros that FC had amassed were thanks to the sells of faircoins (via the official platform) to 'anonymous' people. But again, he embellished the whole thing as if 'his funds' were 'common funds' and he was just a responsible manager of 'the commons'.” (#10)*

One interviewee said that Duran also raised funds with private investors who had to remain anonymous, and that because he was the only person bringing euros into FC, he was made into “the leader” and had to shoulder extra responsibility. Local groups could have helped to raise their own funding, which didn't happen.

### **2 Appointing (or helping to appoint) friends to positions of responsibility**

As a result of his control over FC finances, on top of his notoriety, Duran was able to wield considerable political power within FC. Three interviewees stressed the problematic connection between Duran's deep involvement in FC finances, and his lack of transparency in doing so, and how that affected people's status and treatment within the community.

One of them argued that although Duran couldn't choose on his own who should be doing what, whenever he proposed a candidate for a certain role, his candidate was usually endorsed by the assembly. The same person also regretted that people with a closer connection to Duran had priority if they wanted to convert into euros any faircoins they earned while working for FairCoop – while other people had to wait. In this way, Duran's control over these conversion operations was another source of power.

One respondent nuanced this statement, pointing to how Duran had to start somewhere as he started building FC from scratch, and thus naturally turned to close friends and allies, along with others he found had the right skills to play a certain role. They also opined that responsibility for certain roles was also taken on as a result of nominations put forth by other members of FC.

### **3 Taking technical decisions on behalf of the community**

Three respondents charged that Duran's disproportionate influence in FC extended to the realm of technical decisions regarding FC software - despite Duran not having expert technical knowledge himself. One person argued that Duran tended to entrust close friends and allies with key technical roles, and implied that opinions from the rest of the community had less weight in this matter.

This is a significant charge, given that the question of tools to use has been a major bone of contention within FC (see below).

According to three respondents, criticisms such as those mentioned above, and the controversy that grew as a result - culminating in the creation of a dissident faction - led to an important loss of trust and credibility for Duran as time went by, to the extent that other participants ultimately even grew more influential than him.

### 2.2.2 Tools

*“The topic of technical issues in FC, too, was a black hole, quite a powerful one, which created a lot of division.” (#2)*

#### **Telegram: the pitfalls of text messaging**

In the summer of 2015, during the first FC Camp in Greece, participants began to use the messaging software Telegram to communicate. It gradually became the primary communication and organisation tool for all FC activity outside of local groups. Each FC project or area of activity soon had its dedicated Telegram group for participants to coordinate their activities.

Importantly, while Telegram allows online calls, as well as recorded voice messages, the norm within FC was to engage with this medium nearly exclusively through text messages - even in circumstances that would seem more suited to voice or video calls, such as the FC general assemblies.

An interviewee pointed out that text messages were useful, during assemblies, as meeting minutes for those who couldn't attend. Another stressed how the convenience of Telegram allowed the rapid expansion of FC groups and the organic burgeoning of various initiatives and projects. However, the limitations of this medium were pointed out by six interviewees - particularly the difficulty of keeping pace with rapid-fire conversations happening over chat during assemblies.

*“There's a limit [to what] you can really handle in an online assembly and a chat. Because it just takes too long. It's confusing. Nobody, not everybody can put in their own opinion, and then just it explodes in terms of time, and in terms of chat messages...” (#6)*

Text-based interactions were also blamed for hampering empathy and failing to solve conflict. For example, respondents pointed out the difficulty of sensing other people's emotions, or understanding their sense of humour.

Another interviewee mentioned having encouraged others within FC to use video calls, in order to overcome conflicts and misunderstandings, but to no avail: the habit of using typed communication in Telegram had become too ingrained within FC spaces. Another person chalked this up to the activist culture of anonymity that characterised these spaces.

More generally, three respondents linked the conflict and lack of trust that spread in FC to the online nature of the community, and stressed that physical meetups like the annual summer camps were much more peaceful:

*“We hurt one another so much online. Except when we could meet physically, be together and that was the coolest time, because we were all there, we could see each other’s faces, discuss, debate, think together... that was the nice stuff. But everything online, the chats, the criticisms, all this largely failed.” (#2)*

### ***How to better keep track of people’s contributions?***

Another way in which tools proved to be problematic in FC has to do with the adoption of OCP, an enterprise resource planner (along with the associated methodology OCW), which generated much controversy. This software was meant to keep track of flows of value within FC, and to reward people for their contributions via mutual checks on each other’s work.

All interviewees identifying with Faction 1 (see below) mentioned this topic as a key reason for their discontent - and agreed on three main criticisms:

1. OCP was not adopted democratically, but due to the lobbying exerted by a small group of people including Duran;
2. too much money was spent on it;
3. OCP was not useful, or not useful enough.

Interviewees who didn’t identify with Faction 1 had different opinions as regards these criticisms:

- While some believed there was wide agreement to adopt this tool - and stressed that there was no opposition to it when it was proposed for adoption during the FC summer camp in 2017 - others said that the openness of FC assemblies, and the way in which decisions were taken in such assemblies, always made it possible to question the legitimacy of any decision;
- One interviewee was unsure whether OCP had been democratically chosen to be used in FC, but was certain that it hadn’t been chosen by an assembly for use in

Bank of the Commons (BotC), a FC-related project, although much investment into the development of the tool had come from BotC.

A respondent, who identified with Faction 1, mentioned that this tool was initially proposed for billing in one of the projects born within FC, but that it was never formally adopted for use in FC or BotC.

Three interviewees defended the adoption and use of OCP and OCW, and five others said that it could have been useful for FC as a value network tool, although it was still unfinished software, and suffered from implementation issues:

*“It was partially useful for organising the work we had, yes, but not ready. The process itself, like validating the work of each other was to[o] idealistic IMO, which also created ten[s]ion between workers in FC and was one puzzle piece to the whole d[i]lemma.” (#6)*

Two respondents mentioned that OCP was introduced in a way that made it hard to accept and understand by non-technicians in FC; two other interviewees concurred that a lack of organisational capacity or proper planning was also to blame.

Finally, two interviewees also mentioned that the use of OCP was a factor of conflict due to the difficulty of keeping track of who was actually doing productive work for the community in exchange for payment:

*“When some of us started getting money from the OCP, some people started to make tasks and not doing anything... Which led to suspicion. Enric said ‘you work 5 hours as a volunteer, and then you can get paid’. Therefore, money became a problem. People attacked one another.” (#7)*

I will now turn to a final aspect of the “ways of doing” that seems to have been problematic: the issue of FC membership.

### **2.2.3 Membership**

FC may have suffered from a fragile alignment between those participants who were intent on “hacking the markets” to bring liquidity into the ecosystem, and those who were more focused on grassroots economy-building and community currencies (see above).



Beyond this divergence of opinion, six respondents also mentioned another important issue in their eyes: that the main FC Telegram groups (e.g. the General Assemblies group) were open to any newcomer, as links to join these groups were displayed on the FC website. This openness enabled their rapid growth, but was also a source of distraction, as conversations were interrupted by trolls, or newcomers unaware of how FC worked.

Besides these disturbances, some interviewees linked the issue of open membership to that of a lack of foundational shared norms or objectives within the network.

*“Faircoop was maybe too open and did not manage to make clear the necessity for a culture shift towards decentralisation and self empowerment.” (#3)*

According to one, this created confusion due to the diversity of actors involved, and allowed the angriest, loudest voices to dominate conversations.

Two respondents said that the openness of FC meant that new members would keep joining projects at different points in time, without benefiting from the organisational memory needed to make sense of what was happening - and thus feeling a disconnect with more experienced participants.

In the words of one interviewee, the open nature of FC groups meant that they couldn't function effectively as true commons, following Elinor Ostrom's (1990) design principles: membership boundaries should have been clearer. The same respondent spoke to social cleavage in FC, between more “middle-class” participants and “anarchist/squatters,” in terms of financial needs and expectations, as well as in exposure to burnout (see below).

Another respondent also mentioned how the very growth of the FC ecosystem led to an increase in the workload and the processes needed to manage that expansion.

## **2.2.4 Discussion: Ways of doing**

### ***Problematic governance aspects in FC: The frailty of participatory democracy?***

Most interviewees charged that while FC was a supposedly non-hierarchical and decentralised project and network, unacknowledged power dynamics were at play. These patterns gave extra weight to long-term FC participants, and in particular Duran, to the detriment of others. This situation, which many experienced as disempowering, was made worse by the way consensus was used in the project, preventing any assembly decision from being passed (including motions to reverse previous decisions) as long as at least one person blocked it. In this regard, delegating certain decisions, for example on technical matters, to sub-groups who would then be held accountable by the assembly, might have been a more productive design.

Duran's role has been described as instrumental, both in launching FC and securing energy and commitment around it, but also in failing to make its governance more genuinely participatory.

The question of FC's governance brings us to focus on the central aspect that characterise it as a prefigurative project: the use of participatory democracy, as "an organizational form in which decision making is decentralized, nonhierarchical, and consensus oriented" (Polletta, 2014, p. 1). Indeed, the Integral Revolution manifesto makes it clear that FC aimed at bringing into being a society marked by values of radical equality, freedom, and community that commonly justify the use of this organizational form, following Breines's characterisation (Breines, 1989).

Maeckelbergh (2009) argues that the practice of prefiguration and the development of participatory democracy have been intricately linked historically, particularly in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and that while the meaning of the term has evolved, it is most commonly conflated today with the practice of consensus-making (pp.14-15). She also contends that prefigurative politics are closely associated with anarchist praxis, particularly "when the means and ends being used/enacted... are attempting to be as non-hierarchical as possible", and cites anarchists during the Spanish civil war as one of the most famous examples of prefiguration (pp.86-87).

In her ethnography of decision-making processes in the Global Justice Movement, she investigates the practice of *horizontality* as a key prefigurative orientation: "[It] is a

term used by movement actors to refer to less hierarchical, networked relationships of decision-making and organising structures that actively attempt to limit power inequalities” (p.69). She describes horizontality both as “a decentralised network structure that produces non-hierarchical relationships between the various nodes (people, groups, ideas) of a network” (p.109) and as an attitude and ethos – allowing for oppressive forms of power (power-as-domination, or power-over) to be transformed. This is accomplished through the use of consensus, as “the only legitimate decision-making method for limiting hierarchy and increasing horizontality” (p.122). This allows an organization to avoid bureaucratic decision-making structures, which are seen as concentrating power and thus hierarchy. From interviewees’ testimonies, it appears that horizontality was an important practice within the context of FC.

Following Graeber (2007, p. 341), consensus can be defined as

a process of compromise and synthesis meant to produce decisions that no one finds so violently objectionable that they are not willing to at least assent....

Most forms of consensus include a variety of graded forms of disagreement. The point is to ensure that no one walks away feeling that their views have been totally ignored and, therefore, that even those who think the group came to a bad decision are willing to offer their passive acquiescence.

However, as pointed out above, it appears that in FC, little was done to allow for the expression of “graded forms of disagreement” – as many decisions appear to have been blocked by individuals repeatedly, thus making it impossible to resolve certain critical situations, such as FairCoin’s double pricing issue. I return to this issue below.

According to Polletta (2014), many social movement scholars view participatory democracies as fragile, and raise issues of:

1. inefficiency;
2. inequity; and
3. irresolvable disagreements in participants’ interests.

This raises the question of the extent to which the practice of horizontality, and more widely, participatory democracy, might have been a stumbling block for FC. I will

explore each of the three recurring criticisms of this form of decision-making in the light of interviewees' testimonies.

### **1. Was FC considered inefficient?**

Scholars often view participatory democracy as lacking efficiency due to the time spent in consensus-making decisions, problems of coordination from decentralised administration, and minimal labour division sacrificing the benefits of expertise (Breines, 1989; Polletta, 2002, 2014). Studies of participatory-democratic groups have surfaced frequent tensions between “pragmatists,” calling for more centralised and hierarchical organisational structure, and “purists,” refusing such reforms (e.g. Polletta, 2002). Within the context of the Global Justice Movement, people embracing such orientations were respectively referred to as “verticals” and “horizontalists” (Juris, 2008; Maeckelbergh, 2009). These tensions tend to lead either to the bureaucratisation, or to the collapse of the group.

While some FC interviewees did refer to lengthy assemblies, the efficiency of decision-making processes was not a recurring theme in my interviews. Besides, efficiency did not seem to be an issue directly at play in mentions of conflict within the community; but it is likely that it was, indirectly, through the controversial introduction of the enterprise resource planner software OCP. Interviewees mostly discussed the tool's usefulness (or lack thereof) with regards to monitoring and rewarding contributions on behalf of network participants (see next section). However, increased efficiency in the administration of decentralised tasks in FC appears to have been part of the rationale for using it, from its proponents' point of view.

In any case, the lack of delegation of decision-making power to task forces within FC, and the possibility for individuals to repeatedly block any decision within the assembly, appear to have prevented many important decisions to be taken efficiently.

### **2. Was FC considered inequitable?**

Two widely-discussed phenomena tend to be associated, in the scholarly literature, with inequity in participatory democracies: the “iron law of oligarchy,” and the “tyranny of structurelessness.” The former was theorised by Michels (1915) as referring to

oligarchic structures “inevitably” (p.27) emerging within any organisation, no matter how democratic. As for the latter, Freeman (1972) describes it as the free rule of informal cliques within democratic groups seeking to avoid bureaucracy and other formal structures of authority.

To what extent do interviewees’ testimonies imply that either of these phenomena was at play? I will examine each possibility in turn.

### **Oligarchy**

As regards the “iron law of oligarchy,” first of all, it is important to stress that while a number of empirical studies have found it at play in supposedly democratic groups (e.g. Hernandez, 2006; Tolbert and Hiatt, 2009), others (e.g. Leach, 2009; Polletta, 2014; Diefenbach, 2019) have also shown that it is far from being the kind of “sociological law of universal validity” proposed by Michels (1915, p. 210).

Leach (2005) defines oligarchy as “a concentration of entrenched illegitimate authority and/or influence in the hands of a minority, such that de facto what that minority wants is generally what comes to pass, even when it goes against the wishes (whether actively or passively expressed) of the majority” (p.329). Following this definition, to show that such a phenomenon may be at play, one needs to show that:

1. the group in question has a democratic structure;
2. a minority wields a disproportionate and illegitimate influence in or on the group;
3. the majority of participants in some way resisted that power; and
4. the minority tend to overcome this resistance on issues that it feels are important.

Regarding the first point, Leach refers to a democratic structure as one including, at the very least, “structural mechanisms that place ultimate governing authority in the hands of the organization’s membership—either through direct participation in all important decisions or indirectly through the election of representatives—as well as structural protections for the minority and checks on the power of elected representatives, where they exist” (p.316). In terms of the global governance of FC, which is what I am focusing on, the FC Wiki page describing processes in use stresses the critical role of

open global assemblies, but is noticeably incomplete as regards decision-making (FairCoop, no date c). Besides, local groups federated through the FC network were expected to be autonomous and self-organising (FairCoop, no date g).

All research participants mentioned the use of consensus in the general assemblies as the primary decision-making process, which implies that ultimate governing authority was indeed placed in the hands of the membership, and that there were no elections of representatives. I found no mention in FC documents of structural protections in place for the minority – but considering the power granted to any assembly participant to block any decision, and the avoidance of voting in favour of unanimous consensus, minority opinions were indeed protected. Referring to the Global Justice Movement, Maeckelbergh (2009, p. 162) writes: “Consensus is one of the ways movement actors try to continuously create equality. In most collective spaces of this movement voting is considered an automatic violation of equality. Voting violates equality because it silences minority voices.”

So I will assume that FC had a participatory democratic structure based on the use of consensus decision-making.

In terms of the second item on Leach’s list, does it appear that a minority was wielding a disproportionate and illegitimate influence within FC? Most interviewees charged that Duran wielded considerable influence, especially due to his control over FC finances. Some also considered that this influence was exerted through friends in influential roles, and/or through technical decisions that were made. Whether or not this influence was “illegitimate” would depend on FC participants’ perception of Duran’s right to this influence, and the extent to which he used means considered inappropriate – following prevalent group norms – to affect decisions (Leach, 2005, pp. 326–7). Again, most interviewees expressed disapproval of how Duran wielded his influence, although some did justify this influence on the ground of the risks he took, his instrumental role in creating FC, and the funds he channelled into the network.

Did most FC participants actively resist this influence? This is difficult to ascertain. While most interviewees expressed disapproval of it, it is unclear how many took a stand against it, and how – besides members of the Komun affinity group, which were most critical of FC governance. As a result, it is equally unclear whether there was a

pattern of the minority being able to overcome resistance on issues it felt were important. Some interviewees did mention that Duran's influence and credibility eventually waned within FC, which could indicate that resistance became stronger with time.

Therefore, while there are signs that an oligarchic pattern of influence was at play within FC for some research participants, further investigation would be needed to ascertain the extent to which this impression was shared.

### **Structurelessness**

I will now turn to the other commonly mentioned reason for inequity developing within participatory democracies – the “tyranny of structurelessness.” Freeman (1972) argues that:

There is no such thing as a structureless group... [the idea of structurelessness] becomes a smokescreen for the strong or the lucky to establish unquestioned hegemony over others. This hegemony can be so easily established because the idea of ‘structurelessness’ does not prevent the formation of informal structures, only formal ones.... As long as the structure of the group is informal, the rules of how decisions are made are known only to a few and awareness of power is limited to those who know the rules. Those who do not know the rules and are not chosen for initiation must remain in confusion, or suffer from paranoid delusions that something is happening of which they are not quite aware. (p.152)

This concept is critiqued by Leach (2013), who points out that many consensus-based groups have learned from the failures of the 1960s and 70s feminist groups that Freeman analysed. She argues that contemporary participatory democratic groups are less eager to avoid structure or division of labour altogether, and rather trying to avoid formal hierarchy and systematic inequalities of power. As a result, the primary question to examine should be “*what kind of structure to have* that will maximize participation and prevent anyone from dominating the group” (p.183 – emphasis in the original). She also shows that having too much structure can be just as detrimental to a group, as in the case of Occupy Wall Street meetings that felt alienating to marginal or oppositional groups, and that *fostering an egalitarian culture* is at least as critical than having *the right structures* in place to prevent informal elites from dominating a group. This

corresponds to Maeckelbergh's characterisation of horizontality as comprising both a structure, and an attitude or ethos (2009, p. 109).

Nonetheless, it is notable that two interviewees spontaneously mentioned the “tyranny of structurelessness” being at play in FC, as a result of informal power dynamics and a corresponding lack of accountability. In this regard, as I mentioned above, I find it striking that while there are traces of FC participants exploring how to better shape democratic processes within the network, including through the use of better tools (FairCoop, no date e), public documents presenting FC governance are noticeably lacking in details on any formal processes. Of course, this does not mean such tacit processes did not exist. But I feel tempted to agree with these two participants on their assessment – especially since the “conflictual culture” that Maeckelbergh (2009) and Leach (2009, 2013) highlight as a key element of consensus-driven groups' ability to enact horizontality (by viewing disagreements and critical discussions of power dynamics as a way to preserve diversity and equality) did not appear to be encouraged in FC. Indeed, although a group of participants did become vocal critics of FC governance, power dynamics do not seem to have been altered substantively as a result of their complaints. I will return to the issue of conflict in the next sections.

Besides, according to Gerbaudo (2012), who investigated the new forms of protest that emerged in the first decade of the twenty-first century, structurelessness is “an astute way of side-stepping the question of leadership, and allows the de facto leaders to remain unaccountable because invisible” (p.25). So the question of structure – or lack thereof – is also connected to issues of leadership, which I discuss below.

Another important aspect of the political culture associated with the use of consensus has to do with the use of the veto (or “block”). In theory, the practice of consensus enables a group to balance the inequalities of power that characterise individual participation in the process: everyone has absolute power to block a decision in a meeting they are part of. However, the underpinning logic is that a block should only be used when a decision is considered to violate one's most fundamental interests:

The individual actor is expected to put the interests of the group above their own, except when her basic values or principles would be violated by the decision being reached. In such a case, the group is expected to respect the



individual, not the other way around... When a block is used (in large groups), it requires that the whole group take seriously the individual's concern and try to understand it in order to either rework the proposal to resolve the concern (which is what usually happens) or to find a satisfactory way out for the person blocking. (Maeckelbergh, 2009, p.165).

Several interviewees pointed out that the disproportionate influence of certain FC participants was manifested by these participants repeatedly blocking certain proposals they disagreed with. Reasonable questions to ask, in this context, would be: Was the right to block a proposal in FC generally considered as an ultimate recourse, or did it become normalised as a way to obstruct any process going against one's wishes and interests? And were participants able to challenge a block they found was not justified, or to help the blocker find grounds for compromise with others? Graeber (2013, p. 109) mentions such processes being commonly used within the Occupy movement. As for Haug (2015, p. 30), he stresses the need for "formalizing the consensus building process in a way that ensures that concerns about the emerging decision are heard and addressed at an early stage so that nobody will be forced to resort to blocking as the ultimate means to be heard."

As the right to block a decision is such a central aspect of the praxis of consensus-based groups, it appears worthy of further exploration in the case of FC.

### **3. Were there irreconcilable interests within FC?**

The third commonly perceived weakness of participatory democracies is that consensus processes provide no means for adjudicating fundamental conflicts of interest (Polletta, 2002, 2014). This can create a stalemate, which may devolve into an organisational crisis.

I explored the question of possibly diverging goals and objectives in FC in the previous section ("Strategy and objectives"). Some interviewees did consider there might have been contradictory interests within the network as a result of FC's twin strategic orientation, towards hacking the global financial markets and building a grassroots economic system. They described how the problematic double pricing of FairCoin – particularly following Bitcoin's 2018 market crash – led to a situation of irreconcilable

interests: on the one hand, merchants who sold products in FairCoin were not able to exchange these faircoins into euros; and on the other, several FC participants refused to lower FairCoin's official ("assembly") price. As a result, as one interviewee put it, FC became "stuck in the status quo," and the consequences for the whole community were disastrous.

Therefore, it does appear that FC's decision-making processes were unable to resolve the FairCoin double pricing situation, and thus point to a critical governance failure.

In summary, interviewees' testimonies do highlight certain weaknesses of participatory democratic processes that are widely discussed in the literature on social movements. At the very least, it appears safe to state that there were signs of oligarchy and informal power structures, contradicting FC's democratic ethos; as well as irresolvable disagreements between various stakeholders, particularly with regards to financial questions and FairCoin.

### ***A failure of collective leadership?***

When I asked them about FC's governance issues, some participants said that an important reason for the inequities that they observed was that few people were actually willing to take on leadership roles within the network – which concentrated influence in the hands of the most active participants. I will briefly discuss what the literature on leadership in self-styled "leaderless" groups may tell us about this situation.

Scholars have noticed that participants in prefigurative, "horizontal" groups often shy away from taking on responsibility, to avoid being criticised by other members, especially in fledgling grassroots groups (Blee, 2012; Breton *et al.*, 2012; Laamanen and den Hond, 2015). As a result, it may happen that "active participation in a prefigurative organisation leads to certain roles and functions becoming stratified, whereby those taking on responsibility become de facto owners of the collective mission, not least by the grace of other participants" (Laamanen & den Hond, 2015, pp.17-18). Maeckelbergh (2009, p.116) explains that when a group perceives itself to be horizontal, if any person can be identified as particularly influential, the suspicion of hierarchy and domination emerges. "Consequently... an abuse of power occurs the moment the ability to identify who rules exists." And because of the assumption that

this centralisation of power is serving someone's purpose, "it therefore becomes the responsibility of movement actors to actively resist this centralisation" (p.119).

The matter of enacting leadership on the transnational network of FC was likely made all the more complicated by various aspects, such as the economic situation of certain participants in austerity-struck Greece and Spain, or the technical complexity of stewarding tools such as FairCoin or OCP. However, generally speaking, what can be said about the exercise of leadership within a prefigurative, horizontal group?

Writing from the perspective of Critical Leadership Studies (CLS), Western (2014) argues that emancipatory social movements relying on radical forms of participatory democracy tend to disavow any notion of leadership, in favour of a utopian fantasy of "leaderlessness." This is a source of cognitive dissonance and conflict within these movements, displacing the movements' agency and constraining them from developing the novel forms of non-hierarchical leadership they have pioneered – what Western refers to as "autonomist leadership": a form of anti-hierarchical, informal and distributed leadership, based on the key elements of spontaneity, autonomy, mutuality, affect and networks (the clearest example of which being the practice of mutualism and syndicalism). He therefore calls on participants in these movements to acknowledge and embrace such forms of leadership, instead of disavowing and repressing awareness of them. Western's analysis of rejection of leadership in anarchist-leaning SMOs confirms Gerbaudo's assessment that "despite their repeated claims to leaderlessness, contemporary social movements do have their own 'choreographers' and these choreographers are not identical with the 'dancers' or participants" (2012, p. 159).

However, not all scholars agree on this assessment. For example, Simsa and Totter (2020), using a CLS lens, found that activists in new social movements in Spain were not hostile to the idea of *leadership work*, but to that of *permanent leadership roles*. They also observed that in these groups, the use of collective reflection and (explicit or implicit) rules was key to navigate the tensions that come from the kind of decentralised leadership they favoured, as autonomous prefigurative movements. This confirms the conclusions of Sutherland, Land, and Böhm (2014), who found that in four anarchist-leaning, democratic SMOs, leadership was occurring without the need for individual leaders: opportunities for leadership and meaning-making were distributed, so that

others may have the opportunity of taking on leading roles in the future, and practices such as role rotation were used to prevent leadership actors from permanently staying in the same role. The authors also described critical, reflexive feedback loops as essential to avoid the emergence of informal hierarchies. However, they voiced uncertainty as to the extent to which such “anti-leaders(hip) practices” could be scaled up effectively and over large geographical distances, as was attempted within FC.

Therefore, ways of better acknowledging and enacting such forms autonomous or sustainable leadership, particularly within large groups and projects functioning on an international scale, remain to be investigated. At the very least, on the discursive and psychological level, CLS point to the need to detach the concept of leadership from ideas of hierarchy and authoritarianism, which could make it more compatible with horizontality and participatory democracy. On the practical level, groups would likely benefit from combining processes and norms that foster critical reflexivity as regards power dynamics, and from clear rules structuring decision-making and the rotation of leadership roles.

### ***Tools: How to structure activities in a decentralised network?***

Outside the FC local groups, coordination of FC activities and related projects largely took place online, by means of Telegram groups, including many groups open to all newcomers. According to some interviewees, the use of Telegram, overwhelmingly by means of text messages - including to hold FC assemblies - was a source of increased misunderstandings and conflict, and hampered mutual empathy.

Another tool which generated much controversy within FC was OCP, a system meant to keep track of project contributions and to reward contributors. According to its detractors, the decision to finance and develop this tool for use in FC was not made democratically; it was too costly; its usefulness was limited; and people could take advantage of it to claim rewards without contributing to the project.

On this question of how to coordinate and structure activities within decentralised, horizontal networks such as FC, useful insights may be drawn from studies carried out in the domains of open-source software development, collaborative editing projects such as Wikipedia, or underground activist networks like Anonymous.

In the case of Linux, for example, Garud, Jain and Tuertscher (2008) highlight how “social rules built into the technology... fostered generative engagement by actors.” (p.357) This includes releasing software under a General Public License, and establishing practices to recognise the contribution of individuals (such as a “credits” file) – but also relying on oversight by a hierarchical meritocracy within the community of developers, to ensure the system maintains coherence in the midst of extensive experimentation. As for Wikipedia, the authors show that the integrity of articles rests on a mix of social and technical elements such as webbots continually trawling the site and automatically fixing obvious misdemeanours, and on a hierarchical meritocracy ranging from anonymous contributors to the “super elites” (p.362) making direct changes to the software and database. However, these structures are also accompanied by a growing number of rules and procedures, which critics charge are unwieldy.

I find it stimulating to consider how such socio-technical processes might be adapted to the context of a more explicitly horizontal network of participants engaging in *social production* – which Benkler (2008) refers to as an alternative form of organizing production that is facilitated by contemporary digital technology. This is particularly challenging when this production involves a much wider array of tasks and projects than the development of an operating system or an encyclopedia. According to Aaltonen and Lanzara (2015), such forms of social production require creating a collective governance capability as an “evolving, enabling and embedded process driven by individual and collective learning that is made possible by contemporary information technology” (p.1667). Technological platforms, in this regard, should simultaneously provide the production tools, and the means for the system and individual agents to learn about production and its governance.

Could OCP and OCW provide tools and a methodology suited to this purpose?

According to several interviewees, this called for improving the software itself, which many FC users found difficult to use – thus pointing to the social challenge of coordinating technical tasks in a network bringing together people with very different skill-sets and levels of technological proficiency.

Finally, there is the question of coordinating activist work in contexts of relatively high anonymity, which is what was attempted in FairCoop. Massa (2017), documenting the

formation and growth of the hacker collective Anonymous, shows that an online community can establish itself and thrive on socio-technical networks in spite of total individual anonymity, as a collective identity doing away with individual reputations and other individual incentives. Anonymous accomplished this by developing an online platform providing the conditions for pluralistic activities, ranging from hacktivism to traditional protest as well as more recreational purposes. Furthermore, Massa and O'Mahony (2021) present how Anonymous evolved a form of architectural control based on constructing "the spaces and places through which participation can flow, enabling the channeling of participation in ways that support growth and curatorial control" (p.1071). This enabled the online community to scale direct participation, channel newcomers automatically into designated forums, and bypass the need to socialise them into the norms of the community. In other words, these activists efficiently leveraged the automation affordances of digital technologies to amplify their impact and enable self-organising in open networks, without needing permanent leadership roles. Online communities like FC, especially when attached to anonymity and devoted to social change, may draw useful lessons from such participation architectures.

## 2.3 Ways of being

This section summarises aspects related to FC as a community of people communicating, collaborating, and spending time together. What are some important lessons we may learn from interactions and behaviours within FC?

### 2.3.1 Mutual care, civility and trust

Five interviewees mentioned that FC was severely lacking spaces for mutual care and listening, and processes to help people feel safe enough to engage in open-hearted conversations. This made it more difficult to defuse tensions, or resolve and transform conflict. One person mentioned that "soft skills" were also lacking in a network that foregrounded the voices and ways of doing of "male engineers."

*"Caring for each other, conflict-resolution, all of this, managing emotions, was missing... we didn't know how to take care of one another." (#2)*

Nine respondents mentioned having witnessed cases of burnout throughout FC or related projects. The lack of mutual care and mutual understanding almost certainly contributed to growing disenchantment and disengagement. With the conflictual atmosphere that became increasingly pervasive in FC spaces during 2018, verbal attacks between members of different factions (see below) grew more and more frequent.

One interviewee even reported an episode of harassment taking place, involving mental health issues. This corroborates what another person stated about tensions in local groups:

*“Many people had mental issues, a lack of mental stability (due to drug abuse), which created tensions on the physical level.” (#6)*

For a long time, there wasn't even a netiquette in place stating what kind of behaviour was expected and encouraged among FC participants in their online interactions. One of the respondents volunteered to write it, but conflict had already escalated between the two factions at that point.

### 2.3.2 Conflict and division

#### ***Two factions?***

All respondents mentioned that severe conflict broke out within FC. While nearly all interviewees spoke of two factions emerging as a result, respondents didn't agree on how to define them, or on the factors unifying each of them against the other. In fact, one interviewee argued that speaking of two factions was misleading.

*“There was one group acting as a group against other people acting individually, [and] considered by them as a faction but not being so.” (#7)*

Nonetheless, most interviewees spontaneously referred to two factions. According to one of these respondents, the figure of Duran was a key cleaving factor:

*“Faction 1: People who saw FC = Enric. These people would complain about one or the other almost equally. Enric was rotten, and because FC was Enric, FC was rotten.  
Faction 2: People who saw FC as something much bigger than Enric. The complaints of the others really hurt these people. Then, of course, within this faction, you would find people who defended*

*Duran almost no matter what, as they still saw in him some kind of leader. And then, some other who were well aware of all the problems that Enric had/was causing, but still persisted in saying that this is Enric, and not FC.” (#10)*

The testimonies of most respondents seemed to tally with this summary. All interviewees – including those most critical of Faction 1 members – made it clear they saw Duran as playing a central role in FC's issues, but also that there were more systemic issues at play.

As for interviewees identifying with the faction opposing Duran (henceforth, "Faction 1"), they were particularly critical of:

- the governance of FC, and in particular Duran's role within it;
- and the adoption of the OCP, a tool they considered useless and a waste of collective funds.

One respondent, identifying with Faction 1, also ventured that the two factions had different understandings of the key objectives of FC, which seems to map onto the two different visions of FC's objectives and strategy (see above). This person viewed Faction 1 members as more intent on using FairCoin to favour the emergence of a grassroots circular economy, particularly within the Iberian peninsula, and as concerned about the risks of engaging in speculative financial markets. They also said that people in Faction 1 were largely Spanish speakers, and were “almost unable to take part in Telegram discussions, as they were held in English.”

However, other respondents felt that members of both factions agreed on the same objectives, listed on the FC website. Interviewees who self-identified with either of the two factions referred to this text as a foundational rallying point.

Respondents were unanimous on the fact that Faction 1 was centred on a group of FC activists who decided to form an affinity group – Komun - although this faction appears to have included people who were not part of this particular collective. It would seem that most Spanish FC members joined this faction.



Participants in this group claimed they wanted to rescue FC as a project from the issues that plagued it, and to promote more decentralisation, transparency, and horizontality in FC.

### ***Mediation efforts***

Attempts at mediation were made to mend relationships and work on solving conflicts, notably through a dedicated Telegram group. However, all interviewees agreed that efforts at mediation failed. The main reasons for this were reported to be:

- the online-based nature of FC, which made it difficult for key parties to meet;
- reluctance on behalf of some parties to take part in video calls, leading such efforts to take place in yet another Telegram text chat;
- one of the parties not wishing to take part in the mediation process, which seems linked with...
- ... a lack of general agreement as to whether the conflict was more about problematic interpersonal relations, different ideological standpoints, or power distribution within FC. Interviewees viewed all three factors as having been at play to some extent.

In particular, it seems that participants in Faction 1 viewed abuses of power within FC as *the* key issue, and therefore felt that mediation wouldn't solve anything. As a member of Komun explained:

*“The mediation efforts never worked... For one thing, due to the pessimistic feeling that in the end Duran always had his way... And despite all the love among participants... The ideas aiming at making everything more horizontal never worked.” (#1)*

Four respondents who viewed themselves as not belonging to Faction 1 admitted that while the Faction 1 “critics” were putting the finger onto real problems within FC, they behaved “sarcastically” and “aggressively,” and did not put forth much constructive effort. According to one of them, this behaviour led the main FairCoin developer to leave FC abruptly, which hampered software maintenance and development. Another person even accused Faction 1 members of stealing data and people away from FC.

However, interviewees identifying with Faction 1, too, complained of attacks and abuse. One of them admitted:

*“All sides are to blame for not having maintained a good and respectful communication.” (#1)*

### 2.3.3 Cultural and linguistic issues

An observation that was voiced by six respondents is that people joining FC hailed from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and that these differences may have led to some misunderstandings, for example with regards to jokes, or even feelings of resentment, when participants struggled to express themselves in English.

This resonates with the testimony of one Spanish respondent, who also spoke about the problematic intersection of technology, language, and decision-making within FC:

*“Deciding things in Telegram leads us to ‘speedocracy’: if you can withstand the breakneck speed and speak English fluently... your opinion counts more.” (#1)*

However, other interviewees saw linguistic issues as mere compounding factors for conflict. Several people stressed that the main hurdle was the online nature of communications, and the lack of in-person meetings in FC at the international level.

### 2.3.4 Discussion: Ways of being

#### ***How to foster mutual care and trust?***

Several interviewees considered that FC lacked spaces and processes fostering mutual care and understanding. This seems to have aggravated divisions and conflict within the project, and brought about burnout<sup>9</sup> in several participants.

Social movement scholars and practitioners have stressed the critical importance of building norms of behaviour and practices that help to generate trust, as well as self- and mutual understanding. Polletta’s (2002) study of participatory democratic groups in a North American context led her to conclude that “To work effectively as well as fairly,

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<sup>9</sup> Activist burnout can be described as a state of exhaustion, which is more or less destabilising and debilitating. The term is generally used to cover an array of symptoms, including deteriorated emotional, psychological, and physical well-being, as well as a sense of disillusionment, hopelessness, and cynicism (Maslach and Gomes, 2006; Rettig, 2006; Cox, 2011; Gorski and Chen, 2015).

democratic movement organizations should enact what feminists have called an ethic of care, in which members are treated equally but also with concern for each one's self-development" (p.229). This concept of ethic of care was first expounded by Gilligan (1982, pp. 73–4):

The logic underlying an ethic of care is a psychological logic of relationships, which contrasts with the formal logic of fairness that informs the justice approach. ... This ethic, which reflects a cumulative knowledge of human relationships, evolves around a central insight, that self and other are interdependent.

This ethic does not only involve caring for the other person, but also exercising self-care, as well as critical self-reflexiveness. In his work on the micropolitics of prefigurative groups, Vercauteren (2018) urges people in such groups to “become better aware of the poisons that run through your body” (p.209, my translation) – referring to individual and collective reflection on the unhelpful and semi-conscious patterns of thinking and behaviour, such as individualism, or a deeply ingrained habituation to hierarchical relationships, that may affect anyone trying to bring about social change (p.179). He therefore argues for the adoption of “artefacts” – i.e. techniques and processes, such as the use of rotating roles or deliberate silence during meetings – which may help groups to explore these shadow dimensions of the self, while supporting the emergence of collective intelligence as well as new forms of collective existence (p.31).

Similarly, studies of activist burnout have shown that within groups and organisations, the presence of “social support (whether supportive family, friends and colleagues or support within the movement and organisation)” and of “a general acceptance of the need to rest, to manage work and to deal with the sense of urgency” (Cox, 2011, p. 20) are essential to prevent burnout. However, in too many activist communities, a “culture of martyrdom” prevails, which makes people feel guilty for looking after their own well-being (Gorski and Chen, 2015). More recently, movements like Extinction Rebellion have made the prevention of activist burnout into a strategic purpose, through the attention to fostering a regenerative culture (Westwell and Bunting, 2020).

Processes from the fields of mutual learning (Schwarz, 2002) or Non-Violent Communication (Rosenberg and Chopra, 2015) are often referred to in the literature.

These may support participants to practice empathetic listening (Ehrlichman, 2021, p.143), and thus understand another person more fully. Similarly, Bendell and Carr (2021) present principles and practices for the deliberate facilitation of meetings that can greatly improve the quality of dialogue, and help people gain deeper awareness of their own unconscious behavioural patterns.

In her guidebook for collaborative groups, Starhawk (2011) focuses on the ways such groups can improve their communication and foster trust. Besides examining unhelpful norms and toxic patterns of behaviour, she stresses the need for such groups to discuss their shared norms or values, and to establish governance agreements that translate these norms into principles. Many practitioners agree on the importance of making norms and boundaries explicit. For example, according to Brown (2017), “having clear principles or intentions means, that as conditions change, there is a common understanding of what matters, a way to return to shared practice and behavior” (p.221). Ehrlichman (2021) discusses how “principles are the ultimate articulation of what the network stands for and how it will show up in the world. When created collectively, they provide a powerful touchstone that enables participants to hold themselves and each other accountable for walking their talk in how they work together to advance the network’s purpose” (p.98). These principles can be listed within a co-created charter, as a living document embodying participants’ commitments to one another and providing newcomers with a useful orienting device. Drawing on Ostrom’s (1990) research on commons governance, the Prosocial methodology developed by Atkins, Wilson and Hayes (2019) can also help groups to clarify their collective norms and design collaborative methods that cultivate psychological flexibility.

In this regard, it is worth noticing the episode narrated by one interviewee, who mentioned the challenges they faced in simply introducing a “netiquette” within the context of FC. Although this document was eventually adopted (FairCoop, no date d), its focus was mainly on communication practices within an online setting. Broader principles establishing how FC participants agreed to treat one another do not seem to have been articulated.

### ***How to engage in generative conflict?***

As a result of many of the factors mentioned above, it appears that two broad factions emerged within FC. For some interviewees, the conflict was triggered by issues of governance and management, while for others, problematic individual behaviour was to blame. Conflict was fierce, and led to many (or most) participants disengaging from the project. Efforts at mediation were attempted, but failed, apparently as a result of lack of engagement in the process and lack of trust in the neutrality and intentions of the mediators. It also appears that some parties in the conflict felt the mediation efforts would not help to solve the issues of problematic governance they perceived.

Research (e.g. Leach, 2009; Maeckelbergh, 2009) shows that in prefigurative, horizontal groups, conflict is not always perceived as something to be avoided – as long as it can be constructive. In particular, within the Global Justice Movement, conflict was considered an important guarantee of diversity: “Consensus should be conflictive.... Insistence on conflict was an attempt to create a consensus process that allowed for diversity, a consensus that did not insist on unanimity. Conflict is welcomed because it represents diversity” (Maeckelbergh, 2009, p.100). In other words, by challenging hierarchies, the practice of horizontality enables a multiplicity of conflicting opinions to emerge within the consensus process. If these divergences are not treated as adversarial and within a zero-sum game, they can be a prompt for creative energy and ideas. “One of the main principles of consensus is that no one should win and no one should lose an argument. Instead the aim is to brainstorm until a solution can be found that suits everyone” (p.101).

However, “Whether conflict becomes constructive or adversarial depends a great deal on the type of power that is exercised in the process of discussion... when power is perceived to be exercised hierarchically, movement actors resort to an adversarial form of conflict with each other. These power practices inhibit the constructive potential of conflict, and consequently, conflict is not always resolvable” (ibid, p.106). In FC, several participants expressed strong dissatisfaction with the concentration of power they perceived, which may have hampered the possibility of conflict operating in a constructive way. Besides, FC was apparently lacking both clear conflict-resolution processes, and practices enabling deeper mutual understanding and trust-building. Moreover, participants, unable to meet face-to-face, were reluctant to discuss matters

otherwise than by text messages. In such conditions, solving any deep conflict appears particularly challenging.

The literature on conflict resolution and transformation in collaborative groups is too extensive to review here. Practitioners (e.g. Starhawk, 2011, pp. 153–196; Ehrlichman, 2021, pp. 144–145) tend to encourage such groups to allow constructive or generative conflict to emerge, which requires a foundation of deep trust. Indeed, as Blee (2012) remarked, most activist groups avoid openly discussing interpersonal tensions – and as a result, such issues are often left to fester. But such discussions also require active involvement from the whole community to develop the social and emotional capacity to navigate tensions, and help conflicting parties to repair their relationship through appropriate mediation.

Restorative practice, a transformative approach which aims to promote collective healing and justice through appreciative dialogue and community-building (Zehr, 2015), appears particularly adapted to democratic participatory groups for its ability to build and restore relationships in a context of widespread social disconnection. These practices are based on creating a relational environment that fosters a sense of safety, relational awareness and compassion, and relying on a circle process in which participants may be seen and heard, and lower their defences (Lauridsen and Munkejord, 2022). Evidently, text communication alone does not appear conducive as a medium for such processes to unfold.

## **2.4 Outcomes of participants' involvement in FC**

In this section, I present an overview of the outcomes, both negative and positive, that were mentioned by respondents with regards to their engagement with FC. These relate to my theoretical framework as instances of social learning taking place on the cognitive, relational, experiential, or affective levels.

### **2.4.1 Burnout**

Nine respondents mentioned having witnessed cases of burnout - sometimes the interviewee themselves - throughout FC or related projects. One interviewee said that nearly every single person who was involved in FC from the beginning of the project

grew disillusioned, and burned out. Another mentioned how many people “disappeared” from FC and did not stay in touch with others, which they felt was quite saddening.

One respondent even mentioned having become clinically depressed, partly as a result of their involvement in FC.

While some interviewees expressed dismay at the many episodes of burnout they witnessed, another was less surprised, and considered that this was a phenomenon that “tends to come with the territory” of such ambitious activist projects.

### **2.4.2 Friends and money**

Several respondents mentioned having lost friends and/or money as a result of their involvement in FC, or having seen evaporate the money they borrowed from friends to invest in the project. However, most of those to whom this happened said they didn’t dwell on it, and that they were conscious of the risks as they took part in this exciting endeavour.

*“I lost a lot of money personally though... But this is all part of the struggles of building something big. Risks are always present and I have to lick my wounds and move forward, I do not blame anyone and I hope no one blames me. I only did what I knew to try and help.” (#5)*

*“All what I have invested ( time and money ) was voluntary with the knowledge that a total loss can happen.” (#13)*

Only one interviewee mentioned having slightly benefited financially from their involvement.

### **2.4.3 Ways of doing**

Asked to share instances of practical learning they drew from their involvement in FC, respondents mentioned various insights related to “ways of doing”, particularly concerning tactical and strategic dimensions of organising online to create social change.

For example, one respondent now considered that “the groups [they] worked within online were too large,” and that they should have been broken up into smaller units for better coordination. Another came to the conclusion that “assemblies and consensus

aren't the best for everything," but that diverse decision-making practices should be combined. One person also mentioned that clearer membership structures should have been in place within FC.

Yet another spoke about the fundamental importance of building trusting relationships through commonly agreed processes of accountability, for instance by asking everyone to report (informally, but regularly) on their activities when collaborating on a common project online. Otherwise, suspicion and tensions may arise. Similarly, someone opined that

*"Nobody should be working alone on something for the commons. Working alone for something collective will lead to burn out and probably human conflict." (#10)*

Some respondents reported having already brought practical organisational insights from their experience of FC into other projects. For example, an interviewee said that their affinity group decided to hold their meetings and assemblies over video-conference instead of through text messages in Telegram; to keep their group small, and federate into a larger whole if necessary; to avoid centralising financial management; and to require that anyone blocking a proposal offer a viable alternative.

Several people also mentioned having gained important insights in the field of cryptocurrencies and economics. For instance, one person said they had gained a deeper awareness of the complexity of currency systems, the dangers of becoming involved in speculative markets, and the strategic importance of focus points such as crypto-exchange markets within a decentralised landscape. Another one discovered that a lack of collective clarity regarding capital, and how to protect the commons from its encroachment, was fundamental to FC's troubles as a commons-oriented community.

#### **2.4.4 Ways of being**

Several interviewees mentioned insights they received from their participation that I would categorise as representing certain "ways of being" in the process of organising for social change.



For example, one interviewee said that thanks to their involvement in FC, they had discovered the importance of attending to three “fundamental pillars” when organising in groups and communities:

- values and objectives;
- decision-making processes and the distribution of power; and
- mutual care.

They opined that only the first of these aspects had been given enough consideration in FC, but that there was a lack of attention to the two others.

Another person said that FC as a project was befallen by “egos, dogmatism, money, and a lack of experience,” and that they had discovered the critical nature of nurturing human relations and creating space for mutual listening:

*“We need to have more empathy and understand one another. When your idea is too strong, don't impose it on people.” (#7)*

Several respondents also said their involvement had been an occasion for improved self-understanding. For example, one person discovered they had a natural affinity for facilitation work, and eventually retrained as a professional facilitator.

Another interviewee discovered how much they were guided by anger towards power structures in everything they did. They realised the importance of working on themselves to become a better person through their activism, and to foreground compassion over labelling and separation.

### **2.4.5 Relationships and projects**

All respondents mentioned that their participation in FC helped them create many new friendships, and learn about new projects to collaborate on.

In spite of the conflicts that rocked FC, many of these friendships and collaborations sustained themselves through time. For many interviewees, these relationships were one of the most important outcome of their participation.

*“I've met people who are like brothers and sisters for me.” (#7)*

*"I still consider those people as friends. ... We got to know each other. Those people are still here. those connections, these networks are here. It just transformed. What are we gonna do now? It's up to us. ... I'm an engineer and we learned in physics that energy doesn't disappear. It's just transformed. Now, if it's bad energy and black, and beeeh!... we can transform it so that it's again positive." (#12)*

#### 2.4.6 Tools

In spite of the important issues that unfolded around the design of FairCoin, for several interviewees, this project remained one of the more promising and meaningful outcomes of the FC "experiment." The main issue concerned the governance of this decentralised cryptocurrency, attached to a FC assembly that wasn't regularly convened any more. One respondent said that discussions were ongoing to detach FairCoin from FC.<sup>10</sup>

Other respondents also pointed to some of the other projects developed within the FC ecosystem as worthy of being carried forth into future endeavours – such as Bank of the Commons, or OCP.

*"[FC] is not living but it's not dying, because we still have those tools. We have BotC, we have FairCoin, we have these tools.... technologically, I still find it brilliant, like, as a tool that it's so innovative... it's, wow, whenever I speak with somebody, I have goosebumps, you know, people are really like, what the fuck, you're crazy - you did what?!" (#12)*

#### 2.4.7 Discussion: Outcomes

What can be said about the outcomes of my research participants' involvement in FC, in terms of cognitive, relational, and experiential or affective dimensions of social learning?

##### ***Emotional impacts***

Many FC participants have experienced burnout - a state of destabilising and debilitating exhaustion, including deteriorated emotional, psychological, and physical well-being, as well as a sense of disillusionment, hopelessness, and cynicism (Maslach and Gomes, 2006; Rettig, 2006; Cox, 2011; Gorski and Chen, 2015).

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<sup>10</sup> Between December 2021 and January 2022, a FairCoin Winter Camp hackathon took place (FairCoin, 2021). I joined one of the sessions, during which I learned that work was ongoing to strengthen FairCoin on both the technical and the governance levels.

Interpersonal tensions and exhaustion are common issues within SMOs at large – and all the more so in activist work related to social issues, which “involves cultivating and maintaining awareness of large and overwhelming social problems, often carrying a burden of knowledge that society as a whole is unable or unwilling to face” (Maslach and Gomes, 2006, p. 43). To alleviate such tensions, scholars investigating burnout agree on the importance of fostering a culture of self- and mutual care, and to bring attention to conflict-resolution processes. Otherwise, the risk is not just that burnout may lead to an activist “damaging her self-esteem and relationships”: most importantly, “when an activist burns out she deprives younger activists of a mentor, thus making them more likely to burn out” (Rettig, 2006, p.16).

Therefore, fostering an ethic of care, focused on nurturing relationships as well as physical, emotional, and social health (Cox, 2011) appears central to favouring social learning within social movements. But without an attention to equity and distribution of power, none of the above are likely to be enough to prevent conflict from occurring. In her research on activist-led projects, Blee (2012) observed that “When activists talked to me about being ‘burned out’ in grassroots politics, they weren’t referring only to the enormous effort it takes to make social change. They also were upset about how people worked with each other and they struggled over whether to continue in groups whose difficult dynamics they saw no way to change” (loc.1311).

### ***Positive outcomes: Towards collective learning***

Although FC may have failed as a project, all interviewees said that FC had also helped them create many new friendships and connections, which in some cases had been a source of new projects and activities. Several interviewees also said that important tools that were born thanks to FC - most notably, FairCoin - were still creating value for them or others, or could do so in the future.

Most significantly perhaps, participation appears to have yielded useful learnings for many participants, especially regarding:

1. Ways to organise and mobilise to create social change in collaborative projects - which had, in some cases, already been put into practice in new projects and activities;

2. How money and currencies work, especially cryptocurrencies;
3. Human relationships and community-building; and
4. Self-knowledge.

Besides the more “informative” aspects among those listed above, I view the issue of personal and collective learning to be one of the most important purposes for engaging in prefigurative groups. Indeed, for many activists, engaging in the difficult task of horizontal organizing and participatory democracy is a premise for engaging in wider societal change (Maeckelbergh, 2009).

Prefiguration is often mentioned in relation to the idea of *prolepsis* – i.e. “to anticipate or enact some feature of an ‘alternative world’ in the present, as though it has already been achieved” (Yates, 2015, p. 4). This notion is at the heart of De Smet’s (2015) study of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. Building on Vygotsky’s learning theory, in which *prolepsis* refers to “anticipat[ing] or imagin[ing] competence through the representation of a future act or development as already existing” (p.52), De Smet suggests that the Egyptian Revolution was driven by *proleptic collective learning*: it projected a future image of its own future as a guide for its own activity, as an attractive horizon for action.

Swain (2019) argues that *prolepsis* provides prefigurative politics with a developmental justification. Future practices play a formative and educational role in organisations and movements, as participants can “‘try out’ and exercise alternative social relations and forms within the course of a movement, in order both to prepare for an alternative and hasten its arrival” (p.58). From this perspective, which conflates a movement’s ends and the means used to reach them, these practices may be viewed as rehearsals for a future society – in the same way that Berger (1968) viewed mass demonstrations as rehearsals for revolutions. Although these practices almost always fall short of the “real thing,” they may still help to bring it into being.

Nonetheless, this collective learning can surface problematic interpersonal dynamics in participatory democratic groups, particularly if some participants take on the role of teaching others how to behave. This calls for “a pedagogical relationship that recognises

the need and potential for development while affirming a radical underlying equality” among all members of the group (Swain, 2019, p.60).

Collective learning also requires an orientation to learning and collective reflection that is far from being always present: in most of the activist groups studied by Blee (2012, loc.1296), “collective learning dies away with no acknowledgment.” Learning may take a backseat as groups become engulfed in getting things done, steer clear of conflict, or designate certain members to take on a role of learners or knowledge keepers.

Within the context of FC, while individual participants appear to have drawn many useful lessons from their experience, processes of collective learning do not seem to have been given much explicit attention. This is not to say they did not take place. A notable example of such a process took place in 2019 among several participants, who reflected on the mistakes that had been made in the project, summarised a variety of lessons, and considered what kind of new purpose and structure FC might adopt in the future (FairCoop, no date f). I do not know to what extent these ideas were circulated or acted on within the network at large.

In the next section, I conclude this chapter, and discuss the contributions of this Action Research cycle to my thesis and to the wider field of prefigurative online communities.

### ***3 Conclusion: Some learnings***

In this chapter, I presented the results of the action research cycle I carried out with participants from FairCoop (FC). I will summarise here some important personal learnings from this research, which I hope may be useful to networks and communities intent on creating generative social change.

I found that while FC was an ambitious project dedicated to bringing about radical social and economic change, after a period of impressive growth, the network ran into deep issues that brought it to a standstill.

A key element in FC’s early success phase, which seems to have attracted much engagement and attention, was the development and use of FairCoin – an ecological and socially-conscious cryptocurrency. As an important innovation born in FC, FairCoin

enabled a new system of exchange to emerge between a variety of grassroots economic actors, and helped the network to channel capital from the global financial markets into a post-capitalist commons (Dallyn and Frenzel, 2021). However, this tool eventually became a source of conflict when this double focus led to a situation of double pricing, which FC's governance mechanisms were unable to resolve.

From this situation, I draw the following insights:

- > *It is very difficult (and perhaps impossible?) for a community to maintain a good balance and integration between simultaneously **participating in global financial markets**, and building **local economy initiatives** – particularly if this community has no buffers in place against the fluctuations that affect global financial markets;*
- > *When participants with very different ideological perspectives and intentions are brought together into a common project, due care should be exercised to ensure **everyone is fully informed and aware of the implications of strategic decisions** that are made – for example, in making a community currency vulnerable to speculative financial markets.*

Another pain point in FC was its governance, whose flaws were acknowledged by all interviewees. Although FC set out as a participatory democratic project, based on the prefigurative use of consensus as primary decision-making process, informal power dynamics were not kept in check, and the distribution of influence and leadership through the network did not appear to correspond to its stated goals. In this regard, it appears that FC lacked both the formal rules and structures that would have allowed fairer and more equal participation, as well as the democratic norms and culture that might have helped to challenge emerging oligarchical patterns.

- > *Projects like FC should make sure to put into place **clear structures to acknowledge the role and responsibility** of influential participants, and solid mechanisms to keep these participants **accountable** to others in their actions.*
- > *Decision-making and accountability processes should be **explicitly articulated** and **open for regular revision and discussion**, to make sure a diversity of voices can be heard and included.*

- > ***Emergent, episodic and distributed forms of leadership can be better acknowledged and embraced** in horizontal groups, and help them avoid bureaucratisation or oligarchy.*
- > *Critical responsibilities, such as management of project funds, should not be **concentrated** into the hands of a single person - and if they are, maximum **transparency and accountability** should be exercised towards the rest of the project/community participants.*
- > *For more efficiency, **a general assembly can be usefully complemented by smaller working groups** that are tasked with taking certain decisions, while being ultimately accountable to the assembly.*

The tools that FC relied on for its activities do not seem to have been on a par with its ambitious mission. Reliance on text messaging seems to have generated misunderstandings, particularly within such a multicultural setting, and prevented deeper connectedness and trust to form. As for the software OCP, which some participants viewed as essential to coordinate the various forms of decentralised social production taking place around the network, its adoption and development was considered undemocratic by many in the network, and thus became another source of conflict.

- > *Projects like FC, involving the coordination of activities on behalf of geographically dispersed participants, should make sure **not to concentrate all their critical communications on a single medium**, especially one that may feel disempowering to some. In particular, arranging **video calls** might help to complement text-based mediums.*
- > *Tools affecting whole project management should be adopted as **democratically** as possible, with **strong concerns taken as useful feedback** to improve the decision-making process - especially when engaging large costs.*

FC, as an action-oriented community, appears to have neglected practices and processes that would have built trust, fostered an ethic of mutual care, and led to the clear articulation of common norms and principles. As I will argue (**Chapter 6**), these aspects

seem central to increase a prefigurative community's potential to enact radical collective change.

Besides, participants do not seem to have found productive ways to explore patterns of behaviour and interpersonal dynamics that can be unhelpful to collaborative endeavours. As a result, the social fabric of the community appears to have been rather weak, all the more so due to heterogeneous linguistic and cultural backgrounds. And when conflict erupted and spread, there were no structures and practices that might have helped to transform it into occasions for fruitful collective learning and change.

> *Ways to **promote and nurture mutual care** are important to build trust, and maintain engagement and cohesion in a project, especially when facing difficult challenges. Plenty of space should be dedicated to this, especially in the case of online projects.*

> ***Processes for conflict transformation and mediation** by commonly approved third-parties should be agreed on (or at least outlined) in the early stages of a project.*

> *When power dynamics are a key cause for conflict to erupt, mediation alone is unlikely to succeed in the absence of **collective processes of deliberation** that may challenge these dynamics.*

> *Participants whose native language isn't the dominant one in the project should be cared for and helped to take part in the project as best as possible (including via **translation/interpretation tools or practices**).*

As a result of these difficulties, many FC participants experienced burnout, and lost friends or money. Thankfully, participation in this project was also a source of many new friendships, projects, and tools that were still in use at the time of writing, such as FairCoin. FC also led to much personal and collective learning for participants in the fields of democratic collaboration, community-building, and finance.

To me, this points to a vast potential for prefigurative projects like FC. In this case, an accumulation of interconnected issues eventually led to a significant loss of energy and to the collapse of most social learning spaces in the network; but this does not have to be the case. By combining “ways of doing” more supportive of a participatory



democratic approach, “ways of being” fostering trust, care, and understanding, and a sustained orientation toward critical reflection on the personal and collective levels, I believe that an online community may become a place in which to enact radical collective change as the prefiguration of an alternative world. But this calls for much conscious, collective, and sustained attention to processes of unlearning, which may enable people to “compost” unhelpful forms of organising and behaving. I will investigate this further in **Chapter 6**.

This chapter contributes to knowledge of informal learning and knowledge production happening through involvement in social change efforts. It also contributes to scholarship on social movements, and in particular:

- to the understanding of the governance of online self-organised and participatory democratic groups, which is under-researched (Massa and O’Mahony, 2021)
- to the field of social movement learning.

On the methodological level, my data-collection methods (blending synchronous and asynchronous convergent interviewing, translation, commenting functions on online documents, etc.) may also be of some interest to fellow researchers carrying out similar studies within conflictive, multilingual groups.

In the next chapter, I will turn to a community that has placed much more attention to relational “ways of being” as part of its prefigurative practice: the Deep Adaptation Forum.

# 5 Different ways of being and relating: The Deep Adaptation Forum

*Many of us fear that confrontation with despair will bring loneliness and isolation.  
On the contrary, in letting go of old defenses, we find truer community.  
And in community, we learn to trust our inner responses to our world  
– and find our power.*  
- Joanna Macy (2008)

*Quelles paroles faut-il semer,  
pour que les jardins du monde redeviennent fertiles ?<sup>11</sup>*  
- Jeanine Salesse (cited in Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2013, p. 268)

In this chapter, I will present findings from the evaluation process that took place within the Deep Adaptation Forum. Using social learning theory and methodologies developed by E. Wenger (1998, 2009) and E. and B. Wenger-Trayner (2015b; 2020), this chapter will assess patterns of personal change taking place within this network. These findings will be discussed using the metaphor of the social learning space as a cultivated field, involving *seeds* (elements of personal and collective change), *soil* (conditions enabling learning to take place), and *sowers* (people who care for the seeds and the soil).

## 1 Introduction

In July 2018, Prof Jem Bendell published an academic paper on the IFLAS blog of the University of Cumbria, where he taught and still teaches (Bendell, 2018). The paper was titled “Deep Adaptation: A map for navigating climate tragedy.” It had been originally written for the Sustainability Accounting, Management and Policy Journal. It was

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11 “What words should we sow, for the gardens of the world to become fertile again?” My translation.

rejected by the reviewers of that journal, who found unacceptable that the paper didn't build off existing scholarship – while the paper's aim was in fact to fill in a gap in such scholarship – and who found it inappropriate, moreover, to “dishearten” readers with its central claim: that the collapse of global civilisation is inevitable, and that it may happen within the coming decade, due to the catastrophic impacts of climate change. In the paper, social (or societal) collapse was defined as “an uneven ending of our normal modes of sustenance, security, pleasure, identity, meaning, and hope” (Bendell, 2020b, p. 4). On the basis of this assessment, Bendell proposed an approach he called the “deep adaptation agenda,” relying on aggressive emission cuts and drawdown (mitigation) efforts coupled with personal and collective attempts at adaptation to the coming changes, based on compassion, curiosity, and respect, which I will introduce in more detail below.

Surprisingly for this kind of work, the self-published paper soon went viral. Within a few months, it had been downloaded several hundred thousand times. Its notoriety further grew as the Deep Adaptation approach was publicly endorsed by leading figures of the Extinction Rebellion movement (Bendell, 2019a; Read, 2019; XR UK, 2019; Bradbrook and Bendell, 2020), and after it was reported on in several major news outlets, such as the BBC (Hunter, 2020), the *New York Times* (Bromwich, 2020), or *Vice* (Tsjeng, 2019).

In late 2018, a private sponsor approached Prof Bendell, offering some financial support to launch an initiative building on the wide-reaching impact of the ideas presented in the paper. Bendell agreed, under the condition that the sponsor would have no authority in designing said initiative. Having secured that agreement, he invited several close collaborators to form a Core Team which would help steward this project: the Deep Adaptation Forum (DAF). I was one of these people, due to my having provided Prof Bendell with some research assistance during the final stages of writing, as I have described elsewhere (Cavé, 2019a, 2019b).

By early 2020, I decided that DAF could constitute an interesting case study as part of my PhD research. Having obtained approval from the university's ethics committee, I initiated a participatory action research project within the network. Prof Bendell left the

Forum at the end of September 2020, as originally intended. Most of my research happened between April 2020 and April 2022.

## 1.1 What is deep adaptation (DA)?

In Bendell’s seminal paper and subsequent writings, Deep Adaptation (DA) is presented as “an agenda and framework for responding to the potential, probable or inevitable collapse of industrial consumer societies, due to the direct and indirect impacts of human-caused climate change and environmental degradation.” It “describes the inner and outer, personal and collective, responses to either the anticipation or experience of societal collapse, worsened by the direct or indirect impacts of climate change” (Bendell and Read, 2021b, p. 2).

In contrast to more shallow (or mainstream) forms of climate adaptation, DA encourages conversations that go deeper into the causes and potential responses to climate impacts, at personal, organisational, and societal levels. As a way to structure these conversations, Bendell (2020b, pp. 23–24) suggests relying on the following “4 Rs” (Figure 5):

- “How do we keep what we really want to keep?” (**R**esilience)
- “What do we need to let go of in order to not make matters worse?” (**R**elinquishment);
- “What can we bring back to help us with the coming difficulties and tragedies?” (**R**estoration); and
- “With what and with whom shall we make peace as we awaken to our common mortality?” (**R**econciliation)

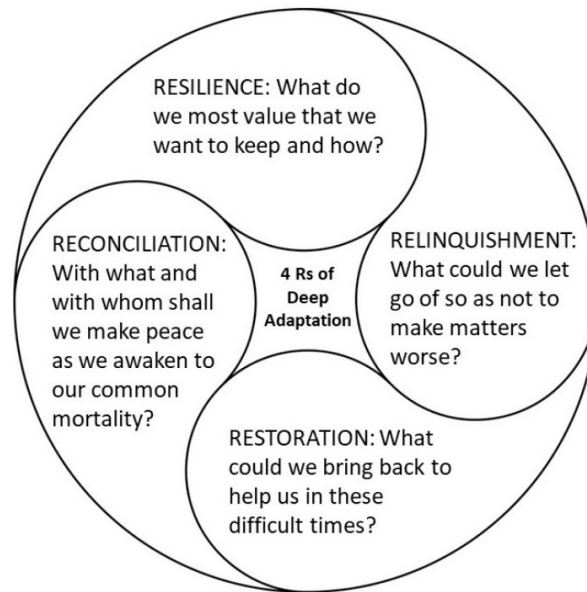


Figure 5: The four Rs of Deep Adaptation (source: Bendell & Carr, 2021)

DA is also an ethos (DAF Core Team, 2019b, p. 3), foregrounding the following key values:

- *compassion*: “We seek to return to universal compassion in all our work, and remind each other to notice in ourselves when anger, fear, panic, or insecurity may be influencing our thoughts or behaviours.”
- *curiosity*: “We recognise that we do not have many answers on specific technical or policy matters. Instead, our aim is to provide a space and an invitation to participate in generative dialogue that is founded in kindness and curiosity. Valuing curiosity also invites us to challenge some of the ingrained or ‘invisible’ assumptions that underpin our worldview”; and,
- *respect*: “We respect other people’s situations and however they may be reacting to our alarming predicament, whether they are first learning about impending collapse or already experiencing it.”

These values were first articulated as central philosophical principles meant to govern the Deep Adaptation Forum (Bendell and Carr, 2019), and later were enshrined in the Forum’s evolving Charter (DAF, 2022a).

As an approach, DA has meaningfully informed studies in various academic fields, including urban planning (Miller and Nay, 2022; Pérez, 2022; Zwangsleitner *et al.*, 2022); sociology (Lennon, 2020; Tröndle, 2021); security studies (Trochowska-Sviderok, 2021); education (von Bülow and Simpson, 2021); public policy (Monios and Wilmsmeier, 2020; Carbonell Betancourt and Scarpellini, 2021); philosophy (Schenck and Churchill, 2021; Roderick, 2022); and performance arts (Stevens, 2019). According to a systematic review of the academic literature which I carried out using the Google Scholar search engine (Cavé, 2022c), by the end of October 2022 Bendell's 2018 "Deep Adaptation" paper had been cited in at least 296 publications, including 138 journal articles, 94 books, 42 theses, and 22 other documents. All were in English save for 15.

## 1.2 What is the Deep Adaptation Forum (DAF)?

Simply put, DAF is the name that has come to designate the various online platforms and initiatives initially established and managed under the leadership of Prof Bendell and/or the DAF Core Team, since March 2019, as vehicles for DA-oriented discussion and action according to the DA ethos. In the next section, I will return to the question of DAF leadership and my involvement in it.

Defining the nature and purpose of DAF has been and remains challenging, in large part due to three factors:

1. Changes in the entity that the name refers to;
2. How the project's form and purpose has evolved over time;
3. The project's open-ended nature.

In the following, I will present an outline of some of the main perspectives I am aware of with regards to the DAF mission and purpose, and how it may be described.

### 1.2.1 Mission and purpose

As I explain in **Annex 5.4**, originally the term "Deep Adaptation Forum" was the name of a particular platform, hosted on the software Ning, designed and launched by the DAF Core Team in March 2019 under the leadership of Prof Bendell. This platform was framed as an international online space in which to engage with DA and the topic of societal collapse from the perspective of organisations and professional fields of

activity, and as a place in which mutual support and social learning could happen about these topics (Bendell, 2019c). However, the term quickly grew to cover all activities initiated by the DAF Core Team, as a central organisational body, through the platforms and communication channels available to us at the time – including the Ning platform, but also a Facebook group, a LinkedIn group, a YouTube channel, a newsletter, etc. In order to reduce the confusion, the Ning platform was renamed to “the Professions’ Network of the Deep Adaptation Forum” in October 2019.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, DAF’s official framing has also evolved since its creation. While the project was originally focused on initiating conversations within professional fields of activity, a new emphasis on cultivating new forms of relationality gradually came to the fore, which was later complemented with an emphasis on social justice issues (**Annex 5.4**).

DAF’s original mission statement was first articulated in the Core Team’s “Strategic Overview and Planning” document from August 2019 (DAF Core Team, 2019a), which I view as the first comprehensive expression of DAF’s purpose and strategy, as follows:

The overarching mission of the DAF is to embody and enable loving responses to our predicament, so that we reduce suffering while saving more of society and the natural world. (p.8)

In parallel to these official framings, largely articulated by the Core Team, I also want to honour the perspectives presented by stakeholders less centrally involved in this project. A useful reference point in this regard is “What Is DAF? Five Ws”, a collaborative document summarising the responses of 13 DAF participants to a series of questions raised by a volunteer and answered collectively between November 2021 and December 2021 (DAF, 2022d). These participants included all kinds of constituents mentioned in Section 4 (including myself and another Core Team colleague). Regarding the purpose of DAF, responses were summarised as follows:

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<sup>12</sup> This can be viewed as enacting a conscious semantic shift in the meaning of the term “forum” in the project name, from one of its common definitions – i.e. “an area of a website where users can post comments and have discussions” – to another – “a place, situation, or group in which people exchange ideas and discuss issues, especially important public issues” (Collins English Dictionary, 2022).

To connect people in a space where they can learn to reorient and respond to collapse with love and compassion, discuss freely and accompany one another on an emotional journey and in projects. (p.1)

### 1.2.2 Defining DAF

The nature of DAF itself has been articulated in a variety of ways. From the beginning of the project until the time of writing, DAF remained an unincorporated entity. Legally speaking, it may be defined as a project of the Schumacher Institute, the registered UK charity acting as DAF's main fiscal sponsor.

In the 2019 “Strategic Overview and Planning” document, DAF is described as “a set of communication platforms that enable collapse-aware people to connect internationally, exchange information, and take positive action” (p.4).

Responses to the “What is DAF?” exercise mentioned above referred to DAF as one, or several, (online) “space(s)” (5 times), a “community” (4 times), and a “network” (4 times). They were summarised as follows:

An intentional, self-organising network (and associated community) comprising platforms, people, content, and events for learning, support and action. (p.1)

My perspective is that DAF can be understood as an international (or transnational) network; an online community; and as a complex landscape (Wenger-Trayner *et al.*, 2015) comprised of various communities of practice, as defined in **Chapter 3**.

I view DAF as both a learning and an action network, following the typology put forth by Ehrlichman (2021, p. 14):

Learning networks are focused on connection and learning. They are formed to facilitate the flow of information or knowledge to advance collective learning on a particular issue.

Action networks are focused on connection, learning, and action. They are formed to facilitate connection and learning in service of coordinated action.

Both of these aspects are embodied in the various communities of practice that have emerged within this network. For example, the DA Facilitators' group brings together several dozen participants, in order to form “a ‘share and support’ space for people who



are hosting, or would like to host, Deep Adaptation gatherings online. The intention is that we can share practices and approaches that embody the ‘Principles of Deep Adaptation Gatherings’, and support each other in holding these conversations” (DA Facilitators, 2022). The Diversity and Decolonising Circle, dedicated to addressing the main forms of separation and oppression that characterise modern industrial societies, is another such community of practice (**Annex 5.3**). Together, these various communities form the landscape of practice of the Deep Adaptation Forum (Figure 6).<sup>13</sup>

At the time of analysis, DAF platforms brought together between 15,000 and 17,000 participants, largely English-speaking and living in North America, western Europe, and Oceania. In addition, more than 16,000 mostly non-English speakers participate through groups affiliated with DAF. I discuss DAF membership in more detail in Section 2.4 of this chapter.

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13 For more details on the concept of landscape of practice, please see **Chapter 2**.

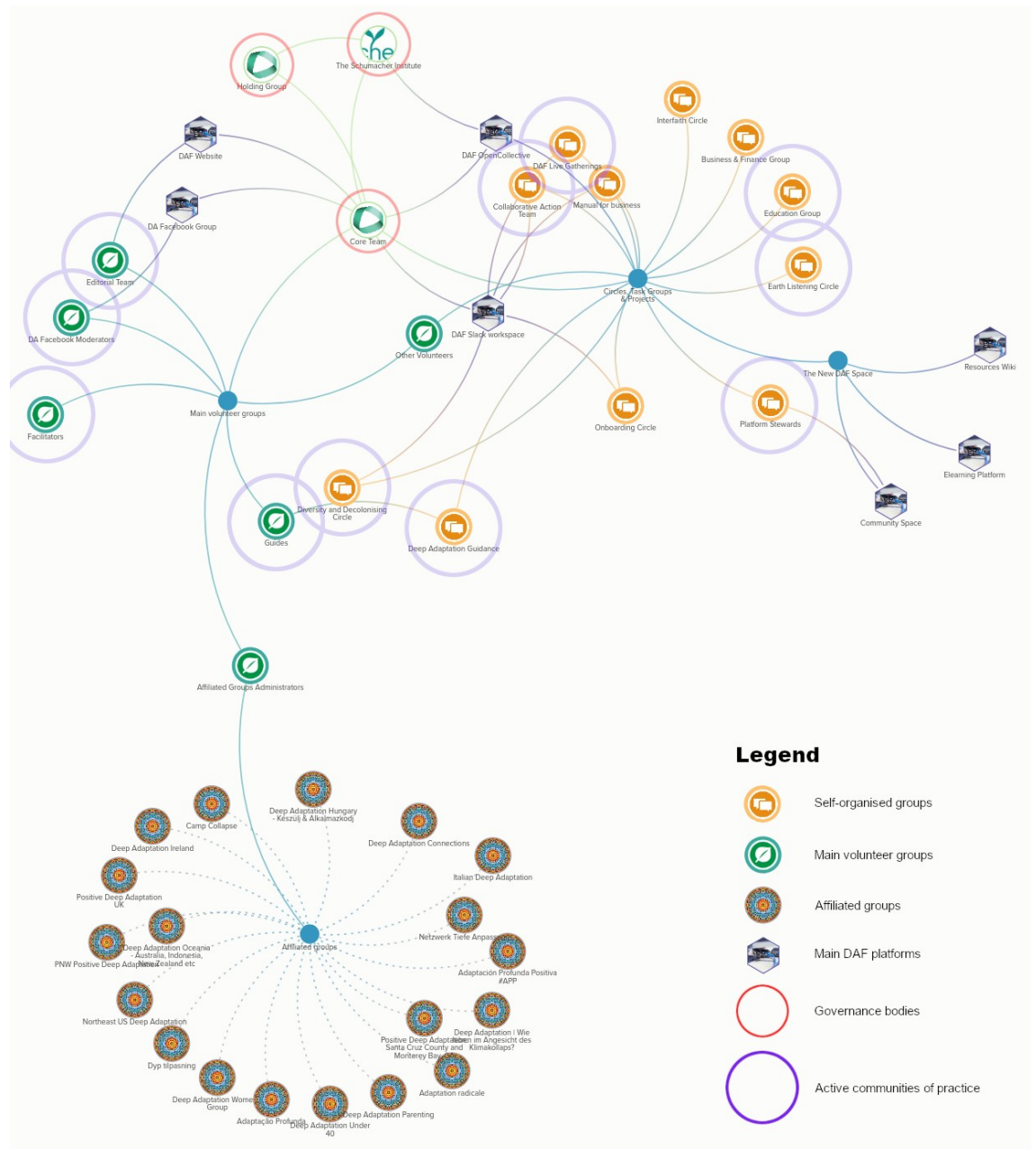


Figure 6: The DAF landscape, as of November 2022

### 1.2.3 Why select DAF as a research site?

As stated above, I was invited in early 2019 to join DAF's main organisational body, the Core Team, ahead of the launch of the main DAF platforms. Since then and until the time of writing, I have remained deeply involved in this network. As as a paid Core

Team member<sup>14</sup>, I have had to fulfil the various commitments outlined in the various iterations of my memorandum of understanding; and out of personal interest, I have also been investing much of my time and energy in various DAF initiatives on a volunteering basis.

I decided to include DAF into my PhD research as a case study for several reasons.

First of all, by early 2020 it had become obvious to me that through its activities and the relationships it enabled, DAF was in fact becoming an online community that could potentially bring about forms of radical collective change, although of a very different kind than those aspired to within the other community I was studying – FairCoop. Indeed, DAF was a rare example of a network premised on the perspective that radical societal changes were going to happen due to the magnitude of the global predicament: therefore, equally radical action was needed to stave off the worst of these changes. In particular, I was intrigued by the role that cultivating new forms of relationality may play as part of this collective action. I could feel myself undergoing various changes as a result of my engagement, and I was keen to explore whether such changes were also happening to others – and if so, what (un)learning processes could account for these shifts. I discuss some of these changes that took place for me in **Chapter 6**.

The ethos embodied by my friends and colleagues in DAF also appeared very much aligned with Action Research philosophy as I saw it (**Chapter 3**). For example, I could see that we were exploring participatory and emergent forms of governance; that we called attention to the somatic and affective dimensions of the person; that we valued collaborative learning; and that the purpose of DAF was emancipatory. This led me to hope that my research project would appeal to others, who might want to join me as part of a research team – which indeed happened.

Finally, my involvement and good relationships with others in the network granted me easy access to other participants. As a result, I was able to set up individual research conversations and disseminate surveys, but also, with my research partner, organise more sophisticated research processes, such as the Conscious Learning Festival activities (see **Annex 5.5**).

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14 Core Team members are self-employed contractors receiving a basic living stipend of GBP 100 per day of work, and can invoice DAF for up to six to eight days of work per month.

From the beginning, I have been aware that my involvement in DAF might lead me to overlook or downplay the disheartening aspects that, as any human endeavour, it was bound to present. Therefore, I have strived to balance my partiality to this community – whose membership I feel has become part of my identity – with critical attention to its limitations and shortcomings. My aim in this chapter is not to praise or to romanticise, but to pay as much attention as possible to “the good, the bad, the beautiful, the ugly, the broken, and the messed up” in DAF – to use Vanessa Machado de Oliveira’s (2021) expression – so that other networks may learn from this example.

### 1.3 Research questions

In this chapter, I will focus on answering the following questions:

1. **What are the main “seeds of change” that are being cultivated within DAF social learning spaces?** This refers to *forms of social learning* that appear relevant to DAF participants, in view of the global predicament.
2. **What are the conditions – or the “soil” - enabling these changes to happen, or preventing them from happening?** This refers to the *social and material conditions* that may help these seeds to grow.
3. **What kind of learning leadership – and who are the “sowers” – helping to nurture the soil and to sow the seeds?** This refers to the persons within a social learning space who enact the clearest forms of *leadership* in creating the conditions for learning to prosper, within the network and beyond.

In order to answer the research questions listed above, our research team carried out a social learning evaluation process in three specific and interrelated Research Streams within DAF:

1. the DAF Diversity & Decolonising Circle (social learning space)
2. the research team itself (social learning space)
3. DAF as a whole (landscape of practice)

In this chapter, I will focus on Research Stream #3, which addresses social learning in DAF as a landscape of practice. Research Streams #1 and #2 are respectively presented in **Annex 5.3** and **5.5**. See more details on these evaluation processes in **Annex 3.3**.

## ***2 Social learning in the landscape of DAF***

In this section, I will first introduce participants' aspirational narratives in the DAF landscape of practice; then, I will investigate the seeds of change, enabling soil, and sowers that can be identified within the social learning space. Finally, I will conclude this chapter with a discussion of these results in view of my research questions.

The value-creation stories created over the course of this study constitute an important source of primary data (**Chapter 3**). These stories can be read in **Annex 5.2**. For more details on the collection and co-creation of these stories, please refer to **Annex 3.3**.

### **2.1 Participant aspirations**

First, we should investigate what have been some important aspirations and intentions that participants have been bringing into DAF, as a constellation of social learning spaces and communities of practice. This requires examining both the intentions of the network founder and other conveners, reflected in the discursive framing surrounding the purpose of DAF as it was launched and evolved; and the aspirations expressed by various network participants through time.

For an in-depth discussion of both aspects, see **Annex 5.4**.

The purpose of DAF was originally introduced by its founder using two main framings: as a network in which to engage with the DA framework and societal collapse from the perspective of organisations and professional fields of activity; and as a space in which to cultivate new forms of relationality, overcoming separation, and fostering compassion and loving kindness. The former reflected a strategic intention to structure the core of DAF activities around a particular platform, initially named “The Deep Adaptation Forum,” and which later became “The Professions' Network.” However, this platform did not fully live up to its mission. Partly as a result, the second framing gradually grew

in importance within official communications in DAF. This relational framing was later complemented with a third one, focused on addressing aspects related to the effects of global systemic injustice.

In parallel, participants engaging in the various DAF platforms expressed an interest in a number of topic areas. While some were very much aligned with either of the two main framings described above, others also voiced aspirations that did not readily fit within either of these topics. In particular, more peripheral participants especially expressed a desire for more local community-building efforts, and wished to find more spaces in which to learn about forms of practical preparedness to societal collapse.

This is not to say that none of these other topics have ever been explored and acknowledged as relevant within DAF's official channels. However, they were originally less central within DAF's official framing, which has gradually evolved to incorporate a greater variety of concerns. Besides, the outcomes of various consultation processes between 2020 and 2022 confirm aspirations for more attention to these areas within the network. These outcomes also show the low interest for forms of intervention within professional and organisational fields on behalf of most participants, in contradiction with the network's original framing.

The history of these strategic consultations speaks to a continued intention, on behalf of the DAF Core Team, to foster self-organisation and support a wide variety of endeavours throughout the network, following a particular ethos - as opposed to driving participation towards meeting any particular set of goals. However, the complexity of this mode of organisation (which breaks from more conventional social movement or non-profit practices) has been reflected in the difficulty for spontaneous groups to emerge and persist in time.

Another important finding, originating from the results of two surveys investigating participants' aspirations, is that intentions for engaging in DAF vary depending on one's degree of involvement in the network. I will return to this more fully below.

What have been the main forms of social learning have taken place within various DAF spaces to meet some of these key aspirations?

## 2.2 Seeds of change

### 2.2.1 New ways of being and relating

A key aspect of the original framing of DAF, as I have shown in the previous section, has been about fostering new forms of relationality.

Within the network, a number of modalities that are directly concerned with this aim have been developed, practised, and promoted, notably within the DA Facilitators online community of practice. In particular, participants in this research project have referred to:

- Deep Relating (DR), which is “a relational meditation practice, or an approach to being in relationship with another person, or group of people, in a way that is grounded in a deep and detailed awareness of present moment experience” (Bendell and Carr, 2021);
- Earth Listening (EL), which is a guided collective meditation centred around the stated purpose of “listening to the Earth” and exploring one’s connection with the wider natural ecosystems of the planet; and
- Wider Embraces (WE), a collective, guided meditation, allowing participants to experience, explore, align and reflect upon different aspects of their being. In this process, one “evoke[s] and explore[s] the physical, the biological, the cultural, the collective and planetary perspectives, which facilitates a greater sense of belonging and alignment between them.”<sup>15</sup>

Available effect data regarding DR and EL mostly comes from the Group Reflections Survey (Cavé, 2022d). Through their involvement, participants in the weekly EL circles report having found new ways of being and relating (particularly with regards to other-than-humans and the natural world), as well as more self-understanding and personal healing, and developed more confidence in practising their truth. Similarly, DR participants said they had found more confidence and self-acceptance, more self-understanding and personal growth, as well as finding fulfilment, and that they had become better able to be present with and relate to others. In other words, participants in

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<sup>15</sup> From an official event description on the DAF online calendar:  
<https://www.deepadaptation.info/event/wider-embraces-eu-as-aus-su22/2022-04-03/>

these two groups appear to have experienced impactful changes in their relational skills and awareness, and in their well-being.

These respondents also mentioned having started new projects or initiatives as a result of their involvement; having found more clarity as to how to shape their home or work life; and having decided to engage more deeply in DAF.

In particular, according to its facilitators, the EL group has been meeting weekly almost every week since it was first convened (in October 2020). As a sign of its success, other groups using the EL method have been initiated over time, in DAF and beyond, by the original group's facilitators or others who discovered the modality thanks to them.

Interviewees have testified about the impact that practising these modalities had had on their lives. For example, Dana mentioned the profound changes that their engagement with EL had had on them (Story #10). They said they were now speaking to the Earth whenever they went out into the wild. Besides, taking part in EL prompted them to join a course that played a transformative role in their journey towards healing intergenerational trauma.

Asked what they had been learning through their participation in WE, a regular attendee wrote me the following:

*"I am learning to let go my need for understanding and thinking. I am slowly opening to the feeling of being in a new way, for me. Allowing my ego and many voices to quieten, allowing senses to open and reach out and in for expressions that sometimes are not speakable."*

These testimonies speak to the important affective benefits that participants have drawn from their participation, particularly with regards to their ability to become more focused, and present to themselves and others.

### **2.2.2 Self-organising**

As mentioned in the previous section, encouraging self-organisation within DAF has been an important intention of the Core Team since the network's creation. This was clearly articulated on the DAF website (DAF, 2020b):



DAF doesn't follow the typical route of identifying a specific professional / stakeholder group to serve. Instead, it responds to rapidly increasing concerns about the risks of climate-induced societal breakdown and Deep Adaptation, by channelling them into networks of peer support. This leads to projects that may not have been imagined at the outset.

This ambition has been materialised in two main ways:

1. By creating scaffolding, within the network architecture, allowing for the creation and acknowledgement of self-managed teams or groups;
2. By providing occasions for participants to articulate their aspirations to one another, and enlist others in the pursuit of common projects or other aspirations.

What seeds of change have been created as a result?

### ***Self-organising scaffolding***

Self-organisation scaffolding in DAF has taken three main forms: *task groups*; *circles*; and *crews*. *Task groups* (TGs) are a mode of organisation introduced through the Ning platform in April 2019. Any platform members could mention their TG idea in a dedicated space on the forum, and invite others to join them. Once three members had agreed to collaborate, they would be invited to sign an Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with a representative of the Core Team. Following the 2021 Strategy Options Review (see **Annex 5.4**), a new scaffolding was introduced: *circles*. Circles are similar to TGs, except that instead of a formal MoU, initiators are invited to a open conversation with the Core Team, leading to a public disclosure of the circle's remit and intention. Thirdly, to acknowledge the importance of groups self-organising in a more informal way, the concept of *crews* was introduced in DAF in 2022. Contrary to TG or circles, crews are described as small (from 3 to 7 participants), informal groups, meeting regularly, and which might work on collaborative projects but also simply engage in mutual support or other kinds of discussion (DAF Core Team, 2022d). The concept was borrowed from the Microsolidarity framework (Bartlett, 2022).

A final element of scaffolding is a monthly meeting, co-facilitated by a volunteer and two members of the Core Team (including myself), which aims at enabling mutual

support and capacity-building among participants in the process of forming (or taking part in) a crew.

### ***Self-organising events***

In order to give more visibility to DAF participants' respective intentions, facilitate the building of trust and the creation of relationships that may lead to self-managed teams forming, online events using an "open space technology" format are regularly organised in DAF. The first series of online open space events were convened by volunteers (with support from Core Team) as part of the 2020 Strategy Options Dialogue. While these activities were primarily about inviting DAF participants to express their wishes as regards the future of the network (see **Annex 5.4**), they also led to the building of relationships between attendees that gave rise to certain TGs (such as the D&D Circle).

Thereafter, between July 2020 and July 2022, 10 other open space events were organised, mostly facilitated by volunteers forming part of the Collaborative Action Team – itself a self-organised crew. These events attracted registrations from over 300 different participants, many of whom were not active within DAF.

### ***Is DAF a self-organising network?***

In spite of the efforts mentioned above, it appears that few self-organised groups have succeeded in maintaining their efforts in time. Besides, efforts aiming at supporting the creation of more circles and crews have led to little engagement so far. It is therefore tempting to conclude that DAF has failed to become a self-organising network or community – i.e. one in which "complex interdependent work can be accomplished effectively at scale in the absence of managerial authority" (Lee and Edmondson, 2017).

Nonetheless, literature on self-organisation in open sociotechnical networks like DAF (Massa and O'Mahony, 2021) points out that such ways of organising tend to take time to emerge, not least due to most people's lack of experience in this domain. In this regard, it is worthwhile to consider encouraging signs that the practice of self-organisation may be slowly spreading through DAF.

*"[Thanks to] many conversations [I've had in DAF]... I've learned that our way of doing things [in the Collaborative Action Team] is spreading within DAF. I notice, for example, how the Business and*

*Finance group leaders now announce their events as ‘Zoom sessions in an open space context.’ I’ve also heard of teaming processes being used more deliberately, for instance in the DA Facilitators’ group. Now, DAF feels more self-organised, more adaptive and focused on small collectives.” (Story #11)*

The testimony above was provided by one of the DAF volunteers who, together with other members of the Collaborative Action Team, has been most instrumental in spreading self-organising practices – such as “teaming,” i.e. working in small teams – within DAF. He points out how the practice of allowing emergent groups to form using the open space format has also been applied within meetings of various interest groups in DAF.

Other volunteers mentioned having become better at teamwork since joining DAF, such as David (Story #15). Sasha and Wendy, two volunteers who co-founded the D&D circle (Story #3, cycles 10-13; Story #4, cycles 4-6), mentioned how the scaffolding and support provided by the Core Team, and the know-how shared by the Collaborative Action Team, were instrumental to the circle getting started. As for Matthew (Story #12, cycles 4-7), he explained how becoming a DAF volunteer enabled him to encounter collaborators and to co-found the DA Guidance TG.

There are also emerging examples of other generative projects emerging in a self-organised fashion within DAF. Between September 2020 and September 2022, a comprehensive evaluation and evolution of the software infrastructure supporting DAF groups was carried out by a group of over two dozen volunteers and Core Team members, who coordinated their research, testing, and implementation efforts in a self-organised way. The expertise of three participants in the domain of Sociocratic project management, who occasionally stepped in to facilitate these efforts, was critical (which points to the important enabling role of facilitators, which I return to below). Thanks to this project, three new platforms were introduced into the DAF, and an existing one was retired.

In November 2022, a DAF volunteer invited several others to take part in the efforts of a self-organised collective offering support to women in Ukraine who suffered sexual assault (Story #16). Her story shows how the trusting and affectionate connections she

had fostered within DAF were critical to this collaboration taking place, as well as her fellow volunteers' comfort with self-organising.

Overall, it therefore appears that self-organisation – and the skills that support it – are among the seeds that have been consciously, and influentially, cultivated within DAF. While the network remains in the early stages of relying on such practices, their diffusion is taking place and may lead to fuller emergence of circles and crews in the future.

### **2.2.3 Integrating and transforming difficult emotions**

The Collapse Awareness and Community Survey (CAS - Cavé, 2022a) indicates that most DAF participants view societal collapse as a phenomenon that affects (or will affect) the entire world and from which they will not find shelter, and they also think that it has already started. Their predominant affective (somatic, emotional) responses to this assessment include sorrow and grief, as well as anxiety, fear and terror.

In this context, multiple survey results have repeatedly confirmed that DAF plays an important role in its participants' ability to live with these difficult emotions, and even to transform them.

A large majority of respondents to the DAF 2020 User Survey (DUS – Cavé, 2022b) said they were feeling “less isolated” and “more curious” as a result of their participation in DAF platforms. Many others also reported feeling “more self-accepting”, “less despairing”, “less confused”, “less apathetic”, and “less fearful.” Four in ten respondents also said they had gained confidence in their ability to deal with the future thanks to their involvement.

Over six out of ten respondents to the CAS found some emotional relief and comfort (including acceptance, joyfulness, feeling less isolated, or learning how to better manage their emotions) through their engagement in DAF. In particular, nearly three out of four volunteers actively involved in DAF testified to reaching better acceptance. Nearly three in four CAS respondents had taken practical steps to bolster their personal or family resilience (such as growing food, changing jobs, or moving to a new location); about half of them were engaged in social forms of adaptation, such as local community-building; and nearly half had become involved in moral or psycho-spiritual

forms of adaptation, such as being in service to others, engaging in activism, or embracing new priorities in life.

As for respondents to the Group Reflections Survey (GRS – Cavé, 2022c), most of them expressed having reached improved emotional states (such as more self-confidence, personal understanding of one's needs, or a sense of trust and belonging) as a result of their involvement in DAF groups, particularly EL and DR. Many also found in these groups the inspiration to undertake new personal projects and activities, from anti-racism work to the creation of new educational groups.

Several interviews provided vivid examples of the sense of relief and encouragement that people may experience, upon encountering a community of “collapse-aware” others.

Stuart, for instance, recounted how joining the DA Facebook group helped him to deal with chronic depression, become more open and honest about his emotional state with family and friends, and attach more value to interpersonal relationships (Story #13). This had a transformative impact on his life. Similarly, Matthew found ways to integrate his grief with other aspects of his life through his involvement with DAF, and to better regulate his anxiety (Story #12). Fred said that experiencing deep connection and fellowship with like-minded others in DAF had helped him to pull himself out of his sense of helplessness and hopelessness, and to undertake meaningful new initiatives as a result (Story #7). As for Diana, she mentioned how participating in various events and groups within DAF made her feel relieved and connected; helped her to find generative new ways of engaging with colleagues; and gave her the confidence to finally “come out” about her views on collapse in a public talk, after having kept her views to herself all her life (Story #14).

Therefore, DAF appears to provide many participants with a renewed ability to reach acceptance of the global predicament, to live with the very difficult emotions it may bring, and even turn these into a source of meaningful action in the world. This is another “seed of change” that has been nurtured within the network.

What conditions enabled these seeds to grow and thrive? What elements of “soil” have been most favourable to them in DAF – or, on the contrary, prevented them from flourishing?

## 2.3 The enabling soil

In order to explore what conditions participants have found most useful to their personal learning, I will first summarise the enabling factors that were mentioned in respondents' answers to several surveys, as well as those mentioned in various reflective conversations taking place in DAF. Specifically, I will draw from the following data set:

- Responses to the Group Reflections Survey (Cavé, 2022c), from participants in the Earth Listening (EL), Business and Finance (BF), and Deep Relating (DR) groups;
- Responses to the Radical Change Survey (RCS – Cavé, 2022c);
- Responses to the DAF 2020 User Survey (DUS – Cavé, 2022b);
- The transcript of the Conscious Learning Festival closing call from October 8, 2021 (CLF); and
- The results of my investigation of social learning taking place in the D&D circle (**Annex 5.3**)

I will then turn to factors that have been mentioned as disabling. I will draw these from the following sources:

- Responses to the DAF 2020 User Survey; and
- Interviews with nine DAF participants.

For both enabling and disabling factors, I will then examine the extent to which this effect data corresponds to contribution data provided within value-creation stories.

### 2.3.1 Enabling factors

Whether asked about their experience of engaging in a large group, such as the DA Facebook group, in smaller groups or circles – like EL or DR – or in DAF at large, participants' comments on what aspects had been most helpful to their learning displayed a certain amount of consistency. Table 2 summarises the factors mentioned in the data set.

Table 2: Enabling factors in DAF

		D&D	EL	BF	DR	RCS	DUS	CLF
<b>Design of the social learning space</b>	Clarity of purpose and clear principles of engagement				X	X	X	
	Presence of facilitators and moderators	X	X	X	X		X	
	A stimulating and informative space					X	X	
	Regular meetings within small groups	X	X		X			
<b>Relational and somatic processes and modalities</b>		X	X		X	X		X
<b>Group culture and atmosphere</b>	A safe space, trust, possibility to make mistakes	X	X		X		X	X
	A focus on cultivating relationships	X						X
<b>Enjoying the company of one's fellow participants</b>	Finding like-minded others, cultivating belonging		X	X		X		
	Diversity of participants and perspectives		X				X	
	Helpful and inspiring fellow participants and role models	X				X	X	X

These enabling factors can be grouped in four main categories, which feed into each other or overlap with one another to a large extent.

### ***Design of the social learning space***

Participants valued DAF social learning spaces that had a clear purpose and focus, as well as principles of engagement known to all. DA Facebook group members, for example, frequently mentioned their appreciation for the clear focus of the group expressed in its guidelines document (e.g. it is not about discussing climate news). The presence of moderators – like in the Facebook group – or facilitators – like in smaller groups like EL, BF and DR – helping to keep conversations “on track” was also often positively remarked upon. Clarity of scope and facilitation were also considered helpful in terms of keeping discussions stimulating and informative, and thus for them to function as vibrant learning spaces.

*“I found that the [Facebook group] moderators worked hard, and were doing a very good job at modelling certain ways of being. They helped to keep the group civil, kind, and loving.” (Story #13).*

Within smaller DAF groups, regular video calls (on a weekly, biweekly or monthly basis) tend to be the norm. Several participants valued the feeling of continuity created by such a meeting rhythm, which enables attendees to build strong relationships over

time, in space of geographical distance. Both Fred (Story #7) and Dana (Story #10) remarked on the importance of such regular meetings to build relationships, work on difficult emotions, and practice new kinds of relationality.

### ***Relational and somatic processes***

It is customary, in most DAF online calls, to begin the meeting with a moment of collective “grounding” or “presencing” meditation (see **Annex 5.3**). This is followed by “check-ins,” during which every participant shares a few words about their current physical and affective state, and any other comments about what may be going on in their lives. Calls usually end with “check-outs” in which people express how there are leaving the meeting.

David (Story #15) mentioned that following initial annoyance at these “woo-woo” rituals, he discovered their “critical” importance: “First, we have to connect as humans, otherwise the rest of it is useless.” To him, it is a “unique” aspect of DAF that “these practices are part of the culture, and they successfully reveal the humans who are involved.”

Participants who regularly take part in DAF calls, for example as part of their involvement with a particular group, have tended to mention such relational and somatic modalities as particularly useful to their learning. Within groups like EL or DR, most of the meeting time is in fact dedicated to engaging with such processes (Cavé, 2022c). Speaking of his experience as a participant and facilitator within several of these groups, Nando said:

*“Such gatherings and experiences have had a deep impact on me. My participation in them has changed how I relate with reality, and it is also changing the way in which I express myself about our predicament - more and more, I stress the need to approach these questions from the point of view of feelings and relating.” (Story #9)*

### ***Group culture and atmosphere***

DAF participants often mention the importance of psychological and emotional safety within discussion spaces. This sense of trust in other participants is fostered through group agreements<sup>16</sup>, and various textual reference points laying out the ethos in which

<sup>16</sup> For example, participants in DAF calls are often reminded by facilitators that personal matters shared within a particular group context (for example, a Zoom breakout room) should be not be repeated



discussions should be taking place – such as the DAF Charter, or the Deep Adaptation Gatherings Principles, which invite participants to “return to compassion, curiosity and respect.” Safety is also encouraged by a group culture within DAF which aims at making “everything welcome,” including difficult emotions, and at being forgiving of one’s and others’ mistakes. Moderators, facilitators, and other respected members of the community, play an essential role in modelling such behaviours.

*“A culture of being able to name what you're observing is really powerful in any group I think, permission for a member to say, 'I'm noticing...' or 'I feel...' and be able to actually speak it into the space, is really powerful.” (D&D Circle participant)*

Another enabling element, referred to particularly by members of the D&D circle and the Collaborative Action Team, is that of encouraging participants to dedicate special care, time, and effort, to sustaining and nurturing interpersonal relationships within the network. On occasion, this may mean setting time aside to work through tensions and conflict, be it happening between oneself and another person, or between other members in one’s group. See **Annex 5.3, Section 2.2.4** for an example of a conflict resolution process within the D&D circle.

*“The conflict-resolution process that I went through, for some conflict that I was involved in... enabled me to see myself from an outsider’s perspective, and gave me deep insights into how different people with good intentions can approach the same situation.” (Story #4)*

### ***Enjoying the company of one’s fellow participants***

DAF participants often express their sense of deep gratitude for having found like-minded others, with whom they can share a sense of belonging and community. For many, this is because no one else around them has an interest in the topic of collapse; for some, the sense of belonging may be linked with an even more specific group focus – be it connecting with the Earth in EL, or engaging with issues of systemic injustice in D&D. Enabling factors mentioned above are likely essential in fostering such feelings of community and belonging.

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elsewhere by another person elsewhere without the sharer’s consent.

*“I feel part of a community of people who are loving and with whom I'm on the same page. This feels extremely rewarding.” (Story #12)*

However, this sentiment does not have to mean feeling part of a monolithic, homogenous collective which erases personal differences. In EL as in the DA Facebook group, participants remarked on the insights they gained from encountering a diversity of opinions and perspectives.

Finally, being in the company of others who are trying to be caring and helpful toward one another is also often mentioned as an important enabling factor. Among these important fellow participants, the presence of “key enablers,” in other words “elders” or “mentors” who have been in the network for longer than oneself, or who may have struggled with difficult questions that one is also facing, can also be a source of courage, insights, and inspiration.

*“I received important mentoring from Nenad and Kat in the Community Action group that helped get [D&D] going.” (Story #3)*

### **2.3.2 Disabling factors**

What conditions may hamper social learning from taking place within DAF groups?

#### ***Platform issues***

DUS questionnaire respondents, asked to assess the usefulness of two main DAF platforms (the DA Facebook group and the PN), tended to have a more favourable opinion of the former than of the latter (Cavé, 2022b). Their feedback revealed various issues with both of these platforms as mediums of communication. However, their observations focused on different aspects: while PN users mentioned specific limitations with the software Ning, several Facebook users stressed that the platform was problematic for deeper socio-political reasons, including the way it functions as a social media platform.

*“I do not find [the PN] intuitive nor easy to navigate or use. If I were on it daily, it would of course be better. But for light periodic use which is all the activity actually warrants so far, it's like a re-learning session every log-in.”*

*“I wish [DA] wasn't on Facebook. I am considering shutting down my account.”*

Other respondents also mentioned limitations that had to do with the social structuring of such platforms. For example, several PN users disliked the “slower” and occasionally “over-philosophical” conversations they encountered on this platform, compared to the liveliness and interaction they found within the Facebook group. On the other hand, users of the latter regretted that too many conversations focused on grief instead of more practical topics.

Beyond this general feedback with regards to the functionality and atmosphere within these two platforms, what more deep-seated organisational issues have DAF participants encountered in the course of their participation?

### ***Organisational issues***

In order to better understand what aspects of DAF might prevent social learning from taking place, the RT interviewed nine DAF participants who were actively involved in the network for a while but who eventually decided to withdraw from the network, or to only engage in a more limited way. Feedback shared during these interviews sheds light on several disabling factors they identified within DAF, and overlaps with aspects mentioned in several value-creation stories.

#### **Vision and purpose**

One interviewee, Carla\*<sup>17</sup> mainly engaged in DAF through the DA Facebook group. She came to the conclusion that it was largely a “support group,” lacking “social vigour,” and which did not help to foster the localised forms of community-building she aspired to. She considered that DAF was struggling to build the capacity to enable more practical forms of adaptation to global disruptions, and gave people “no call to action.” Simultaneously, she viewed the network as attempting to cater to a wide-ranging diversity of needs, without enough focus on a core area of activity.

This criticism of DAF as too dispersed in its purpose, and not enough “action-driven,” has been a recurring theme in various parts of the network since its creation. Another DAF volunteer, Patrick\*, also a community organiser, regretted the “philosophical” and

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<sup>17</sup> Names followed by an asterisk have been changed to preserve interviewee anonymity.

“open-field” approach to change promoted in DAF, leaving it up to anyone to decide what to do, instead of galvanising specific change in order to pursue the network’s mission of reducing harm.

Ruth\* joined DAF and became a volunteer on the PN with the intention of discussing the global predicament from the perspective of the biosphere, or the planet as a whole, from a deep time perspective – and was disappointed to find that most other participants were more interested in “focusing on humans,” and particularly on “their own survival and that of their family.” She also regretted the lack of collaborative efforts and task-orientation within the groups they joined.

As for Nina\*, she was involved both in the DA Facebook group, and as a volunteer on the PN. But contrary to Carla, she decided to leave the former because she felt “attacked” in discussions she raised on the topic of spiritual growth, and like Ruth, she found she had “no patience for people who are trying to save themselves or their children.” As a result, she started to meet and discuss her topics of interest locally with a small circle of friends, on a monthly basis, which she found much more rewarding.

These testimonies show some of the tensions that have been running through DAF with regards to the specific purpose or framing of the network, its mode of organisation, and the theory of change promoted by the Core Team.

### **Power and leadership**

Another set of tensions concerns the forms of leadership enacted by DAF Founder Jem Bendell and the Core Team.

For instance, Carla was disappointed when Bendell stepped down from his leadership role<sup>18</sup>, and felt that DAF had become “rudderless” since his departure. On the other hand, Nina stopped volunteering as a result of disagreements with Bendell, head of the Core Team at the time, whom she felt was overly restrictive of the efforts made by herself and other volunteers in the group she was part of. Another former volunteer, Michael\*, also expressed discomfort with Bendell’s influence in the network, and considered the founder was “clinging to DA” as his “personal brand” instead of allowing for more collective interpretations and shaping of the DA framework.

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<sup>18</sup> Jem Bendell left the DAF Core Team at the end of September 2020, and stepped down from the DAF Holding Group in February 2021.

Others mentioned difficulties in working with, or within, the Core Team. DAF participant Dana\* (Story #10) was put off by the “rigid norms” perpetuated by the Core Team, and stopped communicating with the team as a result. As for Heather (Story #6), she said she had “lost [her] job” within the team because other team members were “afraid to confront [her]” on certain work issues. Another former Core Team member, Alex\*, mentioned they had struggled with difficult power dynamics within the team, which had not been adequately addressed.

From these stories, one can perceive the difficulties that have been faced by the founder and Core Team in attempting to encourage self-organisation and emergent leadership (see Section 2.2), while often failing to deal generatively with issues of power, boundary-setting, and accountability.

### **The anti-racism and decolonising agenda**

Another recurrent point of tension has concerned discussions of matters of social justice, and in particular, the approach of the D&D circle – whose work has been supported by the Core Team since the beginning (**Annex 5.3**), and which several members of the Core Team have been part of.

For Dana (Story #10), there was “an absence of critical thinking on the topics of anti-racism, decolonisation, and othering” in DAF, which felt “stifling and dull... and ultimately even limiting of human rights.” Both Ruth and Alex also expressed feeling “alienated” by the “lack of nuance” necessary to account for wide-ranging historical and cultural differences from one country to the next.

On the other hand, Amanda\* said she had been “impressed and delighted” when she heard that the D&D circle was launched, but felt her trust in the network weaken upon realising the “disconnect” between the circle’s intentions and its actual practice. As for Heather (Story #6), she considered that DAF should go much deeper in the work of addressing racism, colonisation, and white supremacy patterns, and that more groups should be encouraged to do so. Michael agreed, and considered that DAF spaces were often “too cuddly” for people to challenge one another on such issues and develop more “authenticity.”

It is perhaps unsurprising that the topics of anti-racism and decolonisation – at the heart of “culture wars” online and in many parts of the world – have proved divisive within DAF. However, could it be that these issues might have proven less contentious, had these topics been more explicitly associated with the “Deep Adaptation agenda,” and mentioned as part of the early framing of the Deep Adaptation Forum? Indeed, neither Bendell’s seminal “Deep Adaptation paper” (Bendell, 2018), nor his early articles framing DAF’s purpose, made any reference to issues of social justice (**Annex 5.4**).<sup>19</sup> As a result, it appears that the D&D circle invited conversations that were considered unwelcome by many DAF participants – which is not to deny that the circle might have chosen more skilful and nuanced ways of doing so.

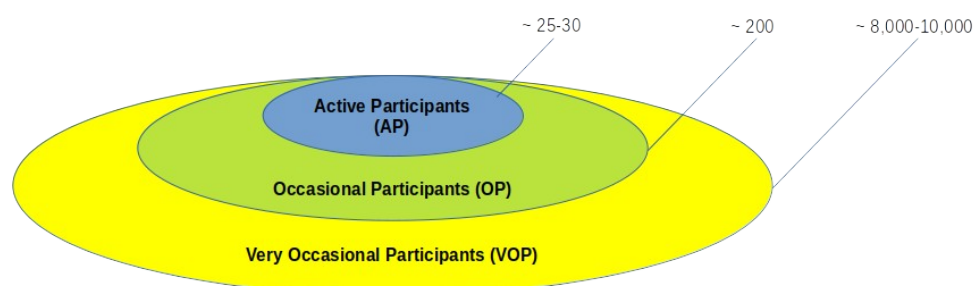
## 2.4 Sowers: Social learning space conveners

In order to grow, the “seeds of change” described earlier require the right kind of “soil,” but also “sowers” who take care of seeds and soil, and help seeds to propagate. What are the leadership characteristics that these sowers (or systems conveners) embody in DAF? What roles do they play in fostering social learning in the network and beyond?

### 2.4.1 Conveners in DAF: Degrees of active involvement

#### ***Participation constituencies***

First, let’s examine several broad participation constituencies in DAF. This can be depicted as a series of concentric circles (Figure 7).



*Figure 7: DAF participant constituencies and approximate number of people involved (as of August 2022)*

<sup>19</sup> In speeches and writings, Bendell has explicitly linked issues of social justice and solidarity with the DA framework on several occasions (e.g. Bendell, 2019d, 2020a). However, these issues were not prominent in the initial framing of DAF.

An important caveat is that these constituencies tend to be fluid, as a person's involvement may vary in time. Besides, while certain specific roles in DAF have a clear job description (such as Core Team members, or Facebook group moderators), mostly these broad categories have not been reified so far, which makes it more difficult to have clear statistics on who is actively involved in the network or not. This lack of clearly defined "participation tiers" also allows DAF participants' perception of these categories to vary. The typology I present below is a reflection of what I witnessed through my participation, and of my readings into the literature about online community management.

At the heart of the graph are Active Participants (AP). This category comprises the DAF Core Team, as well as another two dozen of the most deeply involved volunteers, for instance:

- Facebook group moderators;
- Facilitators of regular meetings (such as EL, BF or DR);
- The Tech Support team;
- The Editorial team;
- Etc.

AP, as the core of DAF, tend to be most involved in various projects and initiatives, including regular group calls, and participate in strategic framing events and conversations. According to statistics compiled by 18 DAF Core Team and volunteers in April 2021, these active participants spent on average 30 hours per month volunteering on the network, with about half of respondents volunteering at least 40 hours per month.<sup>20</sup>

Occasional Participants (OP) may convene meetings and conversations, but tend to be involved in a more sporadic way. They may be actively involved in a DAF circle or group, which they may have convened, but are less eager to take part in framing conversations, or to take on leadership roles regarding the whole network. Some of

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<sup>20</sup> This data does not account for the paid work that Core Team take on as part of their responsibilities, beyond their volunteering time. Depending on the person, this paid work ranges from 6 to 8 working days per month.

them are very active discussants on the DA Facebook group. I estimate that up to 200 participants are in this category.

By Very Occasional Participants (VOP), I refer to DAF participants who do not take on any responsibilities as conveners or volunteers, and are present mostly as participants within the Facebook group. On occasion, some may attend certain group calls, but they don't become regular participants. At the time of writing (August 2022), according to platform statistics, there had been on average about 9000 active members<sup>21</sup> in the DA Facebook group, monthly, over the past six months.

### ***What do Active Participants actually do?***

AP are the group of people most deeply involved, at any given time, in sustaining, supporting, and enlivening DAF as a community and a socio-technical network. Therefore, although the vast majority of AP are volunteers holding no formal title, they can be seen as the “network leaders” who steward the network and its purpose, and model DAF norms and values. They are also the “sowers” who nurture and propagate the “seeds of change” described above.

What are the main categories of work accomplished by AP, as they help to convene and structure DAF social learning spaces?

A good starting point for this exploration is the four-part typology offered by Ehrlichman (2021, pp. 60–1). A single person or group may take part in several areas of leadership.

Many AP take on the role of Coordinators – i.e. people who “organiz[e] the network’s internal systems and structures to enable participants to share information and advance collective work” and “establish and maintain network operations, support knowledge management, and assist network teams.” In DAF, such people filter and approve new platform membership requests; inform newcomers and moderate conversations in large semi-public groups; maintain the technical infrastructure; edit regular newsletters; help facilitators publish new events on the DAF calendar; etc.

Facilitators “guid[e] participants through group processes to find common ground and collaborate with one another” and “design and lead convenings, hold space for different

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<sup>21</sup> According to Facebook’s definition, “active members” include “people who viewed, posted, commented, or reacted to content” in the DA Facebook group.



points of view, and help conversations flow” (ibid). In DAF, a very active online community of practice – DA Facilitators – exists for this very purpose. Many AP are involved within it, and host regular weekly or monthly gatherings that are free and open to all. Some of them occasionally help with resolving conflict among participants. However, all DAF participants are encouraged to convene and facilitate their own online and offline events, as well as project teams. For example, the 2021 and 2022 “Deep Live Gatherings” hybrid events featured local gatherings convened by volunteers around the world to discuss DA-related topics.

Catalysts craft the network’s vision, and inspire action. As part of this role, they help to “organize new project teams, raise resources, and foster new opportunities to expand the network’s impact.” Thus far in DAF, this has been a role mostly embraced by Core Team members, particularly with regards to fundraising, and considerations of overall network strategy. The Holding Group has also played an important role in shaping issues of vision and strategy.

As for Weavers, they “engage with participants to gather input, introduce participants to each other to inspire self-organization, and build bridges with new communities to help the network grow.” This has been a role embraced by members of the Collaborative Action team, who host online open space events several times a year for DAF participants and other interested parties; and by the volunteers who have been hosting yearly strategic community efforts to decide on the future of DAF (see Section 2.2). But weavers have also emerged spontaneously among existing AP to introduce DAF, or the DA ethos and framework, to other networks and contexts.

However, this typology does not cover all roles taken up by AP within DAF. For example, certain groups such as the D&D circle (**Annex 5.3**), the RT (**Annex 5.5**), or volunteers editing the DA Wikipedia page, embody certain forms of leadership in the service of the network that do not correspond to any of those above. Other emerging categorisations (e.g. Strasser, Kraker and Kemp, 2022) provide additional insights with regards to corresponding network leadership roles and practices, but space does not allow to address them here.

Suffice to say that the form of leadership promoted within DAF tends to resemble the *network leadership* proposed by Ehrlichman (2021, p. 59) – i.e. leadership that is

“adaptive, facilitative... and distributed.” Indeed, instead of telling people what to do, or “defining rigid structures and rules,” DAF sowers seek to “connect and collaborate” and “nurture a culture of reciprocity” while “sharing credit and acting in the service of the whole” (ibid, p.60). This fluid approach also corresponds closely to definitions of leadership grounded in Critical Leadership Studies, such as the *autonomist leadership* put forth by Western (2014) – i.e. leadership that anti-hierarchical, informal and distributed, and based on the key elements of spontaneity, autonomy, mutuality, affect and networks; or *sustainable leadership*, which Bendell, Sutherland and Little (2017, p. 426) define as “a more emergent, episodic and distributed form of leadership, involving acts that individuals may take to help groups achieve aims they otherwise might not.”

### **2.4.2 What moves us?**

What are the specific intentions and aspirations that move people to become or remain active participants in DAF?

#### ***Intentions for engaging in DAF as a reflection of one’s depth of involvement***

First of all, it should be pointed out that at the time of writing, several active participants received a financial compensation from the network in return for their involvement. Thus far, this has mostly concerned members of the Core Team, like me, as well as a handful of other participants taking care of particular tasks (notably, the administration and development of DAF software infrastructure). All of these participants invoice DAF as self-employed contractors. However, as the pay rate is set to a basic living allowance of GBP100 a day regardless of the role, for a maximum of six to eight days a month, and given that active participants often volunteer as much time as what they are paid for, this financial compensation is unlikely to be a critical incentive for those who benefit from it.

The results of the Collapse Awareness and Community survey (CAS – Cavé, 2022a) shed some light over the motivations of DAF participants. The survey analysed responses from three groups of DAF participants. Although it is impossible to know exactly to what extent respondents’ self-identification corresponds with the typology offered above, due to the survey anonymity, it was distributed in such a way that the following descriptions should be relatively accurate:

- Group 1 was mostly composed of Active Participants (AP);
- Group 2 was mostly composed of Occasional Participants (OP); and
- Group 3 was entirely composed of Very Occasional Participants (VOP).

Figure 8 and Figure 9 present the answers of these different participants to questions about their motivation for being in DAF, and the type of community activities they were most interested in finding within DAF.

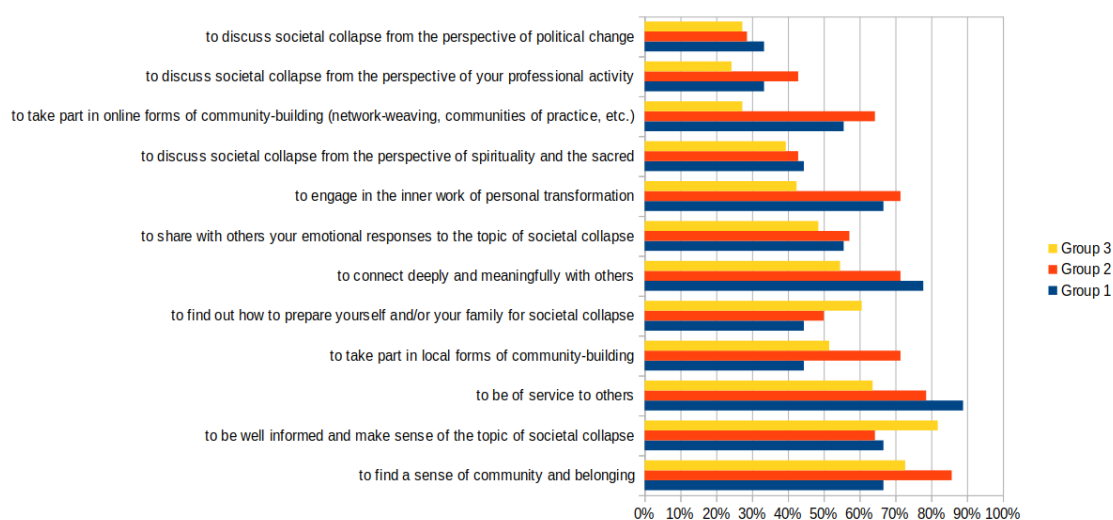


Figure 8: CAS Respondents' answers to the question: "What is your key purpose (or purposes), currently, as you connect with others in DAF?"

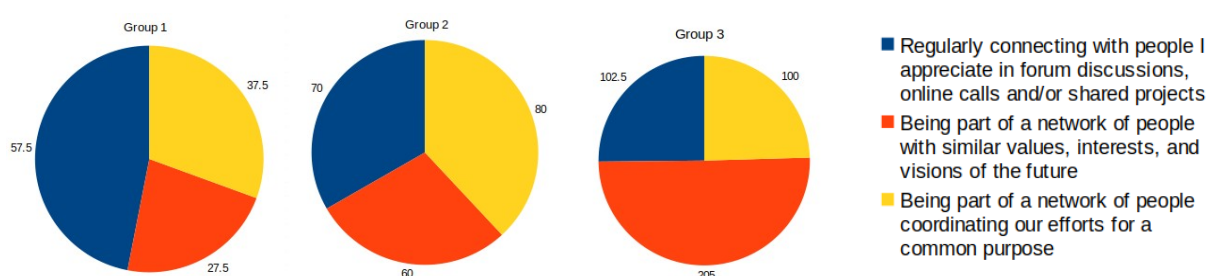


Figure 9: CAS Respondents' prioritised answers to the question: "How important to you are the following aspects of participating in DAF?"

VOP said they were keener to be part of a collapse-aware community, in which they could be well-informed, and learn how to prepare for collapse in practical terms. OP were much more intent to be actively involved in common projects and activities (such as online or local community-building); and AP viewed deeply and meaningfully

connecting with others, and engaging in the inner work of personal transformation, as fundamental to their engagement.

Both the AP and the OP were keen “To be of service to others,” and - in equal proportion - “To take part in local forms of community-building,” “To connect deeply and meaningfully with others,” and “To engage in the inner work of personal transformation.” AP and OP were also much more interested in “online forms of community-building” than non-volunteers; but they were less keen about topics like “find out how to prepare yourself and/or your family to societal collapse” or “to be well informed and make sense of the topic of societal collapse” than were VOP. “To find a sense of community and belonging” and “To be well informed and make sense of the topic of societal collapse” were the two purposes that most respondents had in common overall.

Asked to prioritise different aspects of DAF as a community, the three groups of respondents displayed different preferences (Figure 9):

- VOP were overwhelmingly more interested in “being part of a network of people with similar values, interests, and visions of the future”;
- OP had more widely distributed preferences, with slightly more interest in “being part of a network of people coordinating our efforts for a common purpose”;
- As for AP, they largely favoured the statement “regularly connecting with people I appreciate in forum discussions, online calls and/or shared projects”.

These broad differences in aspirations, between the three groups of participants in DAF, prompt the following hypotheses:

1. If these three groups represent successive stages of involvement in DAF – from “very occasional” to “occasional” and finally “active” participation – then participants’ goals and interests may evolve as they transition from one stage to the next;
2. Alternatively, people with particular mindsets and preferences may tend to become most actively involved in DAF.

Stories from participants who have transitioned from one stage of involvement to the next are informative in this regard.

For example, when David arrived in DAF (Story #15), his intention was only to “reach other people who were considering the issue of potential collapse,” and his interest in this issue revolved mainly around issues of eschatology and spirituality. But following his experience as a moderator on the DA Facebook group, he gradually became intent to find “a new kind of experience, deeper, and more involved in the Forum at large.” He became involved in various other projects and conversations, grew to “[understand] the value of teamwork,” as well as the importance of the relational processes cultivated within DAF. Towards the end-point of his story, David’s aspirations (“to be part of the formation of a truly effective team... to create community...”) appear much more coherent with the main aspirations of other AP than at the beginning.

As for Stuart (Story #13), he joined the DA Facebook group “to discuss matters of civilizational collapse with people, to talk about [his] fears, and find some comfort,” and in order “to learn more.” After a rocky beginning, he found himself acculturating to the group, which brought him much emotional comfort and even helped him overcome an episode of depression. Thereafter, he too became a group moderator. He found that he valued his team members and his interactions with them (“I love the other Moderators. I learn from them, and they improve me as a person”), and his sense of belonging to the team seems to have become an important reason for remaining actively involved in DAF.

David and Stuart both stand as examples of participants who, as they grew increasingly engaged in DAF, saw their intentions evolve and become more representative of those of AP – for instance, wanting to be part of a community of engagement (more than a community of imagination); or becoming more interested in “connecting deeply and meaningfully with others,” “being of service” or “engaging in the inner work of personal transformation” rather than being well-informed. Both of them also seem to have found that a sense of community and cultivating strong relationships have been important reasons for their engagement in DAF over time. Their stories support the first hypothesis above.

However, other AP exemplify the second hypothesis. For instance, Nenad (Story #11) joined DAF with the intention “to support a network” dedicated to fostering “learning experiences” that could bring about transformations in people. Through his participation, he felt he and his collaborators did succeed in supporting positive changes in the organisational culture of DAF. As for him, his intention did not change, although his own learning journey led him to refine his own practice as a “network-weaver.” This is a case of an AP who came into the network with a mindset and preferences which characterise many other active participants.

As can be seen from the other stories presented in **Annex 5.2**, people become active participants in DAF for a variety of reasons, and each of their trajectories is unique. It is difficult to assess at present whether one of the hypotheses above might be a better reflection of these multiple paths and experiences.

### ***Ideas of (and desires for) radical collective change***

Do DAF participants view their involvement in the network as a way to bring about radical collective change? If so, what kind of change do they aspire to?

Results of the Radical Change Survey (RCS – Cavé, 2022c) help us explore these questions.

The questionnaire invited respondents to take it as a given that radical collective change was needed in the world – and to engage in a thought experiment as to what might be the nature of such a change. In response to this framing, two respondents said that they didn’t feel capable of answering the question. For both of them, this impossibility reflected a lack of conviction that they were able to bring about such change. One of them considered the question irrelevant, in part because they thought nothing may prevent generalised collapse from happening, and in part because they did not seem to view pursuing such change as being intrinsically worthwhile. The other respondents were more willing to engage in this thought experiment, regardless of their belief in the possibility of any radical collective change actually taking place.

I consider that respondents aspired to three main types of radical collective change, which I will summarise here (for more details, please see Cavé, 2022c).

### **1. Orienting towards connection, loving kindness, and compassion towards all living beings**

The predominant theme had to do with a new orientation towards collective and more compassionate ways of being and relating. This involved, first of all, human beings adopting a new way of being in the world, grounded in loving kindness. Respondents also linked this theme with the creation or restoration of fairer communities around the world, and with the importance of working on issues of grief and trauma. Another dimension of this new orientation also has to do with finding a new attunement to other-than-humans and the Earth, as well as a deeper understanding of humanity's place within the rest of the natural world.

*“Individual humans are embedded in the ecosystem and how we relate to each other, as well as make a living cannot be separated. Thus, our understanding of the world, our relationships with others, and the way we make a living must all change, radically and collectively.”*

### **2. A transformative shift in worldviews and value systems**

The second major theme that I identified was about transforming dominant ways of seeing the world and finding meaning. In particular, several respondents noted that this epistemological shift involved truth-telling, in order to reach a recognition of the deep flaws, injustice and destructiveness permeating modern societies, as a result of ignorance, denial and inertia. Respondents also mentioned that this shift in understanding should fundamentally be about modern humans de-centring themselves, and embracing a less arrogant, more biocentric perspective.

*“All humans currently engaging in modernity need to unpack our view of how society should be ; assumptions of privileges, assumptions about other human's place in our world - the view or map we have.”*

### **3. A radical reshaping of political and economic structures**

Finally, respondents also referred to deep changes in the economic and political systems that structure modern-day societies. While some of them seemed open to the possibility of such changes being enacted at a global or systemic level, and thus presumably as a result of revolutionary change and new policies, others spoke rather to a renewed

reliance on local, autonomous and democratic communities, and a withdrawal from more systemic concerns.

*“I’d like to see everyone’s basic needs met. Of course, this presupposes the elimination of capitalism. When I think about the climate predicament, what comes to me is the phrase ‘extend the glide’ i.e., don’t stop flying the plane even though the engines have failed.”*

The questionnaire then went on to ask whether participating in DAF might have been part of such change taking place – and if so, how. While some respondents did not think this had been the case, or were unsure, over two thirds of them answered more positively. Most of them considered that DAF had been useful to help bring about the radical collective change they had in mind, and that they themselves had been able to bring about some of this change through their involvement.

They saw this as mainly enabled by:

- A caring, supportive community;
- Useful relational modalities practised in the network;
- A community of like-minded others for one to emulate;
- The use of the Deep Adaptation framing and ethos;
- Access to useful information and resources;
- Encouraging and inspiring fellow participants.

These correspond to a large extent to the enabling elements already identified above.

It is important to note that by and large, when asked to describe how DAF may have helped to bring about forms of radical collective change, respondents have tended to lay a strong emphasis on individual changes they experienced themselves as exemplars (with less emphasis on collective changes).

Another key finding is that several respondents who self-identified as “actively involved” in DAF (and therefore, presumably, best categorised as “AP” in my typology above), did not seem to find the idea of radical collective change relevant, or had nothing to say about what such change might look like. This could indicate that



participants may choose to be actively involved in DAF regardless of any wishes or expectations for social change.

Value-creation stories collected in this research provide several examples of AP mentioning aspirations that correspond to forms of radical collective change mentioned above. For instance, Sasha (Story #3) and Wendy (Story #4) described how their involvement in DAF eventually led them to start the D&D circle, and therefore to invite others in DAF enact a transformative shift in their worldviews and value systems. Several interviewees also stated that the DAF social learning spaces that suited them best were those – such as the Practical DA group – focused on “adaptation at the personal, family, and village/community levels.”

Finally, interviews with two former Core Team members show the strong emphasis they placed on the idea of inviting more connection, loving kindness, and compassion, through their involvement in the Core Team:

*“I wasn't particularly keen to explore collapse, or what it means to people. My passion is about exploring how to live and be present with one another, right now.” (Interviewee 1)*

*“I had a sense of very strong alignment between the DA conversation, and what I wanted my life to be about and with which I have years' worth of practice. And that is, fundamentally, about exploring the ways that meaning-making is carried out in relational spaces, and when people are willing and able to be their most tender, vulnerable selves.” (Interviewee 2)*

### **2.4.3 How do sowers view their involvement as a factor of collective change? The role of unlearning**

I have described how many AP have expressed a desire for radical collective change, and considered their involvement in DAF as helping to bring about such change – even if on a small scale. For these participants, how do they envision this change taking place thanks to them and DAF?

Results of both the RCS and the GRS questionnaires (Cavé, 2022c) show that the idea of unlearning plays an important role in this regard, for these AP. I have found that in RCS, three main categories of unlearning were mentioned. In decreasing order, these were:

1. **Ways of knowing, imagining, and evaluating legitimacy (epistemological):** changes in respondents' ways of thinking about themselves, others, and the world. This includes a deeper attention to historical and systemic inequalities, and one's implication in such hierarchies and distributions of power, wealth, and labour. It is also about rediscovering and reconsidering "*what and how we know* – and how we might know *differently*" (Machado de Oliveira, 2021, p. 135).
2. **Ways of being, desiring, hoping, relating, and existing in the world (ontological):** changes in how one relates to the world and experiences coexistence, and a reconfiguring of one's understanding of fundamental aspects of reality, self, consciousness, time, space, change, life, and death. It is also about relinquishing certain desires and hopes that may constrain the imagination (V. Andreotti *et al.*, 2018). Overwhelmingly, respondents' descriptions of this form of unlearning (or their aspirations in this regard) concerned new forms of relationality.
3. **Ways of doing (methodological):** changes in respondents' ways of carrying out certain activities, or to their adoption of new behaviours, without necessarily implying deeper transformations in their self-awareness, value system, or worldview.

For nearly half of RCS respondents, instances of unlearning were explicitly mentioned as part of the process by which they viewed themselves as contributing to bringing about some of the radical collective change they aspired to, through their involvement in DAF. Therefore, for these respondents – who were mostly actively involved in DAF – the unlearning they were experiencing (or had experienced) appeared to play an important role within their theory of change: they viewed DAF as a network that enabled people to relinquish unhelpful ideas, worldviews, ways of relating or behaviours, and thereby to take part in a process of collective change.

It also seems that through this process of unlearning, these respondents experienced a greater sense of agency in helping to bring about this change, as in their replies, they emphasised their own involvement in creating radical collective change within DAF

(although they often qualified this emphasis by stating that this change had happened on a small scale).

I would also emphasise that for these respondents, *epistemological* and *ontological* forms of unlearning seem to have been prevalent. In other words, they viewed processes of orienting towards loving kindness and compassion, and transforming worldviews, as most relevant from the point of view of radical collective change.

How might such forms of unlearning come about for participants in DAF?

Responses to the Group Reflections Survey (GRS – Cavé, 2022c) are worth considering in this regard. They throw some light onto DAF participants' experience of engagement within three different social learning spaces in the network: the Earth Listening circle (EL), the Business and Finance group (BF), and the Deep Relating circles (DR).

For two of these groups (EL and DR), nearly all respondents mentioned experiencing very impactful personal changes, and most of these changes were connected with relational and epistemological forms of unlearning. For example, they spoke of finding new ways of being and relating with other-than-humans and the natural world; becoming better able to be present with and relate to others; and developing more self-understanding and self-acceptance.

*"I've been led to engage very deeply with my own history of sexual trauma, which Earth Listening also showed me to be an obstruction to my ability to connect to the Earth and to hear well. My body is my 'ear' to hearing the Earth and if that 'ear' is numb, dismissed, or self-absorbed, my listening is less sensitive."*

Importantly, EL and DR meetings are centred on the practice of particular relational modalities – respectively, exploring one's connection with the wider natural ecosystems of the planet, and being in relation with other people in a way that is grounded in a deep and detailed awareness of present moment experience. Besides, the participants in the sessions organised by the EL and DR groups meet two to four times more frequently than those attending BF meetings, and have two to three times more regular participants than the latter. In view of the contrasting reports from these three groups, it therefore seems that more frequent meetings, featuring relational modalities, and bringing

together a wider group of committed participants, correlate with a sense of deeper social (un)learning.

Finally, a majority of respondents from the EL and DR groups also said that their involvement was prompting them to want to contribute more to DAF as a community. For nearly half of them, their participation was also enabling them to reach more clarity as to the nature, and style, of their political or professional activities, and/or had made them want to start new personal projects or educational endeavours. Consequently, these respondents considered that their participation in these groups had been both a source of deep unlearning – corresponding to the radical collective change mentioned by RCS respondents – but also as a source of empowerment to action. This confirms the positive link that emerged in RCS, mentioned above, between respondents' experience of unlearning and their sense of personal agency.

Examples of the above can be found in the value-creation stories of several members of the D&D circle (Stories #1, 3, 4, and 5), who established clear causal links between their involvement in this small group, experiences of epistemological (and at times, ontological) unlearning, and the desire to undertake new activities on topics of anti-racism and decolonisation. The stories of Nando (#9) and Dana (#10) also speak to the ontological unlearning they experienced through their attendance of the EL circle, which also led them to get involved in new endeavours (e.g. writing articles, or attending a new course).

In summary, from the data above, I conclude the following:

1. Many “sowers” (or AP) in DAF understand their own experience of (epistemological and/or ontological) unlearning as part and parcel of bringing about forms of radical collective change, thanks to DAF.
2. Those in this case tend to experience a greater sense of personal agency in creating this change.
3. Meeting frequently to practice particular relational modalities, within the context of a group of committed participants, may facilitate both this experience of unlearning, and provide an enhanced sense of agency.

These findings correspond with several of those that emerged from the CAS questionnaire. According to the latter, AP mentioned several critical reasons to be involved in DAF, which distinguished them from VOP (and, to a lesser extent, from OP):

- “to be of service to others,” which I interpret as reflecting a sense of agency and ability to contribute;
- “to connect deeply and meaningfully with others,” which may reflect the importance of practising new forms of relationality in the network; and
- “to engage in the inner work of personal transformation,” which I view as reflecting an intention to engage in deep forms of (un)learning.

Interestingly, however, only 30% of AP were interested in “discussing societal collapse from the perspective of political change,” which is an important dimension of radical collective change. Besides, most of them clearly viewed “Regularly connecting with people [they] appreciate in forum discussions, online calls and/or shared projects” as their priority for being in DAF, ahead of “being part of a network of people coordinating [their] efforts for a common purpose.”

This confirms that while many AP aspire to forms of radical collective change, and see their participation in DAF as helping to bring those about to some extent, for most of them the intention to facilitate these changes may not constitute their primary reason for engaging in DAF (or for becoming increasingly involved). Instead, it appears that for many (and perhaps most) sowers, being at the service of the network they steward, and frequently interacting with their fellow participants as part of a “community of engagement,” is the most important driver.

Finally, like OP and VOP, AP showed little appetite for “discussing societal collapse from the perspective of [their] professional activity.” This is another sign that the first main framing that was originally articulated for DAF by the network founder – i.e. “DAF as a space in which to discuss collapse from the perspective of organisations and professional fields of activity” – has been superseded, as the dominant reason for most AP to remain engaged in DAF, by the second framing, i.e. “DAF as a space in which to

cultivate new forms of relationality, overcoming separation, and fostering compassion and loving kindness.”

### **3 Discussion and conclusion**

I will now attempt to answer the questions raised at the start of this chapter:

1. What are the main “seeds of change” that are being cultivated within DAF social learning spaces?
2. What are the conditions – or the “soil” - enabling these changes to happen, or preventing them from happening?
3. Who are the “sowers” helping to nurture the soil and to sow the seeds? And what kind of learning leadership do they enact in doing so?

I will address the first question by discussing the affective and relational aspects that participants have mentioned as constituting major areas of learning and change in DAF, and will connect these aspects to literature on transformative social change. Then I will turn to self-organisation as both a critical enabling condition for these changes, and a locus of leadership. I will conclude by discussing DAF’s relevance to socio-political change from a decolonial perspective.

#### **3.1 Personal and collective changes**

##### **3.1.1 Integrating difficult emotions**

A recurring criticism of networks and movements that consider seriously the possibility of societal collapse is that they lead people to hopelessness, and therefore, to abandon all drive to create social change. For example, scientist Michael E. Mann views DA as a “doomist” and “disabling” framing (Hunter, 2020), dissuading people from taking part in political processes to demand systemic changes in the face of climate change, and thus reinforcing ongoing trends towards “inaction” and “disengagement” (Mann, 2021a, 2021b). Others have called DA “demotivating” (Nicholas, Hall and Schmidt, 2020).

As I pointed out earlier, several personalities involved in the launch of Extinction Rebellion (XR) acknowledged the complementarity between their approach and the DA framework, and even the impetus that DA brought to their action (e.g. Bendell and

Cavé, 2020; Bradbrook and Bendell, 2020). And this action has been very impactful: indeed, “XR have greatly contributed to the increasing attention paid to climate change by citizens, policymakers and other actors” (Berglund and Schmidt, 2020, p. 97).

Therefore, it is tempting to dismiss on this basis any arguments that DA is counterproductive for generating political pressure on topics like climate change.

However, since this chapter explores the extent to which a network like DAF may be helpful to bring about radical collective change, it is important to consider whether the data collected in my research validates these criticisms.

As I show above, results from all three surveys and several interviews overwhelmingly show that respondents became better able to live with the difficult emotions they experienced with regards to the global predicament, and were feeling less isolated, less despairing, and less fearful as a result of their participation in DAF groups. Besides, a clear majority of CAS respondents (Cavé, 2022a) had decided to change their lives as a result of their engagement with the topic of collapse (including on practical, social, psycho-spiritual, and moral dimensions), and the respondents most deeply involved in DAF were much more likely to have taken action. These results confirm those obtained in a different survey (Bendell and Cavé, 2020), which indicated that people are more likely to lead in their community if they anticipate societal collapse. These results are also consistent with the results obtained in another qualitative research project on DA carried out in Germany (Tröndle, 2021), which found that none of the respondents were driven by apathy by their anticipation or experience of collapse. Indeed, they tended to be involved in various forms of activism or social change-oriented endeavours, and to draw a sense of inspiration and empowerment from their participation in a community of like-minded people.

Several of the research conversations I carried out confirmed the importance of experiencing belonging and community as a way to generatively engage with difficult topics such as that of societal collapse.

However, my research data also indicates that many participants do not view taking part in DAF as a form of activism. For example, most CAS survey respondents were not interested in discussing societal collapse from the perspective of political change, although more seasoned participants did express a sense of strong curiosity in this topic

(Cavé, 2022a, Section 6.1 and 6.2). But this does not mean that DAF participants do not engage in activism elsewhere: over 12% of respondents to the DUS survey said they were involved in various activist groups and movements (Cavé, 2022b, Section 4). This seems to show that most participants do not consider DAF as a political-change-oriented network, and yet are yearning for such change. Correspondingly, a clear majority of respondents to the RCS survey aspired to various forms of radical collective change, but only a minority among them viewed DAF as facilitating the “radical reshaping of political and economic structures” to which they aspired (Cavé, 2022c).

Therefore, what emerges from my research is that while engaging with the topic of societal collapse may be a source of difficult emotions, this in itself does not seem to be a cause for apathy – particularly when one can benefit from feeling part of a community of like-minded others. Smaller affinity groups appear particularly well suited to mutual support and encouragement, as the example of the D&D circle clearly shows. In fact, most of my survey respondents and interviewees appear involved in various prosocial activities and endeavours, which can include political activism. However, few of them consider DAF the conduit for this activism taking place. In the opinion of a Core Team member, who is also a long-term DAF participant:

*“Many, many of our people [DAF participants] are strident and engaged ‘activists’ - they just do it in different forums. So I do my marches / protests / campaigning with Fuel Poverty Action / CATJ [Christian Action for Tax Justice] / FoE [Friends of the Earth]. Meanwhile, DAF is where I come for the inner work.”*

Whether DAF groups will grow more closely involved in efforts aiming at generating political change, as advocated by some (Bendell and Read, 2021a), remains an open question. But at the time of writing, dominant aspirations in the network, particularly among more deeply involved “sowers,” are concerned with more onto-epistemological dimensions of collective change: “Orienting towards connection, loving kindness and compassion for all beings” and “A transformative shift in worldviews and value systems” (Cavé, 2022c). I will now turn to discuss these aspirations.



### 3.1.2 Cultivating relationality

#### ***The need for inner transformations***

Increasingly, scholars from various fields are calling for a widespread collective reorientation towards a relational onto-epistemological paradigm as an essential response to the global social ecological predicament (e.g. Q'Sullivan and Taylor, 2002; Spretnak, 2011; Escobar, 2014, 2020; Lange, 2018; Walsh *et al.*, 2020; Walsh, Böhme and Wamsler, 2021; Woiwode *et al.*, 2021; Williams, 2022). Like French writer and public intellectual Alain Damasio (2022), they point out the societal and political implications of our ways of *being* in the world:

The current political crisis, in Western countries, is one of our relationships to each other. There is a growing anaesthesia to the modes of attention and availability that we nurture with others, including all living beings.... Therefore, the first step of establishing what could be termed a 'polytics of life' is to reactivate our capacities to relate – in all forms and with all our strength. Indeed, contrary to what the liberal doxa pretends, one is not freed through individual independence, but through interdependences and relationships: through what these allow and weave between us in terms of fertile possibilities.<sup>22</sup> (p.28)

Similarly, Woiwode and colleagues (2021) argue that “the current multiple crises are due to an alienation from ourselves, others, and the natural world” (p.845).

In response to this growing awareness, the work of systems theorist Donella Meadows (1999), in particular, is now frequently cited in the sustainability field (e.g. Abson *et al.*, 2017; O'Brien, 2018; Fischer and Riechers, 2019; Ives, Freeth and Fischer, 2020; Woiwode *et al.*, 2021) in support of a renewed focus on the transformation of people's inner worlds, as the deepest (and least explored) leverage point to shift social systems (Figure 10).

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22 “La crise politique actuelle, en Occident, est une crise de nos relations aux autres. Une anesthésie croissante des modes d'attention et de disponibilité que nous entretenons avec les autres, tous vivants confondus. ... L'enjeu premier de ce qu'on pourrait baptiser une 'polytique du vivant' est donc de réactiver nos capacités à lier - sous toutes leurs formes et de toutes nos forces. Puisque, contrairement à la doxa libérale, ce n'est pas la quête d'une indépendance individuelle qui libère, ce sont les interdépendances et ce sont les liens : ce qu'ils nous permettent et ce qu'ils tissent entre nous en termes de possibilités fécondes.” My translation.

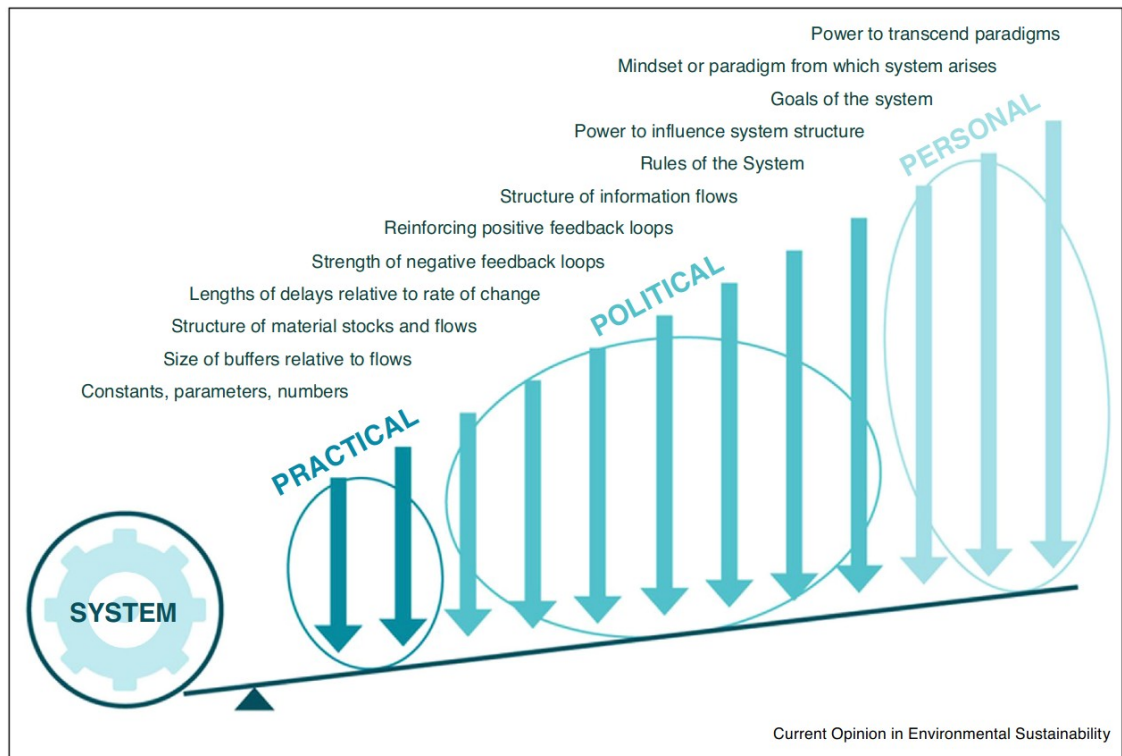


Figure 10: Leverage points for systems change based on Meadows (1999) and their relationship to the practical, political and personal spheres of transformation. Source: O'Brien (2018)

From this perspective, a strong case can be made in favour of shifting mind-sets (including value and belief systems) towards a relational focus, in order to favour an ontology, epistemology, and ethics (Walsh, Böhme and Wamsler, 2021) recognising that

all entities in the natural world, including us, are thoroughly relational beings of great complexity, who are both composed of and nested within contextual networks of dynamics and reciprocal relationships. We are made entirely of relationships, as is the whole of the natural world. (Spretnak, 2011, p. 4)

Such transformations, under the form of expanded consciousness (Fazey *et al.*, 2018; Wamsler, 2020), do not preclude political or practical action. On the contrary, they should inform action in these domains, in recognition of the fact that the mainstream, dominant technocratic responses to current challenges are unable to recognise that these challenges are *adaptive*, not just *technical* – in other words, that addressing them actually requires new beliefs, values, and worldviews (O'Brien, 2018).

The importance of focusing on relationships and a relational ethos as a primary locus to enact social change is also becoming increasingly recognised within activist circles and in social movements. For example, activist and scholar adrienne maree brown (2017) draws on the seminal work of leadership theorist Margaret Wheatley (Wheatley, 1999; Wheatley and Frieze, 2006) as she places the long-term transformation of relationships at the heart of her theory and practice of emergent strategy:

Focus on critical connections more than critical mass—build the resilience by building the relationships. (p.37)

As for the participants in the arts, research and social movements collective *Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures* (Stein, V. Andreotti, *et al.*, 2020), they argue that “it is the quality of our relationships (to all beings) that determines the political possibilities that are viable in any particular context” (p.60) and thus stress the importance of “nurturing different kinds of configurations in order to open up the possibility for a politics that could uphold the integrity of our relationships and the responsibilities that follow from them” (p.61).

In view of the above, to what extent can DAF groups be viewed as fostering the emergence of more relational worldviews and ways of being in the world?

### ***A relational framing***

As presented in **Annex 5.4**, an important part of the framing of DAF since its creation has been an emphasis on fostering new forms of relationality in response to the global predicament. Turning to love, and overcoming the mindset of separation based on the “othering” of other people and the natural world, was described as a fundamental aspect of “collapse-transcendence” – i.e. “the psychological, spiritual and cultural shifts that may enable more people to experience greater equanimity toward future disruptions and the likelihood that our situation is beyond our control” (Bendell and Carr, 2019).

According to the title of the blog post cited above, this focus on relationality constituted “a philosophy for the Forum.” However, the Forum itself was initially about “collapse-readiness,” referring to “the mental and material measures that will help reduce disruption to human life – enabling an equitable supply of the basics like food, water, energy, payment systems and health” (ibid.). Indeed, DAF was presented as enabling

this “outer adaptation” to societal collapse<sup>23</sup> through fostering collapse-readiness in various organisations and professional fields of activity, which was the original purpose of the online platform called “the Deep Adaptation Forum” (see **Annex 5.4** for more details).

Nonetheless, DAF’s official framing gradually evolved, and increasingly featured the cultivation of new forms of relationality as a central purpose for the Forum. This may be due, in part, to the lacklustre performance of the Professions’ Network, as a platform dedicated to bringing about the collapse-readiness mentioned above; and to the emergence of the DA Facilitators community of practice as an important component of the DAF landscape. Indeed, facilitators have been offering a number of free online gatherings on a regular basis, several times a week, particularly since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020.

Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that “new ways of being and relating” emerged as an important type of social learning experienced by study participants, especially through their participation in regular group processes such as Earth Listening or Deep Relating. This includes relating to oneself, to others, and to other-than-humans or the planet at large (Cavé, 2022c). Many participants reported experiencing greater well-being as well as various affective benefits from their experience of these relational modalities.

In the D&D circle, strong bonds of trust and belonging have been consciously cultivated during regular calls and storytelling among participants, and through the willingness to engage in conflict transformation processes. Most of the experiences of personal transformation mentioned in the circle have to do with various forms of relationality, including:

- understanding one’s own implication in global systems of oppression (relation to society or the world);
- finding unprecedented psychological safety in the presence of others (relation to the group);

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<sup>23</sup> Katie Carr and Jem Bendell contrast ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ deep adaptation. The former refers to “the psycho-social, the emotional or the spiritual aspects of integrating collapse awareness” while the latter is about “the practical aspects, e.g. exploring and putting into practice realistic measures for addressing food security at community or country level” (Carr and Bendell, 2021, p. 183).

- overcoming one's internalised oppression and feeling empowered as a result (relation to oneself).

As pointed out in this case study (**Annex 5.3, Section 2.1.12.3**), prioritising mutual care and the building of relationships has been a central theme within the life of the D&D circle. This is another reflection of the commitment to fostering relationality within DAF.

### ***Fostering social and ecological consciousness***

This recognition of the importance of relational dimensions of being, in DAF participants, may be a sign of the development of the *ecological consciousness* called for by O'Sullivan and Taylor (2002).

According to these authors, modernity has led to the dominance of *instrumental consciousness*, which mainly values what humans can accomplish by objectifying the self, others, and the rest of the living world, as tools or resources. This instrumentalising tendency leads to a “deeply truncated” vision of the self, which rejects or disregards “the quality of our relationships to each other and to our context, our inherent capacities to heal, renew, and evolve, and our worthiness simply to sojourn as an integral inhabitant of the earth” (p.11). This view has caused suffering, alienation, a disregard for the cultivation of the spiritual life, and is at the root of the current social and ecological predicament.

From the perspective of an *ecological consciousness*, on the other hand, “there is no sense of the person without the sense of community” (p.13): the personal self is formed by co-constituted relationships. The intimate sharing of one's conscious understanding and lived experience with others is “inherent in what it means to be human,” and one has a “wider sense of connection with all the powers of the world” – including other species (ibid.). For these authors, addressing the global predicament requires developing social configurations that foster the emergence of such an ecological consciousness. DAF groups, which centre the use of relational modalities and the cultivation of relationships, may constitute such social configurations.

This seems to correspond to the experience of *world-view transformation* – i.e. “a fundamental shift in perspective that results in long-lasting changes in people's sense of

self, perception of relationship to the world around them, and way of being” (Schlitz, Vieten and Miller, 2010, pp. 19–20). This entails more than minor conceptual alterations in one’s understanding of the world, but rather deep onto-epistemological changes: “transformation involves epistemological changes in how [people] know what they know. It is not only behaviour that changes, but also the motivational substrate from which that behaviour arises. It is not only a change in what people do, but also in who they understand themselves to be at an ontological level” (p.20). While stressing that such transformations are not necessarily prosocial (for example, a traumatic experience may result in more fearful and narrower views of the world), the authors conceptualise how transformative experiences can lead to *expanded social consciousness* – that is, higher levels of conscious awareness that one is part of a larger whole, and of an interrelated community of others. This is correlated with more compassionate and service-oriented behaviours, as people are “inspired to act as agents for positive change in their immediate communities and beyond” (p.22).

Describing five nested levels of social consciousness that one may reach, Schlitz and colleagues allude to several capacities that appear necessary in this process. First, they show how developing *criticality* with regards to how one’s lived experience and subjectivity are shaped by ideology and hegemonic power relations, as well as other social, cultural, and economic factors, is an important first step in this process of expanding social consciousness. They also stress the necessity to develop a capacity for *self-reflexivity*, as a key to increased *cognitive flexibility*. Greater self-reflexivity, in turn, can help one become more aware of and attentive to the consciousness of others, and therefore, to build *emotional connection* and the capacity for *empathy*, which may lead to the desire to improve the well-being of others. While this desire may initially manifest as a unilateral mission to save others, expanded social consciousness may eventually bring people to realise the limitations of this approach, and to embrace ways of engaging with the world that are *collaborative* rather than prescriptive.

The authors consider that empowering conversations and storytelling are essential in this regard. Such conversations can be facilitated by modalities that enhance *collaborative social consciousness*, by surfacing group collective intelligence and wisdom - for example, using Open Space Technology, or Bohmian Dialogue Groups.

To what extent does DAF enable its participants to undergo generative world-view transformations? While interviewees have reported noticeable onto-epistemological shifts in how they view and relate to themselves, others, and the world, assessing the *long-lasting* quality of these shifts has not been possible through the present research methodology, and would require further investigation. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that of the six factors that Vieten, Amorok and Schlitz (2006) identify as critical to facilitate long-term behavioural shifts, following a transformative experience, several seem present within DAF – for instance, the presence of a like-minded social network or community, and a shared language and context.

In any case, it is important to note that aspects of the ethos and relational modalities that are put into practice within several DAF groups do focus on developing several of the elements that Schlitz and colleagues view as fundamental to expanded social consciousness.

For example, Bendell and Carr (2021) mention how practices of DA group facilitation centre the development of critical consciousness, particularly in terms of discerning when one's thoughts or behaviours perpetuate systems of oppression and destruction (criticality); how they encourage embracing radical uncertainty, and even to view the self itself as a fluid and uncertain phenomenon (self-reflexivity and cognitive flexibility); and how they make space for the vulnerable expression of feelings, particularly around one's sense of loss and grief, as a way of relating that encourages deeper compassion and understanding of others and their inner world (emotional connection). These principles are particularly foregrounded in the practice of Deep Relating, which itself is a modality influenced by Bohmian dialogue, designed for the authentic expression of private experience in a group context. Deep Relating invites participants to “a critically conscious engagement with the stories we participate in” and to surface “unconscious patterns within dominant discourse” (p.14).

Therefore, Deep Relating can be considered a practice that enhances collaborative social consciousness. The use of Open Space Technology is also well-established in DAF (see above). And practices such as Wider Embraces or Earth Listening, which aim at exploring directly one's connectedness with other-than-human, planetary or even

cosmic dimensions of existence, may also be helpful in furthering the development of social and ecological consciousness.

According to Schlitz and colleagues, “shifts in consciousness need not wait for random life-changing experiences, but can be invited through intentional practice” (ibid, p.31). As noted earlier, participants in Earth Listening (EL) and Deep Relating (DR) groups – which are regularly convened to practice the relational modalities presented above – tend to report important experiences of onto-epistemological unlearning, and their testimonies seem to correspond to expressions of expanding social consciousness. It is also worth remembering that respondents to the RCS survey considered that “orienting towards connection, loving kindness and compassion towards all living beings,” and “a transformative shift in worldviews and value systems” were the most relevant forms of radical social change they were hoping to see taking place, which speaks to the importance of these aspirations within DAF.

A majority of GRS respondents from the EL and DR groups also stated that their involvement was driving them to want to contribute more to DAF as a community. Thus, it appears that their sense of personal agency in bringing about the expression of more compassion and loving kindness, as well as the transformation of worldviews, has been enhanced by their regular participation in these groups. This speaks to a “desire to *engage* actively in improving the well-being of others and the world,” described by Schlitz and colleagues (p.26) as another important marker of expanded social consciousness. The same prosocial desire transpires from the various social justice initiatives launched by the D&D circle.

Therefore, several elements indicate that the focus on intentionally cultivating new forms of relationality within DAF, be it through the general ethos of the network or through specific practices used in various DAF groups, may be enabling participants to develop or expand their social and ecological consciousness. For this reason, this case study provides an illustration of practices that can be implemented in order to help bring about a collective reorientation towards a relational onto-epistemological paradigm as an essential response to the global social and ecological predicament.

Two caveats should be raised, nonetheless. First, most of the participants I interviewed were actively involved in DAF (and could be classified as “Active” or “Occasional



participants” following the typology presented in **Section 2.4**). They tended to value relational process much more than the more peripheral stakeholders (“Very occasional participants”) who answered my surveys, and who tended to be more interested in practical forms of adaptation to the threat or experience of societal disruptions (**Annex 5.4**). Therefore, it would be important to consider the extent to which the relational framing promoted by more active participants is influential in areas of DAF less involved in online events, such as the DA Facebook group, or the affiliated groups.

Secondly, most of my interviewees stated that their involvement in DAF (or even their “collapse awareness”) was the result of a gradual personal journey, taking place over several years and integrating various influences, towards realising the depth of the global predicament. In other words, they experienced learning about DA as a confirmation of what they felt they already knew, instead of as a sudden revelation. This has been noted in another study involving “deep adapters” (Tröndle, 2021). It is thus possible that the same is true for them about the importance of relationality, and that they only found in DAF a place in which to embody a counter-cultural world-view they had already adopted. For those in this case, the network might have been less of a transformative space, and more of a support structure for a transformation having already taken place. Further research would be needed to clarify this matter.

### ***Relationality in practice***

As I mentioned earlier (**Chapter 2**), prefigurative groups seek to embody in their practice itself those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture and human experience that are ultimately desired for the whole society. In view of the above, I contend that a relational focus is at the core of the prefigurative practice of DAF groups, and the cultivation of relationality appears to be an essential “seed of change” growing within the network.

What does this mean, in practice? What kinds of generative changes may a relational focus bring about? How may personal, inner transformation connect with political and practical action in the world?

Several examples emerged in my research that speak to these questions. First of all, the value-creation stories make it clear that for many DAF participants, strong relationships cultivated within DAF have been instrumental to the integration and action-oriented

transformation of the difficult emotions experienced while contemplating the state of the world and our global predicament (see for example stories #2, #7 or #10 in **Annex 5.2**). So relationships, in and of themselves, have been a source of great value for many of us in the network.

As the example of the D&D circle shows (**Annex 5.3**), foregrounding relationships has also been essential to the group's ongoing collaboration, and to our collective capacity to transform conflict, which has enabled us to engage in the various endeavours championed by our group. More recently, the collaborative efforts initiated in support to women in Ukraine among several DAF participants were clearly catalysed by the strong mutual trust that had been cultivated between them (**Annex 5.2, Story #16**).

While the above may appear to be only small instances of collective change enabled through relationality, they are redolent of the widespread, self-organised mutual aid actions that took place in various “caring geographies” (Springer, 2020) around the world, following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, embodying responses motivated by a clear relational ethos (Travlou, 2021; Chevé, 2022).

This topic leads us to another aspect of DAF's prefigurative practice: that of self-organisation, to which I now turn.

### **3.2 Enabling soil and sowers: DAF and self-organisation**

In this chapter, learning to self-organise was discussed as one of the “seeds of change” that have been cultivated within DAF. I will now discuss the extent to which these self-organising processes, and the actors supporting them, may have played an enabling or disabling role with regards to the collective processes of learning and change within the network.

In discussing learning governance as a factor affecting the *learning capability* of a social system, Wenger (2009) argues that the interplay of two main governance processes has a strong impact on this capability:

- *stewarding governance* “derives from a concerted effort to move a social system in a given direction” and is “a process of seeking agreement and alignment across a social system in order to achieve certain goals” (p.13); in contrast,

- *emergent governance* is the product of “a distributed system of interactions involving local decisions” (ibid.), negotiated in various learning spaces and disseminated by their participants.

Both types of governance are useful for social learning. While the former fosters the recognition of interdependence and the capacity for joint action, the latter ensures the possibility of unforeseen, innovative ideas emerging from local interactions. Therefore, “it is the combination of the two [processes] that can maximise the learning capability of social systems” (p.14).

Besides governance, Wenger also emphasises the role of accountability structures within social systems. A leaderless social learning space might be characterised by *horizontal accountability*, as participants are, by definition, accountable to one another through their engagement in joint activities; whereas *vertical accountability* would be much more present, for example, in an organisation relying on a hierarchical decision-making structure – since people “lower down” must report to others “higher up.” Just like the two forms of governance presented above, both forms of accountability can be artfully articulated within a social system to maximise social learning capability, through both emergent and stewarding governance: horizontal accountability, based on negotiation and mutual expressibility, is vital to social learning spaces for peer engagement to be genuine; as for vertical accountability, based on compliance (for example, in the form of commonly agreed rules and agreements), it can help facilitate governance processes across a complex social system.

Wenger suggests that this should take the form of “interwoven learning experiments” (p.16). This refers to experiments taking place in semi-autonomous learning spaces without any forced homogeneity, yet with supporting structures in place that can help the results of these experiments to spread beyond their local setting. In this regard, Wenger therefore proposes that social systems may benefit from a centralised role or body which would provide stewarding governance with the specific aim of fostering learning capability.

To what extent does this theory of learning governance help explain the learning capability of DAF as a complex landscape of practice?

As mentioned previously (**Section 2.2.2**), from the creation of DAF, an emphasis was put on the network aiming to enable the emergence of peer support structures within a DA ethos, instead of directing collective efforts to achieve certain goals (DAF, 2020b). This intention was premised on the impossibility of knowing what might constitute the “right answers” to the global predicament, as the latter was recognised as occurring due to an epistemological crisis – in other words, current dominant worldviews are unhelpful for anyone to know the “way forward”:

The anticipation of societal collapse is therefore to acknowledge a crisis of epistemology and a collapse of the hitherto dominant ways of seeking to know the world.... DA is primarily a container for dialogue that begins with an invitation to unlearn, to let go of our maps and models of the world and to not prematurely grasp at any new ones. That can be difficult because a habit of needing fact, certainty and right answers means people are often uncomfortable being with uncertainty or ‘not knowingness’. (Carr and Bendell, 2021, pp. 176–7)

The ethos of the DA concept and spaces at present is not to colonize people’s own explorations of the topic and to welcome ‘unknowing’. (Bendell and Read, 2021a, p. 303)

This helps to account for the strong focus on promoting self-organisation within the network, in the form of self-convened groups and projects, rather than DAF aiming to achieve certain specific goals, or to materialise a specific vision. It also explains the attention brought to developing alternative ways of relating in groups, particularly within the DA Facilitators community of practice, in order to enable more participants to grow more comfortable with uncertainty and “maplessness” (Carr, 2021).

In discussing DAF governance, it is necessary to touch on the role of the DAF Core Team (CT), which I have been part of from the creation of the network and up to the time of writing. This role is defined as being largely about supporting “the aims, ethos, and policies of DAF” as well as “other emerging areas of work and priorities” (DAF, 2022b) – rather than setting strategic goals. During the first year of the network’s activities, the CT relied strongly on stewarding governance to pursue certain strategic objectives, decided with little consultation of other stakeholders, although feedback was

invited on the documents laying out these objectives (e.g. DAF Core Team, 2019a). But gradually, the CT only offered recommendations for focal action areas, on the basis of the outcomes of wide-ranging community consultation processes taking place on an annual basis (see **Annex 5.4**, Section 2.1 for details).

In this way, the CT came to provide a layer of governance in accordance with that described by Ehrlichman (2021, pp. 181–182), according to whom core teams “coordinate the work, activities, and resources of the network in partnership with other network leaders... to support greater contributions and aligned action among participants” but “do not hold formal authority over other network members. Core teams make recommendations, but final decisions ultimately rest with the network as a whole.”

The CT therefore shifted its role from a focus on stewarding governance to emergent governance. It also favoured horizontal accountability across the network, by encouraging the creation of self-directed social learning spaces. But this is not to say that the CT relinquished all processes of vertical accountability: for example, it supported a participatory process leading to the co-creation, in March 2021, of the first version of the DAF Charter<sup>24</sup> which itself is an instance of vertical accountability, among other network policies – such as the Safety and Wellbeing Policy (DAF Core Team, 2021).

Overall, has the CT succeeded in fostering learning capability in DAF, by acting as a centralised body providing stewarding governance while allowing the emergence of “interwoven learning experiments” (Wenger, 2009, p.16)?

On a formal level, the CT has undeniably supported some of the transversal processes (cutting across dimensions of governance and accountability) which Wenger argues are critical to maximise learning capability (ibid., p.17) – most notably, the creation of autonomous social learning spaces and communities of practice, such as the D&D circle and other groups (see **Section 2.2.2**). Another example might be the public acknowledgement of the learning citizenship exercised by DAF volunteers through the activities of the Gratitude Month in August 2022 (DAF Editorial Team, 2022), and the

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<sup>24</sup> The DAF Charter (DAF, 2022a) was co-created by over a dozen DAF participants, mainly volunteers, to provide a commonly agreed set of principles governing the activities of all groups and projects in the network. It is revised at least once a year at the time of writing.

publication of a “Credits” page on the DAF website, listing the names of contributors wishing to do so (DAF Core Team, 2022b). At the time of writing, the CT had also supported two editions of the Conscious Learning Festival, organised by the research team I initiated in DAF (**Annex 5.5**).

In practice, however, it is worth noting that at the time of writing, few self-organised groups have succeeded in meeting regularly over time. To a certain extent, this may be due to the lack of familiarity, on behalf of many DAF participants, with the relational mindset and forms of leadership that are promoted in DAF:

For [people] who have worked exclusively in hierarchical organizations their whole lives, shifting into a network mindset can take some time, given how it contrasts with Western assumptions of how change happens through deliberate planning and control. ... Hierarchical leadership is directive and consolidates control. Network leadership is facilitative, generating connections between others and decentralizing power such that people can organize without a top leader. (Ehrlichman, 2021, pp. 38–39)

The CT might adopt new practices in order to better support emerging initiatives and catalysing new learning – for example, setting up an *innovation fund*, which is a “small pool of money that provides seed funds or incentive funds to encourage self-organization and collaboration” (Holley, 2013, p. 150), or engaging in joint events and partnerships with aligned networks and organisations. Such practices would likely require more robust sources of funding than are available at the time of writing.

It should also be pointed out that several people have also encountered issues in working directly with CT members and/or DAF founder Jem Bendell, which prevented them from further engaging in the network (**Section 2.3.2**). Therefore, individuals assuming leadership roles in DAF have occasionally played a disabling role in other stakeholders’ learning.

More fundamentally perhaps, the perception that DAF gives people “no call to action,” and that it is overly “philosophical” and “open-field,” have been recurring criticisms voiced within the network (**Section 2.3.2**). Using Wenger (2009)’s theory outlined above, these criticisms can be interpreted as calls for more stewarding governance: indeed, for many DAF participants, the network’s mission of “enabling and embodying

loving responses to collapse” requires more alignment and coordination in order to bring about more practical, on-the-ground initiatives that may reduce the social, political, and ecological impacts of collapse. Perhaps these statements also express a desire for more attention to “collapse-readiness,” as compared to the focus on “collapse-transcendence” which has grown more central in the network since its creation, as exemplified in the attention to doing “inner work” and cultivating relational processes (as discussed in the previous section).

Finally, from a purely pragmatic perspective, it may be that DAF’s current governance model, characterised by its focus on emergence, will prove unsustainable, due to the difficulty of securing funding for efforts involving relational (as opposed to transactional) ways of organising, whose outcomes are impossible to predict – a difficulty acknowledged by other practitioners (Jay, 2022; Starter Culture, 2023).

In this regard, it may be that systems of governance that are distributed but preserve more elements of vertical accountability and concentration of decision-making power, could be more reassuring to funders.

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It may be useful here to summarise the main findings presented so far in Section 3.

I have argued that in DAF participants’ view, the network’s relevance to radical collective change is most clearly articulated in terms of “Orienting towards connection, loving kindness and compassion for all beings” and “A transformative shift in worldviews and value systems,” and that these aspirations are coherent with the relational framing that has grown dominant within the network. As a result, various groups and modalities encourage the cultivation of this relational paradigm in several parts of the DAF landscape of practice, and many participants have attested to deep experiences of social learning taking place in these social learning spaces. While these practices display the potential to foster long-lasting world-view transformations towards expanded forms of social and ecological consciousness, a longitudinal study would be required to confirm this aspect.

On the organisational level, there are signs showing that an increasing number of active DAF participants are growing more proficient with the emergent governance promoted

in the network, through self-organised practices scaffolded and disseminated by certain participants. However, self-organisation has not grown to its full potential in DAF yet. Most importantly, it appears that the choice, on behalf of the Core Team, not to promote more directionality (or stewarding governance) in the network has been experienced as disorienting to many, particularly with regards to the current emphasis on inner work and relationship-building. While this governance is a reflection of the prefigurative aspect of DAF, it may be all the more troubling to those participants who are more intent on enacting practical or political changes, and regretting the absence of guidance in this regard. Similarly, this relational, inward-oriented focus makes it more challenging for the network to resource itself financially.

In the next subsection, I will close this chapter with a discussion of DAF's relevance to socio-political change using a decolonial lens. This will enable me to transition to a deeper exploration of this approach in **Chapter 6**.

### 3.3 Considering DAF from a decolonial perspective

Thus far, this thesis has been rooted in a pragmatic and constructivist approach (**Chapter 3**). Accordingly, my posture as a researcher has been to foreground the voices and narratives of all participants in this research. I have refrained from critically engaging with this content, but instead strived to enhance its credibility through a commitment to *multivocality* and *member reflections* on my findings, in a spirit of “collaboration and reflexive elaboration” (Tracy, 2010, p. 844).

However, the remainder of this study will now give more space to another research stream which unfolded simultaneously for me, even while I carried out my case studies on FC and DAF. This intellectual process became increasingly central to my understanding of the topic of *radical collective change*. I am referring to a *decolonial approach* to personal and collective change.

This perspective was entirely foreign to me as I began my thesis, which explains why neither my case studies nor the social learning evaluation methodologies that I deployed are particularly “decolonial.” It was during the last two years of my research, even as I was starting to write my thesis, that this approach gradually became too important a part of my understanding and reflection for me not to acknowledge it and seek to integrate it



within this thesis. This was largely a result of my involvement in the DAF D&D circle (**Annex 5.3**), and thus constitutes an example of social learning taking place within an online community.

Therefore, as part of my commitment to producing *movement-relevant research* (**Chapter 1**), I will now offer some reflections which may “defy the ‘common-sense assumptions’” (Bevington and Dixon, 2005, p. 191) of the participants I have engaged with throughout this research, particularly in DAF, and take a closer look at the socio-cultural lenses characterising my own perspective – including its limits, impacts, and implications.

### **3.3.1 A community of privilege?**

The Deep Adaptation paper (Bendell, 2018) was written by a white, British, middle-class university professor, who spent most of his career in the environmental field. It was intended for publication within a scholarly journal, to be read by other sustainability academics – mainly in the global North.

It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the people who gathered to discuss the implications of this paper, and came to form the Deep Adaptation Forum community, tend to hail from similar socio-economic and cultural backgrounds as Prof Bendell. From my experience, at the time of writing, a typical active participant in DAF is white, Western, over 40 years old, middle-class, holds a university degree, and has a history of involvement in the environmental field. This profile is very similar to mine, although I am younger.<sup>25</sup> This may help explain why I felt comfortable choosing DAF as a research site, rather than other social contexts in which my positionality may have been less welcome.

In what ways may the socio-economic and demographic positionality of DAF participants affect the potential for radical collective change to take place thanks to this community?

Firstly, circumstantial evidence suggests that the language in DAF spaces and DA(F) publications often comes across as academic and abstruse (e.g. Mowdy, 2021), which I have also heard from several Forum participants. This likely constitutes a challenge in

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<sup>25</sup> Participant demographics in DAF, at all levels of engagement, tend to be skewed toward female participants, which is another difference with my positionality.

terms of epistemological access to, and participatory parity within, DAF spaces (Muller, 2014; Garraway, 2017). In other words, people unfamiliar with such language may feel discouraged from participating in DA conversations, or even silenced by other participants' rhetoric. This could especially affect members of marginalised communities (Samaržija and Cerovac, 2021), and thus stand as one explanatory factor for their relative absence from DAF groups (**Annex 5.3**).

Even more importantly, perhaps, the DA rhetoric itself has been experienced as exclusionary by people from different socio-cultural and economic backgrounds.

The original framing of DA as articulated in Bendell's seminal paper was undeniably more focused on the threat of future disruptions to a way of life considered "normal" by people from demographics like the one outlined above, and made little space for consideration of similarly frightful disruptions experienced by less privileged people (and other-than-humans) in the present or in the past. Until 2022, the "About" page of the DAF website cited the following excerpt from the paper:

The term social or societal collapse is used here to refer to the uneven ending to our current means of sustenance, shelter, security, pleasure, identity and meaning. (DAF, 2020b)

Neither the DA paper, nor this webpage, considered whose perspective was encapsulated within the word "our." In the words of two volunteers curating a page about the "invisibilised voices on collapse" on the DAF website (Virah-Sawmy and Jiménez, 2022),

The current means of sustenance and security that some of us experience, and which we previously referred to, have not been equal or even existent for most of the world. In fact, they are built upon centuries of injustices that have led to the cyclical collapse of societies. The global majority has repeatedly experienced societal collapse in one way or another.

Accordingly, DAF's early-day framing did not bring attention to these topics, although this began to evolve in 2022 (**Annex 5.4**). Prof Bendell has also called for more humanitarian action and transnational solidarity efforts (Bendell, 2020a; Bendell and Read, 2021a). However, the difficulties experienced by the D&D circle to raise funds

for such efforts (**Annex 5.3**), as well as the first-hand experience of Black, Indigenous and People of Colour in the Forum facing the denial that racism and colonialism have anything to do with climate change (Sabic and Virah-Sawmy, 2023), point to the difficulties of championing these ideas within a context in which this awareness was only belatedly brought to the fore. I want to fully acknowledge my own responsibility for this situation, as someone who has been involved in leadership roles since the start of the network.

Besides, as discussed earlier in this chapter (**Section 3.2**), neither the DA paper nor the foundational texts of DAF advocated for any particular course of action with regards to how the “DA agenda” (**Section 1.1**) ought to be applied. As a result, there was no explicit call to dismantle capitalist social structures and other systems of oppression, to redistribute wealth, or enact reparations for historical harm – although the DAF founder did advocate for similar measures in later texts (Bendell, 2022). Consequently, DA(F) spaces have been perceived as apolitical venues for privileged participants to offer solace to one another over the anticipated loss of their way of life, at the expense of much-needed radical reforms of the social order (Foster, 2021). Some commentators have even suggested that anxiety about the impacts of climate change is often an expression of white fragility or racial anxiety (Ray, 2021). In view of the difficult emotions experienced by many DAF participants, and the community’s demographic makeup, this critique is an important one to address – I return to it below.

Finally, on a psycho-social level, it is also possible that in centring “loving responses” to global socio-ecological crises as its mission, in a spirit of “curiosity, compassion, and respect,” DAF rhetoric may be viewed as discouraging the expression of certain affects – especially anger or outrage – that are widely elicited by these crises, and presumably more within demographics with less privilege (and far more exposed to injustice and inequalities) than the typical DAF participant. Together with the points mentioned above, this could leave many less privileged people feeling alienated by DAF rhetoric.

The positionality of DAF spaces – as mostly white, Western, educated, and middle-class spaces - is not in itself problematic, in my view. However, I consider that radical collective change requires *facing the denial of systemic, historical, and ongoing violence and of complicity in harm* (as I will develop more at length in **Chapter 6**). And

I doubt the possibility of doing so without forming relationships of solidarity with those who have historically suffered the most from the harmful aspects of modernity-coloniality. Therefore, for generative change-oriented initiatives to emerge thanks to DAF, it seems important to reduce the obstacles that may stand in the way of such relationships being formed. In the process of working on these obstacles, DAF itself may become more “diverse” as a result, but it would be very risky to make this the primary aim of such efforts, considering the long and harmful history of tokenistic “inclusion” of representatives from marginalised groups into spaces dominated by more privileged people (Elwood, Andreotti and Stein, 2019).

What are some ways in which DAF might reduce the alienating effects of its framing and rhetoric?

### **3.3.2 Towards decolonial love**

First of all, and evidently, the language used in DAF publications and within the community itself needs to be more accessible, and avoid centring the experience of its more privileged constituents. As mentioned elsewhere (**Annex 5.4**), such efforts were underway at the time of writing. I will bring more attention here to the place of “loving responses” within DAF rhetoric, and consider to what extent can this notion be expanded to bring more attention to matters of social justice.

Let us return to the relational theory of change that came to the fore within the DAF framing shortly after the start of the community (see **Annex 5.4** for details), and which became an essential philosophical foundation for the Forum. According to this framing, a key *raison d’être* for DAF groups and spaces was to enact “collapse-transcendence,” or “the psychological, spiritual and cultural shifts that may enable more people to experience greater equanimity toward future disruptions and the likelihood that our situation is beyond our control” (Bendell and Carr, 2019). Participants were invited to foreground a relational mindset and to overcome their cultural indoctrination into a mindset of separation, in order to counteract the violent and xenophobic socio-political tendencies that were likely to become dominant within a context of societal collapse (see **Section 3.1.2** above). Simultaneously, facilitated relational practices such as Deep Relating aimed at encouraging reflexivity and criticality in order to start dismantling the

psychological patterns feeding the mindset of separation (leading to “othering”) that underlies all systems of oppression (Bendell and Carr, 2021).

In this way, the dominant framing within DAF focused on “loving responses” as a strategy to foster cooperative and non-oppressive forms of social change in uncertain times. It finds echoes in the work of community educator Sarah Jaquette Ray (2020), who recommends adopting an attitude of “curiosity, flexibility, and respect” (p.99) and cultivating “compassionate curiosity” (p.110) to build alliances between social groups around climate change action, and constructively harness climate anxiety in non-polarizing ways. But importantly, Ray centres the need to “make climate change a social justice issue and recognizing that our position in society—our relative access to power and privilege—affects the way we frame and feel about these issues” (p.106) – which is a perspective that emerged only belatedly in DAF (**Annex 5.4**). She also explicitly validates feelings of anger in the face of injustice and oppression, but calls for cooperation and community-building in spite of these strong emotions:

That is the real challenge—to hold space for both righteous anger and curious compassion. (p.109)

For DAF groups and spaces to become more welcoming of participants from marginalised groups motivated by aspirations for socially just political change, it may be important to give more space to righteous anger and people’s passion for justice. Such containers are often part of certain methodologies utilised in DAF, such as the Work that Reconnects (Prentice, 2003). In the words of Black feminist Audre Lorde (1984, p. 133),

I’ve suckled this wolf’s lip of anger and I have used it for illumination, laughter, protection, fire in places where there was no light, no food, no sisters, no quarter.

As pointed out by Christine Hentschel (2022), rage and anger “can be visionary and creative” and “transformed into care, consolation, solidarity, and justice” (p.6). These affects should not be invisibilised rhetorically by the intention to overcome othering.

Going further, Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2016) considers that the struggle to transcend ontological separation, and the omnipresent paradigm of war that is a hallmark of modernity-coloniality, requires *both* love, and rage – “as a form of negation that is

inspired and oriented by the positive attitude of love” (p.23). Rejecting liberal romantic notions of love, he considers Chela Sandoval (2000)’s concept of *decolonial love* as a critical part of decolonisation as a political and social project. In Sandoval’s words:

[decolonial love is] a ‘breaking’ through whatever controls in order to find ‘understanding and community’ ... as a set of practices and procedures that can transit all citizen-subjects, regardless of social class, toward a differential mode of consciousness and its accompanying technologies of method and social movement. (Sandoval, 2000, p. 139)

Building on Frantz Fanon (1952) and Gloria Anzaldúa (2009), Maldonado-Torres (2016, p.22) views decolonial love as key for human beings to recover their agency as “node[s] of love and understanding,” beyond the matrix of coloniality; and for love and rage to scar the wounds of modernity-coloniality, and create new bridges “linking people who have been split apart” (Anzaldúa, 2009, p.313).

But how may decolonial love be enacted in practice? Yomaira Figueroa (2015) proposes carrying out *decolonial reparations*. These involve both “a recognition of structural, gendered, and intergenerational violence and a move away from its normalization” (p.46): beyond “the oft-used positivistic calculation of debts or apologies owed,” such reparations represent transformative, “intergenerational and collective acts of love” based on an “understanding of (and an accounting for) the *longue-durée* of colonialism” (ibid.). Material reparations for historical injustice and structural violence are a useful first step, but they must be accompanied with “a commitment to transforming both the ideologies and structures of coloniality” (ibid.).

I suspect that enacting *decolonial loving responses* through the praxis of decolonial reparations may constitute a fertile avenue of exploration and political engagement for DAF groups, and other communities with similar demographics. It could enable a deeper acknowledgement of systemic harm, of our complicity in it, and pave the way for more generative engagement with the struggles of marginalised groups and communities. This may involve giving space to the expression and witnessing of anger, rage, and other affects of resistance (Flowers, 2015) within appropriate containers, while preserving compassion, curiosity and respect as central values guiding the “intergenerational and collective acts of love” advocated by Figueroa (2015). Besides,

Figuroa also shows how reparations can be seen as an essential ingredient of any process of *reconciliation* (Figuroa, 2015) – which is an important theme in the Deep Adaptation agenda (**Section 1.1**).

Concrete forms of reparations could include, for instance, pressuring governments to carry out debt cancellation in Global South countries (Táíwò and Bigger, 2022), or to allow for cross-borders freedom of movement (Mbembe, 2018; Ouassak, 2023) as critical climate justice and adaptation measures; or demanding reparations for slavery and the transatlantic slave trade (Caricom Reparations Commission, no date), and the restitution of cultural artefacts and human body parts that were stolen by the European colonial powers in Africa, and which are exhibited in galleries or archived in Europe’s museums and libraries (Ferdinand, 2021). At a more personal or community level, reparations might also be envisioned as *decolonising solidarity* practices (Boudreau Morris, 2017; Kluttz, Walker and Walter, 2020), through unconditional (material and political) solidarity with Indigenous struggles, critical reflexion on how to decolonise the solidarity effort itself, and “taking active steps towards building ‘right’ relations, with a commitment to both naming and righting the material, epistemic, cultural and political injustices of present and past” (Kluttz, Walker and Walter, 2020, p. 56).

Let us now turn to the question of eco-emotions as a key topic of discussion within DAF spaces.

### **3.3.3 Eco-emotions and the need for constructive action**

As I have shown (**Sections 2.3.1** and **3.1.1**), relational and somatic processes play an important role in DAF groups, and help many participants to better integrate within their lives the difficult emotions arising from their awareness of socio-ecological crises. In studies as in popular usage, such difficult emotions are often grouped under broad labels such as *eco-anxiety* (e.g. Rehling, 2022), *ecological grief* (e.g. Cunsolo and Ellis, 2018) or *solastalgia* (e.g. Rehling and Sigston, 2020). Scholars (e.g. Pihkala, 2022b) have discussed the lack of conceptual clarity within this emerging field, and pointed out that this complex experience may involve feelings of frustration, overwhelm, guilt, grief, fear, numbness, uncertainty for the future, a sense of disrupted place-based attachments, existential concerns around meaning and loss, as well as anger or betrayal, pre- and post-traumatic stress, or even love and wonder (e.g. Hamilton, 2022; Pihkala, 2022b,

2022a; Rehling, 2022).<sup>26</sup> I will use the term *eco-emotions* to refer to the above, following Panu Pihkala (2022b).

In view of the relatively privileged socio-cultural and economic background of most DAF participants, does spending time processing one's eco-emotions constitute an indulgence that comes at the expense of political organising, as some have suggested (Meadway, 2022)?

First of all, it is important to note that eco-emotions are far from being the preserve of privileged white demographics. Research suggests that disadvantaged communities – especially racialised people - in Global North countries are as likely, or more likely, to be affected by such emotions, due to their stronger exposure to environmental impacts of all kinds (American Psychological Association and ecoAmerica, 2017; Ballew *et al.*, 2020; Tremblay, 2022); indeed, a study that surveyed 10,000 young people around the world found that 75% of those in Global South countries such as Nigeria, India, or the Philippines felt the climate crisis was negatively impacting their ability to function on a daily basis, in contrast to countries less impacted by climate disasters such as the UK, where 45% of respondents felt negatively impacted (Hickman *et al.*, 2021). Indigenous communities around the world have been shown to be particularly strongly affected by eco-emotions, as a result of physical ecological losses, disruptions to their environmental knowledge and loss of identity, as well as anticipated future ecological losses (e.g. Durkalec *et al.*, 2015; Oakes, Ardoin and Lambin, 2016; Cunsolo and Ellis, 2018; Rehling and Sigston, 2020). In other words, eco-emotions evidently have a huge impact on the communities most exposed to ecological crises globally, due to structural inequities and injustices. This points to the need for mental health support systems offered to those who often have the least social and economic access to such support (Bauck, 2023).

Why is it, then, that more privileged (or White) demographics have been denounced (Ray, 2021) as most concerned about finding relief for their eco-anxiety and other eco-emotions? This perception may be due in part to asymmetries of epistemological access to scientific and medical discourse on topics such as “eco-emotions,” on top of easier

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<sup>26</sup> The CAS survey disseminated within this research project provides an equally varied array of emotional responses to the anticipation or experience of societal collapse among DAF participants (Cavé, 2022b).



access to means of communication about these issues (Browne, 2022). Other demographics may lack the vocabulary to discuss such topics, or feel stigmatised when they do (Bauck, 2023).

Nonetheless, concerns that eco-emotions in dominant groups may bring about about xenophobia and even forms of fascism (Ray, 2021; Ouassak, 2023) seem warranted: scholars have shown that anxiety can be a source of defensive routines that undermine collective efforts toward generative change (Mnguni, 2010; Norgaard, 2011). How to avoid this?

Psychologists have shown that eco-emotions are part and parcel of living with the awareness of socio-ecological crises, and can in fact be harnessed for positive change (Nairn, 2019; Wardell, 2020; Kurth and Pihkala, 2022). But in order for this to happen, these emotions must be properly engaged, if possible through group or community interventions (Rehling, 2022), and not ignored by rushing into problem-solving, which is what contemporary cultures drive most of us to do (Pihkala, 2022a). Many scholars (e.g. Hufnagel, 2017; Verlie, 2019; Hamilton, 2022) have argued for constructive engagement with one's emotions by means of practical workshop activities. Jo Hamilton (2022) shows that this may enable one to develop *emotional reflexivity* – or the embodied and relational awareness of (and attention to) the ways that people engage with and feel about issues, the actions they take, the stories and worldviews they inhabit, and their perceptions of individual and collective agency. She explored approaches that may contribute to a “‘deep determination’ and ongoing resource to act for environmental and social justice, and to live the future worth fighting for in the present” (p.1). However, this requires the possibility to keep engaging with these practices regularly, as part of social settings that offer a locus for action, or “climate change engagement for the long haul” (p.16).

This corresponds with the results of the process of eco-anxiety and ecological grief charted by Pihkala (2022a), on the basis of a wide-ranging interdisciplinary review. A key insight of this model is that once a person has gained awareness of the depth and scale of socio-ecological issues, coping and adjusting to this awareness (and, hopefully, reaching a stage in which one can live with it skillfully) requires grieving, taking action, and distancing oneself from one's eco-emotions. Thus, if any of these dimensions are

lacking (for example, if one neglects to engage with their emotions), a person is likely to eventually experience burnout or other forms of breakdown.<sup>27</sup>

I draw two conclusions from these studies. First of all, they validate a foundational premise of DAF – i.e. that developing emotional reflexivity is in fact an essential aspect of learning to live with one’s awareness of socio-ecological crises; and furthermore, that this “inner work” enables one to take generative action as a result of this awareness (see also **Section 3.1.2** above). Secondly, they point to the critical importance of finding, in one’s everyday life, occasions to actively engage on these issues in parallel to this inner work – which is “needed... for ethical, practical, and psychological reasons” although “various forms of action can be more or less helpful either in relation to alleviating the ecological crisis or advancing human well-being” (Pihkala, 2022a, p. 28).

Thus, in the case of online communities like DAF, participants will likely benefit from *leadership* that catalyses various forms of collective action, as well as group structures and processes favouring *critical discernment* in doing so (I will return to these aspects in **Chapter 6**). And considering that more vulnerable communities and other-than-humans have long been on the frontlines of ecological and societal collapse (Virah-Sawmy and Jiménez, 2022), and suffer more heavily from physical, mental, and community health issues (American Psychological Association and ecoAmerica, 2017), it seems ethically necessary that any action – including local community-building – be taken first and foremost in a spirit of solidarity with these other inhabitants of the Earth. The decolonial reparations discussed above may constitute such forms of action.

### 3.3.4 Beyond the nature-culture dualism

Finally, I will touch upon certain philosophical underpinnings of DA and DAF, and examine how these (implicit or explicit) ontological and epistemological foundations may benefit from being examined critically.

Decolonial scholars, such as Kothari and colleagues (2019), point to *anthropocentrism* as an early cause of the current planetary socio-ecological crises, due to “the ancient monotheistic premise that a father ‘God’ made the Earth for the benefit of ‘his’ human children... At least in the West, it evolved into a philosophic habit of pitting humanity

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<sup>27</sup> Pihkala is careful to point out that this model may not accurately speak to the experience of people facing multiple injustices.

against nature, and gave rise to related dualisms such as the divide between subject versus object, mind versus body, masculine versus feminine, civilized versus barbarian. These classic ideological categories legitimize devastation of the natural world, as well as the exploitation of sex-gender, racial, and civilizational differences." (p.xxii).

Indeed, the philosophical split between nature and culture (humans-nonhumans) is one of the most distinctive markers of the modern-colonial mindset (Escobar, 2020).

Anthropologists such as Descola (2015) have shown that the very notion of "nature" is overwhelmingly absent from any onto-epistemologies other than the modern one.

So going beyond anthropocentrism and the nature-culture dualism (along with other modern-colonial binaries) can be seen as an essential task, in order to explore ways of engaging with socio-ecological crises that do not reproduce the ways of being and knowing that led to these crises. What elements of DA(F) discourse and philosophy are helpful in engaging with this task, or on the contrary, stand in the way of doing so?

### ***Deep ecology and biocentrism***

Deep ecology (Næss, 1973) is an influential environmental philosophy which has, as a foundational premise, the belief that "humans must radically change their relationship to nature from one that values nature solely for its usefulness to human beings to one that recognizes that nature has an inherent value" (Madsen, 2023). In recommending a "shift from an 'anthropocentric' to a 'biocentric' perspective" (Guha, 1989), this school of thought enables a recognition that human existence is inseparable from that of other-than-humans, and foregrounds a relational ontology (Walsh, Böhme and Wamsler, 2021).

There are indications that deep ecology is one of the philosophical roots of DA. This includes explicit references from the DAF founder:

A 'Deep Ecology' perspective invites a non-anthropocentric account of the relationship between 'humans' and nature. (Bendell and Carr, 2021, p. 6)

The biocentric perspective that deep ecology invites can be seen as a step forward in remedying the "philosophic habit of pitting humanity against nature." However, this perspective has also been criticised for perpetuating the nature-culture dualism central

to the modern-colonial paradigm: indeed, as is evident from the passage above, “nature” still features as an entity distinct from “humans.”

Moreover, in deep ecological writings, the former tends to be valued over the latter (Perez de Vega, 2014), which in itself can be problematic. Critics (e.g. Bookchin, 1987) have pointed out that deep ecology’s biocentric orientation, by regarding humans as “an outsized threat to non-human life on the planet” (Spanne, 2021), lent itself to misanthropic and even eco-fascist tendencies – especially in view of calls for substantial decreases in human population to address (perceived) issues of “natural resource consumption.” Others have also criticised the movement for its focus on defending “pristine wilderness,” and overlooking how this preservationist perspective may come at the expense of marginalised communities such as Indigenous peoples, who may be displaced from their lands to create national parks (e.g. Guha, 1989).

The reader may notice several references to “nature” or “the natural world” in previous sections of this chapter, be it in participant testimonials, or even in my own words – in spite of my conscious intention to avoid reproducing the nature-culture dualism. This points to the great difficulty of doing so, when the very language we use is so steeped with such binaries. Moreover, most of these references likely carry, implicitly, the deep ecology frame of “nature as something pristine, beautiful, wild, to be protected.”

Considering the problematic aspects of such a frame, it seems important to carry out more conscious efforts on the level of discourse within prefigurative communities like DAF - while recognising that the issue is less about individuals becoming more virtuous, and more about enacting cultural change. Ultimately, the aim should be to embrace an ecology that relinquishes the idea of “nature” itself (Morton, 2009). In the words of Slavoj Žižek (2007), “The first premise of a truly radical ecology should be, ‘Nature doesn’t exist.’”

### ***A decolonial ecology***

Beyond the nature-culture dualism, deep ecology has also been criticised for its apolitical view of systems change. This has led scholars to recommend integrating its relational ontology with frameworks - such as that of social ecology - that recognise the class-based struggles of marginalised people:

Radical social ecology investigates the material, social, and spiritual conditions of an ecological society by pursuing the elimination of human's domination of nature via the elimination of human's domination of humans. It connects ecological issues to a broad array of interconnected social issues. (Walsh, Böhme and Wamsler, 2021, p. 79)

Similarly, Malcolm Ferdinand (2021) acknowledges the value of deep ecology's gestalt ontology, which centres the interrelatedness of human and other-than-human existence. But in order to avoid homogeneising "humans" and their diverse histories, he calls for "a relational ontology that recognizes that our existence and our bodies are made up of encounters with a plurality of human beings *and* a plurality of non-human beings." (p.231) On this foundation, Ferdinand proposes a *decolonial ecology* as "an ecology of struggle... a matter of challenging the colonial ways of inhabiting the Earth and living together" (p.175). Like Fatima Ouassak's (2023) *pirate ecology*, decolonial ecology establishes colonisation, racism, gender discriminations, but also speciesism, as processes integral to the ecological crisis:

[D]ecolonial ecology turns the degradation of social life, the extractivism of Negro skins, and environmental racism into the primary targets of ecological action. *Yes, antiracism and decolonial critique are the keys to the ecological struggle.* (Ferdinand, 2021, p.179. Italics in the original)

[T]he collective and urgent issue at stake here is the overthrow of the slave-making inhabitation of the Earth, which enslaves human and non-human animals... Antislavery and decolonial emancipation also involves decolonizing our modes of consumption and our relations to non-human animals. (Ferdinand, 2021, p.224-5)

As mentioned previously, there is much to do in order for this perspective to permeate DAF spaces more fully. This is especially important to avoid forms of discourse that flatten "humanity" into an undifferentiated subject causing societal or ecological collapse, which obscures the historical processes that have brought about such crises and the very different impacts created and suffered by various demographics (most obviously, European colonists as compared to colonised peoples; or middle-class people

from the global minority as compared to working-class people from the global majority).

As these last remarks indicate, the social learning evaluation I carried out in DAF led me to adopt a critical, decolonial stance that was difficult to accommodate using the Wenger-Trayner evaluation methodology, which is values-agnostic. Therefore, in order to further my reflection on these matters, I turned to another field of literature and practice. In the next chapter, I will explore more fully how the decolonial approach has come to inform my idea of radical collective change, and how it helps to assess the relevance of both FairCoop and DAF in this regard.

## 6 Towards new mistakes

*My awakened dreams are about shifts.  
Thought shifts, reality shifts, gender shifts;  
one person metamorphoses into another  
in a world where people fly through the air, heal from mortal wounds.  
I am playing with my Self, I am playing with the world's soul,  
I am the dialogue between my Self and el espíritu del mundo.  
I change myself, I change the world.*

- Gloria Anzaldúa (1999, p. 9)

### 1 About this chapter

In this chapter, I will carry out a cross-cutting analysis of the data presented in Chapters 4 and 5, as I investigate the following research question:

“How do I assess the extent to which the prefigurative online communities I investigated have been (or are being) a source of radical collective change?”

I will answer this question by means of a first-person inquiry, which will lead me to consider how the way I think and feel about radical collective change and prefiguration has been evolving over the course of this research; and what I have been unlearning – if anything – during this process, and how this came about.

In what follows, I will take as starting points various excerpts from the research journal I have been writing over the previous four years. I will explain how I have come to believe that two main aspects are fundamental for prefigurative projects to have the *potential* to bring about radical collective change:

1. adopting a decolonial approach to address the four constitutive denials of modernity-coloniality; and
2. cultivating communities of critical discernment.

This will allow me to develop a framework of analysis, through which to examine the data I have gathered about FairCoop and the Deep Adaptation Forum, and consider whether any *actual* radical collective change appears to have happened in or thanks to these communities. I will close by mentioning some of the main criticisms that decolonial approaches tend to face, and see how they can be addressed.

I will show that a critical part of the answer to the research question above, for me, is that assessing whether an initiative is a source of radical collective change requires one to step away from modern-colonial frameworks of analysis, which are predicated on separation, and on “a series of constitutive dualisms that constrain knowledge (subject-object, mind-body, reason-emotion, nature-culture, human-nonhuman, secular-sacred, and many more)” (Escobar, 2020, p. 86). According to Steiner (2022, p. 257), decolonial perspectives are in the service to life, and thus are fundamentally about relationships, “contrary to modernity/coloniality’s emphasis on seeing things as separate entities and perceiving a separation between them rather than the inherent interconnectedness, interbeingness, and entanglement.”

## 1.1 How I want to proceed

In the two previous chapters, particularly outside discussion sections, I have strived to foreground the voices and perspectives of the many other people who have taken part with me in this research work. This chapter is much more explicitly focused on my own experience and perspective.

As a result, I am conscious of the risk of making my perspective appear superior or better informed than those other voices we have heard so far. I suspect this is unavoidable, to an extent, considering that I am the author of this thesis. Writing from the position of a PhD researcher grants me particular power to issue statements and pass judgement. This is compounded by other aspects of my positionality, given that I am White, Western, cis-gendered, heterosexual, male, able-bodied, and a quasi-native English speaker, which are aspects that already grant me particular power and privilege. Although I have strived to engage with the other research participants while maintaining relational rigour, by foregrounding qualities of consent, trust, respect, reciprocity and accountability (Whyte, 2020), I realise that there is always the possibility that my activity as a researcher may inherently be a source of violence:



What makes research violent is the way that moral choices, ethical and analytical decisions, representational practices and personal investments of the researcher are secreted away and so are made to appear natural and innocent. (Redwood, 2008, p. 8)

This risk is compounded by the use of academic text itself to present my insights and understandings, within this thesis, considering how “text... can be seen as a cause and a symptom of the disempowerment of research subjects” and “is a barrier to developing connectivities between academia and communities” (Beebeejaun *et al.*, 2014, p. 5). Indeed, the conventions of academic text and the specialist terms it relies on are a source of “power, privilege, exclusivity and exclusion (for outsiders to the academy)” (ibid). I have noticed this myself when sharing chapters of this thesis with interested parties, who sometimes confessed to facing insurmountable discouragement after a few pages, due to the density of the academic style!<sup>28</sup>

Thus, my wish is that this chapter may help to balance – at least to some extent – some of the power inequalities that have characterised this research endeavour, by providing the reader with more insights into the thoughts and feelings that have accompanied me throughout the past four years, and by being as open as possible about my personal investments.

I also hope that writing these lines can help me become more skilled at centring humour, humility, honesty, and hyper-self-reflexivity, and at disinvesting from some of the arrogance that characterises the behaviour and perceived entitlements of academics within intellectual economies of worth (Machado de Oliveira, 2021); but also to develop a compass that may lead me to bringing more sobriety, maturity, discernment, and accountability into my way of being in the world (Valley and Andreotti, 2021).

To guide me as I write these lines, I will keep reminding myself of four fragments from the text *Co-Sensing with Radical Tenderness*, by Dani d’Emilia and Vanessa Andreotti (2020):

*Face your complicity in violence and disinvest from arrogance, superiority, and status.*

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<sup>28</sup> As a result of this feedback, I have decided to create a website presenting the core insights from this research in a more accessible format, including through shorter blog posts.

*Let go of the fear of 'being less', the pressure of 'being more', and the need for validation.*

*Embrace yourself as both cute and pathetic, be courageously vulnerable.*

*Turn the heart into a verb: corazonar, senti-pensar.*

## 1.2 On Unlearning

In Section 2 of this chapter, I will comment on several passages from my journal which I consider attest to my personal *(un)learning*, with relation to my evolving understanding and feeling into an idea at the core of this research project: that of *radical collective change* <sup>29</sup>. I will bring these excerpts into perspective with the help of the existing literature, mainly from the field of decolonial studies. This reflection will then enable me to assess the extent to which my case studies of FairCoop (FC) and the Deep Adaptation Forum (DAF) seem to exhibit elements of radical collective change.

For Lawhon, Silver, Ernstson, and Pierce (2016), *unlearning* is “a continual, but always partial, reflexive process of identifying ways our conceptualizations of the world are unselfconsciously bounded and invisibly contingent” (p.1615). And for Soto-Crespo (1999), “The process of unlearning signals not indoctrination but rather a critical process of weighing previously acquired beliefs when confronting new ones.” (p.43) These characterisations correspond to the emphasis I wish to lay here on an ongoing reflexive and critical process, with regards to my own beliefs and understanding.

Steiner (2022) defines *(un)learning* as “the ongoing, never-ending process and cycle of both deconstructing and constructing knowledges, of simultaneously creating new understandings and letting go of previously held understandings” (p.2). I appreciate the bringing together of this double movement of deconstruction and construction, as it speaks to the twin ambitions of the decolonial perspective, which I adopt in this chapter. Indeed, according to Gallien (2020),

decoloniality is best described as a gesture that de-normalizes the normative, problematizes default positions, debunks the a-perspectival, destabilizes the

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<sup>29</sup> Although self-reflection on my own journey of *(un)learning* is potentially fallible, it is a source of insight that warrants exploration and sharing.

structure, and as a program to rehabilitate epistemic formations that continue to be repressed under coloniality. (p.28)

My only quibble with Steiner's definition is that the words "knowledge" and "understanding" have very cognitive connotations in English. Beyond the intellectual level, I am keen to investigate how my ways of being in the world are evolving, and what affective and relational processes of (un)learning are involved in this evolution (Stein, 2019).

Finally, I also view (un)learning as a commitment, by more privileged persons, to relinquish aspects of one's self-image, question one's assumptions, deconstruct one's prejudices, and show solidarity in ways that may go against one's material or reputational interests (Andreotti, 2007).

How have these various dimensions been part of my experience of (un)learning over the past years?

## 2 *Unlearning separation and sensing into entanglement*

Let us go back to the journey of discovery I sketched out in **Chapter 1**, in which I described my quest to find a role to play with regards to the global predicament. As I mentioned, back in 2017, I had come to the conclusion that a crucial aspect of radical collective change would be *a change in mindsets*. But I was lacking a comprehensive way of characterising these flawed "mindsets," as well as a theory on how they might evolve.

I now feel I have more clarity on both these aspects. My (current, and provisional) understanding is that radical collective change, at the very least, calls for:

1. Embodying a *mycelium of change-oriented initiatives* addressing the constitutive denials of modernity-coloniality; and
2. Cultivating this mycelium within *communities of critical discernment*.

I will address each of these aspects in turn, and draw from my research journal to illustrate how processes of cognitive, affective, and/or relational (un)learning have brought me to these conclusions.

## 2.1 Embodying a mycelium of change-oriented initiatives

Over the past few years, I have developed a strong interest in mycology. I do not think this happened as a direct outcome of this PhD research, but rather due to a pre-existing curiosity for altered states of consciousness, following ceremonial experiences involving psychoactive mushrooms that I was invited to take part in, ten years ago, in South America. In any case, the idea that initiatives aiming at bringing about radical collective change may be likened to mycelium occurred to me in early 2022, as I was undertaking my first experiments in mushroom cultivation.

One reason I found this image fitting is because I learned that fungi play two essential roles within ecosystems. First, mycorrhizal fungi are a “keystone organism” or even “ecosystem engineers” (Sheldrake, 2020, p. 158) that are critical to the health of the soil, and to the nutrition of plants, with whom they form indispensable symbiotic relations; they also enable communication and exchange of nutrients to take place between plants and across entire forests (Read, 1997; Simard *et al.*, 1997; Song *et al.*, 2014, 2015). In the words of mycologist Merlin Sheldrake (2020, p.51), “Mycelium is ecological connective tissue, the living seam by which much of the world is stitched into relation.” This mycorrhizal connectivity reminded me of the connected communities with whom I have been carrying out this PhD research. The spontaneous communication and social learning taking place within and between these online communities seems to mirror the enabling role that mycelium plays in communication and exchange of nutrients between plants and within forests.

Secondly, saprophytic fungi are equally vital to the living world as decomposers of organic matter and builders of soil. They “recycle carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, phosphorus, and minerals into nutrients for living plants, insects, and other organisms” within natural habitats (Stamets, 2005, p. 29). Furthermore, fungi are also essential organisms for environmental remediation: “They are able to degrade pesticides (such as chlorophenols), synthetic dyes, the explosives TNT and RDX, crude oil, some plastics,

and a range of human and veterinary drugs not removed by wastewater treatment plants, from antibiotics to synthetic hormones” (Sheldrake, 2020, p.201). This role recalled the task of recognising the harmful ways of doing, knowing, and being that are characteristic of modern humans, and of finding ways to compost these habits of being.

Fungi are fundamental to the health and flourishing of the living world. I consider that we modern humans, as we face the necessity of (un)learning – decomposing our old, harmful ways of knowing and being, and generating new ones – should look to fungi as our teachers. We need to learn how to form connected, prefigurative initiatives that embody a mycelium of change, at once connective and restorative. In this section, I will outline some characteristics of this potential mycelium.

### 2.1.1 Composting personal and collective “shit”

Let’s start with a brief leap back in time.

***Journal entry - Dec.12, 2022***

*Remember this thought I had back in 2007, Beijing time... Analyse this vision - the vision of the stones lifted up. What that told of me. Critique what there is in me that still perpetuates this masculinist, self-aggrandizing ethos. Not gone, oh no. And this thesis is certainly an outlet for that - although I puncture my own self-aggrandizing by counting on collapse to wipe out electronic servers. ... I want to be part of a mycelium of responses now. Happy to be a sower, but only if I view my heart as the field that is being sown, cultivated by all the people in the learning circles I take part in. I am made of other people.*

One day in the Spring of 2007, I wondered how to assess whether I was living my life to the fullest. An answer came to me, unexpectedly. It told me that I should imagine the last few seconds of consciousness before my death. If, during this brief moment, I was to “see my entire life flash before my eyes” (following the well-known trope), my life course might appear to me as a landscape, shaped by everything I ever did. And every important deed I ever accomplished would feature within this landscape, under the shape of a big slab of stone, lifted upwards through my efforts and dedication. I decided that living a worthwhile life was a matter of steadily curating this inner landscape, and lifting these slabs of stone.

I now feel ambivalent about this image. Among other things, it centres me as the master landscape gardener of my life, and as the lone heroic figure lifting up heavy stones on my own, like some superhuman Stonehenge-builder. This metaphor is not altogether dissimilar to the idea of social learning being enacted by sowers, disseminating seeds of change and tending to the enabling soil, which I used as a structuring image in **Chapter 5**. It implies that agency is a mostly individual and anthropocentric quality, and that radical change takes place thanks to these individual acts of agency.

What if I weren't really in control? What if my very idea of myself – as an autonomous individual, able to pass judgement on what is worth doing with his life, be it lifting up stones or sowing seeds – were a reflection of the culture I have grown up with, a culture which has brought about the planetary predicament? What if I were multiple, and constantly expressing and channelling the dreams, traumas, ideas and affects of every being who ever had a part in shaping my life, whether I am aware of it or not? What if instead of a gardener, I were to *see myself as a field*, cultivated by a multitude of humans and other-than-humans? And what if a corner of this field was polluted by a large pile of accumulated, unprocessed “shit” (GTDF, 2020a, 2020b; Machado de Oliveira, 2021), its nutrients kept unavailable to the soil that might be fertilised thanks to it?

It is time to do some composting. And I believe this process begins with the four denials that are constitutive of modernity-coloniality, according to the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures (GTDF) collective. These denials stand for “what we need to (be made to) forget in order to believe what modernity/coloniality wants us to believe in, and to desire what modernity/coloniality wants us to desire” (Machado de Oliveira, 2021, p.51). As such, they “severely restrict our capacity to sense, relate, and imagine otherwise” (ibid.) (see **Chapter 2**). They include:

- the denial of systemic, historical, and ongoing violence and of complicity in harm;
- the denial of the limits of the planet and of the unsustainability of modernity/coloniality;
- the denial of entanglement; and

- the denial of the magnitude and complexity of the problems we need to face together.

I consider that my involvement in the Deep Adaptation Forum – and my intention to undertake this PhD research – came as a result of my growing awareness of the widespread *denial of unsustainability*, and that of *the magnitude of current challenges*. And I believe my engagement with these issues has led me to consciously (attempt to) relinquish several beliefs and other mental structures, on the cognitive level – including the theories of sustainability policymaking that I studied as part of my Masters degree; on the affective level – such as dreams of “fixing the world,” or my avoidance of the topic of death; and on the relational level – including the inchoate sense that “someone else will clean up all that mess!”

But it was only later that I started to more consciously address the two other forms of denial, to which I will pay more attention here. I will start with the *denial of the historical injustice and systemic violence* that are part and parcel of the world I have been brought up in, before turning to the *denial of entanglement*.

### 2.1.2 A history of violence

#### ***Journal entry - Mar. 3, 2022***<sup>30</sup>

March 2020. [At a collapse-themed retreat in Russia] I finish giving the presentation I spent much time and effort preparing, on the topic of societal collapse - how it may happen, what main factors might unleash it, and what Deep Adaptation offers in response. Afterwards, I discover that it went down quite badly with Nonty, who regrets that the presentation focused on the impacts of collapse on rich/industrialised societies. Others wonder whether Deep Adaptation might only be something for rich "global North" people. I feel a bit annoyed, thinking that I only had 20 minutes to talk about a huge topic. But it is true that I did not at all touch on the question of peoples/regions/countries that have experienced collapse in the past as a result of European imperialism and colonialism. Later, as it becomes clear that Nonty feels strongly about the topic, and starts speaking out about it, I approach her to ask more about what she is experiencing in the environmental and ecovillage movement in Europe. She tells me about her experience of everyday racism, ignorance of these topics, and spiritual bypassing. I discover that I

<sup>30</sup> In this journal entry, I reflect on experiences that happened two years prior, contrary to the other entries in this chapter, which were written “in the moment.” The reason for this is that I have lost access to my notes from early 2020.

*know very little about all of this, and acknowledge that over the past 10 years I lost track of that powerful sense of injustice that hit me when I started learning about climate change. ... That night, my sleep is very troubled. The following evening, I walk with Nonty along the frozen path... we agree that once the retreat is over, we will look together at how DAF could begin working more closely on such issues.*

In this excerpt, I reflect on how my encounter with Nontokozo (Nonty) Sabic prompted me to re-engage with the visceral sense of injustice that struck me when, on the first day of my Masters programme in sustainability, I learned that the countries that were most affected by climate change were the ones that had contributed the least to this phenomenon. Over the following years, perhaps as a result of my social context, I lost sight of this injustice. When I joined the DAF Core Team, in early 2019, I did not notice that our activities were framed entirely around the collapse of the way of life enjoyed by people like my colleagues and I – middle-class people from the Global North. Until encountering Nontokozo, and sensing the extent of the trauma visited upon her, as a Black and Indigenous South African woman, by the centuries of racism, colonialism, heteropatriarchy and exploitation that accompanied European countries' violent conquest of the world.

A few months later, Nontokozo and I took part in the founding of the Diversity and Decolonising Circle (D&D), whose aim was to reflect on and address issues of systemic oppression within DAF – that is to say, to help more of us, in a predominantly White, Western and middle-class network, consider the fundamental violence and injustice that enabled the rise of industrial civilisation, and that led to global heating and other aspects of the planetary ecological catastrophe (Abimbola *et al.*, 2021). As such, the work of D&D was about squarely facing one of the constitutive denials of modernity-coloniality (Machado de Oliveira, p.51):

The denial of systemic, historical, and ongoing violence and of complicity in harm (the fact that our comforts, securities, and enjoyments are subsidized by expropriation and exploitation elsewhere).

As I describe at length elsewhere in this thesis (**Annex 5.3**), we circle participants soon realised the immensity of the challenge. At times, I have felt powerless and desperate when facing the complexity and intricacy of this history of violence and harm,



bewildered by the multifarious ways in which it expresses itself in various personal and social contexts, and shocked by the depth of the intergenerational trauma it has fostered. As a result, our endeavour has been a source of repeated discomfort, disorientation, and even conflict, both inside and outside D&D. But perhaps this was a sign that we were indeed producing “compost” – at the very least, this endeavour seems to have had a generative impact on our lives, and on the lives of others.

I now consider radical collective change as requiring initiatives such as D&D, which function like mycelium that “decompose[s] the debris that other organisms left behind” and “even boost[s] decomposition by providing mycelial highways that allow bacteria to travel into otherwise inaccessible sites of decay” (Sheldrake, 2020, p. 201).

The only trouble with this metaphor is that it may imply that the entity carrying out this composting is working on “shit” that originates from elsewhere, and hide the fact that the flawed humans who compose this entity have their own shit to compost before anything else. As I discuss elsewhere (**Annex 5.3, Section 3**), the work of D&D could be criticised for having given more attention to this process of personal and collective composting within the circle, as opposed to more politically oriented forms of radical collective change efforts. However, I do not believe this work has been (primarily) performative, and (only) motivated by the desire for forms of “personal development” that are irrelevant to the global predicament. On the contrary, I consider that this process of “inner composting” is wholly relevant to the challenges of our time, and a necessary premise to any outward-oriented action – i.e. challenging the unjust power structures built atop the harmful ways of being embodied in modern humans. It is a fundamental part of the task of *unlearning one’s privilege* (Spivak, 1988; Moore-Gilbert, 1997; Beverley, 1999; Kapoor, 2004; Andreotti, 2007).

“Modernity is... faster than thought itself, as it structures our unconscious” (Machado de Oliveira, 2021, p.53). As a result, it is inevitable that our desires may include the need to “look good, feel good, and move forward” (ibid, p.113). Such desires may also be at play in my writing these lines. This alone is not a valid reason not to undertake this composting work, but simply points to the need to do so with “honesty, humility, humor, and hyper-self-reflexivity” (ibid, p.304), in order to become more aware of such desires when they emerge, and learn to interrupt them.

My involvement in D&D was also the occasion for me to venture into even more complex territory, which speaks to the connective characteristics of mycelium: the denial of my own *entanglement* within the planetary organism – the fourth constitutive denial of modernity.

### 2.1.3 Sensing into entanglement

***Journal entry - Dec.21, 2021***

*We trudged up the Pic de Montgros on our snowshoes, the mushrooms and us. At the top, fragments of messages come to me: “Remember what you already know – and trust your gut... Now is a time to make a stand... Life is also full of tragedy... There is nothing to fix... It’s time for you to come into your power – and this power is about reconnecting with your anger, with that wild instinctive side of you.” As a backdrop to this brouhaha: the blades of the wind turbines, shining under the sun, shearing methodically and ceaselessly through the air and the wind – their shadows rolling over the snow and the firs – whooosh, whooosh... shearing through time, shearing through the mountains; but the mountains scoff at them, and just keep on walking.*

On the winter solstice of 2021, my brother, my girlfriend and I went on a trek up a mountain in southern France. It was far less snowy than we expected, but we still needed snowshoes most of the way. We decided to give the journey a ceremonial purpose by consuming *psilocybe cubensis*, a popular type of psychoactive mushrooms. Upon reaching the summit, we found that the landscape was dominated by huge wind turbines. Seeing them, something happened in me. A shock. A visceral, inchoate flow of energy that raged in my chest and my abdomen like lava for the rest of the hike. Somehow, the flow spoke to me.

As I describe elsewhere (**Annex 5.2**, Story #5), I later reflected on this experience in the light of the work of the GTDF collective – in particular, the book *Towards Scarring our Collective Soul Wound*, by Cree scholar Cash Ahenakew (2019). It gave me food for thought with regards to the foundation of separation that characterises the modern-colonial world, and the role of knowledge and meaning-making as constitutive of this separation.

Ahenakew conceptualises colonialism as the ongoing maiming of one arm (non-humans, the land, Indigenous and marginalised peoples) by the other arm (colonisers),

both part of the same body. This leads to extreme pain for the whole body, although the wounding arm is denying this pain and numbing itself to it, mostly in ways that defend the maiming. Colonialism is thus the source of lasting trauma, “which can only be healed through a renewal of relationships, through a recognition that the wounding and the pain affects us all, and through an acknowledgement that *numbing* is not *healing*” (p.36). Unfortunately, the modern onto-epistemology, founded on separation and individuality, prevents this acknowledgement of entangled relationality from happening, and these collective wounds from healing.

Indeed, a key insight from the work of GTDF (Stein *et al.*, 2017) is that “the house of modernity” – which stands for the key social structures of modern existence – is built on a foundation of separability. This foundation both separates humans from the rest of nature (through human exceptionalism and anthropocentrism), and separates human beings and cultures from one another according to hierarchies of worth that represent their perceived utility within the economies of modernity. Separability lies at the core of the violently objectifying and *othering*<sup>31</sup> tendencies of modernity-coloniality, as pointed out by Aimé Césaire (1950) or Gloria Anzaldúa (1999).

How to overcome this foundation of separability? Ahenakew, inspired by Brazilian psychoanalyst Suely Rolnik’s investigation of the Guaraní cosmovision, speaks of the need to re-activate one’s *vital compass* – i.e. an internal capacity to “be part of and affected by the forces of the world in an unmediated way” (Ahenakew, 2019, p.24). Indeed, this intuitive capacity is limited by an over-emphasis, in modern schooling and society, on the *symbolic-categorical compass*, which drives a deep need for control of the world (by codifying it in language and knowledge) and of our relationships, and their resulting toxic objectification. Therefore, it is necessary for us modern humans to interrupt our desires for the totalisation of knowledge, and instead, allow the wider metabolism that we are part of to “show us the way” through a recalibration of the intellectual compass. Instead of “creating” new possibilities for less destructive ways of being, we should assist with the birthing process, and avoid aborting these possibilities

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31 “Othering is an active rhetorical practice in which dominant people (i.e., the “Self”) malign, demonize, and stigmatize communities of people as “Others” through cultural productions (language, media, publications, popular culture); political discourse and action; and the management and containment of knowledge (including the policing of expertise and regulation of education). Othering is a form of dehumanization, against which the Self arises as most wholly human, noble, and valued.” (Murray, 2020, p. 315)

by smothering them with preconceived ideas (Hine and Andreotti, 2019). This has important implications with regards to the research question I am exploring in this chapter: to me, assessing whether radical collective change is happening is only possible by stepping out of a modernist paradigm, based on this same foundation of separation and the exclusive use of the symbolic-categorical compass.

As Vanessa Andreotti explains,

We [in GTDF] are interested in the shift of direction from the neurobiological wiring of separability that has sustained the house of modernity to the neurofunctional manifestation of a form of responsibility ‘before will’, towards integrative entanglement with everything: ‘the good, the bad and the ugly’. This form of responsibility is driven by the vital compass. It is not an intellectual choice nor is it dependent on convenience, conviction, virtue posturing, martyrdom or sacrifice. (ibid, p.257)

In practice, reactivating this vital compass is very challenging: as suggested by Suely Rolnik, it has to do with a process of *decolonising the unconscious* (ibid, p.252). It implies a visceral, embodied process – more than gaining new understanding, this decolonisation requires interrupting harmful, addictive *habits of being* (Suša *et al.*, 2021; Stein *et al.*, 2022). Fundamentally, it is about confronting another constitutive denial of modernity:

The denial of entanglement (our insistence in seeing ourselves as separate from each other and the land, rather than ‘entangled’ within a wider living metabolism that is bio-intelligent) (Machado de Oliveira, p.51).

I originally interpreted what I experienced on that day as hinting at the need for me to become reacquainted with neglected affective dimensions of my being – such as my anger – and with my body. But later, having engaged with the texts above, I realised that this act of interpretation, in itself, was just another expression of the modern urge to make meaning from everything in life, as a result of the dominance of one’s intellectual compass.

The symbolic-categorical compass that drives these desires for the totalization of knowledge and the control of relationships takes up all the space and energy and

it does not leave room for the vital compass to be developed and used. If, within modernity, we derive satisfaction from certainty, coherence, control, authority, and (perceived) unrestricted autonomy, we also miss out on the vitality that is gained from encountering the world (and ourselves in it) in its plurality and indeterminacy. Modernity-coloniality makes us feel insecure when we face uncertainty and when our codifications of the world and the stability they represent are challenged. (Ahenakew, 2019, p.24)

Confronting the ontological denial of entanglement is much more than an epistemological necessity, as it would enable modern humans to reacquaint ourselves with the fundamentally interconnected nature of the universe and of our place within it. It is also about healing the wounds of separation. This healing, according to Vanessa Machado de Oliveira, requires “seeing all human knowledge as limited, culturally bound, and equivocal” (2021, p.212), and recognising our ontological entanglement within a wider metabolism. She calls this *getting to zero*:

In getting to zero we recognize that we don’t know everything, we cannot know everything, we are not a special species, and there is a bio-intelligence in the living planet-metabolism itself that is much older and larger than what human intelligence can fathom. As we start getting to zero, we will need to clear out the things that have cluttered our existence in modernity so that this bio-intelligence can begin to work through us in more profound ways, through the gifts and medicines we carry. (ibid)

There is a direct connection between this realisation – or felt sense – and one’s reorientation toward “fac[ing] and embrac[ing] both unlimited responsibility and accountability”: we become responsible to “continuously compost our individual and collective shit in order to be available to this bio-intelligence” and “sense more deeply our accountability to those, both human and nonhuman, whose lives were taken so that we could live” (ibid.). It is by getting to zero that we may “choose the path of collective healing over the path of collective self-destruction” (ibid.).

I find myself still struggling to fully grasp the implications of the radical relational worldview that underlies the process of decolonising the unconscious, activating my vital compass, embracing indeterminacy and seeking “sense-fullness rather than

meaningfulness” (d’Emilia and Andreotti, 2020). It is painfully obvious that my secular upbringing has not taught me to relate to the planet as a metabolism I am part of. (Re-)activating my vital compass is likely to be a lifelong endeavour, which will require much cognitive, affective, and relational unlearning.

For this reason, I have trouble envisioning such a radical reorientation taking place, socially and politically, at the level of individuals or large polities. But my thesis has explored this at an intermediate scale – that of communities. To what extent might the two networks I have investigated be assessed in terms of the metaphorical mycelium described above?

#### **2.1.4 Looking back on FC and DAF**

To ask this question is to ask how these communities allow or facilitate ontological decolonisation, the activation of our vital compass, and an unflinching awareness of the historical violence and systemic injustice.

##### ***The Deep Adaptation Forum***

The philosophical foundations of DAF are built on the premise that the collapse of the global industrial society is either possible, inevitable, or already ongoing. This is a clear acknowledgement both of the unsustainability of current social and political systems, and of the magnitude of our global predicament.

Besides, as I have shown in the previous chapter, DAF foregrounds the need for enabling and embodying loving responses – and thus, cultivating new forms of relating – as a primary way to confront this predicament. Within the network, several communities of practice are engaged in the development of modalities, such as Deep Relating and Deep Listening, which invite participants to relate differently to one another (Carr and Bendell, 2021). Others, such as the Earth Listening or Wider Embraces groups, bring more attention to one’s personal and collective entanglement within larger spheres of being, from the planetary to the cosmic (**Chapter 5**). Finally, the activities of the D&D circle and its associated community of practice directly address the widespread denial of systemic violence and historical injustice (**Annex 5.3**).

As such, it would seem that DAF provides various social learning and unlearning spaces which together make it possible, for participants, to start confronting each of the four

constitutive denials of modernity which I referred to above. My lived experience, and that of my fellow participants in the DAF action research project, attest to the potential for deep (un)learning to occur as a result, and thus, to the presence of *potential factors* of radical collective change.

That being said, I cannot in all fairness romanticise DAF, or any of the groups within it. Nor do I wish to exaggerate the extent of the change these groups may have brought about (or may yet bring about).

For one thing, and crucially, only a tiny fraction of the 16,000 network participants at the time of writing are involved in any of the communities of practice I mention above.

I estimate that no more than a few dozen people are deeply involved in regular

gatherings organised by these groups. For all the others, participation in the network is limited to reading and commenting on messages within the DA Facebook Group.

Survey respondents have mentioned drawing value from this group, such as emotional comfort, a sense of community, and access to useful information. But a platform such as Facebook, which is engineered to fuel modern addictions and conflict, and to extract as much data from its users as possible (**Chapter 1**), is hardly a good candidate for cultivating relationality, or enabling a reorientation of the harmful habits of being I have discussed here. My research conversations clearly show that small groups meeting regularly seem to function as a much more powerful crucible for personal change.

Currently and as far as I know, no more than a dozen of such self-organised groups are being convened regularly.

As for participants in the communities of practice I mention above, few of them seem to take part in practices that confront all four of the constitutive denials of modernity, which means that many blind spots might remain. For example, engaging in practices focused on reconnection and spiritual oneness without confronting the denial of systemic harm and historical injustice can allow for *spiritual bypassing* of these issues to take place (Ahenakew et al., 2020). This points to the need for DAF to encourage a wider acknowledgement of the value of these various modalities and groups – and in particular, to centre the recognition of historical harm and injustice as an integral part of DA discourse, which thus far is only starting to happen (**Annex 5.4**).

## **FairCoop**

The *Integral Revolution* manifesto put forth by FairCoop (2021) points to an acknowledgement, within the network, of the limits of the planet, and thus of the need for radically new forms of politics and economics. However, there were few signs, within this community, of a deep awareness of the magnitude of the global predicament, of the pervasiveness of systemic harm and the heritage of historical violence, or of the ontological entanglement of humanity within the wider planetary metabolism. On the contrary, an important finding from this case study is that there was little reflexivity in FC around participants' "ways of being," or to the quality of their relationships. For several participants, this absence led to important insights, which some said led them to shape differently the social learning spaces of projects they took part in later. But overall, it seems clear that ontological decolonisation was not a form of change sought or enabled by FC. Therefore, in terms of the framework presented above, it doesn't seem that FC showed potential for radical collective change to take place through its activities.

However, compared to DAF, FC had much more success – for a while – in pursuing another form of collective change: federating decentralised, self-organised groups convened in local settings around the world. I will briefly return to the question of localised groups as potential agents of radical collective change in the conclusion of this thesis.

First, I will discuss the importance of how prefigurative communities are structured, in particular with regards to enabling collective discernment.

## **2.2 Communities fostering belonging and critical discernment**

A second factor has come to my attention as determining a prefigurative community's potential to create radical collective change: *community structures and processes fostering belonging and critical discernment*. This factor plays a containing and enabling role with regards to the first one. In theory, nothing prevents individuals with access to the internet or a reasonably well-furnished public library from starting to face the constitutive denials of modernity-coloniality. But in practical terms, given the magnitude and difficulty of the (un)learning that this entails for an average human being



socialised into modern society, I doubt the feasibility of going very deep or sustaining such efforts on one's own – or the possibility of initiating relevant projects – without the company of dedicated (un)learning partners. What then might be some minimal enabling conditions that may allow such radical change to be undertaken on a *collective* level, as part of prefigurative initiatives?

My experience has led me to sense-think (*sentipensar*) that a delicate balance of belonging, space for generative conflict, and emergent leadership, is required for a *community*<sup>32</sup> *ecosystem* to emerge in which a mycelium of change may grow and prosper. And that the cultivation of critical discernment is an integral part of allowing this emergence.

These conditions are summarised in Figure 11. The trees in the image represent these characteristics of generative communities, which live in symbiosis with the initiatives forming a mycelium that slowly decomposes the denials of modernity, referred to in the previous section. Occasionally, mushrooms may sprout from the soil and disseminate spores that will be carried by the wind – or other means of communication – to other social contexts.

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32 Here, I use the term “communities” in a broad sense, in reference to “[groups] of people that have something in common among them” (Townshend, Benoit and Davies, 2020, p. 344). I am not referring only to online communities. And in terms of the Wenger-Trayner social learning theory, I suspect that the groups most able to form communities that foster belonging and critical discernment are those that are able to develop a regime of competence (characteristic of communities of practice), while simultaneously cultivating social learning spaces that keep challenging this regime of competence.

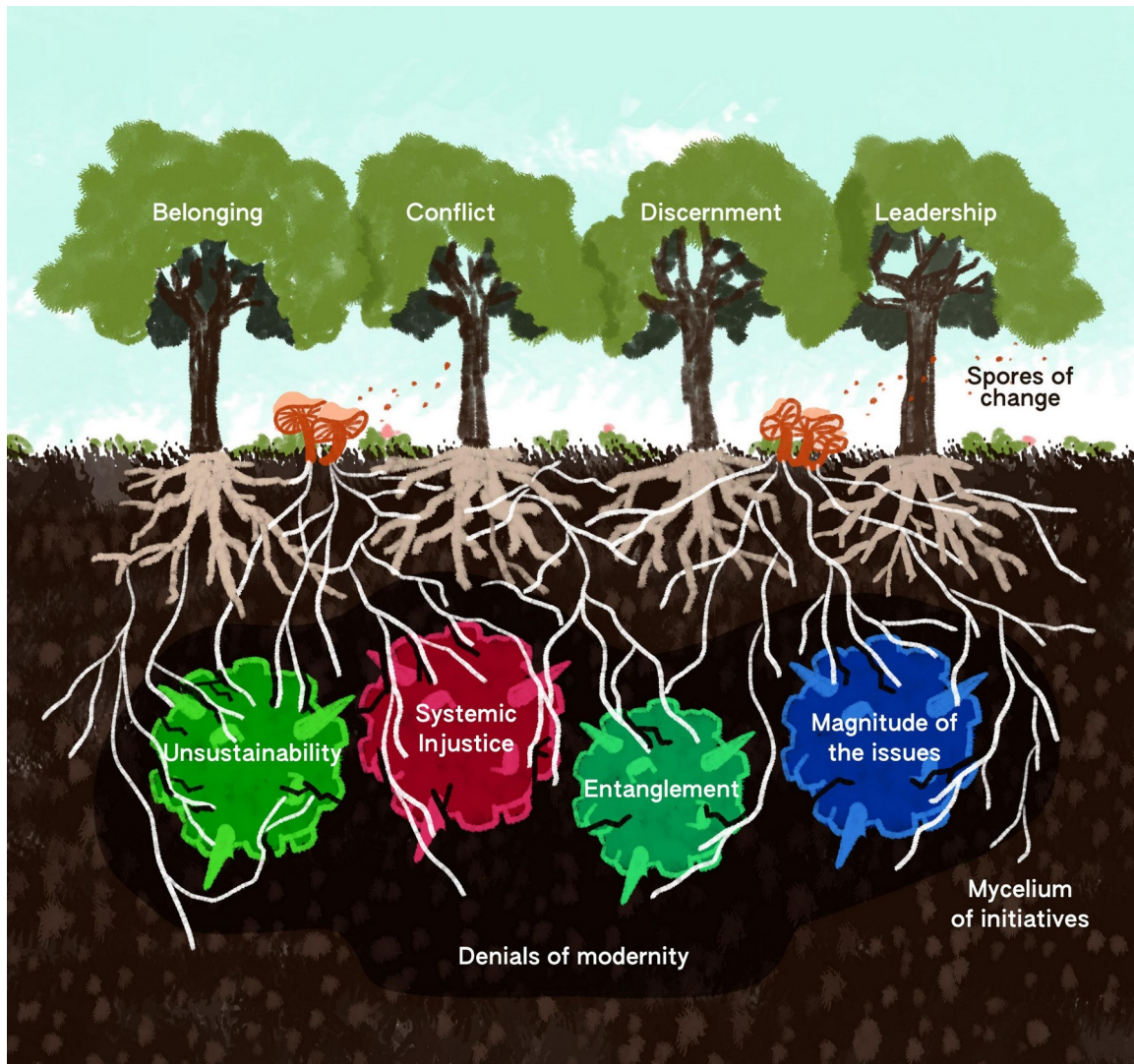


Figure 11: A social ecosystem favouring the emergence of radical collective change in prefigurative communities. Artwork by Yuyuan Ma

I will now turn to each of these characteristics, starting with the cultivation of trust and belonging.

### 2.2.1 Cultivating belonging in spite of divergent worldviews

**Journal entry - Feb.15, 2021**

*The shittiness of it all. The stories crossing paths, not tallying, only making sense in their own self-contained and self-reinforcing universe of pattern-detection: racism, white supremacy, scapegoating on one side; alliance-building, betrayal, self-victimizing on the other. The carried traumas, wreaking chaos on*

*our nervous systems, befuddling our wisdom and hearts. Where's the exit? And have I learned absolutely nothing from studying FC?! The need to share the stories. To make the space for the stories, to look at them critically.*

A running theme in my research journal is about the pain and joys of community and belonging – or the lack thereof. Another is about the confusion and conflicts that occur when very different stories and visions of the world come into contact. How to remain in relationship with someone who does not seem to be looking at the same reality? The question is all the more complex when these relationships are maintained by electronic means, between people who aren't present to the same local context... especially when the means of communications, in themselves, amplify political polarisation (Lorenz-Spreen *et al.*, 2021) and even create “digitized realms incapable by their nature and design of generating a broadly shared experience of reality” (Sacacas, 2022a) - as mainstream social media appear to do (**Chapter 1**).

Over the course of my research, I witnessed most of the online communities I was involved with become divided over the question of the legitimacy and usefulness of Covid-19 government policies. Some were torn apart by a lack of consensus on this issue. I also witnessed other spaces become raging battlefields as a result of interpersonal conflict, lack of trust, and poor governance (**Chapter 4**).

My observations have led me to believe that online communities can provide a sense of trust and belonging that, in itself, helps to reduce stress and anxiety in an increasingly chaotic and unpredictable world (Cavé, 2022a). Such communities can also enable people to lower their defences and engage more authentically with one another. As I wrote in my journal:

***Journal entry - Sept.16, 2021***

*[In DAF] I have learned about how I can better express my emotions, be vulnerable with others, and be heard, in the face of this ongoing tragedy. ... I have gained the embodied, active hope that I can be fully present with this predicament that is unfolding, and keep journeying with others through this darkness in meaningful ways.*

This is precious. However, the possibility remains that such spaces will “[keep] us in an infantile state where our relational bonds are dependent on mutual coddling” (Machado de Oliveira, 2021, p.157). Avoiding self- and mutual compassion from slipping into

indulgence, and cultivating critical discernment collectively, requires being able to speak one's truth more directly to others. Given the pervasiveness of modernity-coloniality, fostering such discernment feels imperative to any form of decolonisation.

Indeed, according to Jacqui Alexander (2006, p. 281), it is the experience of fragmentation and separation due to modernity-coloniality that produces “a yearning for wholeness, often expressed as a yearning to belong, a yearning that is both material and existential, both psychic and physical, and which, when satisfied, can subvert, and ultimately displace the pain of dismemberment” (cited in Andreotti, 2019). While we modern humans can build new alliances, coalitions or communities, these new polities ultimately reproduce the very fragmentation and segregation they spring from, by reproducing an “us-versus-them” dichotomy and obscuring the interdependence that is constitutive of our existence on this planet.

I believe that in order to potentially bring about radical collective change in the midst of collapse, for instance by enacting decolonial approaches, participants in prefigurative communities need to engage in at least three simultaneous efforts:

1. build strong relationships and a solid foundation of mutual trust, which tends to work well within small affinity groups, and cultivate an *ethics of care* (Gilligan, 1982);
2. establish *safe enough* social learning spaces and communities of practice (Carr and Bendell, 2021), in which participants may stay at the edge of their knowing, and critically examine and discuss what they see happening in the world at large as well as their personal and collective experiments, without fear of compromising their relationships; and
3. develop their *negative capability* (French, Simpson and Harvey, 2009) – that is, the capacity “to live with and to tolerate ambiguity and paradox,” “to tolerate anxiety and fear, to stay in the place of uncertainty” and thereby “engage in a non-defensive way with change, without being overwhelmed by the ever-present pressure merely to react” (p.290).

My research has led me to discover certain modalities that have generative potential in this regard. For instance, paying attention to “hot spots” during meetings can help

interpersonal tensions and dissatisfaction to be expressed and normalised (**Annex 5.3**). Deep Relating is a useful process to examine the stories that are we often reproduce unconsciously in how we think, and what we say or do (**Chapter 5**). As for small affinity groups meeting regularly, such as microsolidarity “crews” (Bartlett, 2022), they can work as useful containers in which to develop strong relationships, for the productive examination of failed experiments.

### 2.2.2 Leaning into conflict

It also seems necessary to develop spaces in which to productively examine and work through conflict when it occurs, in order for deeper mutual learning and understanding to emerge – as I have experienced in the D&D circle (**Annex 5.3**). A number of my journal entries speak to the evolving (un)learning that I believe has been occurring for me, cognitively, affectively and relationally, on the topic of conflict:

***Journal entry - Feb. 17, 2021***

*Choosing not to completely cave in to seductive narratives on any side, and sit firmly (打坐) within the trouble: one of the only ways to keep the chaos from spreading and growing more acute? ...*

*Choosing to hold in mind BOTH the very worrying things reported by people about X, the damning litany of [affronts] and suspicions... AND the inability to see X in this light - or only in this light? ...*

*A few hours later... Sensation of a breakthrough. An opening, light streaming in.*

*Reminder to self: LISTEN TO THE BODY. When that contraction in your abdomen tells you, "Go speak to that person" - speak to that person. Do NOT ignore the signals. Maintain the clarity, the listening. The bridge-building.*

On several occasions over the past years, as a researcher, as a friend and as colleague, I have found myself “sitting between stories” – between seemingly irreconcilable interpretations of words, actions or events, big or small, and the wider implications thereof. I have felt myself nearly torn apart emotionally by calls to join one side or the other, which sometimes felt excruciating. And while I generally found myself leaning more towards one side or the other, I also feel I have become more skilled at holding within myself these messy, contradictory stories, and at looking for the sparks of provisional truth I could relate to. This was possibly as a result of the attention brought to somatic processes within DAF. Bringing more conscious awareness to my bodily

responses – and less primacy to my cognitive processes – is a practice I am keen to explore further.

But I have also been invited to unlearn much of my conflict avoidance, which is a characteristic of *white supremacy culture* (Okun, no date), and to consider how I tend to ignore my feelings of discomfort within a group or a relationship. I agree with Steiner (2022, p. 273) who states that “Learning to engage with conflict in generative ways is an important skill for delinking from the colonial matrix of power and relinking to life-affirming pathways.”

While it remains difficult for me to lean into conflict, I have become better able at doing so. I give credit in this regard to the explicit agreements made in certain groups I am part of (such as the D&D circle) recognising that conflict is a normal aspect of life, and one that can be a source of deeper trust and understanding when explored with care and respect.

This mutual understanding extends beyond the interpersonal domain. I believe that conflict, when treated as a fertile friction/encounter, can help reveal people’s different exposure to systemic injustice, and their entanglement with different layers of the planetary metabolism. For this reason, it may be a source of critical discernment. But when the conditions don’t allow these conversations to happen, and when people are not willing to “sit in the fire,” communities fall apart and no more (un)learning happens (**Chapter 4**).

It is important not to confuse interpersonal conflict and institutional violence. But “what we practice at the interpersonal level is important and is part of how we get to larger structural change” (Steiner, 2022, p.276), as other scholar-activists such as adrienne maree brown (2017) have noted. For me, leaning into generative conflict is a primary pillar of radical prefigurative practice.

### **2.2.3 Embracing (facilitative) leadership**

Finally, questions of leadership and power are crucial to consider closely in any prefigurative community. As I have shown in **Chapter 4**, influential participants – especially community founders – play a critical role in kindling energy and enthusiasm, as well as in attracting funding and other forms of support. Their role is essential. But

clear structures to acknowledge their role and responsibility, and holding them to account, are equally necessary, particularly when a community relies on participatory democracy.

Moreover, communities that aspire to “horizontality” will benefit from embracing a more positive vision of *leadership* itself – if the kind of change-related initiatives mentioned above are to emerge within them.

***Journal entry - July 7, 2021***

*Again and again ... the same question: What is it that moves people? How to nurture meaningful, purposeful drive and participation with as little pulling and prodding as possible, and with as little command-and-control as possible? How to conjugate energies and bring about transformative change without burning out oneself, or falling into despondent àquoibonisme<sup>33</sup>? Surely this must be a crucial question for this PhD as a whole? And is this not a question of... leadership?! Loathe as I am to use this word, most likely due to its strong flavour of managerialism...*

Since I began this research project, I have overcome the feeling of repulsion that I used to experience whenever hearing the “L-word,” which evoked neck ties and confident business-school smiles. I have discovered that leadership does not have to mean a centralisation of power, exercised in a hierarchical, top-down fashion. For instance, notions of *autonomist leadership* (Western, 2014), *sustainable leadership* (Bendell, Sutherland and Little, 2017) or *network leadership* (Ehrlichman, 2021) are explicitly non-hierarchical, and refer to spontaneous, emergent, episodic and distributed actions that individuals can take in order to help groups achieve their aims (**Chapter 4, Section 2.2.4**). These forms of leadership feel particularly suited to the “horizontal and intergenerational relationships grounded in commitment, trust, reciprocity, vulnerability, accountability, care, love, and consent” (Steiner, 2022, p.258) that are called for by decolonial approaches to collective change.

Embracing such forms of leadership to encourage emergence and self-organisation is easier said than done. According to community practitioner Alanna Irving, “there is no such thing as self-organisation. There’s only unseen, unacknowledged, and unaccountable leadership” (Bollier, 2022). I now believe that a prefigurative community will harbour more potential for radical collective change to the extent that it values,

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<sup>33</sup> From the French “À quoi bon ?” meaning “What’s the point of it all?”

encourages and acknowledges acts and roles of leadership. I have discovered that there are techniques and philosophies of organising – such as Sociocracy (Rau and Koch-Gonzalez, 2018) or Prosocial (Atkins, Wilson and Hayes, 2019) – that do not require endless meetings in general assemblies, a blind faith in spontaneous self-organisation, or the reliance on hierarchical chains of command. But adopting or imposing such methods wholesale, without consideration of existing norms and ways of doing that may have already organically emerged within a community, may be unwise.

Leadership should also be valued when it aims at enriching the social learning happening within a community. This is the role of *learning citizens* (Wenger, 2009) or *system conveners* (B. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015), who broker new relationships and learning partnerships, “reconfigure social systems through partnerships that exploit mutual learning needs, possible synergies, various kinds of relationships, and common goals across traditional boundaries,” and “view their work, explicitly or implicitly, as an endeavor to generate new capabilities in their landscape” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p.100). I have found that taking on such a facilitating role, and focusing on relationship-building in both my research and my work, has helped me overcome some of the embarrassment and lack of legitimacy that I used to experience in starting a new initiative. This was doubtless due to my experiencing a sense of safety and belonging in DAF. Conversely, it has also helped me let go of the feeling that leadership is necessarily heroic and self-sacrificing: one can be in service to a group or project while still establishing boundaries and engaging in self-care. As a result, it has become less daunting for me to convene groups and projects, most of which have been useful collective change experiments for myself and others (including many generative failures) – such as the Conscious Learning Festival in DAF (**Annex 5.5**).

Finally, placing an emphasis on emergent and distributed forms of leadership does not mean that everyone in a community is at the same stage in their decolonial practice. As I discuss elsewhere (**Annex 5.3**), the presence of experienced “key enablers” helping to orient and stabilise the social learning within groups – for example, on the topic of conflict – can be extremely helpful. However, such forms of learning leadership do not imply that such individuals should have more power over agenda-setting or decision-making.



### 2.2.4 Looking back on FC and DAF

To what extent do FC and DAF constitute examples of communities fostering belonging and critical discernment?

As I show in **Chapter 4**, FC was initiated on the basis of a radical acknowledgement of the failings of financial capitalism and nation-states. It aimed at facilitating an “integral revolution” that would lead to the replacement of unjust systems from the bottom up, notably thanks to innovative currencies and an alternative grassroots economy.

However, it seems that this community did not create enough space for the cultivation of critical discernment, for instance with regards to the risks of being exposed to speculative financial systems, or to the issues of maintaining two different values for the currency Faircoin in spite of the cryptocurrency market crash. Besides, when severe conflict erupted, there were no capabilities in place for conflict transformation and mutual learning to occur. And while a number of bold projects were initiated within FC, it appears that the notion of leadership remained mostly conflated with the role of the FC founder, and that the community had neither the structures nor the norms and values that would have enabled leadership to be more equally distributed and acknowledged. It is unsurprising to me, therefore, that no mycelium of radical change-oriented initiatives was allowed to grow in FC.

In the case of DAF, the community was founded on the premise that the collapse of industrial society was underway, and that this reality was widely unacknowledged. From the beginning, cultivating critical discernment with regards to various forms of denial (Bendell, 2018), and to the nefarious influence of harmful ideologies reproduced unconsciously (Bendell, 2021), was thus an important theme within DAF, as exemplified in the methodology of Deep Relating (Carr and Bendell, 2021). This attention was also repeatedly manifested in the community dialogues organised regularly within the network, to take stock of activities taking place and decide on new strategies.

However, likely as a reflection of the dominant culture from which DAF has sprung, critical and difficult conversations were not always welcome. For instance, discussions on whether a large Facebook group dedicated to talking about collapse was indeed helpful and relevant, considering the triggering nature of the topic and the difficulty of

engaging in true dialogue over such a tool, were sometimes shut down. And very little common sense-making and restorative discussion occurred on the topic of Covid-19 policies, in spite of the controversy that has occurred in this regard in the realm of digital information and beyond. Besides, as a participant in the D&D circle, I was disappointed by the relatively low number of participants displaying an interest and willingness to engage critically with the topics of anti-racism or systemic oppression in general. Overall, it may not be unfair to say that a culture of “being nice” and “mutual coddling” remained very present in most DAF groups. While this may have fostered a sense of belonging and emotional safety, it likely prevented more collective discernment to emerge, and thus for the constitutive denials of modernity to be more fully confronted through mycelial, change-related initiatives.

With regards to conflict transformation, social learning occurred over time in certain groups I was part of, most notably the D&D circle. As a result, I feel better equipped to engage with conflictual situations. But it was more difficult for me to assess the extent to which this has occurred elsewhere in the community. At the time of writing, there were no formal protocols or guidelines in place within DAF to address conflict, which was probably a sign that much work remained to be done in this regard.

Finally, a culture of collaborating in small teams slowly spread in DAF (**Chapter 5**), and the community stopped relying on a single leader since DAF Founder Jem Bendell stepped down from his responsibilities in September 2020. These were encouraging signs, signalling the uptake of distributed forms of leadership. As the DAF Core Team was poised to retire from its functions in 2023, for lack of funding, the future will show to what extent this assessment was correct.

In this chapter, I have explained how I have come to consider radical collective change as involving a mycelium of change-oriented initiatives that face the constitutive denials of modernity-coloniality. I have also outlined certain characteristics that I believe are essential for prefigurative communities of critical discernment to exist and cultivate this mycelium – fostering belonging, leaning into conflict, and facilitating emergent forms of leadership. This perspective is predicated on adopting a decolonial stance – and as such, it feels important to point out certain limits of this stance, which I will address in the last section. But first, I will highlight how my work relates to other research efforts.

## 2.3 Discussion: Related research and relationality

In her PhD research on decolonial educational spaces, Stephanie Steiner (2022) shares a “potential ingredient list” (p.104) that one can use to create *decolonial pedagogies* – i.e. emancipatory “cycles of learning, unlearning, relearning, reflection, and action” (ibid.) that aim to further struggles of social and political transformation. Her list brings together various enabling elements of decolonial (un)learning which confirm my own findings, such as fostering trust and vulnerability; leaning into generative conflict; reorienting towards relationships; embracing emergent and collective leadership; and others. It is the only study I am aware of that investigates decolonial (un)learning within informal settings.

Another metaphor for social change relying on the image of a mycelium has also been put forth by the GTDF collective (Stein, V. Andreotti, *et al.*, 2020).

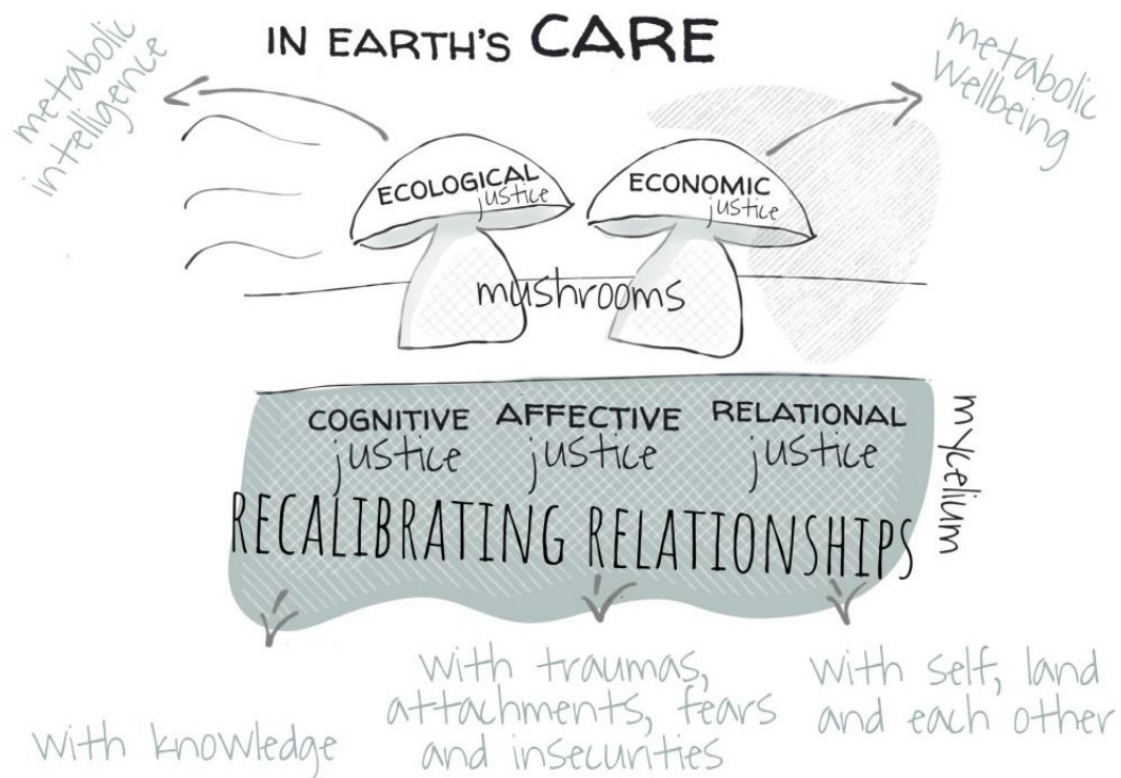


Figure 12: Cartography: In Earth's CARE Global Justice and Well-Being Framework. Source: Stein *et al.*, 2020

According to the social cartography in Figure 12, *ecological justice* (“acting from and towards metabolic health and wellbeing”) and *economic justice* (“cooperating towards systemic (metabolic) balance”) are only possible if cognitive, affective, and relational justice are taken care of first (Vanessa Andreotti *et al.*, 2018, p. 6). *Cognitive justice* refers to “nurturing encounters of knowledges and ignorances” – but also includes “recalibrating our relationship with language, meaning and knowledge” (ibid). *Affective justice* concerns “digesting and composting our traumas, fears, denials and contradictions” (ibid) while disinvesting from harmful modern-colonial desires and addictions. Finally, *relational justice* is about “relating beyond knowledge, identity and understanding and enacting politics from a space of collective entanglement and radical tenderness” (ibid). In each of these dimensions, the work of recalibrating relationships is essential, and points to relationality as the foundation for new forms of politics and “justice-to-come” (ibid).

The mycological metaphor that I have used in this chapter was not inspired by this cartography – or at least, not consciously. There are similarities between both images, although mine is not centred on issues of justice, while the one by GTDF does not explicitly concern itself with communities as agents of change.

Importantly, my perspective shares with both research projects above a fundamental starting point: that of adopting a relational approach to the topic of social change. In effect, this is the main answer I have found to the research question guiding this chapter. Assessing radical collective change needs to take place beyond modern frameworks of analysis predicated on separation and duality.

### ***3 Considering common critiques of decolonial approaches***

In the previous sections of this chapter, I have argued in favour of adopting decolonial approaches as part of prefigurative efforts to bring about generative collective change. However, before closing this chapter, I would like to address recurring criticisms of these approaches, which point to potential limitations. I will focus on those that have the most immediate relevance to this research.

### 3.1 The West and its “others”

A first area of criticism, according to Stein and colleagues (2020), is that “critiques of coloniality tend to rest on uninterrogated essentialisms about both the West and its ‘others’ (p.2). For example, Vickers (2020) suggests that using notions such as “the West” or “Euro-America” in reference to the history of modern colonialism may reproduce “a vague and divisive system of categorization” (p.5). Similarly, Altschul (2022) and Asher (2013) charge that decolonial theorists, in spite of their stated intentions to deconstruct and transcend the dualist thinking characteristic of modernity, reproduce forms of binary thinking by classifying knowledges and speakers as either representative of dominating or subaltern polities and power structures. Considering the ongoing trends of social polarisation I have referred to above, and the importance of enabling dialogue and containers for critical conversations within prefigurative projects, this argument might disqualify decolonial approaches as overly divisive, if not simplistic.

For Gallien (2020), this reliance on “a monolithic version of ‘the’ West and of ‘modernity’” (p.50) calls for more fine-grained categories of analysis, as well as closer considerations of the power relations that are constitutive of the other epistemological orders and cosmologies that are foregrounded by decolonial theory. On the other hand, Stein and colleagues (2020) argue that strategically mobilising an overarching critique of Western knowledge production may be inevitable for the decolonial critique to be heard, and for it to have the strength to alter the overall impact of colonial power. They also point out that emphasising heterogeneity can be a means of bypassing the difficult work of acknowledging and addressing systemic and historical injustice, for instance when policymakers in settler colonial states neglect to properly consult Indigenous communities in view of implementing certain projects, on the grounds of these communities’ complexity and heterogeneity.

I believe that decolonial critiques provide a powerful lens to examine global historical and social continuities that have shaped the modern world, but that this lens should be fine-tuned to the discontinuities characterising local contexts under consideration.

### 3.2 Engaging with alternative knowledge systems

Another recurring criticism concerns the non-Western knowledge systems that are foregrounded by decolonial theory, as “radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis, and thought” (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 17). Scholars (Browitt, 2014; Vickers, 2020) argue that this leads to romanticising marginalised peoples and their knowledges. For others (Asher, 2013), academics engage with these knowledges without enough consideration for “the complexities of representing the subaltern and what circumscribes their speech and reception” (p.838). Some decolonial scholars have even been accused of adopting an extractive approach with regards to subaltern epistemologies, and to turn them into commodities made available for consumption in the neoliberal academy, in order to accumulate more economic or symbolic capital (Cusicanqui, 2012; Altschul, 2022).

As an aspiring scholar-activist (**Chapter 1**), I want to be extremely careful in how I engage with other forms of knowledge than those I have been socialised into, as I try to bring about radical collective change. This includes an intention to remain aware of any sense of entitlement to access these knowledge systems, of the risk of instrumentalising them for personal gain, and of failing to pay attention to their context of emergence and the usage of particular stories or practices (Elwood, Andreotti and Stein, 2019).

Combining both relational and intellectual rigour appears essential as part of learning to cultivate this discernment (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). It also requires that I inform myself about how cultural appropriation and epistemic extraction have been a violent staple of colonialism throughout history – and that I remain open to criticism if anything I say or do perpetuates these patterns (Ahenakew, 2019). Besides, I am also conscious that the act of romanticising is just as violent and objectifying as that of demonising – which encourages me to adopt an attitude both “deeply respectful” and “highly sceptical” of any worldviews, be they my own or others’ (Machado de Oliveira, 2021, p.206).

Scholars have also pointed out that aspects of non-Western worldviews could even be appropriated, in a particularly distorted fashion, to justify authoritarian forms of politics. For instance, Gosselin and gé Bartoli (2022b) foresee the risk that viewing the planet as

an endangered metabolism – “Gaia” – could lead it to be framed as an “overbearing and tutelary figure” serving as a pretext for new totalitarian forms of planetary governance, based on generic and universal norms, to be imposed upon all human and non-human beings. Needless to say, this would run very much contrary to the emancipatory and pluriversal ethos of decolonial approaches. Ecofascism scholars (Biehl and Staudenmaier, 1996; Dubiau, 2022) have also highlighted how theories concerning humanity’s place as part of a moral or spiritual “natural order” are fundamental to reactionary, anti-modern politics from the past and the present (such as the *völkisch* movement in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Germany, or the Nouvelle Droite in France currently).

These warnings are essential to take into consideration whenever promoting knowledge systems that do not reproduce the modern ontology separating humans from the other-than-human world. However, I still believe this modern ontology is even more harmful and needs to be challenged, for other possibilities to emerge.

### 3.3 Theory and practice

A third type of criticism views decolonial theory as too abstract and disconnected from social movements and political struggles. A prominent decolonial scholar admits as much:

The lack of direct relation with struggles and concrete situations, with certain exceptions – and the academic jargon that characterises most text – remains one of the most accurate criticisms of [the decolonial] perspective. (Escobar, 2014, pp. 42–43)<sup>34</sup>

This critique is voiced strongly by Cusicanqui (2012), who charges that decolonial scholars have developed a “logocentric” conceptual apparatus that is disconnected from “insurgent social forces” and yet which “neutralize decolonization” and “capture the energy and availability of indigenous intellectuals” by “depriv[ing] them of their roots and their dialogues with the mobilized masses” (p.98-103). She concludes that “there can be no discourse of decolonization, no theory of decolonization, without a decolonizing practice” (p.100). From a slightly different angle, Tuck and Yang (2012)

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34 “...la falta de relación directa con luchas y con situaciones concretas, con contadas excepciones —y el lenguaje academicista que sigue caracterizando a la mayoría de sus textos— sigue siendo una de las críticas más acertadas a esta perspectiva.” My translation.

argue that “decolonization is not a metaphor,” and that the enterprise of decolonising the mind can be used as a “settler move to innocence” and thus “stand in for the more uncomfortable task of relinquishing stolen land” to Indigenous peoples (p.19).

As I discuss in the D&D Circle case study (**Annex 5.3**), while I agree that “a more radical decolonizing politics center[s] material life and colonial extractions, including the appropriations of land and destructions of environments and livelihoods” (Murray, 2020, p. 324), I do not see this as antithetical with the intention to “interrupt modern/colonial patterns of knowing, desiring, and being” (Stein et al., 2020, p. 5).

It is also important to remember that the question of praxis is considered central by many decolonial scholars. Indeed, according to Gallien (2020, p. 41), “Decolonial thinkers habitually describe their interventions as forms of praxi-theory, that is theory leading to action and vice versa. Contrary to the belief in a-perspectival and universal truth in scientific discourse, decoloniality presupposes that knowledge is always the result of an embodiment and commitment.” For instance, Maldonado-Torres (2016) describes decoloniality as “giving oneself to and joining the struggles with the *damnés*<sup>35</sup>.... decoloniality is rooted in practical and metaphysical revolt” (p.30). And Walsh views this praxis as “the continuous work to plant and grow an otherwise despite and in the borders, margins, and cracks of the modern/colonial/-capitalist/heteropatriarchal order” (Mignolo and Walsh, 2018, p. 101). Jivraj, Bakshi and Posocco (2020) list several recent political movements and social projects that have been initiated as practical embodiments of decolonial analyses and alternatives, including student-led activist initiatives or the repatriation of museum artefacts to Global South countries.

Thus, while it is true that decolonial theory may sometimes be problematic to articulate in lay terms, I am confident that its praxis holds much potential for the enactment of radical collective change, both on the onto-epistemic and on the political level. I agree with Monticelli (2021) on the necessity for prefigurative efforts to include a decolonial approach, in order for them to bring ontological and epistemological forms of change that may complement the action of more traditional parties and protest movements focused on the social transformation of power relations.

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35 This is a reference to colonised peoples, whom Frantz Fanon (1961) calls the “wretched of the earth” (*les damnés de la terre* in French).



### 3.4 Decolonial “orthodoxy”

Finally, one last area of criticism I will touch on concerns certain prominent decolonial scholars, which are presented as a small circle of “gurus” (Cusicanqui, 2012, p. 102) having accrued power and influence through prestigious academic positions, and driven by a logic of conversion: “decoloniality strives to force a quasi-religious transformation and to create a world converted to speak from the side of subalternity” (Altschul, 2022, p. 8). These authors are depicted as a hierarchy of fundamentalist “high priests,” demanding “orthodox belief and practice,” and having arrogated the authority to judge whether one’s “conversion to decoloniality” was successful or not (ibid).

Nonetheless, several decolonial scholars have clearly acknowledged their own inevitable complicity in harm, and implication in affective and relational economies of worth that are integral to modernity-coloniality. For Machado de Oliveira (2021, p.238), “no one has the answers to our current predicament” and “no one is ever off the hook.” Grosfoguel admits that “we are all affected by modernity-coloniality. While some of us are confronting the challenge of decolonising ourselves, no one, myself included, can claim to have succeeded”<sup>36</sup> (Grosfoguel and Andrade, 2013, p. 46).

It is true that the decolonial perspective’s attachment to epistemic justice aims at “dismantling the hegemonic universality and centrality of Western Eurocentric knowledge, or putting Western knowledge in its place” (Steiner, 2022, p. 106). However, this does not imply the aim to “convert” as many “believers” as possible to other, equally hegemonic, forms of knowledge. Recognising that all knowledge systems are partial and situated, Santos (2018) calls for the cultivation of an “ecology of knowledges”: instead of seeking to replace Western knowledge with non-Western knowledges, which would perpetuate the universalist tendencies at the heart of modernity-coloniality, all should be allowed to coexist without one subalternising the others.

As for the participants in the GTDF collective (Stein, V. Andreotti, *et al.*, 2020), they are conscious that “decolonial critiques have become a valuable currency within the intellectual, affective, relational, and material economies of mainstream Western

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<sup>36</sup> “Todos de alguna manera hemos sido afectados por la modernidad/colonialidad y algunos nos hemos planteado el reto que representa descolonizarnos pero ninguno, incluyéndome, podemos reclamar haberlo logrado.” My translation.

educational institutions” (p.44), and they suggest avoiding unhelpful attachments to any orthodoxy, and cultivating an attitude based on “suspending our desire for universal or prescriptive solutions and... instead attending soberly to what is currently working, and what is not” (p.62). Instead of seeking to universalise any particular approach to social change or decolonisation, they invite collective reflection: “How can we move together differently toward a future that is undefined, without arrogance, self-righteousness, dogmatism, and perfectionism?” (p.63)

For me, the decolonial perspective calls for humility and self-reflexivity, not pontification from a higher moral ground. It combines a radical depth of critique with an awareness of the limits of any forms of knowledge. I view it as particularly suited to our times, considering the extreme difficulty of knowing what may be the most generative ways of attempting to bring about radical collective change. However, I do not advocate it as the “one true way” of achieving generative change. How should I know?

In the final chapter of this thesis, I conclude on my main research findings and their relevance to my research question.

# 7 Conclusion

*It sometimes seems that the story is approaching its end.  
Lest there be no more telling of stories at all, some of us out here in the wild oats,  
amid the alien corn, think we'd better start telling another one,  
which maybe people can go on with when the old one's finished. Maybe.*

- Ursula K. Le Guin (1986)

I set out on this PhD research journey in the hope of finding practical and generalisable answers to the following question: “How may online networks enable radical collective change through social learning?”

Having reached the end of this journey, what answers have I encountered? And what new questions have opened up?

I will first review the main findings from Chapters 4, 5, and 6. Then, I will discuss certain topics which I feel might warrant further research. I will end on a personal note.

## 1 *Summary of research findings*

### 1.1 **FairCoop: Learning from our mistakes**

My investigation of the trajectory of FC, and of the issues that befell this community, led me to unearth a number of useful practical insights with regards to questions related to the objectives and strategy, ways of doing, and ways of being that characterised this project. Other social movement organisations or prefigurative communities may wish to reflect on these findings in order to inform their own practice.

With regards to objectives and strategy, I found that such projects need particular vigilance when trying to bridge the twin missions of participating in speculative financial markets, and building grassroots alternative economic systems, as these can be profoundly contradictory. It also seemed crucial that various stakeholders be better

informed of the consequences of strategic decisions that could affect the whole project, which may require more clearly identified membership tiers to consult.

FC suffered from multiple governance-related issues, around accountability, decision-making, and transparency, but also with regards to internal communication - which was largely text-based. This shows the need for social change activists to pay special attention to the agreements and processes that support participatory democratic projects, and to the extra challenges that arise in the context of text-based online communications, which make conflict resolution particularly difficult. An approach explicitly embracing emergent, episodic and distributed forms of leadership may also be helpful to avoid the informal concentration of power in one or several individuals.

Finally, such projects should not overlook ways of cultivating trust and mutual care, and strong relationships more generally. This did not seem part of the culture of FC. And when severe conflict broke out, there were no resolution or transformation processes in place that may have enabled the community to face its long-standing issues.

Despite the apparent failure of FC as a prefigurative community, I found that several useful tools – most notably, the ecological cryptocurrency Faircoin – had emerged out of it, and may yet come into their own as part of other ongoing grassroots efforts for radical collective change. Participants also stressed the importance of the friendships they had established in the project, and in spite of a widespread sense of burnout, spoke of various forms of cognitive, affective, and relational social learning that had taken place for them.

This case study was useful to my investigation in several ways. First, it enabled me to outline some of the practical insights - presented above - which I was looking for, in terms of designing or convening online groups to create social change. These insights, in turn, highlighted what appear to be necessary conditions for social learning spaces to remain functional to their participants: when trust is lacking, or when too little attention is brought to the interplay of vertical and horizontal accountability within a system, its social learning capability is likely to diminish (Wenger, 2009). In the case of FC, it appears that more could have been done to create instances of stewarding governance aimed directly at fostering learning capability, through a more careful - and democratically managed - balance of experimentation and alignment.

Finally, this case study led me to pay all the more attention to the possibility that relationality may be a critical condition of radical collective change. This aspect came to the fore in the second community I considered.

## **1.2 Deep Adaptation Forum: Different ways of being and relating**

Contrary to FC, DAF was still active at the time of my research. Therefore, instead of focusing on the issues that were preventing social learning and change from happening, my investigation focused more strongly on what participants considered to be areas of ongoing, positive value-creation - although sources of dissatisfaction also emerged.

This case study set out to explore some of the primary areas of change that appeared to be taking place through this network and its groups (the seeds of change); the main factors that enabled or hampered this change to be cultivated (the soil); and the actions and forms of leadership that affected this change and its enabling or disabling conditions (the sowers).

Meaningful changes appeared to be taking place for DAF participants, as a result both of their involvement in the network at large, and in self-managed groups. At the network level, the emphasis on self-organisation and collaboration, and on integrating and transforming difficult emotions, were particularly valued. But the deepest personal changes took place within smaller groups meeting regularly, and which aimed at bringing about new ways of being and relating - for example, in Deep Relating or Earth Listening groups - or at fostering more critical consciousness of systemic violence in the network, in the case of the Diversity and Decolonising Circle (D&D).

Primary enabling factors for these changes included:

- *The design of the social learning space*, such as having clarity of purpose and clear principles of engagement; the presence of facilitators and moderators; a stimulating and informative space; and regular meetings within small groups.
- *Relational and somatic processes and modalities*, such as the forms of meditation practised within Deep Relating, Wider Embraces, or Earth Listening groups.

- *Group culture and atmosphere*, including a sense of psychological safety, trust, and the possibility to make mistakes; and an explicit attention to cultivating relationships.
- *Enjoying the company of one's fellow participants*, due to finding like-minded others and a sense of belonging; encountering a diversity of participants and perspectives; and benefiting from helpful and inspiring others, particularly key enablers or role models.

Factors playing a disabling role with regards to social learning included technical platform issues, as well as organisational issues, particularly with regards to DAF vision and purpose, the exercise of power and leadership, or reactions to anti-racism and decolonising efforts.

As I have noted in the case of D&D (**Annex 5.3, Section 4**), the most dynamic small groups in DAF display characteristics of communities of practice - such as a particular regime of competence - while still providing active social learning spaces that may be helpful to challenge this regime of competence, and thus amplify and deepen the social learning taking place thanks to them (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p.33). It also seems that groups like D&D, which foreground the production of liveable knowledge, a commitment to candour and open inquiry, and the embrace of learning citizenship, exhibit particularly rich traces of social learning, which confirms Wenger's analysis on social learning capability (2009, p.4, 6).

In examining the role and action of the most active participants and conveners in the network, I found that they tended to most value relational activities as a key part of their involvement, and that they aspired to “orienting towards connection, loving kindness, and compassion towards all living beings” as a primary form of radical collective change, along with “a transformative shift in worldviews and value systems.” They viewed their participation in DAF as helping to promote these changes, mainly through an ongoing experience of unlearning taking place through relating with other participants in small groups. However, they did not view their participation as primarily aiming to bring about these changes. I concluded that the dimension of radical collective change that seemed most relevant to active participants within DAF was that of reorienting towards a relational onto-epistemological paradigm as an essential response

to the global social and ecological predicament. It appeared that this community may be fostering new forms of consciousness and generative world-view transformations – although further research would be needed to confirm this.

In summary, this case study - and the Wenger-Trayner evaluation methodology - allowed me to explore in much more depth some implications of adopting a relational approach to collective change, as well as modalities and conditions that may enable important personal changes to take place within the context of online groups. The value-creation stories co-created with other research participants (**Annex 5.2**) have also been helpful to examine in a structured way a variety of aspirations, perspectives, and experiences of value-creation within the network.

However, this methodology showed limitations with regards to its ability to assess or reveal transformational change, as I will discuss further below. Indeed, I have come to view radical collective change as involving more than a set of practical techniques and methods, but also a degree of criticality toward the personal and cultural assumptions and narratives that underlie the very idea of creating change.

### 1.3 Towards new mistakes

Finally, in **Chapter 6**, I explained how my research has led me to favour a decolonial approach to assessing radical collective change. I presented a framework, developed from my experience and readings, which I think can allow me to assess whether a prefigurative community has the potential to be enacting radical collective change. Then, I used this framework to examine the data I collected about FC and DAF.

I have come to believe that radical collective change requires fully facing the *four denials of modernity*, including:

- “the denial of systemic, historical, and ongoing violence and complicity in harm”;
- “the denial of the limits of the planet and of the unsustainability of modernity-coloniality”;
- “the denial of entanglement”; and

- “the denial of the magnitude and complexity of the problems we need to face together.” (Machado de Oliveira, 2021, p.51)

For radical collective change to happen, these denials should be faced not simply intellectually, but also affectively and relationally, through the creation of a mycelium of change-related initiatives leading people involved in them to re-orient their lives in important ways. I will return to this aspect below.

I also suggested that *prefigurative communities of critical discernment* (fostering care and belonging, welcoming conflict, and generating emergent leadership) provide a container for these initiatives to emerge and sustain themselves. So the more a community seems to be paying attention to the four denials of modernity, and the more it functions like a prefigurative community of critical discernment, the more potential it has to bring about radical collective change.

Using this framework, I looked back on FC and DAF. I found that FC displayed little potential for radical collective change, as it did not meet most of the conditions above. DAF had more potential: indeed, it was founded to address two of the four denials (that of unsustainability, and of the magnitude of global challenges), and groups within DAF were also confronting the two other denials (of systemic violence, and of entanglement). I also noticed that DAF displayed more features of a prefigurative community of critical discernment. However, I concluded that this potential was in need of strengthening, so that generative initiatives addressing all four denials may better emerge and thrive within or thanks to this community.

## 2 *Issues for future research and practise*

Here, I briefly introduce related areas of research that I have not been fully capable of exploring in the course of this doctoral research.

### 2.1 **Evaluating radical collective change**

I was not aware of any initiatives in FC or in DAF through which the four denials of modernity were addressed, and which might have led to deep re-orientations in people's lives. By this definition, no radical collective change seemed to have taken place thanks to these networks, to my knowledge.



What do I mean by “deep re-orientations”? And how might one assess them?

Since I consider radical collective change to involve, first of all, a full acknowledgement of the four denials of modernity, I would consider a “deep re-orientation” as involving changes in people’s lives that are enacted as a result of this consciousness, and which are viewed as transformative by the person. And in order to be collective, these changes should involve more than an individual – they would probably have a collaborative nature.

However, because “Modernity... is faster than thought itself as it structures our unconscious” (Machado de Oliveira, 2021, p.53), it is inevitable that our desires include the need to “look good,” “feel good,” and “move forward” (ibid, p.113). How then to assess whether these changes are merely performative, tokenistic, and transactional, or rather do constitute radical collective change?

I suspect that this requires an ongoing critical self- and mutual assessment, that should at least include investigating:

1. how a person is (re)orienting their life as a result of their decision to face the denials of modernity-coloniality;
2. what the observed results of this (re)orientation are – on the person and on others;
3. what stories are at play for the person as they enact these (re)orientations (how they interpret what they are doing); and
4. how critical they are of these stories, and sceptical of their own subconscious investments and desires.

In other words, whatever one does with the explicit intent to address one or several of the denials of modernity-coloniality, could be performative, or constitute radical collective change, depending on *how* and *why* they do it. This would depend on the *intellectual and relational rigour* brought to this initiative (Stein, 2021) - and therefore, on the material, affective and relational impacts it creates.

I surmise that the stronger one’s commitment to self-criticality, the more likely these (re)orientations may constitute radical collective change. From a research perspective,

the Wenger-Trayner social learning methodology I used in **Chapter 5** has been helpful to evaluate the first three aspects listed above, but has not allowed a strong focus on the fourth to take place. Cooperative inquiry group processes aiming at supporting the capacity for critical humility (European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness, 2005) may be particularly useful in order to challenge “self-delusion, avoidance or denial” (p.246), in a spirit of mutual care and compassion.

## 2.2 Informal learning and depth education

One could argue that if radical collective change requires intentionally, persistently, and skilfully grappling with the four denials of modernity-coloniality, which are at the heart of the harmful way of being that characterises modernity, such forms of change are very unlikely to spontaneously manifest in informal learning settings. Indeed, the culture of late modernity does not reward sobriety, maturity, discernment and accountability, but rather their opposites (Andreotti, 2022). I have experienced myself the immense difficulty of addressing the denial of systemic violence and ongoing harm within the context of DAF as a community; and fully facing the unsustainability of the modern-industrial civilisation, as well as the planetary predicament it has brought about, remains very challenging emotionally and psychologically for many people, quite understandably.

According to Vanessa Andreotti (2023), what is required to face the denials of modernity is *depth education* – that is, education that will help one to build the capacity to hold various layers of complexity in their understanding of the world and of themselves; to hold the weight of the contradictions and tensions between and within these layers; and to hold space for the good, the bad, the broken, and the messed-up aspects of humanity, with love and compassion, so that one will activate an ethical imperative towards others and the world that is not dependent on intellectual choice. Unlike the standard forms of *mastery education* that are typically imparted by teachers in school, and which can be likened to pouring water into a cup or conquering a mountain peak, depth education is more akin to onion-peeling – and like peeling onions, it can be very uncomfortable. My journey of understanding with regards to radical collective change has increasingly led me to bring my attention from the former to the latter.

A fundamental aspect of depth education is that of developing *decolonial systems and complexity literacies*, including different relationships with language; reality; voice and identity; time, teleology and progress; purpose, purity and relationality; pain and desire; and responsibility. These literacies, as objects of ongoing inquiry, are instrumental to depth education (Andreotti, 2023).

Envisioning such forms of education taking place in informal settings probably requires both the presence of “key enablers” (**Chapter 5**) who would be sufficiently literate with these aspects of depth education; and the willingness and dedication, on behalf of others around them, to learn from these enablers, and to make time and space for deeply uncomfortable (un)learning. Closely knit peer-support and learning groups like the D&D circle may constitute helpful containers in this regard. But it is much less obvious how such unlearning might take place informally at the level of an entire community, if this community’s purpose is not explicitly framed around these issues. More likely this would need to take the form of formal courses and workshops, offered to those with the willingness, consent, cognitive and affective dispositions, and relational capacity to engage with depth education (Andreotti, 2022).

The Wenger-Trayner social learning evaluation framework (**Chapter 5**) may be an interesting lens through which to study the results of such activities of unlearning across a social system – including by the (un)learners themselves, although I found the framework rather complex and not particularly easy to deploy. However, given its agnostic relation to all forms of value-creation, the methodology does not embed any particular criticality with regards to value-creation stories, besides the encouragement to check a story’s plausibility with other social learning space participants (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p. 223). Therefore, integrating practices like the cooperative inquiry group processes mentioned above may be necessary.

## 2.3 Land-based transformative change

A dimension of decolonial work that I have not explored in this research is that of the importance of re-establishing new connections with the land as part of decolonial efforts toward social change. This involves the political aspects of returning land sovereignty and stewardship to Indigenous peoples as a central objective of decolonisation; but also inscribing decolonial approaches, more generally, within place-based practices

(Paradies, 2020). While in this PhD research I have concentrated on the issue of online communities, I now believe that prefigurative practice cannot remain decontextualised and deterritorialised if it is to be part of efforts oriented toward radical collective change.

An important reason for this is that this practice calls for profound personal and collective re-orientations, felt and enacted on a visceral, embodied level, which I doubt can be fully brought about through technical means such as computers and the internet. Escobar (2020) argues that moving toward a relational ontology is very challenging for modern human beings, who are marked by the liberal ontology and its reliance on notions like the individual or the free market. Much personal inner work is thus needed to unlearn disconnection and economicism and effectuate an “ontological reconversion” (Escobar, 2014, p. 60) – and this unlearning cannot only happen in the intellectual dimension, as Stein (2019) points out.

Recent examples of long-lasting social and ecological struggles taking place within territorial contexts point to affective, relational entanglements with the land and its other-than-human inhabitants as enabling activists to begin undertaking such a reconversion. For example, anthropologists, philosophers, and activists themselves (Fremaux and Jordan, 2021; Descola and Pignocchi, 2022; Gosselin and gé Bartoli, 2022a) have studied – and experienced – how the struggle for the ZAD (*Zone à défendre*, or “zone to defend”) of Notre-Dames-des-Landes, in France, has enabled many of its (modern human) participants to enact a more relational world, and to undergo important affective and relational unlearning in defence of the territory with which they found themselves entangled – the *bocage*. This territory also displays important strategic potential as part of wider collective change efforts, by offering a radical alternative to the nation-state as a form of political organisation (Descola and Pignocchi, 2022). I therefore believe that *the political activation of relationality within territorial contexts* is another, potentially critical element of radical collective change.

However, I am also conscious that territories and communities can be essentialised as part of a reactionary politics. As I have described elsewhere (Cavé, 2023), prefigurative initiatives and networks are emerging that may appear to pursue emancipatory forms of radical collective change, but which do not attempt to relinquish fundamental aspects of

modernity-coloniality such as racism, sexism, or heteropatriarchy. Some of them may even contribute to the widespread rise of fascism which can already be observed in various regions of the world (Palheta, 2022). For this reason, I find it crucial for land-based ontological alternatives to be centred on emancipatory purposes (Kothari *et al.*, 2019).

## 2.4 The issue of scale

In this study, I have not been able to investigate the aspect of scale with regards to the topic of radical collective change. The predicament I have outlined in **Chapter 1** is planetary; yet, the two online communities I investigated have only brought together a few hundred to several thousand participants, with an active core of only a few dozen people. Besides, my methodology has not allowed me to evaluate changes taking place outside of the groups I studied, as a result of participants' involvement in these groups - although certain value-creation stories have mentioned changes taking place on occasion. An area for future research would be that of collecting value-creation stories focusing on more wide-ranging social impacts of participating in online prefigurative communities.

How to envision these changes having an effect on the wider paradigms, power structures and social systems that are continuing to inflict harm on the human and other-than-human world, day after day? And how to consider the issue of scale without falling prey to a colonial and capitalist logic?

I find myself inspired by ideas like those of Stout (2021), a prefigurative community theorist and practitioner, who suggests “seeding” transformative change fractally and at various social levels, notably by means of a common set of simple, universal principles for generative social change, a “DNA” that could be adopted by social change activists in various social movements and communities, and adapted to their local context. However, the question of how to create alignment around universal principles in a decentralised way, and without enforcing uniformity (particularly in a time of increased epistemic fragmentation), is one that remains open.

As for sustainability scholars Schreuder and Horlings (2022), they build on the existing literature on potentially transformative social innovations (Moore, Riddell and

Vocisano, 2015), and state that “a combination of different scaling processes is needed to foster system-wide and multi-scale change, varying over time” (p.7) – including scaling *out, up, deep, and within*. Using this framework, it would appear that relatively small communities more focused on inner transformation, such as DAF, may establish partnerships with other change agents that have more capacity to help innovative tools and process to “scale up,” and thus increase their potential for transformative social impact. In the case of prefigurative communities, this could include coalitions with more conventional political actors that have more clout, such as trade unions or political parties (Monticelli, 2021). I suspect that only through such alliances may radical institutional reconfigurations to take place, such as the emergence of the regenerative *terrestrial institutions* outlined by Gosselin and gé Bartoli (2022a) – born from the shared experience and entangled perspectives of humans and other-than-humans.

Finally, another direction of research that is relevant to the study of radical collective change is the emerging transdisciplinary field of socio-technical tipping points (e.g., Otto *et al.*, 2020; Smith, Christie and Willis, 2020; Sharpe and Lenton, 2021; Fesenfeld *et al.*, 2022; Lenton *et al.*, 2022). This discipline investigates how small changes within social systems may enable a given innovation to trigger “tipping cascades and large-scale socio-technical transformation,” so that “niche innovations in technologies and behaviors can gain momentum and eventually trigger non-linear changes in previously dominant socio-technical systems” (Fesenfeld *et al.*, 2022, p.1100). Exploring how relational practices and world-views may percolate through social networks to become more widespread appears urgently needed.

### 3 *In closing...*

Four years and a half since I set off on this research journey – how am I?

***Journal entry – Feb.12, 2023***

*My entire being heavy with grief and fatigue, I lay on the pebbles by the side of the flowing river whom we haven't visited in months, letting the radiant sun and the speedy purling of water work through the pain and the pointlessness. Contemplating in awe the flight of a white heron, admiring the lithe playful agility of a robin flitting to and fro between the roots of a fallen tree, curious about the two strange creatures sitting there not chasing insects. Trying hard not to*

*think about how many insects or birds will still be part of this graceful riverside in a few years' time. Fantasizing about a whole month of rest, come April. Luxurious. Deep. Abolishing calendars and clocks. Weeks in the mountains, seeing no one, saying nothing. Recovering from 4.5 years of foolishness gone by like a flash in a pan, the clang of stones thrown into a cauldron. Violent erosion of mind and body. Until the next bout of idiocy?*

As I write these lines, I feel the strain of the continued effort that writing this thesis has brought into my life – the gradual narrowing of my attention range, until very little else still matters. Which, inevitably, brings me back to some of the nagging questions I raised a few chapters ago – “What’s the point of all this? Was this thesis worth the white hairs that have grown on my head since I started writing it?”

I will probably never know if any of the millions of words I have said, read, or written over this time have been helpful to bring about generative forms of collective change. So I try to make my peace with this unknowing.

Following the fungal advice I received on a summer solstice, some time ago, I continue to look for the path that will lead me up the Third Mountain of my life, as the story goes (Andreotti and Crier, 2020). I expect to get lost, time and again – and I trust that getting lost, and humbly listening to all the beings that surround me, from all times, may be part of finding the way. In the words of Bayo Akomolafe,

The invitation is to listen, it's to humble ourselves enough to fall down to the earth, and listen differently, listen to ancestry, listen to the world around us that we've numbed and muted as “resource,” in our attempts to progress beyond the planet. ... We need new patterns of learning together, that the university cannot provide us. We need new ways of thinking about ourselves as going beyond the individual. ... We must learn how to get lost together. ... It's not entirely left to us [humans] to solve these problems. If it were left to us, we would be reinscribing an anthropocentricity that I find deeply troubling and problematic. It's not entirely left to us. That's where humility finds its feet. To know that we're not going to solve this problem, Bill Gates is not going to get us out of this shit, we're not going to assemble and say “kumbaya,” the IPCC will not save the day... we will need to sit with failure, we will need to sit within cracks, and listen deeply. (*Climate Crisis, Fragmentation and Collective Trauma*, 2021)

As I slowly make my way through the wilderness, following the advice of Buddhist master Thích Nhất Hạnh, I try to breathe into the end of the world as I know it – the end of “a civilisation that has become antithetical to the ontology and ethics of interexistence” (Escobar, 2020, p. 114):

Breathing in, I know that this civilization is going to die. Breathing out, this civilization cannot escape dying. (Nhất Hạnh, 2008, p. 53)

Everywhere, I hear echoes of increasingly terrified attempts, on behalf of the masters of this world who see their ship beginning to sink, to barricade themselves inside “armed lifeboats” (Parenti, 2012; Buxton, 2022). Desperate to control the “threat” of mass migration, to keep at bay the people fleeing places rendered uninhabitable by the lifestyles of the masters themselves. Throwing far more money at barbed wire and AI-powered border controls (Disclose, 2022) than at climate adaptation. Vigorously fanning the flames of the “three evils of society” identified by Martin Luther King – “the giant triplets of racism, economic exploitation and militarism” (King, 2018).

And I wonder: if eradicating exclusion and oppression means widening our conception of “we” until no one is excluded (Rorty, 1989) – how to keep expanding this circle of solidarity, to all humans, but also to other-than-humans, and to the Earth itself? How to puncture the armed lifeboats and decolonise our hearts and minds in a time of collapse?

This calls for a healing of relationships, and for reparations that may allow this healing to take place. I want to end by quoting from Chief Ninawa, of the Huni Kui people of the Amazon, who speaks most eloquently about the magnitude of this task – and about the particular responsibility, in accomplishing it, of those most thoroughly steeped in modern education systems, such as myself (Andreotti and Valley, 2021):

The destruction that is happening is led by people with a high degree of formal knowledge and with a high degree of education. The most educated people are the ones who become most invested in the fantasy of separation and superiority that is destroying our planet. ... We need to confront the harm that this illusion has caused to our planet. The Earth herself and the global challenge we are facing are our teachers.



... In order to do this, we will need a lot of courage, we need a lot of stamina, a lot of compassion, humility, and a lot of patience. We will need to reactivate a form of love that we have forgotten, but that is latent within us.

... There is no way to move forward without dealing with what happened in our past. We need to wake up to the reality that our planet is sick, that we are part of the disease, and that it is our responsibility to seek healing in order to help ourselves and our own planet.

This process is difficult and also painful, but without it we will not be able to understand why the house that was built by colonialism and human arrogance is now falling apart.... If we do not go through this difficult learning, our dreams, our hopes, our aspirations will only reproduce the same fantasies that have brought us to the world of illusion.

... The land is our mother, and as part of it we are a huge family of human and nonhuman relatives. Many Indigenous people still carry this feeling, but it is important to emphasize that, in our tradition, there are not concepts that can be written in words. This is a way of life that involves the intellect, but that is also much broader than the intellect.

The ways of living that respect and care for the Earth and that care for future generations are not just beautiful words, they involve feelings and actions that promote sobriety, maturity, discernment, accountability, which have the power to stop the individualism, arrogance, vanity and greed that put us on the path of extinction. We have to be clear about that.

We need an education that heals, but we cannot have healing if we don't know what disease is making the planet, our hearts and our feelings sick. So, a healing education begins with a confrontation with what humanity has done wrong in the past. This is necessary to open up the possibility of contributing something new and healthier for future generations. This involves the disillusionment with the promises and fantasies of economic growth as progress that are sold by the governments. Each of us needs to do our part.

# Annexes

Annex 3.1 Participant Information Sheets

Annex 3.2 FairCoop Research Process

Annex 3.3 Using the Wenger-Trayner Evaluation Framework in DAF

Annex 4.1 A brief timeline of FairCoop

Annex 5.1 DAF Effect Data Indicators

Annex 5.2 DAF Value-Creation Stories

Annex 5.3 Case Study: The DAF Diversity and Decolonising Circle

Annex 5.4 Participant Aspirations in DAF Social Learning Spaces

Annex 5.5 Case Study: The DAF Research Team

Annex 5.6 RT Research Stream: Framing and Reframing our Aspirations and Uncertainties

# Annex 3.1

## Participant Information Sheets

This annex presents the information sheets that I invited interested participants from FairCoop and the Deep Adaptation Forum to read and understand before becoming involved in the project. I reproduce these sheets here as they were displayed on my research blog at the time of writing.


The information presented on both sheets is largely identical, except for a few small differences:

- the FairCoop sheet includes a self-recorded video, which I used to introduce my project to FairCoop participants;
- the Deep Adaptation Forum sheets includes information relevant to the various modalities of participation in the DAF research project, including through answering surveys, or publishing articles on the Conscious Learning Blog.


### *FairCoop*

Page URL: <https://engramseeker.wordpress.com/faircoop/>

University of  
**Cumbria**



Lancaster  
University



**How may online networks enable radical collective change through social learning?**

**A PhD research project by Dorian Cavé**

**(Lancaster University; IFLAS, University of Cumbria, UK)**



Figure 13: FairCoop introduction video. URL: <https://vimeo.com/406233621>

The human species is arguably living through a period of existential challenges unparalleled in history. Indeed, the planet Earth is undergoing rapid changes — caused by mankind itself — which could severely compromise human survival. These include [mass species extinctions](#); [climatic disruptions](#); and catastrophic [topsoil losses](#). These issues are compounded by widespread systemic social and political failures, such as the [economic growth imperative](#); entrenched [dependence](#) on fossil fuels; rising wealth [inequalities](#); and [failing](#) democratic processes.

And yet, global efforts aiming at rising to this civilizational challenge seem scattered, piecemeal, and orders of magnitude below what appears necessary — one need only look at the weakness of current climate change [commitments](#) in the wake of the 2015 Paris Agreement, and how they aren't even being followed through.

I believe that from the perspective of effectuating a global transition to a fairer and more liveable world, insufficient attention and efforts have been devoted to the following aspects:

1. **Education and consciousness-raising.** A multitude of indicators point at the lack of awareness as regards these issues in the general population. It can be surmised that an insufficient understanding of (and deep emotional response to) what is at stake is one of the roots of the lack of public mobilisation that can be observed.
2. **Means of connected mobilisation.** Online social networks have become a central feature of our lives. These tools have been hailed by some as central to the development of new popular and democratic movements. However, when considering the multitude of grassroots initiatives that aim at creating positive social change on a particular topic (for instance, re-localizing the economy through community currencies), the lack of networks and other instruments specifically dedicated to federating such efforts is rather striking.

My objective in the course of this PhD research is to bring together these two elements, and thus, **investigate how online networks may foster and enable radical collective change through social learning.**

\*\*\*

As an important step in my research, I would like to work with my fellow members of the online community [FairCoop](#), which is dedicated to promoting the social and solidarity economy and transforming society to abolish all forms of domination.

Through my communication and interaction with other members, I am hoping to shed some more light on the following issues:

- 1. How does FairCoop enable us to learn about the social issues we care most about, and to act on those issues?**
- 2. Are these functions desirable? (i.e. are these functions of learning and acting among the main reasons why we joined FairCoop in the first place?);**
- 3. Do we find FairCoop satisfactory in these terms?**
- 4. And if it isn't, how could these functions be improved?**

I wish to work with anyone from FairCoop who may be interested in these issues, mainly via teleconference and email, both individually and as groups. I guarantee full anonymity to every participant.

At the end of this research phase, I would like share the results we have obtained through a special report written specifically for the members of FairCoop.

This is a Participatory Action Research project. [Read more](#) about what I mean by that.

\*\*\*

## **Some questions you may have about this research project:**

### **Why have you asked me to take part and what will I be required to do?**

I believe that as a fellow active member of FairCoop, you are ideally positioned to help our entire network/community better understand how we can make FairCoop a better channel to achieve transformative change, especially through collective knowledge-sharing and learning.

### **What if I do not wish to take part or change my mind during the study?**

Your participation in the study is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time without having to provide a reason for doing so.

### **What happens to the research data?**

All research data will be treated in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation guidelines (which are summarised on [this document](#)).

Research data will consist mainly of records and minutes from conversations, meetings and interviews taking place between myself and other FairCoop members. By default, this data will be safeguarded securely onto my personal computer, in encrypted form.

Only I, the researcher, will have access to the data. However, if I receive explicit consent in written form from you that you agree to share records from our conversations with other official participants, I will enable the sharing of this particular data through a secure cloud-based solution (NextCloud) hosted on my personal web server, in case it can facilitate our collective learning. No data will be shared without anyone's explicit consent.

I will provide full anonymity to all project participants. Anyone will be allowed to ask for the deletion of their own conversation records from the research files. In case of participants whose anonymity may be difficult to fully guarantee (because of the role they play in DAF, for example), I will happily discuss with you personally what data you are comfortable providing to this research on a case-by-case basis.

If you decide to withdraw from the project, I will offer you the option to have all your research contributions and conversation records deleted, if you so wish.

All data will be securely stored in encrypted form for as long as you allow me.

### **How will the research be reported?**

I intend to communicate my research findings to you, as a participant, and to others, mainly through:

1. Webinars organised at regular intervals;
2. A final report, specially written for (and perhaps, together with) the members of FairCoop (i.e. not made public elsewhere);
3. My PhD thesis, which will aggregate and synthesise the results of my research.

As pointed out above, I will do my utmost to guarantee full anonymity to every project participant in these reports.

### **How can I find out more information?**

Please contact me directly, by email ([dorian.cave@uni.cumbria.ac.uk](mailto:dorian.cave@uni.cumbria.ac.uk)) or on Telegram: @doncaviare

### **What if I want to complain about the research?**

Initially you should contact me directly. However, if you are not satisfied or wish to make a more formal complaint, you should contact Diane Cox, Director of Research Office, University of Cumbria, Bowerham Road, Lancaster, LA1 3JD. [diane.cox@cumbria.ac.uk](mailto:diane.cox@cumbria.ac.uk)

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## **Looks interesting. How do I take part in the project? (Consent email)**

Thanks! In order to confirm your participation (even just in an interview), please copy and paste the following text into [a new email to me](#), and send it over. Don't forget to add your name at the bottom of the message!

**By sending this email to Dorian Cave, PhD researcher at the University of Cumbria, I confirm the following points:**

- I have read and understood the [Participant Information Sheet](#) regarding the research project "*How may online networks enable radical collective change through learning?*";
- I have been able to ask questions and have received enough information;
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time, and without having to give a reason for withdrawal;
- My responses will be anonymised. I give permission for the researcher to analyse and quote my anonymous responses;

- I agree to participate in recorded interviews, which may include video interviews, and give permission for the researcher to analyse and quote my responses, under condition of maximum anonymity;
- I wish to take part in this research project, and feel I have had enough information about what is involved.

## *Deep Adaptation Forum*

Page URL: <https://engramseeker.wordpress.com/daf-participant-information-sheet/>



**How may online networks enable radical collective change through social learning?**

**A PhD research project by Dorian Cavé**

**(Lancaster University; IFLAS, University of Cumbria, UK)**

The human species is arguably living through a period of existential challenges unparalleled in history. Indeed, the planet Earth is undergoing rapid changes — caused by mankind itself — which could severely compromise human survival. These include [mass species extinctions](#); [climatic disruptions](#); and catastrophic [topsoil losses](#). These issues are compounded by widespread systemic social and political failures, such as the [economic growth imperative](#); entrenched [dependence](#) on fossil fuels; rising wealth [inequalities](#); and [failing](#) democratic processes.

And yet, global efforts aiming at rising to this civilizational challenge seem scattered, piecemeal, and orders of magnitude below what appears necessary.

I believe that from the perspective of effectuating a global transition to a fairer and more sustainable world, insufficient attention and efforts have been devoted to the following aspects:

1. **Education and consciousness-raising.** Better and more widespread understanding – and deeper emotional responses – to our predicament must be encouraged if any public mobilisation is to occur.



2. **Means of connected mobilisation.** Online social networks carry huge potential for learning and collective action. More federations of action and learning networks should emerge in response to these existential challenges.

My objective in the course of this PhD research is to bring together these two elements, and thus, **investigate how online networks may foster and enable radical collective change through social learning.**

\*\*\*

As an important step in my research, I would like to work with my fellow members of the online community of the [Deep Adaptation Forum](#) (DAF), which is dedicated to enabling and embodying loving responses to societal collapse.

Through my communication and interaction with other members, I am hoping to shed some more light on the following issues:

1. Does DAF enable us to engage more deeply and fruitfully with the various aspects of our predicament, from the intellectual dimension to the relational, normative and societal dimensions?
2. Is this why most of us are participating in this network?
3. If so, can we find ways to improve how we engage with one another in this network, so that it may help us bring about the changes we seek, in ourselves and beyond?

I wish to work with anyone from the DAF who may be interested in these issues, mainly via teleconference and email, both individually and as groups. I guarantee full anonymity to every participant.

It is difficult for me to ensure complete anonymity, given how familiar many of us are with one another. However, I commit to doing my utmost in order to make any contributions to this research as anonymous as possible.

At the end of this research phase, I would like share the results we have obtained through a special report written specifically for the members of DAF.

## Some questions you may have about the research project...

### Why have you asked me to take part and what will I be required to do?

I believe that as a fellow active member of the DAF, you are ideally positioned to help our entire network/community better understand how we can make our network a better channel to achieve transformative change, especially through collective knowledge-sharing and learning.

So far, four main ways have emerged for participants to contribute to this research:

- **As co-researchers.** Such participants are intimately involved in co-designing this research, critically reflecting on it, taking action, and analysing findings;
- **As interviewees or members of a Conscious Learning cohort.** I am inviting volunteers and other DAF participants to chat in private interviews, and share with me their “[learning journey](#).” This can lead to taking part in an informal Conscious Learning cohort, whose members pay special attention to how their learning journey is unfolding, and what resources are being most helpful in this process. Cohort members are also invited to host and attend special learning-focused webinars.
- **As blog post writers.** Anyone, including existing research participants, can take part in this research by publicly sharing their insights and learning journeys on the [Conscious Learning Blog](#).
- **As survey takers.** Occasionally, anonymous surveys are being disseminated on DAF, inviting broader participation in this research.

### What if I do not wish to take part or change my mind during the study?

Your participation in the study is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time without having to provide a reason for doing so.

### What happens to the research data?

All research data will be treated in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation guidelines (which are summarised in [this document](#)).

Research data will consist mainly of:

- **Audio recordings and minutes from interviews taking place between myself and other DAF members.**

First of all, I will never use for this research any recorded information from conversations, meetings, or interviews involving you, without asking you first and saying exactly what it is I intend to use. In other words, I will seek your explicit consent before using anything you have communicated with me, and will request your feedback on how to use this information in the way that feels safest and most comfortable to you.

Only I, the researcher, will have access to the data. However, if I receive explicit consent in written form from you that you agree to share records from our conversations with my co-researchers, I will share this particular data with co-researchers through a secure cloud-based solution, in case it can facilitate our collective learning. No data will be shared without anyone's explicit consent. The co-researchers and I are bound by the same privacy and confidentiality agreements that are expressed here.

I will provide full anonymity to all project participants. Anyone will be allowed to ask for the deletion of their own conversation records from the research files. In case of participants whose anonymity may be difficult to fully guarantee (because of the role they play in DAF, for example), I will happily discuss with you personally what data you are comfortable providing to this research on a case-by-case basis.

If you decide to withdraw from the project, I will offer you the option to have all your research contributions and conversation records deleted, if you so wish. Given the practical needs of having to write a PhD thesis, the deadline to make this request is October 15, 2021.

All data will be securely stored on my university OneDrive server, in encrypted form, until completion of my PhD program (expected date: October 2022).

- **Conscious Learning blog posts:**

By having any content published on the [Conscious Learning blog](#), you agree to let me and my co-researchers analyse and quote from the material you publish for the purpose of this academic research project, under condition of maximum anonymity. However, if

you decide to publish any content under your real name on the blog, please note that you will be forfeiting the possibility of anonymity for that particular content.

To have your material removed from the scope of this research, please delete it from this blog (or request its deletion, if you didn't publish it yourself) by December 31, 2021.

Blog post data will be securely stored on the blog webserver, as well as on my computer, in encrypted form, until completion of my PhD program (expected date: October 2022).

- **Data collected via surveys:**

All data collected via surveys will be securely stored in encrypted form. This data will be fully anonymised. It will be used in priority by me (and my co-researchers) for this project, but may also be processed by staff or students of the University of Cumbria, or organisers of the DA Forum, or third parties which either entity contracts for the purposes of analysing the data. No other parties will have access to any of this data.

## **How will the research be reported?**

I intend to communicate my research findings in the following ways:

1. Webinars organised at regular intervals;
2. A free report on the findings of each survey, shared on the Forum;
3. Occasional blog posts, shared on the DAF blog;
4. A final report, specially written for (and perhaps, together with) the members of the DAF (i.e. not made public elsewhere);
5. Through academic papers and conference presentations;
6. My PhD thesis, which will aggregate and synthesise the results of my research.

As pointed out above, I will guarantee full anonymity to every project participant in these reports.

## **How can I find out more information?**

Please contact me directly: [dorian.cave@uni.cumbria.ac.uk](mailto:dorian.cave@uni.cumbria.ac.uk)

## Who are the current co-researchers?

As of now (September 4, 2021), current co-researchers are **Wendy Freeman** and myself – **Dorian Cavé**.

## What if I want to complain about the research?

Initially you should contact me (the researcher) directly. However, if you are not satisfied or wish to make a more formal complaint you should contact Dr Colette Conroy, Chair of Research Ethics Email: [research.office@cumbria.ac.uk](mailto:research.office@cumbria.ac.uk)

\*\*\*

## Looks interesting. How do I participate in the project? (Consent email)

Thanks! In order to confirm your participation (for example, in case of an interview), please just copy and paste the following text into [a new email to me](#), and send it over. Don't forget to add your name at the bottom of the message!

**By sending this email to Dorian Cave, PhD researcher at the University of Cumbria, I confirm the following points:**

- I have read and understood the [Participant Information Sheet](#) regarding the research project “*How may online networks enable radical collective change through learning?*”
- I have been able to ask questions and have received enough information;
- I understand that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time, and without having to give a reason for withdrawal;
- My responses will be anonymised. I give permission for the researcher to analyse and quote my anonymous responses;
- I agree to participate in recorded interviews, which may include video interviews, and give permission for the researcher to analyse and quote my responses, under condition of maximum anonymity (video and audio recordings will not be made public);

- I agree to maintaining confidentiality about what I share and what I hear shared by others in the course of these research activities, and not to share information that could identify myself or others;
- I wish to take part in this research project, and feel I have had enough information about what is involved.

# Annex 3.2

## FairCoop Research Process

This annex provides a detailed account of the FairCoop (FC) research process, which unfolded between June 2020 and October 2021.

### *1 First AR cycles: Deciding on a methodology*

As I mention in **Chapter 3**, my original intention was to invite participants in FC projects to form a participatory research group, which would explore the kinds of social learning taking place within FC.

Following a few preliminary conversations, it appeared that this intention didn't find much of an echo among the persons I approached. The main reason they invoked was that the community was "dormant" or even "a failed experiment." I also learned that it was (or had been) deeply divided as a result of intractable conflict.

Therefore, I shifted my approach to a diagnostic/evaluation stance. Out of these first conversations, four Research Questions (RQ) emerged which seemed to speak to the interests of the participants I interviewed while corresponding with the overall intention underlying my PhD research:

- 1 What has been the trajectory of FC in time?
- 2 How to explain FC's current level of activity and usefulness?
- 3 What were the main outcomes of participants' involvement with FC, in terms of cognitive, relational, and experiential or affective dimensions of social learning?
- 4 What can social change-makers learn from this project? In particular, what can be learned about the...

- “Ways of doing” that are most closely related to FC's impact in the world?
- “Ways of being” and worldviews, and how these have played into the life of FC?

I decided that RQ #1 and #3, being more straightforward, could be studied by conducting semi-structured interviews followed by a thematic analysis.

RQ #2 and #4, however, called for a more rigorous evaluation methodology, which would give equal weight to a variety of perspectives, and encourage participants to learn from one another.

The Fourth Generation Evaluation approach (Guba and Lincoln, 1989) seemed to fit the constructivist, participatory perspective in which I wished to undertake this evaluation. The key dynamic in this approach is the negotiation between stakeholders, and it has six main characteristics (p.8-9):

- it views evaluation outcomes as a description of how individuals or groups make sense of their situation – not of “how things really are”;
- it recognises a plurality of values shaping the constructions through which people make sense of the situations in which they find themselves;
- it acknowledges that people’s constructions are linked to the social, political and cultural context in which they have been formed and to which they refer;
- it recognises that this form of evaluation can empower, or disempower, particular stakeholder groups in a variety of ways;
- it suggests that evaluation must have an action orientation, in order to ensure follow-up and avoid the non-use of evaluation outcomes;
- it insists on full participatory involvement, in which participants are equal partners in every aspect of the evaluation process.

By deploying the methodology of Fourth Generation Methodology (p.184-227), the authors argue that stakeholders are mutually educated by the evaluation process, as “each group is required to confront and take account of the inputs from other groups” and “deal with points of difference or conflict.” In this process, “a great deal of learning



takes place” (ibid, 56). Given the focus of my overall research on social learning, I decided to invite the study participants to engage in such an evaluation process.

However, it rapidly emerged that most interviewees were unwilling to engage in this evaluation otherwise than through individual, private conversations with me, largely due to lack of time, and to the impact of deep-seated conflict. I decided that the conditions for a productive Hermeneutic Dialectic process (p.149-155) were not met – mainly due to the lack of “a willingness on the part of all the parties to make the commitments of time and energy that may be required in the process” (p.150). Moreover, I found that generating discussions within different FC stakeholder groups was difficult, and I doubted the feasibility of establishing and mediating a forum of stakeholder representatives in which negotiation over the content of the evaluation may take place (p.73-74).

I thus decided to follow a different methodology, and to base the evaluation process, needed to answer Research Questions #2 and #4, on the use of Convergent Interviewing. Nonetheless, as I will describe below, I did make use of certain techniques that are part of Fourth Generation Evaluation, and I tried to remain faithful to the overall philosophy that I outline above.

## ***2 Convergent Interviewing (CI)***

CI has similarities with several aspects of the Hermeneutic Dialectic Process that is at the heart of Fourth Generation Evaluation. It is a flexible data collection process, based on an in-depth interview procedure characterised by a structured process and initially-unstructured content (Dick, 2017). CI is also emergent and data-driven, has a cyclic nature, makes use of a dialectic process, and can be used effectively in community change programs as part of a diagnosis or evaluation project (Dick, 2002, 2014, 2017).

Overall, the CI process can be outlined as follows (Driedger *et al.*, 2006; Jepsen and Rodwell, 2008; Dick, 2017):

5. Planning one’s approach with the host organisation or community. Negotiating how the research can be carried out, for it to be valuable to both the interviewees as well as the researcher.

6. Preparing a maximum-diversity sample, which can be augmented by a modified snowball sample (in which interviewees are asked to nominate who else may be interviewed).
7. Carrying out initially open-ended interviews, from which an evaluation develops gradually and inductively.
8. By comparing interview results, developing probe questions to deepen one's understanding of the emerging theory. These probe questions focus on the overlap between present data and either past data or emergent theory; they lead the researcher to seek out exceptions for agreements between present data and past data or emergent theory, and to seek explanations for disagreements. "The disagreements drive the theory development or diagnosis or evaluation" (Dick, 2017).

CI is based on a constant comparative reflexive process (Driedger et al., 2006). The cyclic nature of this process "allows the refinement of both questions and answers, and even the method, over a series of interviews or successive approximations" (Riege and Nair, 2004). This builds rigour in the continuous refinement of the research content and process, while providing flexibility, which is useful in an Action Research context.

### *3 Interview process – June 2020 to January 2021*

In the early stages of my interviewing process, I invited several of my FC contacts to form a group of co-researchers with me. However, it appeared that this was not possible for any of them at the time. Therefore, I pursued the research process on my own.

Dick (2017) recommends that a CI process be carried out by a pair of interviewers, to enrich the analytical process. However, he also states that a single interviewer may also fruitfully use CI without losing too much rigour, as long as the interviewer takes care to "compare the second interview to the first one, the third interview to the first two, and so on. When a theory (etc.) begins to emerge, each successive interview is then compared to the emergent theory" (ibid, 20). I made sure to follow this guideline.

### 3.1 Forming a sample

In order to form a sample, I asked my initial contacts to recommend other participants in the FC network who would have different backgrounds and points of view from them, while still being representative of the network. I then contacted the persons they recommended. When these responded positively to my request (which was the case about 50% of the time), I had an open-ended discussion with them, and then asked them to recommend another person I could speak to, with the same criteria as previously. In this way, a modified snowball sample of 15 participants emerged.

Interviewees were all persons who were deeply involved in FC as a project, ranging from 1.5 to over 4 years of participation (average: 3 years) at the time of first interview. They included persons identifying with either (or none) of two broad and opposing factions that seem to have formed within FC, and hailed from 8 different countries. I deemed this sample diverse enough for the purposes of understanding the history and dynamics at play within FC.

### 3.2 Obtaining formal consent

Ahead of interviewing anyone, I asked them to express their consent with taking part in this research, by sending me an electronic message containing the copy and pasted paragraph titled “Consent email” on the online information sheet (see **Annex 3.2**). This was usually achieved by sending prospective interviewees an instant message containing this text, and asking them to reply to this message saying “I agree.” For those with whom I communicated in Spanish, I translated this paragraph into Spanish.

### 3.3 Communications

All my initial communications with FC participants happened over the instant messaging software Telegram. When I got in touch with a new contact, I started by asking them what would be the most comfortable way for us to carry out our discussions. 6 interviewees agreed to be interviewed over video-conference calls, and 9 via private Telegram text and recorded voice messages. I also asked them in what language they would prefer to communicate. 11 discussions took place in English, and 4 in Spanish.

In the case of video calls, taking place over Zoom or Jitsi, I took extensive notes during the interview. In the case of Telegram voice messages, I transcribed the messages I received. I translated into English notes and text messages that were in Spanish to facilitate the analytical process, and analysed all text using the thematic analysis software Quirkos.

It should be noted that while interviews happening over video calls were clearly bounded in time, and took about one to two hours, interviews carried out over instant text messages or voice messages were more continuous, as they allowed the interviewee to respond whenever they had time. This enabled several “interviews” to be taking place simultaneously, which made the process more dynamic – as I was, in effect, able to rapidly test for agreement or disagreement when a new issue was raised by someone. On the other hand, it made slightly more onerous the process of keeping track of what questions I had been asking to whom.

I made sure to regularly summarise my understanding of what interviewees were sharing with me, in order to confirm I understood them well.

### 3.4 Identifying convergent issues

In order to explore the two closely related research questions (RQ #2 and #4) that called for the use of CI, I began by asking the interviewees to tell me more about their experience of FC. In particular, I asked them what they considered had been the main challenges that FC had faced or was facing as a project, as a “general probe” question (Dick, 2017, p.7).

By comparing my notes from each interview to my corpus of previous interviews, I then gradually began building an emergent theory about the general categories of challenges that appeared to have been present in FC (ibid, p.13). In effect, I carried out an inductive thematic analysis, building on the method of Template Analysis (TA), as presented by King (2004, 2012) and Brooks and colleagues (2015). I found TA appropriate for its flexibility, and its usefulness to analyse large volumes of diverse data in a time-effective way (Brooks *et al.*, 2015). Besides, as a “codebook” thematic analysis (Braun *et al.*, 2019), it allows the initial development of themes early on in the analytical process,

while enabling the iterative refinement of this framework through inductive engagement with the data in the process. As such, it felt well-suited to being combined with CI.

TA encourages the development of an initial template, made of a priori themes that are based on a sub-set of the data. In this case, this sub-set was the corpus of interviews I was building. The analysis then "progresses... through an iterative process of applying, modifying and re-applying the initial template" (King, 2012, p.430). I define themes as "the recurrent and distinctive features of participants' accounts... that characterize perceptions and/or experiences, seen by the researcher as relevant to the research question of a particular study" (ibid, p.430-1). In TA, themes are hierarchically organized (groups of similar codes are clustered together to produce more general higher-order codes), and "the extent to which main (i.e. top level) themes are elaborated - in terms of the number and levels of sub-themes - should reflect how rich they prove to be in terms of offering insights into the topic area of a particular study" (ibid, p.431).

Through this process, by updating the emerging template iteratively after each interview, I gradually came to build the following template of themes, corresponding to organisational issues experienced in FC by interviewees:

- Objectives and strategy
  - FC's twin strategic goals
  - FairCoin
- Ways of doing
  - Governance
  - Tools
  - Membership
- Ways of being
  - Mutual care, civility and trust
  - Conflict and factions
  - Cultural and linguistic issues

For each sub-theme, I devised probe questions testing for agreement on the relevance of each issue identified. In a spreadsheet, I kept track of the agreements, disagreements, or “no opinion” voiced by interviewees for each issue.

Dick (2017, 13) argues that “idiosyncratic information from a single participant” – i.e. data not overlapping with the existing data set or emergent theory – “can generally be ignored,” thus increasing the efficiency of the process. However, knowing from Riege and Nair (2004, p. 78) that “less important issues discarded in the earlier interviews often [emerge] again in the later interviews,” I did not ignore any issue, and instead asked probe questions for every single issue to at least five interviewees. In the Case Report (see next section), I included issues that appeared significant to at least three interviewees, and attempted to systematically point out the degree of agreement or disagreement for each issue.

### 3.5 Other research questions

Answers to the research questions that weren’t directly connected to the evaluation process (i.e. RQ #1 and #3) were also included in the convergent interviewing process, although more lightly. This was due to the broad agreement on the history or trajectory of FC as a project (RQ #1), and to similar replies to the questions that had to do with the positive and negative outcomes that interviewees voiced with regards to their participation in FC (RQ #3). Nonetheless, particularly concerning the latter, interesting answers from someone helped me develop probe questions to ask other people.

In the case of RQ #1, I triangulated the information I received from interviewees with several media reports on FC.

## 4 *Sharing the first draft of the Case Report*

In order to test my understanding of what the interviewees had shared with me, and invite constructive feedback and criticism, I decided to summarise my findings into a draft Case Report. This is recommended by Guba and Lincoln (1989, p.74) in order to “communicate to each stakeholder group any consensus on constructions and any resolutions regarding the claims, concerns, and issues that they have raised.”

In writing the report, I tried to meet the quality criteria the authors formulated elsewhere (Lincoln and Guba, 1988; Guba and Lincoln, 1989, p. 224):

- Axiomatic criteria: making sure the report resonates with the axiomatic assumptions underlying its guiding paradigm. In this case, I attempted to reflect multiple realities, following the constructivist paradigm in which I carried out this study.
- Rhetorical criteria: paying attention to form and structure, including unity, overall organization, clarity, and craftsmanship.
- Action criteria: working to ensure the study's ability to evoke and facilitate action on the part of the reader. Among these criteria, fairness, educativeness, and actionability or empowerment are prominent.
- Application or transferability criteria: enabling the reader's drawing of inferences which may apply in their own context or situation. The presence of thick description and the provision of vicarious experience are important in this regard.

On January 31, 2021, I shared with all interviewees the first draft report, which I titled: *"FairCoop: What can we learn from this experiment?"* I wrote it in English, translated it in Spanish, and then published both versions using the online platform OnlyOffice. These reports could only be read by viewers receiving the secret URLs leading to them.

The report was structured as follows:

- Welcome message (1 page). This message gave context about the report, and stressed that it did not attempt to present "The Truth" about FC, but instead focused on giving voice to multiple perspectives. It also contained an invitation to leave anonymous comments directly on the document, in a spirit of amicable discussion – or to send me feedback via Telegram. Finally, it asked readers not to share the document with anyone.
- Introduction (1 page). This section briefly presented the rationale for the study, the research questions, some information about the interviewees, and the methodology.

- “A brief timeline of FairCoop” (1.5 page). In this section, I attempted to answer RQ #1, on the basis of interviewee testimonials, media reports, and scholarly articles.
- “Summary: Some key findings” (4 and 5 pages). This was an executive summary of the results of the evaluation process, answering RQ #2, #3 and #4. To answer RQ #2, for each broad category of issues identified in the CI process, I outlined the key topics that interviewees had expressed opinions on during my interviews. To answer RQ #4, for each section I suggested “major learnings” that one might consider worth reflecting on, and which I wrote on the basis of my examination of the scholarly literature on relevant topics (see **Chapter 2**)<sup>37</sup>. To answer RQ #3, I summarised the main recurring positive and negative outcomes that interviewees mentioned, as regards their participation in FC. Finally, the summary invited the reader to compare the report with the contents of a participative online document, co-created by several FC participants a year earlier and without my involvement, and which explored similar questions.
- “What went wrong?” (24 and 26 pages). This section developed the findings of the evaluation process (RQ #2). For each topic identified as an issue by at least three interviewees, I attempted to present a thick description of the issue, and quoted directly from interviewees as much as possible. I also indicated the level of agreement that existed for each issue, and called special attention to those on which different perspectives existed.
- “Negative outcomes from FC” (2 pages). In this section, I further elaborated on the main negative outcomes that interviewees voiced with regards to their participation in FC.

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<sup>37</sup> In offering these suggestions, I tried to make it clear to interviewees that these were only my own subjective constructions, which deserved to be critically assessed along with the rest of the report. In doing so, my intention was to follow the guidelines provided by Guba and Lincoln (1989: 154), according to whom “Finally, the inquirer’s own etic (outsider) construction may be introduced for critique... the inquirer’s own formulations have no particular privilege save that he or she is quite possibly the only person who has moved extensively between participants, stakeholders, and respondents and, therefore, has the benefit of having heard a more complete set of constructions than anyone else in the setting is likely to have heard. Thus that particular construction is likely to be one of the most informed and sophisticated, at least toward the end of the process. This does not procure for the evaluator more power, merely a greater ability to facilitate the negotiation process that must occur.” I am conscious that my status as a university researcher may have made it difficult for readers to consider these reflections as equally worthy of critique as the rest of the report, and indeed none of these suggested “learnings” were critiqued.



- “Positive outcomes from FC” (5 pages). Similarly to the previous section, I presented the key positive outcomes mentioned by interviewees, with a special emphasis on what they said they learned due to their participation.

As the report was quite lengthy – 40 pages in English and 43 pages in Spanish – I invited interviewees to read at least the “key takeaways” appearing on the first 8 pages (in English) or 9 pages (in Spanish). I mentioned that I would give everyone a month to read and comment on the document, in whatever language they felt most comfortable with.

I also explained to them that in order to overcome the language barrier, I would translate all comments posted from English to Spanish or vice-versa, and post the translated comment at the appropriate location on the other version of the document.

## ***5 Feedback on the draft report***

On March 3, I asked all 15 interviewees whether they had read any version of the report, and invited them to share with me privately their general impressions and level of agreement or disagreement with what they read.

I will present here a synthesis of the feedback I received on the topic of the first draft of this report. For an extended version, including quotes of messages sent to me by interviewees, please refer to the second draft of the report (discussed below).

### **5.1 How many interviewees read the report?**

Out of 15 interviewees...

- 11 said they read the report, of which...
  - 3 said they hadn’t had the time to read it completely;
  - 5 said they had made comments (or sent me comments about specific parts of the report privately);
  - 4 said they didn’t make comments;
  - 10 said they fully or mostly agreed with the contents of the report;

- 1 said they objected to the contents for being biased.
- 2 said they didn't read the report;
- 2 did not respond to the invitation to read and comment.

## 5.2 General impressions shared privately

Several interviewees shared general feedback with me in response to my request.

One person mentioned that the report “resonate[d] quite well with [their] understanding of what happened,” but that they didn't recall that one of the issues had been so disruptive within FC (although they remembered it had been disruptive in one of the FC subprojects).

Another remarked that many of the criticisms voiced by a certain group of people within FC, and for which this group had experienced strong pushback, seemed to be generally accepted by the interviewees at large. To them, this sense of consensus made the report very valuable.

A third person, however, voiced concerns that some interviewees had been dishonest in their testimonies, and that the report contained “a biased version of reality” as a result. They also said that they didn't want to leave any anonymous comments on the document, as they expected these other interviewees to respond aggressively.

A fourth person voiced generally positive feelings about the report, but regretted that voices from the critical group referred to above were featured too prominently.

Five other interviewees shared positive feedback about the report, voicing praise for its clarity and usefulness, and for its value in terms of learning about FC and mistakes that were made. One person mentioned they would welcome a documentary which would be produced on the basis of the report, and another found parallels between the history of FC and that of the Spanish Civil War.

## 5.3 Comments on the documents

34 comments were posted altogether on the two versions of the document between January 31 and March 3, 2021, when I closed the document for commenting.

Here, I will not attempt to summarise all these comments, but merely point out the main types of comments that were voiced, with special emphasis on those that shed new light on the report and on FC.

The comments notably include:

- **Historical precisions**, about the FC timeline and in particular the adoption and use of the OCP tool;
- **Technical precisions**, especially regarding the workings of FairCoin, the FairCoin economic ecosystem, or the way decisions are/were made in FC;
- **Disagreements about certain facts and figures** mentioned by other interviewees - for example, how much money was spent on the development on OCP, or whether OCW was used to keep track of people's work. These disagreements mostly concern the main areas of tension that led to (or fed into) conflict within FC, and therefore did not surprise me much.

Another area of disagreement expressed in comments and feedback about the report which I found more interesting, although interviews had already surfaced this disagreement to some extent, has to do with the **nature of the conflict and of the factions within FC**. It would seem that several interviewees expressed disagreements about the report's presentation of these factions.

For example, one commenter wrote:

*"Komun NEVER presented itself as a split. we were people who came from FC, who wanted to use FairCoin and work on useful tools... but we wanted, by affinity, to work without so much protocol and so many barriers as in FC."*

In contrast, another person wrote:

*"There was a group of people that decided to be a faction and act as a faction. But the other 'faction' wasn't so, we were just a group of autonomous people with their own opinions never acting as a 'faction' nor herd following a leader. We were called the Elite but it wasn't so, I insist. There was one group acting as a group against other people acting individually but considered by them as a faction but not being so."*

These comments showed the diversity of narratives that existed as regards the conflict that broke out in FC. While one group of people (whom I referred to as "Faction 1" in the report) do see themselves as consciously united against what they perceived as injustice and mismanagement, from the first comment above, they didn't necessarily view themselves as a breakaway group. As for people who felt most in opposition to them, several have tended to say they didn't consider themselves a "Faction", especially not one that would have been following a leader (in fact, nearly every interviewee levelled at least some measure of criticism against FC).

- **Personal reflections.** For example, on the topic of speculators taking advantage of the FairCoin double rate, one person wrote:

*"in retrospective this was very naïve to think that this would not happen. If there is a hole in the system somebody will be take profit of it. We were kind of 'hacked' while the weak points were obvious for a long time, thinking everything will go well."*

I find this comment interesting, especially given how one of the objectives of FC (see section "Objectives and Strategy" below) was to use FairCoin to hack the global financial markets. This commenter seems to imply that eventually the opposite happened. While I would hesitate to say that the global financial markets “hacked” the community, at least it appears that they were a source of profound economic instability and ideological disagreement, which brought to light deep fracture lines and simmering discontent. And the community’s social cement (“ways of being”) seems to have been too weak to repair the damage – or enable the building of new structures in place of the old.

## ***6 Producing the second draft report***

On March 5, 2021, I produced a second draft of the Case Report (in English and in Spanish). It contained all the comments from interviewees, as well as a new section at the end, which presented the summary of feedback received and the summary of comments that appears in the previous section of this document.

The report also showed (using the “track changes” function) 13 additional precisions and quotes from interviewees, voiced since the report was shared with them. I chose to

integrate this information for the added nuance or new perspectives it brought to certain intricate issues – for example, that of conflict and factions.

The rest of the report remained identical to the first draft, apart from a few minor corrections.

## *7 Third draft report, and ethical dilemmas*

On March 10, I got in touch with the founder of FC, Enric Duran, and shared the second draft of the report with him.

I had chosen not to approach Duran earlier, as it rapidly appeared that his actions were featured prominently – and unflatteringly – in the evaluation process and decided that his participation in the first interview cycles might render the process more complex.

I asked Duran whether he wanted to share feedback with me on the report or any section thereof, in writing or on a video call. However, Duran responded to none of my attempts at obtaining feedback from him, despite the two reminders I sent him (on March 24 and April 7), which were marked as “read” in Telegram.

This created an ethical quandary for me. Producing research depicting a certain identifiable person in a negative light, without including this person’s voice in the process, felt at odds with the participative ethos that I wished to follow in this research. Besides, I did not want this report to create harm – for example, Enric Duran being criticised rather strongly in it for his actions could cause him public shame and other unpleasant consequences. Although this is impossible to control absolutely, at the very least I wanted to minimise the likeliness of this occurring directly as a result of this document being published.

On top of this, one interviewee was quite clear in their feedback that they perceived the report as biased toward one of the conflicting parties, due to some of the opinions expressed within. As a result, I also felt some concern that publishing the report could re-ignite the conflict that shook FairCoop.

In the hope of gaining more clarity, and of co-designing a common decision and strategy that might minimise risks for everyone involved (in keeping with democratic

AR principles), I decided to produce a third draft of the report, share it with all interviewees, and invite them to respond to a questionnaire.

The third draft report, shared on April 30 (in English) and May 5 (in Spanish), was largely similar to the second draft, except for:

- A table of contents;
- A description of my unsuccessful attempts to obtain feedback from Enric Duran;
- An invitation to reflect on whether and how this information might be shared with others, beyond the circle of interviewees.

Simultaneously, I invited all interviewees to respond to an online questionnaire in English and Spanish. This questionnaire was sent along with the following message:

*"Your opinion will be very important to figure out how this document could be shared with the outside world ethically, while hopefully helping to bring about positive change. I commit to balancing truth-telling with compassion, as well as respect for the time that you and others have already spent on this project, in taking this decision. I hope you will support me in doing so. If the answers to the questionnaire don't show a clear way forward, I will consult my university ethics committee for guidance."*

It included the following questions:

- *Do you wish to see this report published and enter the public domain?*
- *If this report were published, would you feel comfortable with Enric Duran being named in it as he is now?*
- *So far, Enric Duran has not shared any feedback or response to this report. Would you be comfortable with this report being published as such, without any input or response to it from ED?*
- *Would you be comfortable with this report being published while still displaying the anonymous comments that were added to it by various interviewees?*
- *If you would like this report to be published, what would be the best way to do so, or the best platform?*

- *Apart from publishing this report, do you see any other way(s) the information it contains could be usefully shared with other networks that try to bring radical collective change?*
- *Do you agree to let me (the researcher) take a decision on whether/how to publish this report, based on the results of this questionnaire? (If you chose "No, I want this decision to be taken differently", please tell me more)*
- *Would you be willing to take part in a follow-up process to decide what to do with this report? (If so, please write your name below)*

9 research participants responded to the questionnaire. All of them expressed their wish to see the report published as such, and several also suggested additional formats in which the information contained within could be shared (e.g. using a video documentary). One respondent expressed the wish for a response from Enric Duran to be included before the report be published, and another mentioned that they considered some opinions voiced in the report “inaccurate and unfair to some.” All respondents agreed to let me take the final decision on whether and how to publish the report, although one of them suggested that if some other participant had strong objections to some of the content (e.g. some of the anonymous quotes), that content should be deleted first.

Three other participants responded to me outside the questionnaire, bringing the total number of respondents to 12 (out of a total of 15). Two of them agreed to the publication of the report, but suggested it be accompanied with short videos on the main findings. The third person objected to the publication, considering it “biased” – the same person who voiced critical feedback upon reading the first report draft.

Based on the ethical principles of my research, the following approach was taken towards anonymity:

- Given that I had only offered research participants anonymity for their own input (see the Project Information Sheet in **Annex 3.1**), and did not indicate that I would also anonymise FC and its founder, I would be able to reveal the organisation and the founder's identity in this thesis.

- However, to demonstrate my respect for some of the concerns expressed as regards the content of the draft report, I could share a final report with all interviewees in which both the network and its founder would be anonymised.

## 8 Sharing the final report

On October 1, 2021, I shared the final version of the Case Report with all interviewees, as two PDF files, in English<sup>38</sup> and Spanish<sup>39</sup>. I titled this report “*Organising online to make a difference. Practical learnings from an online community dedicated to creating radical collective change.*” I indicated on the files that I was publishing them under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

I made sure this report was completely anonymised. In the updated introduction, I presented the code I used, with a certain letter referring to each identifying feature – including the name of the community, the name of its founder, the name of the cryptocurrency developed in FC, etc.

This new introduction also contained more details about my stance as a researcher, stressing that the report did not pretend to contain “the whole truth,” and mentioning the absence of any conflicts of interest on my behalf. I also provided more details on my methodology, and on how I had tried to manage my own biases.

I also added an indicative bibliography at the end of the report. This bibliography listed some important examples of literature I had found useful in reflecting on the learnings that I considered relevant from this research (in response to RQ #4), and which appeared in the same executive summary section as in the previous versions of the report.

While sharing the report, I sent the following message to the research participants:

*“I will not be publishing this report on any public platform, but will only share it with you and the other research participants. I leave it to your own judgment whether to share it with others or not.*

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38 <https://bit.ly/3F4Wkqi>

39 <https://bit.ly/3VH9oZW>



*My hope is that this report can be useful to you and others in order to create social change in the world. In case you hear of anyone (be it a person or a group) drawing any lessons or inspiration from this work, please let me know.”*

Since then, two interviewees mentioned having shared this report on the online platform of another socially innovative project, without de-anonymising it, and that it generated useful discussions. One participant from FC with whom I hadn't been in touch later contacted me, and acknowledged they had read the report and found value in it.

# Annex 3.3

## Using the Wenger-Trayner Evaluation Framework in DAF

In this annex, I provide more details about the Wenger-Trayner theory of value-creation in social learning spaces (outlined in **Chapter 3**), and about the corresponding evaluation methodology. I then explain how I have used this methodology as part of my research processes in the Deep Adaptation Forum (DAF).

### 1. Value-creation theory

As mentioned in **Chapter 3**, social learning spaces *create value* for participants to the extent that the latter view engaging uncertainty and paying attention as contributing to their ability to make a difference they care to make (and this value can be positive, negative, or null).

#### 1.1 Social learning modes

There are four main *social learning modes* that are “inherent in all social learning spaces, whether or not they are perceived, articulated, or facilitated as such” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p.62-3):

- social learning spaces *generate value* to the extent that they “produc[e] something of value toward making a difference” for their participants;
- when participants “tak[e] something of value and do something with it” (for example, if they try out in practice a new idea heard from someone), they are *translating value*;
- *framing* is what happens whenever participants engage in activities that shape their own aspirations and expectations for value creation within a particular space, as they discover and decide what difference(s) they care to make; and

- *evaluating* is about “inspecting the difference learning is making or not” – be it informally, by paying attention to any new changes, or by undertaking specific data collection and analysis processes.

These learning modes are not sequential, but rather in a state of constant interplay. Together, they “constitute social learning” while “offer[ing] distinct channels for agency” (ibid, p.64).

In this study, I have focused in particular on the *evaluation mode*, as I have initiated processes aiming at examining the social learning taking place in DAF, and its relevance to radical collective change.

What are the different kinds of value generation that can be assessed through the Wenger-Trayner framework?

## 1.2 Value-Creation Cycles

In a social learning space, value can be created within and across eight different *value-creation cycles* (Figure 14). Each of these cycles corresponds to an intricate process of value being created “progressively and iteratively over time” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p.75). Value created in one cycle can *flow* (by being *translated*) into another cycle, but this does not happen in a linear or predictable fashion, and there is no overarching definition of success for these social learning processes. The framework allows for a fine-grained and flexible evaluation of how these processes unfold for a person or a group.

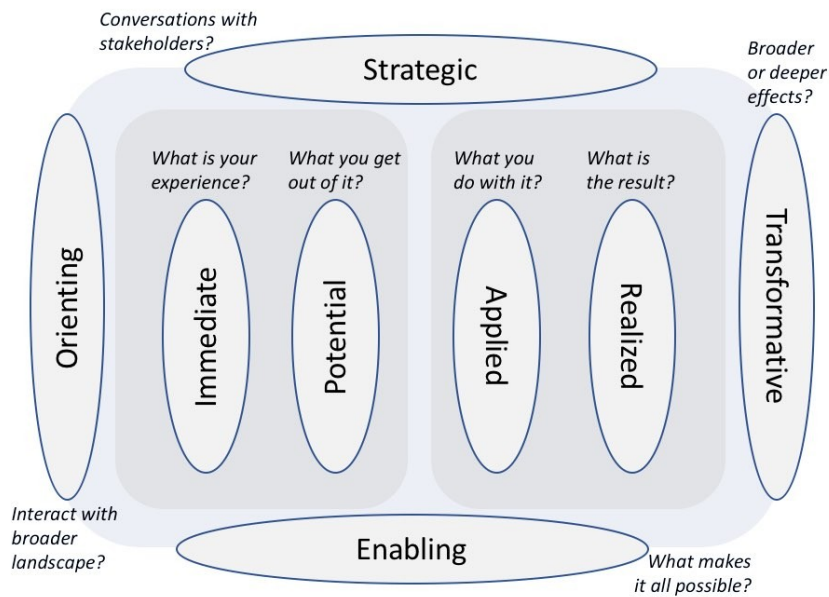


Figure 14: Value-creation cycles (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020)

Each cycle can be described using a guiding question, and illustrated through certain main dimensions of value-creation (ibid, p.79-122). I provide an overview of these in Table 3.

Table 3: Value-creation cycles with their main guiding questions and some illustrative dimensions

Value-creation cycle	Guiding question	Illustrative dimensions of value-creation
<b>Immediate</b>	What is the experience like?	Identification Sense of inclusion Mutual recognition as learning partners Conviviality and enjoyment Productive discomfort Contestability Engaging with other perspectives etc.
<b>Potential</b>	What comes out of it?	Concrete help with specific challenges Innovation Stories of others' experiences Insight Critique Skills Information Resources Self-worth Social capital

		etc.
<b>Applied</b>	What are we learning in the doing?	Inventiveness (as a source of innovation in practice) Adoption/adaptation Reuse Increasing one's influence Resisting more effectively Harnessing synergy Leveraging connections better etc.
<b>Realised</b>	What difference does it make?	Personal difference (better performance and achievements for participants) Collective difference (for participants as a group) Difference for stakeholders Difference for the organisation Societal difference (contributing to a public good) etc.
<b>Enabling</b>	What makes it all possible?	Commitment Internal leadership Transparency Process Social learning support Logistics and technology Strategic facilitation etc.
<b>Strategic</b>	What is the quality of engagement with strategic stakeholders?	Various constituencies Strategic context Aspirations and expectations Ongoing engagement Power Alliances etc.
<b>Orienting</b>	Where do we locate ourselves in the broader landscape?	Participant contexts Biographies and identities Personal networks History and culture Power structures External audiences etc.
<b>Transformative</b>	Does the difference we make have broader effects?	Personal transformation Power shifts New identities Institutional changes Empowerment etc.

Again, it is important to remember that value created in a social learning space is not always positive, but can actually be negative, or null. So the dimensions highlighted

above can be useful to pay attention to unhelpful, non-generative value being created, or to the absence of value-creation in a particular cycle.

For more discussion of each of these cycles and concrete illustrations of the type of value-creation that they cover, please refer to the case studies in **Annexes 5.3** and **5.5**.

### 1.3 Social learning evaluation

How to assess the creation of value across the different cycles in a social learning space, while honouring the agency of participants?

Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020, p.189) have developed an evaluation framework that I find particularly suited to an Action Research approach, in that it is:

- Flexible – it “allows for various degrees of formality”;
- Participatory – it “accommodate[s] different perspectives with participants helping define the parameters”; and
- Dynamic – it “account[s] for the evolving nature of social learning with its inherent unpredictability.”

This framework allows for any participants in a social learning space to carry out their own social learning evaluation, as “value detectives” (ibid, p.228). Its main purpose is twofold:

1. to ascertain whether value has been created in the lives of participants of a social learning space, at a given cycle;
2. and to check to what extent the space contributed to this effect.

For this purpose, the value detectives need to collect:

- *Effect data*, establishing that some difference was made in a given cycle. This data can be quantitative or qualitative, and based on participants' testimonials or other sources (e.g. web analytics, statistics, etc.). This data is used to define indicators that are meaningful to participants, and which can corroborate value-creation stories.

- *Contribution data*, establishing the role of the social learning space in creating that difference. This data takes the shape of *value-creation stories*, which are testimonials from participants that account for the flow of value (social learning) across various learning cycles. In other words, these stories establish the role of the social learning space in making the difference that is valued by participants in the space.

To form a robust picture of value creation, these two types of data should be collected iteratively, and in an integrated way, with cross-references between the two:

Each cycle is a potential integration point because stories can mention effects at any cycle and data can be collected about such effects. The idea is to monitor indicators (quantitative and/or qualitative) for as many cycles as possible and collect value-creation stories (qualitative data) referencing as many monitored indicators as possible. The integration between the two can be dynamic. Effect data calls for stories to explain how effects came about while stories point to effects that may need to be monitored. (ibid, p.192)

Contrary to most evaluation methods used in project management or development studies, this framework does not aim to assess whether a project or programme has met objectives and targets established by donors or a management team, but whether a social learning space is enabling its members to make the difference that they are trying to make – individually and collectively – through their participation in that space. This framework is designed to be flexible and value-agnostic: it doesn't impose a normative set of indicators as criteria for what constitutes "valuable learning" - but considers that "what counts as success – or value – is under ongoing negotiation among stakeholders; it is changing as circumstances and people evolve [...]" (p.189). And finally, it is also meant to function as a feedback process, helping to "deepen the learning" taking place in the space (p.193).

Therefore, this framework appears particularly useful to a participatory Action Research project like the one I undertook.

Having presented the main components of the Wenger-Trayner social learning theory and evaluation framework, I will now explain how I have used them within DAF.

## 2 *Evaluation processes in DAF*

### 2.1 First research cycle

This action research project in DAF began in January 2020. Members of the DAF Core Team, including myself, collaborated with DAF volunteers to create a survey that would be disseminated across the network: the DAF 2020 User Survey. This survey had the twin objective of assessing the usefulness of DAF platforms, and the learning and changes taking place for participants thanks to these platforms.

The survey was open from January 2 to February 25, 2020. A preliminary summary of results was shared in DAF on February 29, 2020. Partial results were also shared on the blog of the Initiative for Leadership and Sustainability, on June 8, 2020 (Bendell and Cavé, 2020). Later, I produced a report providing a more in-depth analysis of the survey results (Cavé, 2022b).

There were 168 survey respondents. In early April 2020, using simple random sampling, I selected 10 of those who had indicated in their response that they would be willing to be contacted by a member of the research team. I reached out to each of them to arrange for a one-hour interview.

With these interviews, I had two main objectives:

- To start gathering contextual narratives – i.e. relatively unstructured accounts that are aimed at “broadly capturing the perspective of the narrator on the history and value of a social learning space” in order for participants’ perspectives to “reveal avenues for inquiry” and “point out where value is created and where some credit should be given for contributing to this value” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p.230-231). This can be particularly useful in order to begin mapping out indicators of value-creation to monitor (and thus, the creation of *effect data*); and
- To begin collecting value-creation stories (as *contribution data*).



Due to the focus of the survey on the usefulness of DAF platforms, I was particularly interested in investigating what aspects of DAF platforms seemed to play an enabling or disabling role with regards to social learning for these participants.

These interviews, which took place in April and May 2020, enabled me to set up a value-creation matrix (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p.219) in a spreadsheet, to start integrating indicators and emerging fragments of value-creation stories (Figure 15).

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J
1		Immediate			Potential				Applied	
2	Monitored indicators	<p>DATA SOURCES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Survey results on experience of DAF (quality of interactions, etc.)</li><li>Survey results on platforms ease of use</li><li>Survey results from Strategy Options Dialogue</li><li>Survey results – collapse community</li></ul> <p>POTENTIAL INDICATORS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Time spent in DAF spaces</li><li>Friendships &amp; connections created</li><li>Quality of facilitation/safety of DAF spaces</li><li>Possible to be open and vulnerable in DAF spaces</li><li>Former nodes / volunteers: ask why they left or stopped</li></ul>			<p>DATA SOURCES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Survey results on changed state of mind, confidence, isolation, etc.</li><li>Survey results on new connections</li><li>DAF training report? (OK to use?)</li><li>collapse and community survey</li></ul> <p>INDICATORS:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>changes in ways of interacting with people within / outside DAF</li><li>changes in ways of relating with people with non-DAF mindsets</li><li>have you met many new people thanks to DAF?</li><li>are you looking for any particular resources within DAF – and are you finding them?</li><li>community responses to media attention, citations, etc.</li><li>learning about racism, colonialism, etc.</li><li>more openness to others' perspectives and life experiences</li><li>have you gained better self-understanding thanks to engaging in DAF?</li><li>fruitful collaborations, mentoring?</li><li>losing social connections due to DA involvement?</li><li>fruitful self-awareness</li><li>new skills acquired</li><li>more self-confidence</li></ul>		<p>DATA SOURCES:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>changes in personal life/work/activism from survey results</li></ul> <p>TO ASK:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>ability to voice disagreement with status quo</li><li>changes in professional practice</li><li>learning things by creating artifacts or other resources</li><li>put new learning into action via team collaboration</li><li>changes in dealing with one's emotions</li><li>experimenting with new practices</li><li>sharing information and practices outside DAF</li><li>starting new projects or circles</li><li>finding that one's practices have been taken up by the others in the network</li></ul>			
3	Value-creation stories	transcript	interpretation	tags	transcript	interpretation	tags	transcript	interpretation	tags
	KS 02.04.20	<p>I took the first opportunity I had to join the forum, because that felt like somewhere I could have meaningful engagement, and not be... so alone. Dorian, in the way I was thinking.</p> <p>And I say: "But that's the bit that feeds me" (pause) All the other stuff takes from you, I'm depleted, because of the energy and the effort. But everything I'm doing for DA, as challenging as it can be, and as, erm, time-consuming as it can be, and frustrating – all the things you can get when you're working with a lot of people – it feeds my soul. I love it.</p> <p>It's about being able to have fruitful conversations about things that matter.</p> <p>touch in, if not via the forum then via the personal relationships, multiple times every day, and with various online gatherings that others host, or we host, it's probably fair to say that's most of my socialising. It's not a lot Dorian, but it's very significant...</p> <p>And it's such a beautiful community. It's so beautiful... Everybody's taking</p>	<p>DAF is a unique place, where I can feel less alone in the way I'm thinking, and where I can have fruitful conversations about the things that matter most to me.</p> <p>Volunteering in DAF is so fulfilling it feeds my soul. This is why I spend so much time doing it.</p> <p>The people are great, and very responsive.</p>	<p>less isolation; fruitful conversations; fulfillment; great people</p>	<p>I think engaging with the forum genuinely gave me a sense of peace. That it was OK to not always be fighting.</p> <p>And I think the second thing it did was, it allowed me to feel strong enough within myself, because of the relationships that were forming, as a by-product to the same thing, that I then don't mind being that voice which asks people to be aware of the limits of their understanding of what's going on.</p> <p>During a high-level work meeting, I voiced disagreements on how to use public funds for climate adaptation. I would never have said things like that. I would have been tentative about making these statements, and I'm more resilient in myself because of my involvement with the forum. And because of that, now I'm very happy.</p>	<p>Engaging in DAF has enabled me to become more tolerant and at peace in dealing with people who don't see the world like I do.</p> <p>It has also enabled me to feel strong enough to voice my disagreement when it feels important. And as a result of feeling more confident, I feel more inner resilience, which is satisfying.</p>	<p>tolerance; personal confidence; satisfaction</p>	<p>And I don't voice my disagreement in ways that are belligerent, I just like to say "hang on a minute, what about have we considered... is this really the best we could hope to accomplish..." So it has changed things.</p>	<p>I also feel able to speak up and voice my disagreement more often, and in non-belligerent ways, including in work settings. This happened, for instance, during one [several?] high-level work meetings.</p>	<p>personal confidence</p>

Figure 15: Preview of the DAF value-creation matrix

## 2.2 Developing an interview process

Interviews took place over videoconference, and were recorded. Ahead of them, I asked interviewees to read the Participant Information Sheet (**Annex 3.1**) and to send me the “consent email” presented there if they agreed to the conditions listed within.

Conversations were relatively unstructured at first. As a list of potential value-creation indicators started to emerge (**Annex 5.1**), they provided support for semi-structured conversations, as I started to probe whether these indicators were relevant to the interviewee. I also invited questions and feedback from the interviewee, and engaged my own uncertainty, in the hope of making it possible for each conversation to function as a discrete social learning space. I took notes during the call.

This interview format remained largely similar throughout the rest of the research project, including in the period during which I collaborated with W. Freeman as part of a research team, as mentioned in **Chapter 3**, and described in more detail within **Annex 5.5**.

## 2.3 Evaluation process in three research streams

In order to write **Chapter 5** of this thesis and answer the research questions mentioned in **Chapter 3**, I decided to follow the following research streams as I collected effect data and contribution data within DAF:

1. the Diversity and Decolonising Circle;
2. the Research Team; and
3. the landscape of DAF social learning spaces.

I selected the first two research streams because they concerned social learning spaces that were:

- relevant to this inquiry, due to the strong collective emphasis on learning and change within them; and
- easily accessible for the research team to collect effect and contribution data, as both Wendy and I were regular participants in each of these spaces.

I selected the third research stream out of an intention to consider social learning processes taking place across various spaces and communities of practice within DAF, as a network – in accordance with the general research question guiding this doctoral research.

In-depth reports on Research Streams #1 and #2 are respectively presented in **Annexes 5.3** and **5.5**. Research Stream #3 is presented in **Chapter 5**.

For each of these streams, my writing-up and analysis process followed the following broad steps. For more details, please refer to the aforementioned locations.

### ***1. Identifying participant aspirations***

Using contextual narratives and framing processes, as well as survey reports where relevant, I started by forming a broad picture of the aspirations of participants in the

social learning space(s) under consideration. This was a crucial step to assess their social learning, especially the creation of Realised value. **Annex 5.4** shows my interpretation of participant intentions and aspirations in the DAF landscape as a whole.

## **2. Selecting and summarising effect data**

I then considered the indicators of effect data that I had been collecting. For Research Streams #1 and #2, this led me to refine the indicators of value-creation I relied on by examining textual sources, and carrying out a Template Analysis (King, 2004, 2012; Brooks *et al.*, 2015). In this process, I sometimes considered complementary effect data sources to create additional indicators of value-creation.

Once I had a refined and consolidated list of indicators for each value-creation cycle in the social learning space(s) I was analysing, I summarised in writing the effect data corresponding to each of these indicators in each cycle, sometimes quoting participants in the process.

In the two in-depth reports (**Annexes 5.3 and 5.5**), I included reflections on any “integrative themes” emerging from the effect data, and cutting transversally across several cycles.

In the case of Research Stream #3, the main sources of effect data were:

- the surveys disseminated throughout DAF;
- opinions voiced in the course of interviews and group discussions;
- personal observations from my part (e.g. on the number of active self-organised groups in DAF).

To write **Chapter 5**, I brought together effect data from my value-creation matrix corresponding to value-creation indicators, classified as representing “seeds,” “soil” or “sowers”:

- *Seed indicators* (mostly) represented Potential, Realised and Transformative cycles;
- *Soil indicators* (mostly) represented Immediate and Enabling cycles; and
- *Sower indicators* (mostly) represented Applied and Strategic cycles.

As mentioned in **Chapter 3**, this is an *impressionistic framework*. In practice, it can sometimes be difficult to classify a given piece of data within one cycle or another (see below).

### **1.3. Preparing the contribution data**

Having a consolidated list of indicators in place for each Research Stream, as well as a summary of effect data, I reviewed the value-creation stories I had been collecting (see below), and considered which ones had relevance to the social learning space(s) I was evaluating and to the effect data I highlighted. All stories are compiled in **Annex 5.2**. Having selected them, I analysed them further, by mentioning in a new column whenever a value-creation cycle referred to one or several of the indicators I had identified. The value-creation matrix was a useful reference point in this regard.

### **1.4. Discussing the contribution data**

Finally, I discussed the value-creation stories that were relevant to the social learning space(s) under discussion, and emphasised how they could be integrated – or not – with the effect data I presented. In the case of Research Streams #1 and #2, I also analysed how stories referenced certain indicators more than others, and proposed explanations for this.

In one instance (Research Stream #1 – **Annex 5.3**), I also considered in more detail the learning flows and loops exhibited by the value-creation stories, and what this could mean in terms of the social learning taking place.

I will now present more fully the process of co-creating value-creation stories.

## **2.4 The DAF value-creation stories**

Value-creation stories are presented in **Annex 5.2**.

### **2.4.1 Collection, co-creation and analysis process**

Each of the value-creation stories presented in this chapter is the result of a process of co-creation and iterative analysis. For participants other than me, this process generally went through the following stages:

#### **1. Recording the research conversations or group calls on Zoom**

The “content matter” for the stories mainly came from one-to-one research conversations, following a semi-structured interview format, and several group conversations, all taking place online. They were carried out using the software Zoom, and the corresponding audio and video feeds were recorded to my hard drive.

## **2. Producing conversation transcripts**

I then imported each new voice recording to the platform Otter.ai, on which I had a paid account. The software produced a rough automatic transcript, which I – together with my co-researcher Wendy - then systematically reviewed and corrected. This led to the production of a first file (the Transcript).

## **3. Creating and sharing value-creation stories**

Having produced a high-quality transcript, I read it and highlighted parts of the transcript that seemed to correspond to a value-creation cycle within someone’s story. I copied each highlighted excerpt into a new text file (the Story Workfile), with one file per person and story, and tentatively coded each excerpt with a “dominant” value-creation cycle or contextual narrative (see below), attempting to adopt a “first-person” perspective as I did so<sup>40</sup>. Excerpts that seemed to speak to the same rhetorical turn in the story were grouped together into a common paragraph. I then rephrased more concisely each paragraph underneath it, using italics to make sure not to confuse the original with my interpretation. Where there appeared to be “gaps” in the story, or where I felt a lack of clarity, I asked follow-up questions by email.

I kept in mind that to form good contribution data, a value-creation story should have the following characteristics (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, p.208-210):

1. A clear protagonist: the story should be told from a first-person perspective;
2. A specific case of flow, addressing discrete events, interactions, ideas, changes, etc. and avoiding generalities;
3. Conciseness, to avoid losing the listener in contextual details;
4. Completeness, avoiding making “magic leaps” and skipping steps in the flow;

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<sup>40</sup> In all research conversations carried out for this project, the research team made a point to enquire as to participants’ aspirations within the social learning spaces they engaged with, in order to honour their perspective and agency in working with them to articulate their stories.

5. Convincing transitions: the flow from one cycle to the next should be clear;
6. Plausibility: a good story should be as realistic and believable by someone familiar with the context as possible.

Once I felt that the story met these six quality criteria, from the Story Workfile, I produced a third file (the Shared Story), containing only my rephrased interpretations of what had been shared with me, along with a story title, subheadings, and an opening quote from the Transcript (leaving out any analytical language, e.g. on narratives or value-creation cycles). I shared this short file with the speaker, along with the corresponding Transcript(s) showing the highlighted areas of text that were “distilled” into that story. My request to each person was twofold:

- To check whether they felt the story I had compiled felt true to their experience and what they had shared with me, along with an invitation to make any necessary changes to it to produce a Final Shared Story;
- To let me know whether they were happy to publish this story openly (after corrections were made) on the Conscious Learning Blog, to share it with the rest of DAF as a network – be it under their own name, or anonymously. When they requested anonymity, I also offered to remove any parts of the Final Shared Story which might lead to others identifying them. If they preferred not to publish their story, I respected their choice.<sup>41</sup>

#### **4. Connecting value-creation cycles and indicators**

Finally, feeling assured that a Final Shared Story had been co-produced, I created a new table from it, with one row per value-creation cycle or contextual narrative. These tables appear in **Annex 5.2**.

For my own story (**Annex 5.2**, story #5), I adapted the process above. Taking as a starting point the recording of a research conversation I had with my co-researcher Wendy Freeman on the topic of my own (un)learning, I wrote a new entry in my research journal, in which I reflected on areas of meaningful change for me as a result of my involvement in the D&D circle. Once I was satisfied, I then published my story

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<sup>41</sup> When a new story was published on the blog, DAF participants were invited to read them – e.g. in the monthly DAF volunteer newsletters – and to leave comments on them, which provided for a manner of “plausibility check,” as recommended by Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner (2020, p.240).

on the Conscious Learning Blog, analysed it using the value-creation framework, and finally attempted to connect value-creation cycles and indicators.

The tables in **Annex 5.2** present the Final Shared Stories which research participants have agreed to publish on the Conscious Learning Blog, or to have included in this thesis.

For Research Streams #1 and #2, I was able to rely on a much more granular list of indicators of effect value than for Research Stream #3 (see these lists in **Annex 5.3** and **5.5**). For stories which I analysed as part of Research Streams #1 and #2, I considered whether each value-creation cycle referred to one (or several) of the indicators of effect value I was paying attention to for that particular social learning space. Where it was the case, I wrote the corresponding indicator reference number(s) in the fourth column of each table. When I could connect the cycle with no indicator, I wrote a question mark instead.

For Research Stream #3, considering that the analysis was more transversal across various social learning spaces, it was much more difficult to connect effect data indicators with particular value-creation cycles in given stories. Therefore, while I used the indicators provided in **Annex 5.1** during research interviews to query potential areas of value-creation, I did not connect these indicators so granularly with the value-creation cycles in the stories.

Table 4 summarises the value-creation stories considered for each research stream.

*Table 4: Value-creation stories considered for each research stream*

<b>Research Stream</b>	<b>Value-creation stories considered</b>
RS #1 – Diversity & Decolonising Circle	#1, #2, #3, #4, and #5
RS #2 – the Research Team	#7 and #8
RS #3 – the DAF landscape of practice	#1, #3, #4, #6, #7, #9, #10, #11, #12, #13, #14, #15, and #16

In the tables of Annex 5.2, I also classified some cycles as “anticipated” (Ant.) – referring to “a cycle that has not happened yet, but that has been explored through imagination” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p.257). And in the last

column, I indicated whether the cycle pointed to the creation of positive value (+), negative value (-), or to the absence of any meaningful value (0).

Finally, many of these stories can be seen as composed of several shorter value-creation stories, introduced by headers. I refer to these shorter stories as “subplots”<sup>42</sup> within the general arc of the person’s story. Sometimes, the learning flows explicitly from one of these shorter stories into a subsequent one; at other times, the flow is less explicit.

## 2.4.2 Distinguishing between cycles

As noted by other researchers making use of the value-creation framework (e.g. Bertram *et al.*, 2014; Bertram, Culver and Gilbert, 2017), it can be challenging to assign a particular comment or activity to one value-creation cycle or to another. For example, in the D&D circle, a remark stating that one has gained new understanding may be categorised as Potential, Realised, or even Transformative value.

Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner (2020, p.123) acknowledge the difficulty:

Social learning does not necessarily involve distinct phases for each cycle. More than one cycle may be involved in any given activity. The creation of value for different cycles may be intertwined and at times indistinguishable.

Nonetheless, in line with the model’s pragmatist perspective, they argue (*ibid.*) that

the distinctions are useful theoretically as a more refined model for social learning processes viewed as value creation. In practice the distinction is useful for being more intentional about improving learning capability at each value cycle.

Therefore, my understanding is that while each cycle can be generally characterised by certain dimensions of positive or negative value that it tends to create, and by certain ways of producing this value (*ibid.*, p.76), there is no “cut-and-dried” list of criteria for assigning part of a given story to a certain cycle, and that this categorisation largely rests on *the value detective’s understanding of this part of the story within the wider context of the entire story, and of the speaker’s stated aspirations*. For this reason, and to acknowledge that “more than one cycle may be involved in any given activity,” I

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<sup>42</sup> The term “subplot” may not be most appropriate, as it could imply a hierarchy of importance between the “main plot” of a story and the “subplots” that compose it. This is not my intention.



refer to the value-creation cycles in Annex 5.2 as “dominant” cycles in my understanding of the story. In other words, while a certain turn may point to the simultaneous creation of Immediate, Potential and Realised value, for instance, I will code this turn with the cycle that I sense is most prominent for this turn in terms of the story’s value-creation flow.

### 2.4.3 Cycles and narratives

Besides value-creation cycles, most stories I collected also contain fragments of *contextual narratives*. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020, p.230) define a narrative as “a relatively unstructured format aimed at broadly capturing the perspective of the narrator on the history and value of a social learning space.” Such narratives, which paint a contextual picture, should be distinguished from the cycles that provide the gist of the value-creation story, which makes “a very specific claim of contribution.” (ibid.)<sup>43</sup>

These narratives come in three types (p.152, 230-3):

1. *Ground narratives* refer to the collective history of the social learning space and what has been going on, including who participates in it, what has happened so far, etc.
2. *Aspirational narratives* refer to the difference participants are trying to make in the space, and the ways they envision will enable this to happen.
3. *Value narratives* refer to “general testimonials about how the social learning space is creating value or not at various cycles” (p.232).

Within the context of evaluating social learning, the authors of the value-creation framework mainly view contextual narratives as useful elements for value detectives to better understand the context of the social learning space (p.230), and the narrator’s perspective on it, as a starting point to elicit value-creation stories. Being familiar with most of the social learning spaces explored in this research, I did not collect contextual

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<sup>43</sup> An image I landed on that has been useful to me, in order to distinguish between narratives and cycles, is that I understand contextual narratives to be densely packed, like compressed electronic files, and once “unpacked,” may prompt a number of stories to unfold – whereas a cycle is a simpler step within an unfolding story.

narratives systematically, but simply chose to keep some of them within the value-creation stories presented below, where relevant.

I should point out that to my knowledge, including contextual narratives within the broader framework of a value-creation stories does not seem to have been explicitly done by any other researchers using this analytical framework; however, I don't think this compromises the quality of the stories – on the contrary, I believe these narratives function as useful “buttresses” helping to support the articulation of long value-creation flows, such as those depicted in most of the stories presented here.

Because contextual narratives cannot be “boiled down” to a single, “dominant” value-creation cycle, in the tables below I have not associated them with any value-creation indicators in particular.

#### **2.4.4 A landscape of social learning spaces**

In the context of the Wenger-Trayner social learning theory, a social body of knowledge can be thought of as a “landscape of practice,” and a personal experience of learning can be pictured as a journey through that landscape (E. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015b). Therefore, in order to better situate the learning in that landscape, I have associated each learning cycle in the stories with the social learning space which I think constitutes the location of that particular moment in the narrator's flow of learning.

Besides, in order to better distinguish between learning spaces, I have highlighted in green the cycles which correspond to the “main” social learning spaces examined in this chapter. For learning spaces that seemed less important (e.g. due to being overly idiosyncratic), I simply used the generic category “Other.”

As contextual narratives often refer to more than one social learning space, I have not associated them with any space in particular.

# Annex 4.1

## A brief timeline of FairCoop

This annex presents a timeline of the history of FairCoop, which I compiled from the testimonies of various interviewees, and from several media reports (Geddis, 2013; Schneider, 2015), websites (Duran, 2008; CIC, 2020; FairCoop, 2021), and research papers (Balaguer Rasillo, 2021; Dallyn and Frenzel, 2021).

**2005 to 2008:** Catalan activist Enric Duran borrows €492,000 from 39 different financial entities in Spain, and invests the money in various projects and networks focused on alternative forms of economics and politics. He publicly declares he will never repay these loans.

**2010:** The Catalan Integral Cooperative (CIC) is established. Duran is a founding member.

**2013:** Duran goes underground to escape from the Spanish justice system.

**April-September 2014:** Duran and a team of friends acquire the code of Faircoin, then a failed cryptocurrency. Developer Thomas König begins to work on the Faircoin code. By the end of September, CIC members start to invest in Faircoin.

**September 2014:** The FairCoop (FC) website goes live.

**From September 2014 to July 2015:** Duran gathers around him an affinity team of activists to work on Faircoin and various other campaigns. They travel around Europe to meet other groups of activists with similar mindsets.

**Summer 2015:** FC summer camp. The instant messaging software Telegram is adopted to coordinate the work of the various emerging FC groups.

**2015:** Faircoin becomes listed and traded on the crypto-exchange platform Bittrex.

**2015-2016:** Following active networking by Duran and others, FC local nodes start appearing around France, Switzerland, Italy, Greece, Germany, Austria, and in Latin

America like Brazil, Argentina, and Chile. Online meetups on FC Telegram groups start to attract more people. The market price of Faircoin begins to rise.

**July 2017:** FC summer camp. An enterprise resource planner software (OCP), and an associated methodology (OCW), are introduced and tested, along with the initiative to build a circular economy, and plans for a new website. A budget of 10,000 euros per month is allocated, via OCP, to people working full-time on FC tasks.

**Mid-to-late 2017:** The project is in a vital stage, and benefits from the general crypto boom. Faircoin market value increases sharply, to nearly 1 euro, to the benefit of some FC members. An official “assembly price” is decided upon (1.20 euro), in line with the high market price. At the same time, an ongoing controversy around the use of OCP, which many consider a waste of money, reaches new levels of intensity.

**Early 2018:** Bitcoin crash. Faircoin takes a steep dive. Speculators start buying cheap faircoins on exchanges, and spending them on FC’s online marketplace (FairMarket) at the official price. Merchants then swap their faircoins for euros, which drains the FC account of euros.

**March 2018:** Faircoin is unlisted from Bittrex.

**July 2018:** FC summer camp. Duran announces that FC has run out of euros, and that a long waiting list of people are hoping to exchange their faircoins. An affinity group (Komun) born inside FC, emerges more formally, and expresses vocal opposition to Duran’s management of FC.

**Summer 2018:** The OCP controversy breaks out into open conflict. People who had invested heavily in Faircoin are looking at large losses. A general feeling of “all against all” starts to spread. People who have been working full time can no longer do so. Many people start leaving, either quietly or angrily.

**Mid-2019:** The CIC formally ceases to function.

**Summer 2019:** Another physical gathering is convened, to consider how to revive the project. But the need to generate euros to pay the queue of merchants wishing to exchange their faircoins is too big of an obstacle for meaningful progress to be made.

From **early 2019 to early 2021**, activity in FC as a whole and in most associated projects decreases considerably.

Some projects born within FC remain active in late 2021 – most notably Faircoin, which is the object of a Winter Camp gathering from **Dec.17, 2021 to Jan.7, 2022**.

Nonetheless, testimonials mention conflict and tensions persisting in many projects, particularly around financial questions.

# Annex 5.1

## DAF Effect Data Indicators

This annex displays the list of effect data indicators (or questions used to monitor these indicators, especially during interviews) that I have derived iteratively from research conversations and surveys disseminated in DAF. They are presented here, classified by social learning cycle (see **Annex 3.3** for more details).

### **IMMEDIATE**

- Changes in ways of interacting with people within or outside DAF
- Time spent per day or week on DAF platform
- Sense of trust and belonging
- Quality of facilitation and safety of DAF spaces
- Possibility to be open and vulnerable in DAF spaces
- Feeling stimulated and energised
- Former volunteers or participants: statements made on leaving the social learning space or decreasing their engagement

### **POTENTIAL**

- Changes in ways of interacting with people within or outside DAF
- Changes in ways of relating with people with non-DA mindsets
- New friendships and connections
- Finding new useful resources
- Community responses to media attention, criticisms of DA, etc.
- Learning about racism, colonialism, etc.
- More openness to others' perspectives and life experiences
- Deeper or more critical self-understanding

- Fruitful collaborations and mentoring
- Losing social connections due to DA involvement
- New self-awareness
- New self-organising skills
- More self-confidence

### **APPLIED**

- Improved ability to voice one's disagreement with status quo
- Changes in one's professional practice
- Speaking confidently about DA and collapse
- Learning by creating artefacts or other resources
- Putting new learning into action via team collaboration
- Changes in dealing with one's emotions
- Experimenting with new practices
- Sharing information and practices outside DAF
- Starting new projects or circles

### **REALISED**

- Changes in personal circles with regards to DA/collapse
- Changes in professional practice (own and others')
- Introducing more people to the forum
- Sharing information about DA/DAF publicly
- Feeling better able to share one's feelings openly
- Feeling better able to integrate and transform one's feelings

### **ENABLING**

- Receiving help or mentoring from other DAF participants
- Lack of support or disagreements with network leadership
- Useful rules and agreements in DAF groups

- Helpful or unhelpful technology
- Being helped to find one's way within or outside DAF
- Finding support from a small group or community of practice

## **STRATEGIC**

- Finding that one's contributions are valued or understood
- Understanding the wider ecosystem and its stakeholders

## **ORIENTING**

- Experiencing other (non-DA) collapse spaces
- Understanding how and where one fits within DAF
- Making connections with other movements (e.g. Transition Towns)
- Using guides and other resources to find one's way

## **TRANSFORMATIVE**

- Relating to self, others, or the universe in very new ways
- New awareness of one's place within the planetary metabolism



# Annex 5.2

## DAF Value-Creation Stories

This annex presents the value-creation stories that I co-created with DAF participants. For more details on the process of collection and analysis, please refer to **Annex 3.3**.

### Story #1 – Kat

Published on the Conscious Learning Blog on March 19, 2022<sup>44</sup>

“Learning and practicing the language of anti-racism

Social learning space	Learning cycle	Story	Referenced indicator(s)	Value created (positive / negative / no value)
Strategy Options Dialogue	1. Enabling	The conversations that led to the founding of the Diversity & Decolonising Circle took place in the DAF Strategy Options Dialogue, in early 2020. I was one of the volunteers who was convening that space and holding the conversations.	?	+
Strategy Options Dialogue	2. Immediate	As the facilitator, I was popping from small group to small group to eavesdrop and make sure that people were progressing. And every time I dropped into the room where Wendy and Sasha and Dorian in particular were, there was this common theme and common thread, and my curiosity was to be with that topic, and to see how it was unfolding – as I always had this issue around accessibility and the voices that were never heard, and the perspectives that were never represented. But I didn’t have the ability to do that, because I needed to be paying attention to the whole event and every conversation thread.	?	+
CA Team	3. Enabling	By virtue of my relationship with Sasha, who participated with me in another group in DAF, I was invited to join the circle in the very early days.	?	+
Aspirational narrative		I came into the circle with an attitude of, “I can learn better skills to make the spaces I host more accessible and more inclusive.” I feel a little bit of embarrassment to admit it, but I was definitely naive about the complexity involved in this type of work. I wasn’t naive or blind to the impact of racism – I’d seen it as a child in my mum’s workplaces, in the decisions that she had made, and the heartbreak she would carry with her because of the racism that she was observing as a medical professional. And then I moved to Australia, where there was still a White Australia Policy in 1983. And blacks would have to cross the street to avoid whites and were not allowed to be on the same public transport. So I wasn’t naive about racism. But I was absolutely naive about how ubiquitous		

44 <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/2022/03/19/learning-and-practicing-the-language-of-anti-racism/>

		<i>it is, about how every structure – every one of our normal ways of being – are racist: our ways of being are designed to separate and to isolate.</i>		
<i>D&amp;D</i>	4. Immediate	It felt easy from the very beginning. And perhaps that's because we'd coalesced around a purpose or at the very least a curiosity, without any real picture of what that might mean or what that might be or what the end point was. For me, that made it really easy to be part of the conversation. Because it wasn't prescriptive. It wasn't fixed. There were no big expectations or grand ideas. It really was just a tremendous curiosity and this heart-open... "Well, what if? What about?" and so for me, that was part of the appeal of becoming part of this circle of folk working together.	<b>I4</b>	+
<i>D&amp;D</i>	5. Potential	The early work that we were doing in the run up to and then in response to the anti racism training, in November 2020, helped me start to really understand systemic racism and just how blind nearly everybody is to it unless they are suffering because of it, unless they are a marginalized group – unless they are black or indigenous.	<b>P3</b>	+
<i>D&amp;D</i>	6. Immediate	So I went through a lot of heartbreak and a lot of crying, a lot of shame and a lot of embarrassment for all the situations in my life where I had not consciously acted to stop racism. I never consciously contributed to it but I was so blind, I didn't speak up. And I never thought to question it, it never occurred to me.	<b>I2</b>	-
<i>D&amp;D</i>	7. Potential	My discussions with other participants in the circle led me to consider whether this was, at least in part, due to my being a woman: I never felt empowered to speak up to my brothers who were awful, or to challenge the authority at school or university or at my workplaces.	<b>P3</b>	+
<i>D&amp;D</i>	8. Enabling	Everyone I've worked with in this circle has been so gentle, so compassionate and so incredibly supportive – especially Nonty, whom we must have inadvertently wounded and hurt many times over, and yet she is still here, celebrating each tiny step forward that we take.	<b>E4</b> <b>E5</b>	+
<i>Value narrative</i>		<i>There is also something powerful about the speed at which we have been doing our work. It hasn't felt forced, or rushed, there was always lots of space, it's felt very much like the relationships came first. For example, I remember being in meetings where the check-in someone's having a bad time or is in a particularly difficult place, or showing up with difficult emotions, and the work gets pushed to one side, because what's important in that moment is being present with the other in there. And similarly with moments of celebration and happiness. So it's been really centred around relationships. As a result, being here isn't onerous – when this meeting pops up in a calendar every week, I've never once had that feeling of "God, again?!" – it's always like, "Oh, great!" because it's not fixed, it's not rigid, you don't know what you're arriving into, or even at the moment of clicking "Join the meeting," what you're arriving with. But just knowing that there is space for all of that feels really powerful.</i>		
<i>Ground narrative</i>		<i>Another important thing is that I haven't noticed any of us dominating. Not having a single leader is so beautiful, because that leaves loads of space for co-creation and for creating in that moment, as a group of people. At one time or another, some of us have stepped forward to make things happen or to take on a responsibility. But I've never felt like anybody was exerting undue power or</i>		

		<i>influence or control over the group or what the group was doing. And my sense is, if any one of us had been particularly dominant, or particularly controlling and demanding of the others, we would have had a lot more tension and difficulty than we did have. And the tensions we had were very challenging and exhausting. In those moments as we were getting through them, had we had a very dominant vocal person in the group who was pressing their perspective and their way, we would have disintegrated. That level of tension and argument may have just pushed us beyond reasonable limits, particularly around a topic which is so challenging and painful already.</i>		
<i>D&amp;D</i>	9. Transformative	This journey of learning has been deeply transformational for me. I almost feel like I've now got a fluency, and the language, that will allow me to speak up anywhere even when there's that little doubtful voice on my shoulder that says, "Hang on a minute! What if, what if, what if...?"	<b>T2</b>	+
<i>Work-place</i>	10. Applied	Thanks to my involvement in the DAF anti-racism training, in November 2020 I invited Nonty to organise an anti-racism training for my team/network outside of DAF. This training has been instrumental in supporting a National Environmental Movement (comprising more than 60 organisations) that are now engaging in the hard work of decolonising their ways of operating, to increase their accessibility and to value and engage appropriately marginalised groups within their local areas.	<b>A3 A4</b>	+
<i>Work-place</i>	11. Realised	The workshop was a success. This work is new and challenging for many, but the training kindled high enthusiasm and commitment in the participants.	<b>R2</b>	+
<i>Work-place</i>	12. Strategic	As a result of this successful training, I was approached in the Summer of 2021 by a Rivers Trust in the South East of England to provide advice and support on inviting BIPOC to their board. All in all, after introducing this work to the National Rivers Trust network, 74 individual trusts are making a combined effort to address systemic racism, white supremacy and to enhance equity, diversity and inclusion in their teams and in the communities in which they operate. This speaks to a potential big change. Many of the original trainees continue to meet monthly to support their ongoing learning.	<b>?</b>	+
<i>Work-place</i>	13. Realised	I also heard that the training we ran inspired several other organisations to launch their own anti-racism efforts supported by the national umbrella organisation. Progress is slow but steady and there are still many mistakes being made but now with more consciousness and an awareness of the harms that, prior to this training, were unconscious.	<b>R2</b>	+

## Story #2 – Nontokozo

Published on the Conscious Learning Blog on March 4, 2022<sup>45</sup>

“Creating safe and trusting spaces for difficult conversations”

Social learning space	Learning cycle	Story	Indicator(s)	Value
Retreat	1. Potential	I met Dorian during a retreat I took part in, in Russia, in March 2020.	?	+
Ground narrative		<i>At the time, I was very tired and frustrated by the lack of learning about racism and colonialism on behalf of white Europeans in environmental movements. Also, I felt I was asked to hold indigenous ceremonies on such events and retreats, without any space being offered for me to speak about the social justice issues underlying climate change. So I started speaking out.</i>		
Retreat	2. Immediate	At one point, Dorian came to sit down next to me, and admitted he had lost track of his original impetus to work on global sustainability and climate change, which was connected to the deep injustice of it all. He asked me how he could learn to do better. I felt deeply touched by his lack of defensiveness and that he genuinely wanted to hear more and take action. Usually there is a strong reaction of defensiveness towards this topic from the white-body community.	?	+
Retreat	3. Applied	That night, we walked in the ice together. We agreed that the Deep Adaptation Forum, once the retreat was over, would invite my help in support of opening spaces for such discussions in the network. This is how my journey started in Deep Adaptation. A few months later, we began having these conversations. I was soon invited to join the newly established DAF Diversity and Decolonising Circle, as a consultant.	?	+
D&D	4. Immediate	These discussions were difficult at first. The Covid lockdowns had begun, and we were connecting through Zoom. But also because the subject was heavy and scary. I was also starting to see how huge and international DAF was, as a network. I knew how people would react to these kinds of topics, and started wondering what was the point of even doing this, and what my role was supposed to be.	I2	-
D&D	5. Potential	But I witnessed strong commitment from the Circle members to keep showing up, and build strong relationships, in spite of the conflicts and difficulties we faced from trying to heal the trauma of racial divide inside of us. People kept coming back, no matter what. I also found that everyone brought strong skills, especially as facilitators, and were able to be creative and use them to craft processes adapted to our specific context, which helped us overcome our difficulties. This commitment to being in the group even when it's difficult helped me feel	P4 P5	+

<sup>45</sup> <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/2022/03/04/creating-safe-and-trusting-spaces-for-difficult-conversations/>

		able to trust these white-body people I worked with.		
<i>D&amp;D</i>	6. Realised	Now, through the work we do in the Circle, I have found a space of safety. A space in which I can openly speak about racism and other oppressions and be fully myself, without having to face the sort of complications and reactions I experienced from white-body people in other organisations. Even though others in the network might not be comfortable with what we do, and how we do it, we've managed to create this space to bring these topics to the forefront. And this has ripple effects, this has an impact on the network and in our personal lives, including other spaces that we interact with.	<b>R1</b> <b>R2</b>	- +
<i>D&amp;D</i>	7. Transformative	I think what has happened is very profound. I don't have western words for it. While I originally joined this group only as a consultant, I feel an internal personal change has happened for me, which has given me hope. Now, I can say that I have a space where I can go which feels safe, with white-body people. This is so important! A white-body person cannot understand this - the privilege of feeling safe in spaces and groups and how whiteness can impact on the safety of BIPoC in spaces and group dynamics. It's a space in which I can just express myself openly. It doesn't feel heavy. Although I still experience racism in my life, having this space enables me to breathe and take care of myself, especially my mental health. It makes it possible for me not to feel like I'm fighting all the time.	<b>T1</b> <b>T2</b>	+
<i>Aspirational narrative</i>		<i>It feels very important that we capture what we have achieved, so it can be shared, and maybe this experience can be replicated somewhere else. More people need to witness that this is something that is possible to achieve. Not just white-body people, but also our BIPoC community who are wounded by everyday struggles of oppressions, who are hurt and angry and are seeking justice. They need to know that there are other possibilities, which involve being able to relax, and to heal, without having to fight so much all the time. We can create those spaces of trust. Of course I do not take it for granted, I know it's a privilege, a privilege that should be a basic human right. Getting to this point required a lot of work and commitment from all of us, and it may not work in other organisations. Policies and strategies are useful, but not enough: radical systemic change will not come only from the justice system (the system is deliberately created to be as it is), or from the documents we write. It has to come from people committing to being on a journey of personal change and the willingness to create an inclusive and just world.</i>		

## Story #3 – Sasha

First published on the Conscious Learning Blog on June 25, 2021. Revised and updated on March 15, 2022<sup>46</sup>

<sup>46</sup> <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/2021/06/25/how-i-decided-to-take-action-on-anti-racism-and-decolonising/>

“How I decided to take action on anti-racism and decolonising”

Social learning space	Cycle/narrative	Story	Indicator(s)	Value
<b>How I joined the Deep Adaptation Forum</b>				
<i>Other</i>	1. Orienting	I heard Jem Bendell speak on a podcast, recommended by someone from my organisation who is also a DAF participant. What he said about the science of climate change and collapse wasn't new to me, but his emphasis on love and the reduction of harm resonated with me. It gave me a new perspective on how I should live and what to do with my life.	?	+
<i>Other</i>	2. Immediate	Hearing him speak of the spirit of Deep Adaptation made me feel more relaxed, self-accepting, and reunited with my true self.	?	+
<b>How I decided to take action in the field of anti-racism and colonialism</b>				
<i>DA FB group</i>	3. Applied	So I joined the Positive Deep Adaptation (PDA) Facebook group.	?	+
<i>DA FB group</i>	4. Potential	Reading a certain conversation thread in the PDA group, I discovered the link between collective trauma, climate change, and colonialism. That felt very true to me.	?	+
<i>DA FB group</i>	5. Potential	I understood that colonialism is a reason for not taking action on climate change. I read more on this, including the work of Vanessa Andreotti.	?	+
<i>Aspirational narrative</i>		<i>I wanted to do this in companionship with someone else.</i>		
<i>Other</i>	6. Orienting	Also, I did an I Ching reading, which said that I should be working on these topics. So I decided I would address colonialism.	?	+
<b>How the Diversity and Decolonising Circle started</b>				
<i>DA FB group</i>	7. Potential	It was thanks to a Facebook conversation thread that I got to first read comments from Wendy Freeman, which resonated with me. I remembered her name.	?	+
<i>DA FB group</i>	8. Immediate	I felt a sense of connection with her.	?	+
<i>Death Cafe</i>	9. Enabling	Later, I met Wendy during a Death Cafe session. The space felt so safe that I was able to share about a particular life-changing experience with her and another person, which I have only rarely been able to do so far.	?	+
<i>Strategy Options Dialogue</i>	10. Orienting	During the DAF Strategy Options Dialogue, I realised that I wasn't interested in the topics of “prepping” for collapse, survival kits, etc. I've been through this phase, and I am much more interested in engaging with as much adaptation that is focused on our connection with the Earth, to re-establish that sense of connection.	?	+
<i>Strategy Options Dialogue</i>	11. Enabling	I then met Wendy again in a breakout room during the Strategy Options Dialogue.	?	+
<i>D&amp;D</i>	12. Applied	These experiences encouraged us to create the Diversity	?	+

		& Decolonising Circle together.		
D&D	13. Enabling	I received important mentoring from Nenad and Kat in the Community Action group that helped get the group going.	E4 E6	+
D&D	14. Immediate	Kat and others joined the group, and from the beginning it was an inspiring group to work in.	I4	+
Ground narrative		When soon after its creation, the Black Lives Matter movement came center-stage with the murder of George Floyd, people were open to doing anti-racism work within the framework of DAF.		
White supremacy and me				
D&D	15. Applied	In November 2020, the D&D circle hosted our first event - the "Dismantling Racism" training, facilitated by Nontokozo Sabic. It was our first foray in attempting to decolonize DAF.	A3	+
D&D	16. Immediate	Helping to organize this training made me very wide open to the message. So it landed very deep in me, and I felt deeply shocked at how invisible my privilege had been to me. How could I have not seen that? I sort of knew it, but didn't actually feel what it meant.	I2	-
D&D	17. Potential	It made me realise I didn't have a very good grasp on the difference between individual responsibility, and being involved in systemic oppression which has indoctrinated us into white supremacy.	P2 P3	+
D&D	18. Immediate	The strong emotions this brought up in me led me into a cycle of blame and shame. Conflict broke out between myself and another member of the circle. The situation became very messy, and I struggled to find a way out of it.	I2	-
D&D	19. Potential	I heard a member of the circle mention the need for us in the circle to get better at "calling in," instead of "calling out." I didn't know what it meant. But this felt like somebody was throwing a rope to me that might help. And fortunately, another friend suggested to me there was a course on "Calling In the Calling Out Culture," held by Loretta Ross.	P2	+
D&D	20. Applied	I signed up to it, eager to find some helpful insights.	A3	+
LR Course	21. Immediate	The course was really good.	?	+
LR Course	22. Transformative	I encountered many concepts there that helped me ease my sense of personal shame. For example, Loretta mentioned an analogy that I found very helpful: "If you buy a house, and the plumbing is bad, you're not to blame for the plumbing - but don't you want to get it fixed?" This made me realise that while we're all responsible, we're not to blame. To me, one of the really big obstacles of trying to get through this work is trying to get through that sensation of it landing in my body - that I have benefited massively from a system of white supremacy. I didn't create it, and I don't consciously want to perpetuate it. And I need to really pay attention to how I might do this inadvertently. I need to use my voice, as somebody who stands in the system, to say, "We really need to change it. This plumbing really is leaking, and it's leaking on other people's heads. I'm in the top apartment, and they're living underneath me."	T1	+

<i>LR Course</i>	23. Realised	I so appreciated the content of the course and its facilitators that since then, I have helped to facilitate it myself, as a volunteer, on several occasions.	<b>R2</b>	+
<i>DAF</i>	24. Ant. Applied	I am now hoping to introduce the "Calling In the Calling Out Culture" workshop to DAF participants.	<b>A3</b>	+
<b>How the circle helped us transform conflict</b>				
<i>D&amp;D</i>	25. Enabling	In going through these difficulties, I have also benefited from Nontokozo's ability to hold a space of holding accountable the rest of us in the circle, while expressing her love. That is not an easy thing, and I find it very rare. The love and bond in our circle generally has also been essential. Our relationships were tested - some of us did get angry, and take some of this out on each other. But love, and the bonds that we had created, helped carry us through this very difficult time.	<b>E4 E5</b>	+
<i>Conflict process</i>	26. Enabling	In particular, one of us stepped up to help facilitate a conflict that emerged between myself and another person in the circle.	<b>E3 E4</b>	+
<i>Conflict process</i>	27. Immediate	This conflict resolution process was difficult and painful, but very important.	<b>I2</b>	-
<i>Conflict process</i>	28. Transformative	It was part of the deepest learning that I've done. Thanks to it, I realised the other person and myself had very different working styles and ways of thinking. So I quit trying to make the other person think like me, and gave them more space! This experience also reminded me that love doesn't always mean sentiments and good feelings. Sometimes, it means really reaching for that part of you that cares and wants to do good.	<b>T1 T3</b>	+
<b>What I have learned and experienced in the Forum</b>				
<i>Value narrative</i>		<i>Being in the D&amp;D circle has been an important experience, for which I am very grateful.</i>		
<i>D&amp;D</i>	29. Transformative	Not only do I feel that with this work, I'm hopefully contributing to making this world a little better in terms of racism. I've also benefited so deeply from taking a look at how oppression works. I've realised that as for myself, I'm both the oppressor and the oppressed. Even though I grew up feeling a victim, due to what I've experienced, others in the world were faring even worse than me, due to systemic racism. And when I can get the attention off my own pain, and pay attention to how the system is impacting other people, I get the benefit of understanding how oppression is playing out in my life. And I get better at speaking up when I'm in a situation in which I need to stand up for myself.	<b>T1 T2</b>	+

## Story #4 – Wendy

Published on the Conscious Learning Blog on March 15, 2022<sup>47</sup>

“A journey of deep learning in the Diversity & Decolonising Circle”

<sup>47</sup> <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/2022/03/15/a-journey-of-deep-learning-in-the-diversity-decolonising-circle/>



Social learning space	Cycle/ narrative	Story	Indicator(s)	Value
<b>How the D&amp;D circle got started</b>				
<i>Ground narrative</i>		<i>It was around the time of George Floyd's murder in the US. There were riots, and the #BLM movement had become more of a focal point for me and others.</i>		
<i>Ground narrative</i>		<i>Around the same time, I witnessed an incident in which a Person of Colour was silenced and forced out of a group I was in, within the permaculture network, for complaining about racism. This person was a friend of mine. So I got together with two other white people to stand with them. This made these issues even more present for me. (Since then, I have fed back into this group some of the work and thinking we did in the D&amp;D circle, which resulted in changes in the language on their website and in their charter.)</i>		
<i>Ground narrative</i>		<i>As a result of this context, I became increasingly aware of the privilege I had of being able to speak out loudly and forcefully in the DA Facebook group, about things I didn't agree with.</i>		
<i>DA FB group</i>	1. Immediate	One incident, in particular, struck me deeply: I had just posted a comment that I felt quite pleased with in the group, and a person with disabilities pointed out that this comment was ableist, and didn't land well with them at all. This gave me the feeling of having a mirror held up to myself, and allowing me to notice more of my privilege (including that of having access to a computer and internet access), and the white worldview that I have, which is also predominant in the group.	?	-
<i>DA FB group</i>	2. Potential	And I realised that I was not the only one expressing myself loudly in this group, and preventing other voices and other stories from being heard: it dawned on me that there was a deeply rich layer of knowledge and experience around the process that I wanted to go through with Deep Adaptation that we were completely missing because of these loud voices in the room. After all, Deep Adaptation is about changing the narratives we live by, and transforming the culture we live in, because it's killing the planet.	?	+
<i>Aspirational narrative</i>		<i>This made me want to learn to step back to give more space to these other voices – but also learn to step in to make this space safer, by engaging with the other loud voices in the room that can be harmful in completely unconscious ways. I knew I needed to learn the language and skills to do this better.</i>		
<i>Strategy options dialogue</i>	3. Enabling	I met Sasha Daucus during the DAF Strategy Options Dialogue in 2020. We were both in a breakout room on the topic of diversity or lack of diversity, and were wondering what could be done in DAF on this issue.	?	+
<i>D&amp;D</i>	4. Applied	So Sasha and I decided to launch an initiative that would help to make the Deep Adaptation Forum more inclusive. Talking about this topic with her, over WhatsApp and some Zoom calls, a picture started to take form. Sometimes, all you need is one other person to give an idea some legs!	?	+
<i>D&amp;D</i>	5. Immediate	It felt very organic.	<b>I4</b>	+
<i>D&amp;D</i>	6. Enabling	The DAF Core Team reached out to us and were very supportive of our initiative from the start, which helped us to set up a structure for our discussion group – which became the Diversity & Decolonising Circle – within the Forum. Sasha and I were very well supported in going forward, as two “plain volunteers,” so to me this is an example of the DAF governance structure working tremendously well. Most of the Core Team joined us in the group, and Dorian invited	<b>E4</b> <b>E6</b>	+

		Nontokozo to join us in a consulting role, to provide us with some guidance.		
Aspirational narrative		<i>We were not sure what to do, but had the sincere desire to provide a safer space within DAF for Black, Indigenous and People of Colour, who are going through collapse and have been through collapse and their ancestors have been through collapse. Deep Adaptation is very much about them, too.</i>		
D&D	7. Immediate	Our group quickly built strong relationships, as we tried to meet every week. These relationships have been very important to us.	<b>I1 I4 I5</b>	+
<b>Learning about my own white supremacy and racism</b>				
Value narrative		<i>The more time I spend doing research and spending time in this group, the more I realize that I am absolutely racist. And there are so many things that have happened through the circle that have helped me with that work – although I realise how much more work I still have to do.</i>		
WSC workshops	8. Enabling	Heather Luna, who was part of the circle at one stage, ran some “white supremacy culture” workshops in the forum.	<b>E3 E4</b>	+
WSC workshops	9. Potential	I found out that I could tick every single one of the 20 boxes for behaviours and beliefs that define white supremacy culture. Almost every single one of those was about something that I do, or things that I hold dear, such as being right or always speaking first.	<b>P3</b>	+
WSC workshops	10. Immediate	It felt like a big slap in the face.	<b>I2</b>	-
WSC workshops	11. Potential	As a result, I have definitely taken on this understanding of myself as having white supremacy culture.	<b>P3</b>	+
Aspirational narrative		<i>Since then, I try to be more aware of myself speaking, particularly in groups where there are Indigenous people or People of Colour. I know that I tend to always jump in and speak first, as a strongly held habit that I am trying to work on</i>		
Value narrative		<i>Similarly, the gentle education that I’ve had in the circle, and particularly from working closely with Nonty (Nontokozo Sedibe), has shown me that racism is very present in me. In the past, I’ve sometimes noticed racism in other white people, but thought I myself wasn’t racist. But now I realise that a lot of things I have said, and that I probably will say, are in fact unconsciously racist, and deeply separating.</i>		
Ground narrative		<i>This may be partly due to my education – I was born and raised in South Africa, and only left the country at age 37. So I have been socialised into white supremacy and racism from a very young age. Everything about me is born of the privilege of being a white South African. I was at university as Nelson Mandela was being released and apartheid came to an end, so I had access to intellectual information about racism. I don’t think I’ve ever consciously tried to be racist towards someone, but I’ve been taught to differentiate between People of Colour and white people – it’s a huge part of how my mind has been formed.</i>		
Aspirational narrative		<i>I have to unpick this. In particular, I want to become more aware of the words that come out of my mouth, and avoid presenting those things in front of people who will be hurt by them.</i>		
D&D	12. Potential	Through my engagement in the circle, I have also learned how to better communicate with other White people when I notice that what they are saying may be problematic. Instead of telling them that they are wrong, I talk about my own experiences and beliefs and understanding, and I let people hear the problem in the language/thinking, by critiquing myself.	<b>P3</b>	+
DA FB group	13. Applied	I practiced using this language on several occasions in the DA Facebook group, in response to comments that had an	<b>A3</b>	+

		ecofascist slant, for example when people talked about overpopulation – which generally refers to there being too many non-white people in the world. When this happened, I didn’t call out these comments as “ecofascist,” but mentioned how I would have said similar things in the past, and how I had become educated about the implications of such statements.		
Other	14. Applied	There was also an example on a Zoom call where a Person of Colour was a participant. Someone else made a comment about overpopulation, and I saw this person flinch. So I stepped in, said that the comment could be received as a micro-aggression by People of Colour on the call, and that I felt it wasn’t OK. I left it at that. In the past, I would have winced, and avoided stepping into such conversations, but I feel that participating in the work of the circle has given me the courage to do so.	A3 A2	+
Other	15. Realised	The Person of colour felt supported I think, as they then spoke up in the group call and explained why the comment was problematic from their perspective. It was educational, and I don’t know if this discussion could have happened if I hadn’t stepped in as a white person and pointed out the elephant in the room.	R2	+
Aspirational narrative		Also, because I am involved in this circle, I feel it is a responsibility for me to try and make spaces safer, and thus embody in action the circle’s charter, even though I always speak from a personal standpoint, not as an official member of a Diversity group. I want to improve my skills around being an ally, and so I try to intervene in order to engage in deeper learning, and become better with the language I use.		
Ground narrative		Sometimes I’m a bit off, and people will give me some feedback.		
Loretta Ross’s course				
Value narrative		I gained a huge amount from Loretta Ross’s training, “Calling In the Calling Out Culture.”		
Aspirational narrative		I wanted to attend it in order to learn how to better express myself and help make the spaces I engage in safer, and more inclusive.		
Ground narrative		In fact, I had already offended another white person in our circle in the past, due to my use of language.		
LR course	16. Immediate	The course was very rich and useful.	?	+
LR course	17. Potential	As a result of taking it, I’ve become much more confident, and I have learned better skills on how and when to engage with people directly, mostly using private messages, instead of publicly (i.e calling the person “in” rather than publicly “out”).	P3 P4	+
Facebook	18. Applied	For example, whenever I see racist comments from South African men on my personal timeline, I call them “in” first about it, in a private message. If I receive poor feedback or a more racist response, I may call them “out” on my public channel, and ask them to apologise. If they don’t do it, I remove them from my friends list – which I had to do with one person.	A3	+
Family	19. Applied	On one occasion, a close family member said something problematic during a family call. I pointed out that it was a racist comment. He was angry at me for doing so, but later we had some good conversations about it.	A3	+
Family	20. Realised	As a result of our discussions, he doesn’t share the kind of racist jokes that he used to in the past, and he has also toned	R1 R2	- +

		down the more patriarchal or anti-feminist things he used to express before. So it was difficult for him at first, as he really didn't feel he was "racist" – but talking about how he sounded, something has shifted. He and I are very close and have deep trust, which might have helped. Calling out racism with people we love is very hard, and risky.		
<b>The transformative power of conflict resolution</b>				
<i>Value narrative</i>		<i>For me, the work of anti-racism and decolonising, on a private, personal, interior level, has very much been part and parcel of the work that we've gone through in resolving conflict in this group. We are all colonised: we are brought up to have expectations of what work looks like, what our purpose is, and how we should appear to others. We want to maintain an ideal picture of ourselves for others to see. The conflict-resolution process that I went through, for some conflict that I was involved in, was incredibly helpful to peel away some of these onion skins.</i>		
<i>Conflict process</i>	21. Enabling	Katie Carr facilitated this process for us. She just gave me and the other person some space, in which she held a very safe and secure centre for each of us to bring our version of the story. We took turns doing this, digging deeper and deeper, with no "feedback" – just telling each other how we had felt and what our intentions were (not critiquing each others stories).	<b>E3 E4</b>	+
<i>Conflict process</i>	22. Immediate	The process was extremely interesting – and I think it will be a completely unique way of learning for anyone who goes into it.	<b>?</b>	+
<i>Conflict process</i>	23. Potential	Thanks to this process, I started to better understand the white supremacist pattern of assuming oneself to be always right. This encourages us to argue with people who think we are wrong, and try to fight them down, and get them to be wrong. But in this space, I realised that while I may be right, the other person was also 100% right! What had happened was some form of miscommunication between us – not just in the use of words, but in what the words stood for, or how we presented ideas. I also found that none of us meant harm: we both wanted to do the right thing, but in so doing, we hurt or triggered each other, or attempted to paint a picture that we felt should be true for the whole group – which couldn't happen.	<b>P3</b>	+
<i>Conflict process</i>	24. Transformative	It enabled me to see myself from an outsider's perspective, and gave me deep insights into how different people with good intentions can approach the same situation. Because we look at the world through our own lens, broadening the scope of that lens and understanding that the other person sees the same situation in a very different light can be very helpful.	<b>T1</b>	+
<i>D&amp;D</i>	25. Transformative	I personally feel that the D&D circle became much more intimate as a result of this conflict transformation process. A lot of things shifted.	<b>T3</b>	+
<i>Family</i>	26. Applied	The awareness I developed in the process also helped me find a way to have that difficult conversation with my family member around racism, as I drew inspiration from the process to hear them out, and then tell them what I was feeling.	<b>A3</b>	+
<i>Other</i>	27. Applied	In another instance, we took advantage of what we had learned in our conflict-resolution process, in order to defuse tensions that were emerging between two of us from the Diversity Circle, and another Deep Adaptation Volunteer, around a certain project. We had a call, and managed to create a space in which each of us could be heard on a very	<b>A3</b>	+

		sensitive and personal topic.		
Other	28. Realised	This allowed the other person to better understand what we in the Diversity Circle had in mind, but also gave them the chance to give us some wise advice, and improve the approach we had originally. As a result, there is now much deeper trust and mutual understanding between the three of us.	?	+
Value narrative		<i>Although the work of conflict transformation can be incredibly painful, there is no better way to learn about oneself. So I think people should welcome conflict as an opportunity to help themselves, and their group in which the conflict happens, shift. Besides, the work of Deep Adaptation is to keep looking for the love in our situation and in this predicament. And as the physical predicament gets worse for all of us, the urge to exclude people we don't get along with will become stronger, and our circles will become smaller. So for me, it's very important to learn to get on with people that we don't necessarily understand. I think the best way to begin practising is with someone who is similar to you, speaks the same language, and has a lot of common ground with you – although you don't get on with them for some reason. To prepare for the situations where we are in serious conflict with those who have very different ideas from us. We need to find ways to get on. It's difficult, but there's a huge amount of personal growth that arises out of being able to do that, and it feels to me, to be a fundamental tool in the Deep Adaptation toolbox.</i>		

## Story #5 – Dorian

Published on the Conscious Learning Blog on March 15, 2022<sup>48</sup>

“How to transform how I am in the world?”

Social learning space	Cycle/narrative	Story	Indicator(s)	Value
Ground narrative		<i>I first grew aware of the "perverse paradox" of climate change in one of the very first lectures of my Master's degree programme, in the autumn of 2007. The lecturer stressed the utter unfairness of climate change: those least responsible for it, particularly in the Global South, are already (and will keep being) most immediately and heavily impacted - whereas the countries historically most to blame will be hit only later. I still remember the tension and indignation in my body, hearing this. Full of righteous anger, I decided to try and do something to prevent or attenuate this tragedy. This led me to get involved in the field of sustainability, as a consultant working on greenhouse gas emissions assessments. A few years later, I grew disillusioned with the "sustainable development" discourse and became involved in other pursuits, in the field of arts. Although I remained intent on creating social change, I lost sight of the feeling of rage I experienced originally.</i>		
Retreat	1. Potential	Until March 2020, when I met Nontokozo Sabic (Nonty) during a retreat in Russia. I had given a presentation on the topic of societal collapse and Deep Adaptation. She expressed deep regret that my presentation focused on the impacts of collapse on rich/industrialised societies, and that it silenced the experiences of collapse on peoples/regions/countries of the Global South, as a result of European imperialism and colonialism.	?	+
Retreat	2. Immediate	Hearing her, I felt defensiveness and the urge to argue with her	?	-

<sup>48</sup> <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/2022/03/15/how-to-transform-how-i-am-in-the-world/> NB: For reasons of length, several quotes present in the published story have been edited out from this table. Please refer to the blog post for the unabridged version.

		and justify myself.		
<i>Retreat</i>	3. Potential	But something about Nonty helped me not to act on these impulses. It was probably related to how she voiced her feelings of deep pain, grief and weariness when confronted - again and again - to the ignorance of Europeans, especially in environmental movements, on questions of systemic racism and colonialism. I could perceive the depth of her grief.	?	+
<i>Retreat</i>	4. Applied	So I admitted that she was right about my presentation, and acknowledged that I had lost sight of the issue of climate injustice that had been so motivating to me originally. I also asked her what I could do to better educate myself on these topics. We eventually agreed to work together and try to raise awareness of these systemic issues within the Deep Adaptation Forum.	?	+
<i>D&amp;D</i>	5. Applied	A few months later, following discussions between Sasha and Wendy, on the one hand, and Nonty, Katie, and myself, on the other, the five of us launched the DAF Diversity & Decolonising circle in August 2020.	?	+
<b>Grappling with racism and white supremacy</b>				
<i>D&amp;D</i>	6. Applied	The first event put together by our circle, in November 2020, was a 3-day intensive anti-racism programme, designed and presented by Nonty (with support from two other co-facilitators), and geared towards white-bodied volunteers throughout the Deep Adaptation Forum. Over thirty people took part in it, including myself.	<b>A3</b>	+
<i>D&amp;D</i>	7. Immediate	The training felt very rich and well-held, which helped me to engage in it fully.	?	+
<i>D&amp;D</i>	8. Enabling	In particular, Nonty's ability to be candid and vulnerable about the impacts of racism on her life enabled me to allow myself to lay down my defences and be vulnerable with others.	<b>E4</b>	+
<i>D&amp;D</i>	9. Potential	Thanks to this training, I learned a lot about the interpersonal, internalised, institutional and systemic dimensions of racism, and realised the extent to which my whole being had been contaminated by this ideology. For example, I thought back on how my education had taught me to distrust or make fun of classmates of North African origins as a child, and prevented me from making friends with non-white people. I also realised how little I tend to think of the topic of racism, of my own skin colour, or other dimensions of my social privileges ordinarily - I have always had the option not to think of such issues.	<b>P3</b>	+
<i>Aspirational narrative</i>		<i>As a result of the training, I set myself the three following objectives (which I jotted down in my notebook): "Fearlessly act to decolonise DAF; Fearlessly remain aware of my own patterns of racism and privilege, invite critical feedback and thank people for it - then change these patterns as much as possible; Work to consciously change what DA is about and make it much more about matters of race and global justice."</i>		
<i>D&amp;D</i>	10. Potential	After the training, we sent out a feedback form to all attendees. I analysed the results as part of my PhD research, and wrote a report based on these results.	<b>P6</b>	+
<i>D&amp;D</i>	11. Realised	The main findings for me were: That the majority of training participants seem to have been successfully disturbed out of their usual ways of thinking and being, brought to acknowledge their privilege and racism, and connected emotionally with the impact of systemic racism on BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour); That this awakening had brought most attendees to consider various ways in which they might change their practice	<b>R1 R2</b>	- +

		and/or start new initiatives in order to help dismantle racism, within or outside of DAF (although several were unsure what they could or should do); That feedback on the training and especially the facilitators was overwhelmingly positive, although three respondents didn't connect with the approach that was chosen and voiced constructive criticism about the training.		
<i>D&amp;D</i>	12. Immediate	This felt validating and encouraging to me. I think it also created important momentum for the work of the D&D circle.	<b>I5</b>	+
<i>WSC workshops</i>	13. Enabling	Following this training, Heather Luna introduced workshops on white supremacy culture in DAF.	<b>E3 E4</b>	+
<i>WSC workshops</i>	14. Potential	This was the occasion for me to learn more deeply about these other dimensions of the white/modern worldview, which are present in everyone - including myself: for example, I became more aware of my perfectionist tendencies, my fear of open conflict, or my urge to "be right" and to consider myself exceptional.	<b>P3</b>	+
<i>WSC workshops</i>	15. Potential	These workshops also gave me a critical lens through which to examine related emerging phenomena, such as the rise of ecofascist thinking - which, like white supremacy culture, is far from only being the domain of violent extremists: the seeds of such forms of "othering" can be present even in the most benign, "common-sense" remarks.	<b>P3</b>	+
<i>D&amp;D</i>	16. Applied	For example, I was alerted about a video produced by an influential DAF participant, a portion of which could be viewed as reproducing this kind of thinking. I did a critical discourse analysis of this portion of the video, and deconstructed what I saw as problematic about it. I shared this analysis with the rest of the D&D circle. After having discussed it and refined my analysis, we shared it privately with the author of the video, and invited them to a conversation.	<b>A3</b>	+
<i>D&amp;D</i>	17. Realised	They acknowledged the passage was problematic, and edited it out from the video. They also accepted to meet with myself and two other D&D circle members. We had a fruitful conversation.	<b>?</b>	+
<i>D&amp;D</i>	18. Potential	I realised that without the critical awareness developed in me through the workshops and conversations taking place in the circle, I would very likely not have noticed the problematic aspects of the video.	<b>P3</b>	+
<i>D&amp;D</i>	19. Immediate	I felt better educated, and glad to have taken part in this mutual learning process.	<b>?</b>	+
<i>Other</i>	20. Realised	Later on, I discovered that the author of this video decided to integrate the problematic portion that we discussed into a course they ran, in order to invite participants to critically assess it.	<b>R2</b>	+
<i>Other</i>	21. Immediate	This also felt gratifying, and I appreciated their openness to criticism.	<b>?</b>	+
<b>Learning from conflict</b>				
<i>Ground narrative</i>		<i>In early 2021, conflict broke out within the D&amp;D circle, and within the DAF core team. The issue centred on questions of white supremacy culture, and how to express one's awareness of it when it manifests in others. This difficult situation lasted several weeks. It was a very painful time for everyone involved, particularly the person who stopped being part of the circle and of the core team as a result, and who self-identifies as a Person of Colour.</i>		
<i>DAF</i>	22. Immediate	It was one of the most distressing periods of time in my life. Although I tried to act as an informal mediator, I was painfully conscious of my responsibility in the emergence of this state of affairs, especially as a result of my conflict-aversion and lack of	<b>I2</b>	-

		confidence in my own intuition.		
DAF	23. Potential	Eventually, I participated (with the rest of the D&D circle) in writing a blog post, in which we presented a summary of our circle's aims, what we had done so far, our future aspirations, and in which we recognised some of our failings. I was also involved in co-authoring another text, which was shared with all DAF volunteer groups, in which we in the Core Team gave more details about some of the mistakes we had made as part of the conflict situation.	P6	+
DAF	24. Immediate	Writing these texts was slow, painful, and at times even agonisingly difficult, in view of the strong emotions present in all of us.	I2	-
DAF	25. Realised	However, these texts enabled both the D&D Circle and the Core Team to exercise more transparency and accountability, thus interrupting some of our usual white supremacy culture patterns (e.g. defensiveness, fear of open conflict, etc.); by doing so, I also felt we were modelling some of the courageous vulnerability that Nonty encouraged us to cultivate in her anti-racism course. These texts also helped to bring the conflict to a conclusion, albeit an uneasy one.	?	+
DAF	26. Immediate	This felt liberating to me.	?	+
Ground narrative		<i>As a result of the difficult emotions brought about in the course of this first conflict, more tensions erupted between two participants within the D&amp;D circle, and led to one of them leaving the circle for a while. Thankfully, another member of the circle stepped up to facilitate a conflict transformation process between them, which eventually led to their reconciliation.</i>		
D&D	27. Potential	A few months later, our circle reflected on this episode. Thanks to the experience which my fellow members brought back to the circle, I learned about the conflict resolution process they followed; how the trust, strong relationships, and sense of purpose cultivated in the circle had been instrumental; and how aspects of the conflict could be seen as manifestations of white supremacy culture at play.	P2	+
D&D	28. Potential	We recorded our conversation on the topic, and I edited the video documenting these insights, which we will soon share in the network.	P6	+
Ground narrative		<i>Around the same time, another situation of conflict emerged during a workshop I co-presented, as a member of the D&amp;D circle, on the topic of the silenced stories of marginalisation and racism and colonisation that are present in people's lives - both in the Global North, and in the Global South. One participant, who self-identified as Indigenous, experienced a sense of discrimination and lack of safety in a breakout room during one of the sessions.</i>		
D&D	29. Applied	As workshop co-host, I invited this person to express her feelings to me and another person, and apologised for what had happened.	A3	+
D&D	30. Realised	The person expressed appreciation for this time we gave her, in which they felt heard, although they still experienced difficult feelings.	R1 R2	- +
D&D	31. Potential	From this experience, I gained further awareness of the challenges associated with holding spaces for conversation around such charged topics, particularly when both white and BIPOC participants take part together in these discussions, and	P3	+



		the need for more comprehensive and skilled facilitation of such spaces.		
<i>D&amp;D</i>	32. Ant. Applied	I plan to bring these insights to any future workshops in which I am involved.	<b>A3</b>	+
<b>Racism, colonialism, and climate change</b>				
<i>Ground narrative</i>		<i>Soon after its creation, we in the D&amp;D circle started convening in monthly "learning circles," to share some of the latest insights and discoveries that occurred for us in our respective learning journeys around the topics of racism, decolonisation, etc.</i>		
<i>Value narrative</i>		<i>These sessions have been very precious to my own learning.</i>		
<i>D&amp;D</i>	33. Potential	Ahead of one of these conversations, one of us shared a link to a new report published by the Heinrich Böll Foundation, titled "Racism and Climate (in)Justice" (Abimbola, Aikins, Makhesi-Wilkinson, and Roberts, 2021). I read the report, and strongly reconnected with the sense of outrage and indignation I had first experienced over ten years ago.	<b>P2</b>	+
<i>D&amp;D</i>	34. Immediate	I read the report, and strongly reconnected with the sense of outrage and indignation I had first experienced over ten years ago. I found that the report gave a very comprehensive and well-documented overview of how our climate and ecological predicament is intimately linked to the history of racism and colonialism.	<b>?</b>	+
<i>D&amp;D</i>	35. Potential	Although I already had some background knowledge of this, the report helped me to connect the dots and gain a deeper awareness of these connections. I shared some of the things I had learned in the D&D circle, and shared my wish to spread this knowledge more widely.	<b>P2 P3</b>	+
<i>D&amp;D</i>	36. Potential	Someone suggested I write a blog post about the report.	<b>P2</b>	+
<i>D&amp;D</i>	37. Applied	It sounded like a good idea, so I wrote a text which was published on the DAF Blog.	<b>A3</b>	+
<i>Other</i>	38. Applied	On this foundation, I also wrote the script for a short online film which will I hope present this information in a more accessible format. I am currently working on this project with my partner, with some help from a volunteer who got in touch with us via the DA Facebook group.	<b>A3 A4</b>	+
<b>Towards activating my own vital compass</b>				
<i>Ground narrative</i>		<i>In late October 2021, Prof Yin Paradies from Deakin University presented a workshop for DAF participants, in collaboration with the D&amp;D circle, titled "Indigenous Perspectives on Decolonial Futures." I attended, and was glad to see that over two dozen participants had signed up, which is quite good for DAF.</i>		
<i>D&amp;D</i>	39. Immediate	I found his presentation very rich and thought-stimulating.	<b>?</b>	+
<i>D&amp;D</i>	40. Potential	Some of the most impactful content (for me) was sourced from the work of the GTDF collective - for example, this quote from Vanessa Machado de Oliveira's book (2021, p.294): "Before anything different can happen, before people can sense, hear, relate, and imagine differently, there must be a clearing, a decluttering, an initiation into the unknowable; and a letting go of the desires for certainty, authority, hierarchy, and of insatiable consumption as a mode of relating to everything. We will need a genuine severance that will shatter all projections, anticipations, hopes, and expectations in order to find something we lost about ourselves, about time/space, about the depth of the shit we are in, about the medicines / poisons we carry. This is about pain, about death, about finding a compass, an antidote to separability. This is about being ready to go—to befriend death—before we are	<b>P2 P3</b>	+

		ready to return home and to live as grown-ups.”		
<i>D&amp;D</i>	41. Immediate	These words were intriguing to me. I appreciated how they pointed to what goes on beyond the realm of the intellect, to an attitude of being that is existentially steeped into the awareness of the predicament - an attitude rooted in the body and in all the affective dimensions of one's being. I read this passage as an invitation to identify the deep unconscious drives that move me in unhelpful ways, to wrestle with these desires, and start undoing their grip on how I am, think, feel and move in the world. This felt like the kind of radical change I had set out to explore and try to help bring into the world - a change that goes beyond the cognitive realm.	?	+
<i>Ground narrative</i>		<i>Previously, I had been exposed on several occasions to the work of the GTDF collective, for example when Jem Bendell published his article on the ideology of ESCAPE, with which GTDF engaged in a fruitful conversation. But I hadn't taken the time to read the collective's production more fully.</i>		
<i>Other</i>	42. Potential	In January 2022, I learned from the DA Quarterly newsletter that a series of workshops was planned around the book from which the excerpt above was sourced.	?	+
<i>GTDF workshop</i>	43. Applied	I decided the time had come to dive deeper into this work. Several other members of our circle took part in this workshop too.	<b>A3</b>	+
<i>GTDF workshop</i>	44. Immediate	Reading the book ahead of the workshop, my feeling of resonance and connection with the approach which I perceived in the quote from Prof Paradies' workshop intensified dramatically. The book gave me a feeling of integration and deepening of many ideas and insights I had previously received from these ideas and approach. What spoke to me most powerfully was a particular flavour of radicality (which is all about developing a keen awareness of our individual and collective shit, taking stock of its omnipresence, and contemplating the possibility of human extinction as a result of our species drowning in its own shit) - but with humour and humility woven deep into it, rather than combativeness.	?	+
<i>GTDF workshop</i>	45. Transformative	Above all, a key takeaway message for me was no one living a “modern” lifestyle, especially not a privileged European like me, can make any claims to innocence or purity in the face of our predicament. This allowed me to finally “get” more fully what I had heard my former Core Team colleague Katie Carr say back in 2019, as I was sharing my anger about the crimes committed by fossil fuel companies: “We are all responsible, none of us are innocent.” At the time, this landed in me as a kind of relativism that I felt unfairly lumped everyone into the same basket: big oil CEOs who funded climate disinformation, and environmental activists who dedicated their lives to protecting the living world. Now, I understand the term “responsibility” differently: in this case, I think it has to do with an attitude of unconditional commitment to compost the shit that is within and around all of us who have been raised in modernity-coloniality - and limitless accountability in doing so.	<b>T1</b>	+
<i>Other</i>	46. Applied	Following the invitation from one of the book's exercises, I wrote snippets from the “Co-Sense with Radical Tenderness” text on bits of paper, and pasted them all around my living room in the hope to help them seep into my consciousness. I focused on the parts that I comprehended the least. One of these lines I copied down reads: “Seek sense-fullness rather than meaningfulness.”	?	+

Other	47. Immediate	This felt intriguing, because "doing meaningful things" or "living my life meaningfully" has been one of my chief personal commandments - perhaps *the* attitude I feel most wedded to. It is at the root of my deciding to embark on this PhD: I want to do something that makes me feel connected with a higher purpose (to be in service to life and other humans) - and not give primacy to things like material comfort, safety, notoriety, or egotistical forms of consumptive enjoyment. So why not pursue meaningfulness?	?	+
Other	48. Applied	In the hope of getting to the bottom of this, I read another book published by the GTDF collective - "Towards Scarring our Collective Soul Wound," by Cree scholar Cash Ahenakew. This passage seemed to address my question: ...	A3	+
Other	49. Potential	These words reminded me of an experience I had a few months ago.	?	+
Ground narrative		<i>On the winter solstice of 2021, I went on a hike with two of the people I love the most. The winter was so mild that only the very crest of the mountain was capped in snow. We decided to make this a special occasion, and to consume psychedelics before we walked – it was the first time that we ever did so together. When we reached the top of the mountain, we found it was crowned with huge wind turbines. Something happened in me. I felt hit by a powerful sensation. A shock. A visceral, inchoate flow of energy that raged in my chest and my abdomen like lava for the rest of the hike. Somehow, the flow spoke to me. Later that day, I wrote down in my diary the parts of this message I had received that I felt able to tentatively articulate into words (reductive as these may be): ...</i>		
Other	50. Potential	Other “bus passengers” <sup>49</sup> cannot keep but wonder - could this have been the voice of the "vital compass" Ahenakew refers to above? Could this be the kind of "sense-fulness" that the Co-sense with Radical Tenderness refers to - feeling affected by the forces of the world in an unmediated way? And if so, how may I learn to better let go of my symbolic-categorical compass, and instead of seeking *meaningfulness,* (and indexing the world in language), learn to maintain myself open to the land of which I am an extension?	P3	+
Other	51. Ant. Applied	These new questions feel like they might be pointing to a new generative path for me to start exploring. I suspect that some practices that are being actively developed within DAF, such as Earth Listening, or Wider Embraces, might be a key part of my future learning journey.	A3	+

## Story #6 – Heather

Published on the Conscious Learning Blog on November 30, 2021<sup>50</sup>

“Going further in the work of decolonizing DAF and cultivating mutual aid”

Social	Cycle /	Story	Indicator(s)	Value
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49 This is in reference to a methodology put forth by the GTDF collective, which invites people to become more self-reflexive by frequently “checking one’s bus.” “Bus passengers” are a metaphor for the many “selves” (or parts of the self) that we carry within us at any given moment, and which may influence our way of being in the world, often unconsciously (Machado de Oliveira, 2021, p.80).

50 <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/2021/11/30/going-further-in-the-work-of-decolonizing-daf-and-cultivating-mutual-aid/>

learning space	narrative			
Ground narrative		I joined the Deep Adaptation Facebook group originally in December 2018, after reading the DA paper, but I wasn't attracted to discussing anything so did not "follow" the group (i.e., DA posts did not appear in my FB feed). I had already joined Extinction Rebellion by then, and reading the DA paper just confirmed my decision to do so. I became actively involved in DAF after after joining the core team as Communications Coordinator in September 2020.		
Aspirational narrative		Regardless of where I work, my intention has long been to create more mutual aid in the world, and learn to function without needing the state. This way, we can all face our common predicament together, with the right kind of resistance and care.		
DAF	1. Immediate	When I arrived in DAF, I had a honeymoon period at first. It all felt very different from XR: I found people in DA much more reflective, more willing to be vulnerable, and more open and reflective about the topic of anti-racism and decolonisation. I was also impressed by things like people warmly welcoming a NYT journalist in the DA Facebook group, and spontaneously sharing many resources with them.	?	+
DAF	2. Potential	However, I gradually found out that things weren't so different, after all –that they just played out in a different way. DAF is more white, middle class than XR. There are more appearances concealing reality, so it takes longer to see what's really going on.	?	+
DAF	3. Applied	Ironically, while I was running workshops on white supremacy culture in DAF, I witnessed these patterns at play very clearly in the network. For example, group-think: I tried to have conversations around whether it even makes sense to talk about collapse with others, given that this can be traumatising, and it's important to think about how promoting this and encouraging its continuation could create harm. But I wasn't allowed to have these conversations. Or fear: it was because the core team was afraid to confront me about ways they thought I was not meeting their expectations that I lost my job as Communications Coordinator - which was unjust. But then, again, these patterns are everywhere around us, so there's nothing special about DAF. And this is why it's important for people to disrupt the status quo, and point out these aspects.	?	-
DAF	4. Potential	From this experience, I've learned that you can't take at face value what people say is going on in a network or organisation, or that they are being fully honest with you.	?	+
Other	5. Realised	I now feel a lot wiser, and better prepared for these things. I've come out the other side feeling a lot of empathy for everyone, including myself, because of realising the extent to which these white supremacy patterns are within so many of us, particularly those trained under Western conditions.	?	+
Other	6. Ant. Applied	In the future, I think I might prefer not to work in an organisation again, but rather stay in some sort of coaching or consulting role for people in organisations. I could help others gain a new perspective on how they do things, and be fully honest, without compromising my integrity.	?	+

Aspirational narrative	My vision for DAF would be to keep bringing in people who are driven by the collapse-narrative, who tend to be white, Western, and middle-class. Then guide them towards understanding that the best way to have a loving response to collapse is to: 1) to recognise that the goal is likely to be learning how to take care of one another and keep each other as safe as possible; 2) to understand that the people most likely to help us do this are the people who have benefited the least from the global system we are under; 3) to see that racism and colonisation keep us separate from just such people (thus making us vulnerable to ecofascist solutions / leaders); 4) that once we deal with our separation, and have developed relationships with those who benefit least from the system, we will know where to put our power and privilege to resist and undermine the system, and we will know how to take care of one another and keep each other as safe as possible. But right now, particularly in the DA Facebook group, there's no such vision or guidance of the kind.
Aspirational narrative	As part of the above vision, small affinity groups of 4-5 like-minded people could gather within DAF for support, political education, and to challenge one other to go through the above steps. (An example of an early challenge would be knock on neighbours' doors.) A facilitator could provide an anchor for accountability so that the affinity groups do not stay within their comfort zones. Stories of the challenges could be shared among the network of groups.

## Story #7 – Fred

Social learning space	Cycle / narrative	Story	Indicator	Value
Value narrative		Although I wasn't able to participate in the 2021 DAF Conscious Learning Festival as much as I wanted, it has been very useful to me, and has brought me meaningful new insights, thoughts and feelings.		
Conscious Learning Festival	1. Immediate	For a start, I was able to experience a sense of deep connection and fellowship with other participants, who were all complete strangers. I found regular spaces in which to acknowledge my painful feelings related to our predicament, and feel understood.	R5	+
Conscious Learning Festival	2. Potential	Being in these spaces also made me realise that in spite of the dire situation, I was alive! For example, I was very inspired by Jane Dwinell's Q&A, during which she described building tiny houses on her land, and helping refugees in Lesbos. This pulled me out of my sense of helplessness and hopelessness, and prompted me to reflect deeply on what kind of generative action I might do with my own life.	R5	+
Conscious Learning Festival	3. Potential	I felt concerned about talking about Deep Adaptation around me, because I didn't want to drop bombs into people's emotional worlds. But in one of the Festival calls, someone in a Zoom breakout room said I could think of it in terms of planting seeds, not dropping bombs.	R5	+
Conscious Learning Festival	4. Immediate	I remembered that I'd spent much of my clinical career having difficult conversations with people, and sensed a renewed sense of courage –	R5	+

		I could do this!		
Other	5. Applied	I write for the Irish Times occasionally. So I got back in touch with the editor, and suggested I could write a follow-up piece to one I wrote in 2019 on parenting and the climate crisis. I wanted to touch on the latest IPCC report, Caroline Hickman's research, COP26 – and lay special emphasis on Deep Adaptation and the 4 Rs. The editor eventually wrote back enthusiastically, so I wrote the article.	R10	+
Other	6. Realised	It was published on November 8, 2021, under the title: "Response to climate emergency set to shape our children's future," with the subtitle: "Concept of deep adaptation could prove a useful tool for coping with challenging change." I wrote it specifically with parents in mind.	R8	+
Other	7. Potential	The article generated some interesting feedback - interesting in terms of the fact that I was prepared for all sorts... but not expressions of gratitude.	?	?
Other	8. Immediate	I'm just pleased that it's out there now and available if/when needed.	R5	+
Other	9. Realised	Recently, I have been able to sneak Deep Adaptation onto the syllabus for for a brand new Module at the University on our Nursing Programme: 'Sustainability and Global Public Health'. The Irish Times article was key in getting this over the line as acceptable content.	R10 R13	+
RT	10. Potential	A conversation with Wendy also inspired me with the idea of launching climate cafés based on solution-focused practice, which is the therapeutic modality that I specialise in.	R10	+
Other	11. Ant. Applied	A colleague and I will be offering these cafés for the Nursing Students taking the new module.	R9	+
Other	12. Applied	I have also started working on an online course on parenting in uncertain times, which I am aiming to deliver later this year. Besides, I've been commissioned to write a book chapter - working title "For Our Children's Future - Solution Focused Practice At The Edge Of Despair" - for a work called 'Holding The Hope'.	R10 R13	+
Other	13. Immediate	I feel quite keen to crack on with these endeavours. Knowing that I am not alone in this mindset and intention helps me to keep going.	R5	+
Other	14. Transformative	I'm done with leaving emotions like terror, guilt, or shame, are in my driving seat. It's fine for them to be in the car, but I'd rather they be passengers. I think cautious optimism may now be in the driving seat – optimism about the beautiful aspects of humanity, and the desire to embody these qualities and fight for them.	T4	+

## Story #8 – David

Published on the Conscious Learning Blog on May 10, 2022<sup>51</sup>

“How to share our reflections on questions that speak to us?”

Social learning space	Cycle / narrative	Story	Indicator	Value
<b>How the project started</b>				
Conscious Learning Festival	1. Enabling	Wendy and Dorian launched the Conscious Learning Festival in early July 2021. I found it a very interesting initiative, as I felt it opened up an important new sphere of enterprise within the Deep Adaptation Forum that is about ideas, as distinct from the well-developed sphere of facilitation.	R5	+
Conscious Learning Festival	2. Potential	This gave me the idea to experiment with a new meeting format, which would make use of many of the regular DAF processes, such as check-ins, but which would be about discussing ideas. These meetings would be based on the 4 Rs of Deep Adaptation, as a legitimate target of inquiry that we should elucidate within our community, and perhaps extend with more Rs - as a way to take from a common starting point, and a way for people to build on it.	R5	+
4Rs Conversations	3. Strategic	During July and early August, I had conversations with several active DAF participants, to clarify what the process might look like for these calls, and what format to use.	R9	+
4Rs Conversations	4. Potential	Participants found that the 4 Rs were useful: - to provide a "scaffolding" to help people process their response to collapse-awareness, - to show a way of moving beyond the initial emotional shock, - and potentially to be a tool for other communities, as well as our own.	R5	+
4Rs Conversations	5. Ant. Realised	We decided to plan regular Zoom meetings which could help collect wisdom over time, without being prescriptive. We also envisioned creating videos based on the 4 Rs which could work as "conversation starters," "explainers," "thought-provokers," and "scene-setters," particularly useful to newcomers arriving in DAF.	?	+
<b>The first calls: Developing a format</b>				
DAF	6. Enabling	On Aug. 20, I created the #four-rs-project channel to discuss and plan facilitated events and the production of communication resources around this project, and to share insights emerging from	R9	+

<sup>51</sup> <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/2022/05/10/how-to-share-our-reflections-on-questions-that-speak-to-us/>

		these activities.		
4Rs Conversations	7. Applied	On Aug. 25, I ran the first iteration of an experimental "Four Rs Discussion Club." In the first round, each participant had two minutes to bring up their own ideas about the 4 Rs.	R9	+
4Rs Conversations	8. Strategic	I found that people had an amazing variety of approaches: the Four Rs can accommodate everything from farming, to giving up farming to live in a mobile home, to making films, to organizing your neighbours, to organizing your singing group, to making a map of spiritual advancement.	R5	+
4Rs Conversations	9. Potential	I realised that this incredible variety among individuals was a primary challenge to creating a coherent model for discussion! One point of general agreement seemed to be the desire for "community." That led us to questions of "on-line" vs. "real-world" community, and other interesting issues.	R5	+
4Rs Conversations	10. Applied	In the second round, individuals asked questions of other individuals, who had two minutes to respond. This was good, in that it allowed for reflection and curiosity about others' views. On the other hand, it was unsatisfying, because the responses were short and therefore shallow, leaving many depths unplumbed. This confirmed to me that the balance between depth, participation, and time available is the critical issue for a discussion group. If everyone tells about themselves, then their time must be short and the discussion is shallow. But if one person goes into depth, then everyone else is reduced to listening — which is more like a Q&A or a webinar.	?	+
4Rs Conversations	11. Ant. Applied	How to provide maximum participation, while also generating useful focus? One possible solution to this, in my view, was the perennial technique of "small groups." I found we could use the first round to let people bring up topics, and then in the second round, let people divide into small groups according to their preference, to go into depth. This is essentially the Open Space model, writ small.	?	+
<b>Insights from the main discussion series</b>				
4Rs Conversations	12. Applied	Building on the lessons from the first workshop, I ran two more sessions of the discussion club on Aug. 31 and Sept. 1, in different time zones. The topic was "Resilience: What do we most value that we want to keep and how?"	R9	+



Ground narrative		<p><i>After a brief presencing exercise, we went “around the table” and each person offered what they have on the topic. I set a timer to give each person 2 minutes 30 seconds, which seemed to be plenty while also setting a boundary. I also experimented with a new technique: After each person spoke, I asked the group to type into the Zoom chat questions about what they had just heard - questions they thought the speaker was asking, questions they wanted to ask the speaker, or questions inspired by what the speaker said. While these questions could have provided topics for breakout rooms, in these sessions we stayed in one group for a general discussion. The list of questions provided a shared foundation of ideas, helping people to focus and interact with each other (rather than devolving into individual rants, which can happen). The resulting conversation was coherent and deep, with useful ideas surfacing from individuals for respectful discussion by the group. At the end of the second session, I realized that a good conclusion was to go back and ask everyone to actually answer the question posed by the topic: “What do we most value that we want to keep and how?” This provides a glimpse of where people have arrived after the process of the discussion.</i></p>		
4Rs Conversations	13. Realised	I received positive feedback from participants, who said they found the time pleasant, engaging, and worthwhile. One participant wrote me: "That was a stellar discussion the other day. Thank you for moderating. Probably one of the best discussions I've ever been in and we could've gone on and probably even deeper. We almost got to the real pain (TBD)."	R5	+
4Rs Conversations	14. Potential	I collected the questions that were asked, to provide a written record of the thoughts and themes of the discussion.	R8	+
4Rs Conversations	15. Applied	On Sept. 7 and 8, I ran two more discussions, on the topic of "Relinquishment": "What do we need to let go of so as not to make matters worse?" I used the same format as previously. ...	R9	+
4Rs Conversations	16. Potential	It occurred to me that this event format could be used to discuss any question at all: to “State the Question” in a way that seeks actual answers is a great way to give direction and motion to the discussion. However, regardless of the question, people will be sharing their own story, so in a funny way it doesn’t matter what the question is, as long as it “hooks” people’s individual experiences!	?	+
4Rs Conversations	17. Potential	People <b>**loved**</b> the timer in the “Around the Table” segment! One participant didn’t want to start until they could see the timer on the screen. It creates a boundary and a container, giving a sense of safety. Two minutes thirty seconds (“two-and-a-half minutes”) is a good length of time. ...	?	+
4Rs Conversations	18. Potential	The collected questions (and statements) from this week are on this online file.	R8	+
4Rs Conversations	19. Applied	On Sept. 14 and 15, I ran two new sessions on the topic of "Restoration: “What could we bring back to help us with these difficult times?” (I added, parenthetically: “What have we lost? Where might we find it?”)"	R9	+

4Rs Conversations	20. Potential	The notes are on this file.	R8	+
4Rs Conversations	21. Applied	Finally, in September, I ran two sessions on the question of "Reconciliation."	R9	+
<b>What I learned from this workshop series</b>				
<i>Ground narrative</i>		<i>On Oct. 8, I joined the recap call of the Conscious Learning Festival to share what the outcomes of this project had been for me.</i>		
4Rs Conversations	22. Potential	In terms of substantive learning, one thing I found in running these workshops was that discussions around the first 3 Rs (Resilience, Restoration, and Relinquishment) ended up being discussions about community. Resilience can only be found in community. The relinquishment we need to do is the relinquishment of the individual mindset. And the restoration is the restoration of community bonds, which gives us strength. So it's very interesting that those that those conversations converged on that single singular idea. The last one, reconciliation and about making peace, went to a different place - a place of responsibility. People wanted to talk about their responsibility to the people they had wronged, with whom they needed to make reconciliation, and that covered everything from one's personal sense to a historical sense of colonialism and reparations. There was special emphasis on their responsibility to the next generation and their individual children, their actual children. How could they reconcile with their children, given the terrible, the story of a terrible future that they are being required to tell right now?	R5	+
4Rs Conversations	23. Potential	Interesting procedural learning also happened for me. Running these sessions and reflecting on them iteratively led me to develop an event format which can be useful to discuss any question within the context of an online group. Also, I found that a group of about six to eight people cohered in each of the two separate sessions I ran each time. So it became the same people coming back, which is great, because you get a coherence, you get a mutual understanding, shared background, and so you can get deep into it. However, I did feel the desire that this could be a wider discussion that could be have a wider application.		
4Rs Conversations	24. Potential	It also occurred to me that a group of six to eight people is too many – or not enough. If you want a big group discussion, then you need 12 or 15, or 30. And you use breakout rooms, and everyone gets a chance to sort of mix and mingle. And the voice the voice of the crowd is very encouraging and gives a sensation of activity and being in touch with a group which is very energizing, it can be healing. And then on the other end, if you have one person or two, then you can ask them open ended questions and get to learn what their thoughts really are. Because for most of us, it takes 10 or 15 minutes at least to just even get into what we're	R5	+

		thinking. It takes a while to let that play out at the speed of normal human speech. So that's why half an hour is the bare minimum for a person just to give the first level of their exploration of the topic of collapse, in any meaningful way. So the discussion group of six or eight people is not enough time to get into it, but not enough people to give a sort of buzz of group vibe.		
<b>Collapse Club</b>				
Other	25. Ant. Applied	So I started considering how to continue to engage in discussions on questions like the four R's, but in a way that's sort of tilted for broadcast, as it were, instead of six people talking to each other, maybe two people talking to each other, with me as a moderator, as a program, a show, something like a podcast, but as a little discussion. I wanted to figure out how to better share with others, not so much the knowledge we may have, but our reflections on the questions that speak to us, in a living process of inquiry.	R5	+
Collapse Club	26. Applied	This led me to start a YouTube channel, "Collapse Club." Through this platform, I publish the conversations I have with interesting thinkers from the field of collapse-awareness (not just from Deep Adaptation, which is a subset of that field), people with insight and wisdom.	R8 R9	+
<i>Aspirational narrative</i>		<i>I want to explore commonalities between the various humans who face into the central question of "How are we to live in the time of collapse?" – while breaking down ideological boundaries in the process. My hope is that these recordings can be of value to people who have not yet begun to walk the path of adaptation, awareness and acceptance. It's a way of trying to draw from the well and give the nourishment of what's inside to those who are outside, so that they can be comforted, and find the motivation to embark on their own path. Maybe this will also help the group of people who are aware and accepting to keep growing as time goes on.</i>		
Collapse Club	27. Potential	A key insight from these conversations so far is that relationships and connections are central to the entire question. Relationships with oneself, with other people, with the natural world, and with the divine. When you're looking for answers, you have to look to what connections do you have. What relationships do you have. If our problem indeed is separation, then the cure is connection.	R5	+

## Story #9 – Nando

Social learning space	Cycle / narrative	Story	Value
Ground narrative	<i>I have been engaging with the field of collapsology since 2009. In 2015, I read the books by the French collapsologists (Servigne and others), which</i>		

		had a deep impact on me.	
Other	1. Immediate	I read Jem's paper as soon as it was published in August 2018, and it resonated massively with me.	+
DAF	2. Applied	I signed up to a Deep Adaptation platform soon afterwards, in 2019.	+
Other	3. Immediate	In September 2019, I took part in a very powerful retreat in Catalonia, "The Practice of Loving and Dying", exploring indigenous rites of passage related to Death. I came out of this retreat very touched and moved. It was a very important experience for me.	+
DA Retreat	4. Immediate	Almost immediately afterwards, I joined a retreat with Katie and Jem in Cumbria. I was not fully present, because I was still trying to digest and metabolise what I had just gone through. But it was very powerful nonetheless.	+
DA Retreat	5. Potential	In this retreat, I got to meet Katie and Jem, as well as other great people. I also discovered many practices that I loved, including Deep Relating, or Death Cafe.	+
DA Retreat	6. Immediate	I loved these practices so much that I decided I wanted to engage with that.	+
Ground narrative		Soon afterwards, my mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer. I accompanied her until her death, and her passing sank me into the depths. I went into a dark night of the soul. I decided to devote time to my grief. So I did the Camino de Santiago in harsh conditions, and I went on a vision quest. I also got acquainted with the ideas of Andrew Harvey, a British mystic, and his vision of the global dark night that the world is entering now; and read other authors, who also discussed possible collapse scenarios and their impacts.	
Joining the community			
Other	7. Enabling	I got back in touch with Katie. We had a long chat, and she started to coach me in Deep Relating. She also invited me to a DA Facilitators call.	+
Other	8. Immediate	I loved it.	+
DAF	9. Applied	After that, I started participating in many DA gatherings, such as Earth Listening, Deep Relating, Songs of One Breath, Ancestors work, Mutual Care, White Supremacy workshops...	+
Other	10. Enabling	Katie also put me in touch with Harriet, who facilitates Ancestors' Work.	+
Other	11. Orienting	The sessions I did with her have been very powerful. Through them, I went on a journey, thanks to which I realised important things: that the Deep Adaptation community is a shelter to me - a warm and cosy place where to go from time to time, when life is rough; that I need to unleash my passions; and that I want to pursue beauty.	+
Other	12. Potential	I also had another powerful experience, through which I was offered a talking stick. I understood that this stick symbolised the work I must do.	+
Becoming a facilitator			
DAF	13. Applied	Now, I've started giving back to the community, by facilitating Deep Relating, the Work that Reconnects, Death Cafes, etc. DA is my work now.	+

DAF	14. Immediate	It feels challenging for me to be a facilitator, because I'm used to speaking. Speaking is a very different craft, and it's one I've practised a lot and been recognised for.	-
Aspirational narrative		But I perceive the power of being a facilitator, and am looking for ways to balance the two.	
Speaking about DA			
Other	15. Applied	Recently, I gave a talk about collapse and DA at my son's engineering school in Scotland, to an audience of scientists.	+
Other	16. Realised	The headmaster loved my talk and the discussion that followed, and so did the students. It was a powerful event. I was invited to come back.	+
DAF	17. Enabling	Katie suggested I join the DA Advocates. I was feeling hesitant about my legitimacy in doing so, because there are some big calibres in that group. But I decided to give it a try, as this could give me a platform as a speaker. So Katie has recommended me to the Advocates group, and I'll be discussing this with her soon.	+
DAF	18. Ant. Applied	However, my calling as a speaker or communicator is still very strong. First, because I love to collect information, come up with models, and share it with others. But also because I want to become better at doing so around the topic of collapse, in order to help awaken people while being conscious of the suffering this can create - which fits with my commitment to loving speech, as part of my training in Zen Buddhism. And I would love to go and do presentations about collapse with my tie, my good shoes, and my costume. That would enable me to make good use of my status as a "regular guy," who hasn't been a lifelong environmentalist; I have more legitimacy this way as a speaker. For example, I could speak at the European Commission, where I can still walk around as an unpaid consultant and where I have access to an audience of thousands of people - I might deliver a Work That Reconnects workshop there at some point. I'm also very well connected in Spain. I also have access to other communities, such as the Spanish Transition Network, as well as access to very effective environmental activist groups.	+
Earth Listening			
Earth Listening	19. Enabling	My sessions with Emma Mary and Deep Listening help me to connect with the land, feel the love I have for it, and realise that the land loves me back. In one of the sessions with her, I travelled to a certain place near where I grew up, near the Atlantic, and the Earth spoke to me: "I'm your mother. You made me sick, then sent me to hospice, and now you're using my pension. Is that a way to treat your mother?"	+
Earth Listening	20. Immediate	This has been a very powerful experience.	+
Earth Listening	21. Transformative	Such gatherings and experiences have had a deep impact on me. My participation in them has changed how I relate with reality, and it is also changing the way in which I express myself about our predicament - more and more, I stress the need to approach these questions from the point of view of feelings and relating.	+

Other	22. Applied	For example, I recently wrote an article about the need to learn the language of the Universe. In it, I mentioned how easier it is to learn a language when one is in love. I wrote that people need to fall in love with Nature again in order to learn her language. By listening to trees, rivers, or clouds, we can absorb their vocabulary, and better relate to them.	+
<b>The Spanish Transition Towns movement</b>			
Other	23. Applied	I also often share DA practices in the Spanish Transition movement, as I'm in the leading team there. For example, I convened a Deep Relating circle over there recently, as well as an Earth Listening circle.	+
<b>Decolonising</b>			
Value narrative		<i>The way I express myself, particularly from where I express myself, has also been massively shaped by what I learned around topics of decolonisation and white supremacy with Heather, as well as critical discourse analysis with Katie and Jem.</i>	
<b>Impacts on my life</b>			
DAF	24. Potential	As a result of my path, and my ideas, I have gained many friends, but also lost many friends. Some people don't want to see me anymore. And what I say or write within the Spanish Transition movement isn't always welcome either, when it touches on the topics of collapse or DA.	+

## Story #10 – Dana

Published on the Conscious Learning Blog on November 3, 2021<sup>52</sup>

“Towards a more holistic integration of one’s personal and professional lives”

Social learning space	Cycle / narrative	Story	Value
Ground		<i>Toward the end of 2019, Dana had a life crisis. Two of the most important relationships in their life broke down, which precipitated a huge shift in their addressing (and breaking) intergenerational abuse dynamics in their family. This also led them to embark on an eco-psychology course. Simultaneously, Dana’s career became a source of discomfort, as they realised their work had a strongly anthropocentric perspective, which instrumentalised the environment. As a result, Dana started to feel like they had no anchor in their personal or career spheres.</i>	
Ground		<i>This led them to use their skills and experience to work on a piece of research to show how the frameworks in their profession were instrumentalising the environment.</i>	
Other	1. Potential	It was through this research that Dana discovered collapse-related writing, including Jem Bendell's research and framing of Deep Adaptation. This felt like an important discovery to Dana, as it helped them realise how much knowledge production in their	+

<sup>52</sup> <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/2021/11/03/towards-a-more-holistic-integration-of-ones-personal-and-professional-lives-danas-story/>

		professional field was in fact pointing to factors that are causing collapse, although the word "collapse" itself was barely ever used.	
<b>Discovering Earth Listening</b>			
Ning	2. Applied	Out of curiosity for the DA field, and hoping to connect with more like-minded professionals, Dana decided to join the Deep Adaptation Forum on the Professions' Network.	+
Ning	3. Immediate	They almost didn't join the platform, as they felt put off by how the guidelines were phrased: these felt parent-child.	-
Ning	4. Applied	Dana was concerned they might be joining a cult, so they decided to give it two days to explore the forum, before closing down their account.	+
Welcoming Circle	5. Immediate	However, Dana then joined a Welcoming Circle, and had a very good experience there.	+
Ning	6. Applied	They decided to follow the host's advice and to attend as many DA events as possible, to get to know the network better.	+
Earth Listening	7. Immediate	One of the next events they attended was an Earth Listening circle. Although it felt a bit puzzling at first, they loved it.	+
Earth Listening	8. Applied	Dana decided to come back regularly thereafter, and to practice speaking with the earth on their own.	+
Earth Listening	9. Transformative	This led to a profound change for Dana: now, they cannot imagine not speaking to the earth whenever they are out in the wild.	+
Other	10. Applied	Through connections made in that circle, Dana also joined the five-week "Attending to Place" course (in late 2020).	+
Other	11. Transformative	This was another pivotal moment for them, as a finale on their journey towards healing intergenerational abuse dynamics. It was also the occasion for Dana to write several poems about the natural world, which felt novel and provided another layer of personal healing to them.	+
<b>A new self-understanding</b>			
<i>Ground narrative</i>		<i>In March 2021, Dana was exploring whether to do a foundation course in ecopsychology.</i>	
Coaching session	12. Applied	In order to make a better informed decision, they decided to book a session with a coach they met in DAF, who had experience in ecopsychology.	+
Coaching session	13. Potential	The coach helped them realise that they had been on a learning journey for decades (involving courses, books, coaching, therapy, etc.), and been intent on achieving continuous self-improvement, personal growth and accountability. The coach said: "What if this drive for self-improvement is part of an 'old you', in which you always have to 'do better' and 'be better' in order to feel you are of value in the world? What if you have grown and learned enough? How about allowing yourself to step into the world with no more dedicated personal development – and just 'being you'?"	+
Coaching session	14. Applied	This insight landed deeply in Dana. They decided that the next phase of their life would be about "self-fulfilment, not self-development." So they didn't take the course, and over the months that followed, simply allowed themselves to be and enjoy life, in spite of their appetite for self-development.	+

Coaching session	15. Realised	In other words, this 90-minute session with the coach had a critical impact on Dana.	+
<b>Growing disenchanted with the Forum</b>			
<i>Ground</i>		<i>Dana also regularly participated in many other offerings within the forum.</i>	
DAF	16. Immediate	Seeing the same people and familiar faces again and again made them feel increasingly comfortable and connected. Dana also felt that people in DAF could speak to their different sides, from the professional to the spiritual and the intellectual - which felt unusual.	+
DAF	17. Potential	Besides, Dana found ways to contribute their professional skills and expertise in various groups and initiatives.	+
DAF	18. Immediate	The network started to feel like home.	+
DAF	19. Immediate	However, this didn't last more than a few months. A sense of intellectual mismatch eventually developed for Dana, as they engaged with several volunteers, Core Team members, or event attendees. In particular, Dana experienced a tendency to perpetuate rigid norms, simplistic group-think, and an absence of critical thinking on the topics of anti-racism, decolonisation, and othering. This lack of nuance felt stifling and dull to Dana, and ultimately even limiting of human rights.	-
DAF	20. Applied	As a result of the above, Dana left the Professions' Network and stopped most involvement with DAF.	+
<b>What Dana learned from this experience</b>			
<i>Value narrative</i>		<i>Although Dana had first felt excited at encountering a network which felt like home, and then was disappointed to experience a lack of belonging to it, they described this journey as a useful process of learning. This showed them that tribal acceptance is less important to them than their sense of personal freedom, and that they do not need to be part of - or aligned with - one group in particular.</i>	
<i>Ground narrative</i>		<i>In spite of the disenchantment, they remain closely in touch with several people with whom they developed strong relationships in DAF.</i>	
<i>Value narrative</i>		<i>Besides, Dana feels that several experiences they've had thanks to DAF, notably a course in which they had to record a song and display it publicly, enabled them to bring their whole self into the world, which felt very brave and liberating. And the coaching session that led them to renewed self-understanding also gave them the permission to stop trying to find their "tribe" and to fit in.</i>	
DAF	21. Transformative	So although they are now much less engaged in DAF than they once were, Dana feels they have become able to more holistically integrate their personal and professional lives together - including both their love for life and nature, and the more brain-centred part of them.	+

## Story #11 – Nenad

Published on the Conscious Learning Blog on November 12, 2021<sup>53</sup>

<sup>53</sup> <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/2021/11/12/building-trust-and-modelling-different-ways-of-doing-things/>



“Building trust and modelling different ways of doing things”

Social learning space	Cycle / narrative	Story	Value
Other	1. Potential	I found out about DA through someone who mentioned the DA paper to me, shortly after it was published.	+
Other	2. Immediate	When I read it, I was struck that someone from the field of conventional sustainability academia was “telling it as it is.”	+
Other	3. Potential	For me, the information was not new: in my circles, people tend to find the actual situation much worse than is normally talked about, and suffer emotionally and physically from it.	+
Other	4. Immediate	However, I found the language in the paper useful and interesting, particularly the 4 R’s of Deep Adaptation.	+
Other	5. Potential	I realised that permaculture, which is a field in which I’m actively involved, isn’t possible without considering these four questions. It also felt relevant to the work I do with others in the field of community-led climate action...	+
Other	6. Applied	... so I reposted the article on my Medium blog, and started attending Jem Bendell's Q&As.	+
<i>Aspirational narrative</i>		<i>In community-led climate action, people often just focus on behaviour change on the societal scale, and neglect individual transformations. So I felt it would make sense to support a network focused on delivering this kind of learning experiences.</i>	
Ning	7. Applied	Therefore, when the Deep Adaptation Forum was launched, I joined the network on Ning, and observed what was going on there.	+
Ning	8. Immediate	I was involved in some interesting conversations in the Narratives & Messaging group...	+
CA Team	9. Potential	... and reached out to people one-to-one, such as Kat Soares, who was a volunteer with the Community Action group.	+
CA Team	10. Applied	I decided to join her as a fellow Group Leader.	+
<b>Cultivating new ways of being and doing</b>			
<i>Aspirational narrative</i>		<i>I joined the Community Action group to find ways of making our work, in my community-led climate action circles, more real and more effective. Kat, myself and others focused on finding out how we wanted to collaborate.</i>	
<i>Value narrative</i>		<i>We found a good fit, as experienced group process facilitators open to experimentation, and we avoid making things overly complicated.</i>	
<i>Ground narrative</i>		<i>Others who enjoyed those ways of collaborating joined us, including several people from Croatia.</i>	
<i>Ground narrative</i>		<i>As I started engaging in the Forum, I found a lot of conventional culture there - e.g. top-down and hierarchical practices, or predefined "volunteer roles" - in spite of good intentions. In particular, I found that there was no deliberate development of small groups or teams.</i>	
CA Team	11. Applied	In our collaborative action care team, we too started working in a conventional way, with an agenda, proposals, notes, etc. But we dropped this, and decided to start working with what is emergent.	+
CA Team	12. Potential	That was a shift for me. I discovered that it doesn't prevent the group to bring about effective outcomes - we do things, but in a relaxed and emergent way.	+

CA Team	13. Realised	This is an inner transformation, for me, which has been influenced by those I interact with in this group and in other spaces.	+
CA Team	14. Applied	Our group also started to actively model the process of “teaming” – forming small teams to do certain kinds of work. Besides, we introduced open space technology into our work, and set up a weekly virtual coworking time slot.	+
How the network has evolved			
DAF	15. Realised	In many conversations I had during our weekly check-in meeting, online Open Space events and in 1-on-1 random coffees, I learned that our way of doing things is spreading within DAF. I notice, for example, how the Business and Finance group leaders now announce their events as “Zoom sessions in an ‘open space’ context.” I’ve also heard of teaming processes being used more deliberately, for instance in the DA Facilitators’ group.	+
DAF	16. Realised	Now, DAF feels more self-organised, more adaptive and focused on small collectives.	+
CA Team	17. Enabling	Our team has been actively involved in facilitating and supporting this change, which doesn't happen automatically, particularly in a remote context.	+
DAF	18. Immediate	This corresponds with my intention as a network-weaver, and feels rewarding.	+
Ground narrative		To be fair, these changes in DAF’s culture of organising have also been facilitated by Kat Soares, in her role as Core Team Coordinator: she has been deeply involved in modelling these processes in our group from the start. And this was also enabled because Jem Bendell, as founder of DAF, was clear that he wanted to step aside, and do this in an orderly way – and he was open to input on how to do it.	
What this all means to me			
Aspirational narrative		In summary, I notice two tendencies in me now: (1) minimizing structured work time and maximising social time, and (2) showing how to do things by modelling, without giving structured instructions or tutorials or training, maybe by sharing brief "knowledge assets". This is related to (2) because this can only work if people are paying attention. If social time develops trust and relationships, then people might pay attention. With these tendencies in me, I influence teams I'm working with.	
Ground narrative		These ways of working are spreading beyond DAF, in other networks and online communities. I’ve taken these practices to other teams I’m in – championing being together remotely while doing things in ways that aren't too over-structured; but this may be part of a more global cultural shift. People are not interested in visioning and backcasting anymore, but prefer to respond to what is emerging.	
Value narrative		I find that working in this way makes for a better experience, less stress and less tensions. It's about being fully present in the moment – and this is a spiritual practice.	

## Story #12 – Matthew

Published on the Conscious Learning Blog on October 8, 2021<sup>54</sup>

<sup>54</sup> <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/2021/10/08/mapping-out-the-five-elements-of-collapse-awareness/>

“Mapping out the five elements of collapse awareness”

Social learning space	Cycle / narrative	Story	Value
<b>The DA Guidance website</b>			
Ning	1. Potential	What first helped me to "find my people" was when I became a volunteer with the Holistic Approaches and Guidance group, on the Professions' Network, and met my co-moderator Dean.	+
Other	2. Applied	Dean and I put on workshops, and now we're collaborating on an eight-week course.	+
Personal relationship	3. Potential	I've learned a lot from Dean.	+
DA Guidance	4. Potential	Being a volunteer also enabled me to start working with Stina and Brennan on the DA Guidance website. Stina started working on the design of this website.	+
DA Guidance	5. Immediate	Working with such cooperative, generous, loving people, has felt lovely and organic, as we've focused on what we feel most inspired to do, and focus our collaboration on skills rather than roles.	+
DA Guidance	6. Realised	So far, most Guides have made a profile on the website, but we haven't got much of an active community. The website is not generating much traffic for them or clients, and communication about it is insufficient in the DA community.	0
DA Guidance	7. Ant. Applied	In the project team, we want to foster more self-organising and a more active community around this project, for example to share more personal and professional practices among ourselves. We also want to start offering affordable therapy to activists and others on the front-lines of collapse. We just need to find the capacity to make it happen.	+
<b>Wider Embraces</b>			
Wider Embraces circles	8. Potential	I was working with S., who was registered as a Guide on the Guidance website. Her offering was the Wider Embraces Meditation.	+
Wider Embraces circles	9. Applied	I asked if I could try it with her, so we did so.	+
Wider Embraces circles	10. Immediate	I loved trialling Wider Embraces. First, because it helps one to expand one's sense of self, to include much wider dimensions. This provides space and capacity in the being, in which the global predicament can surface more safely than when we just experience ourselves as individuals. Besides, it helps to practice adopting different perspectives, which is a very useful and pertinent skill in these times of polarisation.	+
Wider Embraces circles	11. Potential	So she trained me on guiding this meditation.	+
Coaching	12. Realised	I now offer this meditation as part of my coaching.	+
External event	13. Applied	We recently did a Wider Embraces practice at the European Integral Conference, and people loved it.	+
External event	14. Immediate	I enjoyed the conversation at the end of the event.	+

External event	15. Realised	Unfortunately there hasn't been much follow-up, but that's alright.	0
<b>The 5 Elements of DA</b>			
Other	16. Potential	I never warmed to the framework of the 4 Rs, as it feels a bit abstract to me. As I was looking talking with a lot of people in DA, and hearing about their sense of internal collapse and overwhelm when considering global collapse, I started to tease out what goes on for people. I eventually hit upon a new framework through which to consider awareness of and responses to collapse - that of the Five Elements: emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, values, and justice. It's a neat framework, which covers all possible responses to this topic. All are equally necessary and valid, although people may have preferences for one or the other. To me, this framework is a distillation of what I've learned in the DA environment.	+
Coaching	17. Applied	I now use this framework as a diagnostic tool in my coaching, to find out where a person may want to direct their attention to generate individual adaptation pathways. For example, I'm working with a client at the moment, working on one element per session. In the meantime, she explores things through the perspective of that element.	+
Coaching	18. Realised	My coaching sessions with her are greatly benefiting from it.	+
External event	19. Enabling	As a coach, I am also part of another group, the Climate Coaching Alliance. As I found there were few collapse-aware participants around me, I put on a couple of workshops for these coaches, inviting them to consider collapse and the DA response, using the framework of the Five Elements which I developed.	+
External event	20. Realised	People asked me for the slides afterwards, so I assume they found value in this framework, or want to use it and adapt it.	+
Coaching	21. Ant. Applied	I would love to work with coaches on the model, to see what it offers them. I also want to make my coaching in general more permeable to the global condition, so that it may enable more professionals to feel into their responses to the global crisis.	+
DAF	22. Ant. Applied	I would also love to see equal attention being placed for each of the 5 elements in the DA community, because each are important. They are also useful to present a narrative of how this community has evolved through time - from sense-making to emotional processing, issues of justice, practical applications...	+
<b>What DAF has brought to my life</b>			
DAF	23. Realised	I was praying for collaborators and, I found all that in abundance in the Deep Adaptation network.	+
Value narrative		<i>I've had the pleasure of meeting very helpful collaborators in the Forum, from whom to learn and with whom to share new processes I've been trialling.</i>	
Value narrative		<i>I've made very nourishing friendships.</i>	
Value narrative		<i>My work as a volunteer is full of purpose. It enables me to do what I want, to be of service and be useful, which feels very gratifying.</i>	

Value narrative	<i>Being part of the DA movement, and participating in the grief circles, Death Cafes and other meetings has helped me better express my grief, and integrate it with other aspects of my life. Grief now plays a healthier and less dominant part in my emotional spectrum. I've learned how to integrate, handle and regulate my anxiety and other negative feelings. I also feel a renewed sense of hope, which is not grounded in an expectation of the future but in how we can be together. I feel part of a community of people who are loving and with whom I'm on the same page. This feels extremely rewarding.</i>
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## Story #13 – Stuart

Published on the Conscious Learning Blog on July 2, 2021<sup>55</sup>

“How the Deep Adaptation Facebook group is helping me deal with chronic depression”

Social learning space	Cycle / narrative	Story	Value
Other	1. Orienting	My wife and I had concerns about where our civilization was headed, and we wanted to live more responsibly. We moved to Italy, and I started reading up on sustainable agriculture and other matters. This is how I stumbled upon the Deep Adaptation paper, 18 months ago. It made me realise that things were worse than I thought.	+
Other	2. Immediate	I had an episode of depression.	-
Aspirational narrative		I wanted to be able to discuss matters of civilisational collapse with people, to talk about my fears, and find some comfort. And I wanted to learn more. So I joined the PDA Facebook group and started participating.	
Joining the DA Facebook Group			
DA Facebook group	3. Immediate	I found that the DA group was unlike any other group I've been involved in on Facebook. It doesn't have as many keyboard warriors, trying to shout each other down and out-fact everybody. It feels like an oasis.	+
Value narrative		Without this community, collapse awareness would be a really lonely place.	
DA Facebook group	4. Enabling	I also found that the moderators worked hard, and were doing a very good job at modelling certain ways of being. They helped to keep the group civil, kind, and loving. This culture of loving behaviours is also embodied by regular group participants, which makes it easier for new participants to shift their own behaviour. And the group rules, too, are set up to encourage that. It is difficult to change all of this, so people who don't fit in will eventually leave.	+
DA Facebook group	5. Potential	When I arrived in the group, I often reacted angrily to what others wrote. But with the help of other participants, I understood eventually that this anger came from desperately grasping onto my beliefs, defensively. The openness and understanding I found in other group participants helped me accept my fears and worries about the future. I also understood that the group's purpose was to make it possible for people to help each other out, just like I had been helped.	+

<sup>55</sup> <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/2021/07/02/how-the-deep-adaptation-facebook-group-is-helping-me-deal-with-chronic-depression/>

DA Facebook group	6. Applied	Engaging with the PDA group has helped me to grow more mindful, and responsible about my thoughts and my own reactions to them. While I used to be react angrily when triggered, I've become better at recognising this anger, and better choose how to respond or behave. For example, since joining DA, I've never pressed the heart button on Facebook comments as much in my entire Facebook career!	+
DA Facebook group	7. Realised	Joining the DA group helped me to overcome the episode of depression I experienced after reading the DA paper. It has also helped me improve the way I deal with my chronic depression. I still suffer from depression, and it still feels the same to me. But thanks to this new mindfulness and sense of responsibility, cultivated within the DA group, my depression - when it reoccurs - isn't having such a damaging effect in my relationship with my wife. So our relationship has improved as a result: I feel that we now communicate on a more intimate level. Our relationship with friends, who live in the rural area around us, has also improved. We get together and hang out more often. Thanks to my engagement with the group, I am also better able to be open and honest about my feelings with family and friends. I used to keep my emotions to myself, but much less so now: I hug people more, I can tell them I love them when these words would have remained stuck in my throat. This has been really liberating - as well as also being a hugely effective way of dealing with my depression: I can defuse it by practising openness. I also search for emotional openness and honesty in people. And I value interpersonal connections much more.	+
<b>Becoming a moderator</b>			
DA Facebook group	8. Enabling	At some point, I was approached to become a moderator.	+
DA Facebook group	9. Immediate	I was very excited about becoming involved, as a way to pay back for everything I got from the group.	+
<i>Ground narrative</i>		<i>Working as a Moderator can be challenging. Certain situations occur that require a lot of effort from all of us to moderate conversations, for example when members attack Jem or some of his video interviews, or when people contact us and demand to know why we didn't accept one of their posts. But I love the other Moderators. I learn from them, and they improve me as a person. Some people didn't fit in as moderators, but with those who are in this group now, I have very frank, honest, open and loving conversations - even when difficult ones occur. We are good at finding consensus among ourselves, in spite of how different each of us is. We bring different skills to the team.</i>	
DA Facebook group	10. Realised	Becoming a moderator has made me step up my game: I have become more responsible about my own behaviour and reactions, and consider how others may perceive them. So I am now better at listening to others, and at trying to understand how they feel. This sense of responsibility is also expressed in my improved ability at managing conflict: I stay calmer, am better aware of my own responses in a heated exchange, and better at keeping the big picture in mind.	+
DA Facebook group	11. Enabling	Becoming a moderator has made me think that it would be very helpful for many people if they could get the chance to become moderators themselves. Because of the difficult situations you have to deal with, in a responsible way, it is a very good preparation for what lies ahead for all of us in the real world.	+

Other	12. Applied	My engagement in the group is also leading me to think more about what a resilient community might look like in the valley where we live. Furthermore, DA has made me consider what the boundaries are to my own agency in the world. My agency is quite small, as I only act on 12 acres of land where I am cultivating the land and trying to bring in more biodiversity. But I'm happy with this work, which many might consider mundane peasant work.	+
DA Facebook group	13. Transformative	I've learned many skills that have changed me as a person - I wouldn't be the person I am today without the group. I can honestly say that the last 18 months have been truly life-changing for me.	+

## Story #14 – Diana

Published on the Conscious Learning Blog on July 7, 2021<sup>56</sup>

“Finding space to talk about collapse”

Social learning space	Cycle / narrative	Story	Value
<b>How I first grew collapse-aware</b>			
Ground narrative		<i>As a child, I felt the extent of our predicament from a very young age, perhaps due to suppressed emotions in my family. It gave me feelings of anger, which my parents wanted me to repress but which I couldn't - I don't have any ability to put a mask up. I then did a lot of reading, which confirmed my initial intuition that things were broken. I told the adults around me about this, but they didn't do anything to fix the situation, which felt very overwhelming.</i>	
Ground narrative		<i>To cope with what I was going through, I came up with a 3-part plan: 1. Ignore myself and my thoughts; 2. Stay really curious; 3. Do helpful things. I followed this plan for the next 40 years. Until one day I realised that I had accepted myself. Since then I've come to understand that I can be with myself now and was probably radically accepting myself when I tried to 'ignore my thoughts'.</i>	
Ground narrative		<i>Now, I run a huge 20-year internal behaviour change program for the Welsh government, and we're eight years into it. I've been attracted to it because it's about helping people, within the framework of sustainable development and the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act. What I need to be able to help others with is the pain, because there will be a lot to relinquish to become sustainable, and that will involve big efforts for this to happen equitably and in healing ways. I'm glad I've had this awareness about collapse from a young age, because otherwise I would have become frightened about understanding the extent of our predicament, sooner or later.</i>	
Aspirational narrative		<i>To me, the whole point of this program is to maximise the healing, and become really skilled at doing that, no matter the outcome. Any amount of healing is a success.</i>	
<b>What I found in the Deep Adaptation Forum</b>			

Personal relationship	1. Immediate	After I had read the DA paper, Jem Bendell twice gave me an hour of his time to discuss the paper, and I felt very honoured to be able to have this conversation with him. I was also glad to be able to share with him that I had been in this mental/emotional space for decades, and that I knew how it feels like.	+
Ning	2. Enabling	Afterwards, Dorian introduced me to the Professions' Network forum.	+
<i>Aspirational narrative</i>		<i>I joined with a vague intention to meet people with whom I could discuss my work on collapse (more than my feeling about it as I do get to discuss these with my husband). My intention has deepened; now I feel I am here to listen to what others have to say and to come, if we can, to collective understandings.</i>	
Ning	3. Applied	Since then, I've attended many of the talks, watched many recordings, made several new connections, and attended the Cadence Roundtable gatherings.	+
Ning	4. Immediate	Attending these gatherings has given me a huge sense of relief and connectedness: people were saying the same things that I've been telling my husband for years. I also felt excitement, knowing that I could learn something from people, who would be newer to this field and thus spotting things that I've grown rusty on because I've sat with this lens for a long time. Even though these are very difficult topics, and in fact I've dealt with depression all my life, on and off, it's such a blessing to find people with whom I can sit with the idea that things are worse than we could possibly describe in words. People with whom I can speak to these things without fearing that it's going to cause someone a massive shock.	+
Other	5. Potential	I'm now able to have deeper conversations with more people, although sometimes it's only about an element of the predicament, and sticking to the part that people understand already while keeping the broader context in mind.	+
Workplace	6. Applied	For example, this week I was working with someone and hinted at the possibility of collapse, but hedged and admitted that I might be wrong about what happens next. However, I think we won't avoid the worst.	+
Ning	7. Applied	In the forum, I joined discussions on behaviours such as panic, suppression (of information or feelings), or the writing of more and more reports (instead of taking action).	+
Workplace	8. Potential	These discussions help me understand what it is like for people who don't assume collapse. When I am back at work, our discussions help me feel more sympathetic and to explore new ways of responding to colleagues.	+
Workplace	9. Applied	For example, the day after my "coming-out" talk, I was able to have a fruitful conversation with one of my co-workers who I felt had been avoiding collapse, but he was now able to discuss it, and things went very well.	+
Ning	10. Potential	In the forum, I have also made many new friends, which has given me renewed confidence...	+
Public talk	11. Applied	...and this confidence has led me to "come out" in a public talk as collapse-aware.	+
Workplace	12. Realised	This has enabled me to release a lot of internal pressure, and to do my job better.	+
Workplace	13. Realised	Finally, I don't think we would have done the Work That	+



		Reconnects workshops in my team without this confidence that I received from being in the forum.	
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## Story #15 – David

Published on the Conscious Learning Blog on May 10, 2022<sup>57</sup>

“Finding a community of love in action”

Social learning space	Cycle / narrative	Story	Value
<b>Coming to terms with a variety of perspectives</b>			
<i>Ground narrative</i>		<i>I was working at a homeless shelter.</i>	
Personal relationship	1. Potential	In March 2019, a person I trusted recommended I read Jem Bendell's paper.	+
Other	2. Immediate	Reading it, I felt galvanized.	+
DA Facebook group	3. Applied	So I looked up the Facebook group immediately and started participating.	+
<i>Aspirational narrative</i>		<i>I had no particular goal except to reach other people who were considering the issue of potential collapse, which to my mind is and always has been the equivalent of the end of the world as we know it. For me, it's very much an eschatological question.</i>	
DA Facebook group	4. Orienting	When I arrived in the FB group, I didn't really know what it was at all. I'd been studying worldwide calamities since I was 17 years old. So as I read what people were sharing, I recognized some of the ideas, and thought I knew what this was about. So I engaged with the group from a position of "I know what's going on here." But I experienced all kinds of pushback from people who disagreed with my approach, sometimes forcefully.	0
DA Facebook group	5. Immediate	I found this confusing.	-
DA Facebook group	6. Potential	However, I gradually came to recognize that there are a variety of equally valid viewpoints in this conversation. This was the most important lesson of my experience in the Facebook group - there is such a diversity of approaches of feelings and thoughts on the topic generically referred to as "collapse"!	+
<i>Ground narrative</i>		<i>It's now more obvious to me that everyone has their own wisdom. My viewpoint is just one viewpoint among innumerable viewpoints. It doesn't make it less valid - in fact, I have deepened my commitment to my own perspective, which comes from a very internal place. But I now feel I have no right to be judgmental about other people's point of view. I still think I'm right, but critically, I'm right *for me*. And I am able to comprehend that someone else is right *for them*. For example, while some people are keen to build sustainable communities around themselves, my belief is that all human arrangements are going to become irrelevant at some point - and that these people are only using this planning as a buffer against accepting the utter dissolution of human society and even biological existence on this planet at</i>	

<sup>57</sup> <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/2022/05/10/finding-a-community-of-love-in-action/>

		<i>this time. But I don't feel the need to interfere with what they're doing. They're learning valuable skills. They're in touch with Mother Earth. So they're doing things that I'm not doing. We don't necessarily need to reconcile that I don't need to go be part of their community.</i>	
My experience as a Facebook group Moderator			
Moderators' team	7. Enabling	Soon after I entered the group, one of the Facebook group's moderators recruited me to become a moderator, so I was inducted into the Moderators' group.	+
Moderators' team	8. Immediate	The induction process felt comfortable and appropriate.	+
Moderators' team	9. Potential	Being part of the Moderators' team, I also came to realise that some issues were particularly triggering to people in the group we managed - such as veganism, nuclear power, or overpopulation. These issues tend to polarise opinions.	+
Moderators' team	10. Strategic	And I found that while I was reluctant to spend a long time in dialogue with people I considered trolls, other moderators were keen to do so.	+
Moderators' team	11. Immediate	I also regretted that the Moderators' team tended to fracture out into little technical silos, which made me feel we were lacking coherence and a sense of common direction.	-
Moderators' team	12. Applied	And the others didn't seem to agree with me. So I decided I might as well move on.	+
DA Facebook group	13. Immediate	As I was growing dissatisfied with my involvement in the Moderators' group, in which I experienced a lack of belonging, I also grew increasingly tired of the Facebook group. After a while, it felt like the same conversations were happening over and over again, so it stopped being a learning experience for me, as a long-term participant.	-
DA Facebook group	14. Potential	Besides, while I believe this group serves an important purpose, I also came to the conclusion that this purpose is limited by the social media format, and by the fact that Facebook is evil: this company is not interested in fostering conversation or information, but in harvesting data.	+
DA Facebook group	15. Applied	So I stepped down from my role as a Moderator, and my involvement in the Facebook group decreased.	+
Seeking a deeper involvement in the Forum			
Aspirational narrative		I was looking for a new kind of experience, deeper, and more involved in the Forum at large.	
Ning	16. Applied	Therefore, I became more involved with the Professions' Network, on Ning, and first joined the Narratives & Messaging group.	+
Ning	17. Realised	I felt I shared an outlook with Melissa, the volunteer who stepped up in that group, so I tried to figure out what was going on there. Unfortunately, we failed to get much traction.	0
Ground narrative		<i>In March 2020, a year after I first became involved in DAF, I took a break. I was anxious at the start of the pandemic, because I thought I was vulnerable, and felt I had to organise my life and those of my loved ones. So I stopped engaging in DAF for about half a year.</i>	
Ground narrative		<i>After that time, I came back full of a renewed energy. I was still alive! And I</i>	

	<i>missed being in the Forum. The people in DAF are unlike any other group online, and I couldn't find a similar experience anywhere else. So I decided to come back to the Forum. I really started to buckle down and tried to make connections, and tried to find a place to hook in and contribute.</i>
<b>Some key insights from my time in DAF</b>	
<i>Value narrative</i>	<i>I realised that the approach created by Jem Bendell and Katie Carr is quite unique, and attracts a certain kind of person who are different than anyone else. Or perhaps these people simply have access to different practices and procedures which bring out the best in them?</i>
<i>Ground narrative</i>	<i>For example, every meeting - even if it's a business meeting - begins with a brief meditation to center the human person who's participating in the call, and is then followed by a check-in to communicate the humanity of each individual. That's not really done in other groups or other meetings that I attend. And while at first, I thought such practices were too "woo-woo" and a waste of time, I eventually understood how critical they are. First, we have to connect as humans, otherwise the rest of it is useless. So the fact that these practices are part of the culture, and they successfully reveal the humans who are involved, that's unique.</i>
<i>Value narrative</i>	<i>Besides, I'm also very impressed by Jem Bendell's thinking (or most of it at least), and his ability to communicate it.</i>
<i>Value narrative</i>	<i>Another important learning that has happened for me in DAF is understanding the value of teamwork. I've been a lone wolf all my life, and my initiatives have mostly been individual, not to say solitary. In DAF, I observed the commitment to teamwork, and the caliber of people here allows for this to happen at a level I'm comfortable with. It's possible to find actual colleagues here.</i>
<i>Aspirational narrative</i>	<i>What is keeping me in DAF is the desire to be part of the formation of a truly effective team which can bring together the various energetic and profoundly felt impulses that people have, to discover how to enact Deep Adaptation in practice. How can we amplify these different energies which coexist in the fascinating jumble that is Deep Adaptation - as a field which includes Jem Bendell, the DA Facebook group, the Professions' network, etc.? Anything we can do to connect people to each other is valuable, regardless of what's happening in the world, or may happen in the future. Efforts to create community are inherently valuable, and should be pursued. It all comes back to love: any expression of love is inherently valuable. And love in action is community, and justice. We're trying to be kind to people on a mass basis.</i>
<i>Value narrative</i>	<i>No matter what the future may bring, evangelizing for kindness in the context of planetary collapse is a wonderful mission, and a worthy project. I think that's what we're really doing.</i>
<i>Value narrative</i>	<i>My involvement with DA has guided me to some extent, and provided me with an impetus and a safe container: knowing that there are other people on the path is comforting, and that comfort is necessary to proceed. This context has enabled me to pursue internal (spiritual, philosophical, or metaphysical) questions, and reach conclusions that are satisfactory to me. These conclusions enable me to turn back to the world and say: "I'm settled enough in myself. Now, I can engage." This really speaks to the importance of this community in my life.</i>

# Story #16 – Sasha

Published on the Conscious Learning Blog on December 7, 2022<sup>58</sup>

## “How I am helping to catalyse support efforts in the Ukraine”

Social learning space	Cycle / narrative	Story	Value
Ground narrative		<i>In November 2022, I began to make some connections with an informal group, that is carrying out relief work in Ukraine, specifically – but not exclusively – around issues of women’s sexual assault.</i>	
		<i>My connection with this group happened through a friend I know through OACC, a community organisation that organises a yearly conference in which we are both involved. I appreciate her very much, particularly her warm and outgoing personality, and know her to be both a trustworthy and resourceful person. I heard that she was involved in these efforts in the Ukraine, and felt called to participate in them.</i>	
		<i>I was feeling in familiar territory with work on sexual assault, as a midwife, as an organiser, and as a woman having done a lot of my own process work around my own sexual assault. Besides, I felt the impetus to be involved in solidarity work as a result of my involvement in the Diversity and Decolonising Circle, and the process we have gone through as a group. The various processes we went through in the Circle also gave me a sense of strength and stability. So I decided to asked my friend about the project to see if I could help. She quickly put me in touch with the right people.</i>	
<b>Getting more people involved</b>			
Aspirational narrative		<i>It appeared there was a need for more support of these efforts, specifically around offering emotional support online to volunteers who are working in the Ukraine. So I thought of several fellow volunteers in the Deep Adaptation Forum, with whom I had built trusting relationships, and whom I expected might have both the right skills, and an interest in this project.</i>	
Personal connections	1. Applied	I contacted them individually.	+
Personal connections	2. Immediate	Their responses were extremely positive – every one of them expressed a keen interest to become involved. I also sensed that each of them showed a lot of sophistication in their understanding of what might be needed from them: they stepped in with an attitude of openness, flexibility, and of comfort with self-organising outside of official, bureaucratic channels.	+
Personal connections	3. Applied	I connected them with my friend.	+
Personal connections	4. Immediate	A few days later, she told me that these new collaborations with the DAF participants I had introduced her to were “growing like slime mould,” very fast and in a purely self-organised fashion. I felt so excited and gratified!	+
Personal connections	5. Applied	Besides, as a result of these conversations, I have also become involved in conversations with people in a Ukrainian ecovillage, who are interested in increasing their capacity to house refugees, and in receiving planning help on building straw bale houses. They are also faces with power outages and looking to put the solar energy from panels they have to a wider range of uses.	+

58 <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/2022/12/07/how-i-am-helping-to-catalyse-support-efforts-in-the-ukraine/>

Personal connections	6. Ant. Applied	To help with that, I am about to put them in touch with people from my local community with expertise with small scale Solar power systems.	+
<b>The importance of self-care</b>			
Personal connections	7. Potential	One important insight I have received through these various endeavours is around boundaries. When self-organisation happens and grows so rapidly, it's important to know how to handle this rush of energy, and be aware of the need for self-care – particularly in the case of such urgent humanitarian efforts. Otherwise, the risk of burnout is real. With the person I'm working with, on sexual assault, I've been impressed with her awareness of what she has or hasn't the capacity for, and when she needs to take some time off. She is very clear in voicing these boundaries, which I find remarkable.	+
<b>What has made it all possible?</b>			
Value narrative		<i>Reflecting on what enabled this to happen, I found that none of it would have been possible without my connection to the Deep Adaptation Forum. Although I haven't been such an active volunteer in this network, I sense a deep level of comfort and love in it, and I have great respect for both the organisation and the people I know in it. I introduced the people I know in DAF to my friend out of a sense of respect and understanding for what this network has to offer, and because of the strong relationships I have with people in DAF, who have showed me that they want to create change in the world.</i>	
Online event	8. Immediate	In particular, I remembered the affection, respect, and sense of connection that emerged in me for one of these DAF participants during an event he organised a few months ago, after the start of the war. He presented it as an attempt to build bridges between people from Ukraine and Russia. In it, he revealed his pain and vulnerability in a beautiful way, which I found very touching.	+
Online event	9. Ant. Applied	This event inspired me to create bridges of my own.	+
Value narrative		<p><i>This particular bridge was also built thanks to the qualities I perceive in the other group of people I am in touch with, who are coordinating the support efforts in Ukraine. I find these people very focused, clear, and open. I found that they were willing to take me at face value, even though they hardly knew me at all. It felt like a remarkable example of what can happen when people set aside some of the usual fear, egos, walls and boundaries to connect with a very focused purpose around an emergency effort. This allowed us all to be quite transparent with one another, and to mobilise quite a level of expertise and connections.</i></p> <p><i>Finally, another factor has been my level of comfort with technology. Due to security concerns, it was critical for these people that I be willing to use the application they favour, which is Signal. I had never used it before, but my familiarity with other tools like WhatsApp, Messenger and Telegram was really helpful. Our work on decolonisation has helped me understand that if you want to be in support of others, you should be willing – and able – to use the channels these people want to use!</i></p>	

# Annex 5.3

## Case Study: The DAF Diversity and Decolonising Circle

This annex is a report written on the basis of the case study I carried out within the Diversity and Decolonising Circle, in active collaboration and with the full consent of all circle participants past and present. This corresponds to Research Stream #1, as introduced in **Annex 3.3**.

All current circle participants were invited to review and comment on this report between April and December 2022. I called their attention in particular to any passages that concerned them individually.

In what follows, I start off by introducing the social learning space. I then mention the aspirations expressed by participants within it, before presenting a summary of the evaluation results, including effect data and contribution data. I conclude this annex with a critical discussion of these findings.

### *1. Introducing the social learning space*

The Diversity and Decolonising Circle (D&D) was officially launched in the Deep Adaptation Forum in August 2020. It was the product of several conversations and interactions, the first of which took place during the Strategy Options Dialogue (Feb. to Apr. 2020), a consultative strategy process initiated by the DAF Core Team and piloted by volunteers<sup>59</sup>. This circle launched with the following mandate, as articulated in the first version of its mission statement:

"to find ways to reflect on and address the main forms of separation and oppression that characterise our modern industrial societies - including, in no particular order: Patriarchy; White Supremacy; and Desacralization of Nature at large - as we inevitably carry them with us into the Deep Adaptation movement and spaces." (DAF D&D Circle, 2020)

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<sup>59</sup> Please refer to **Annex 5.4** for more details on this process.

As part of this mission, the focus of the circle's work since its creation has been on finding ways "to make DA spaces safer for everyone, particularly people identifying as Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour," and thus on "opening spaces for deeper conversations to listen to, learn from, and stand in solidarity with Black, Indigenous and People of Colour" (BIPOC). Nonetheless, D&D also aims to address other aspects covered by its mission statement, for example issues of gender and sexual discrimination, ableism, etc.

Along with several volunteers and fellow Core Team members, I have been actively involved in this circle since its creation, and participated in the early conversations that gave rise to it. I have always taken part in it on a volunteering basis.

Since its creation, the circle has initiated two anti-racism trainings, as well as several workshops on topics related to racial and cultural discrimination, indigenous perspectives, etc. These activities have been mainly geared towards DAF participants at large, but invitations were always extended to members of other networks, and indeed partnerships were established for several of these activities. Individual members of the circle have also provided other educational activities on similar topics, within DAF and elsewhere, with varying degrees of support and collaboration with their fellow members.

Besides these "external-facing" activities, D&D members have also engaged in a continuous process of mutual learning, mutual support, and self-education. Shortly after the circle's creation, we launched a series of monthly "learning circles," in order to share insights, experiences, and resources with one another. We also initiated other practices aiming at making our own learning more visible, such as beginning each of our weekly meetings with a review of recent "successes" (see below).

It gradually dawned on us that in spite of the many setbacks and difficult moments we experienced, our continued involvement in the work of this circle had been a source of many important insights, individually as well as collectively. Therefore, we began documenting some of our learning, through blog posts<sup>60</sup>, webinars<sup>61</sup>, and lately, video recordings<sup>62</sup>.

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60 E.g. <https://bit.ly/3Llwy2C>

61 E.g. <https://bit.ly/3JZISXo>

62 E.g. <https://bit.ly/3G1i0EZ>

I feel that my participation in D&D has been one of the deepest journeys of personal change I ever experienced (see **Annex 5.2, Story #5**, as well as **Chapter 6**). I therefore invited my fellow circle members to join me in weaving together an articulation of as many of our experiences of learning, awakening, mistakes, heart-aches, conflict, and mutual caring as we could. This annex attempts to summarise this collective work of sense- and change-making that I have been a part of.

## *2. Participants' aspirations*

Assessing the various forms of positive or negative value that are being created in a social learning space requires an awareness of what data might be meaningful to participants, so as to honour their participation and agency (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p.198). Once effects that matter to participants have been identified, a "value detective" (p.193) can derive from these effects indicators that will be meaningful to them, and find ways to collect data to monitor these indicators.

A good place to start, with the D&D circle, would be with the discussions we had around the "framing" of our work. Framing is a social learning mode which has to do with the sense that participants have (or develop over time) of why they are engaged with each other. It is an open-ended collective process which "happens as an integral and ongoing part of the process of social learning itself" (p.152). At times, this process may be particularly explicit and intentional, as participants clarify their respective and collective aspirations dialogically.

Unsurprisingly, the discussions that led to the launch of the circle, and to the publication of our first mission statement, were a time of particularly important framing. Among our stated aspirations, listed in our original mission statement, are the following:

- "- to find ways to reflect on and address the main forms of separation and oppression that characterise our modern industrial societies - including, in no particular order: Patriarchy; White Supremacy; and Desacralization of Nature at large - as we inevitably carry them with us into the Deep Adaptation movement and spaces."
- "to become more in alignment with the Deep Adaptation mission of embodying and enabling loving responses to our predicament, and reducing suffering, while saving more of society and the natural world";
- "to find ways through this reflective process to make DA spaces safer for everyone, particularly people identifying as Black, Indigenous, and People



of Colour";

- "opening spaces for deeper conversations to listen to, learn from, and stand in solidarity with Black, Indigenous and People of Colour";

- "designing a training program for DAF volunteers, core team members, and holding group members, as well as regular 'Deep Listening for Decolonising' gatherings for participants in the various DA networks, on this particular facet of our predicament."

In this sub-section, I will present how I interpreted this mission statement.

Conversations happening over a year and a half after the circle began led me to understand that my interpretation of the circle's purpose was shared with other circle members, but not all. I will return to this important realisation in **Section 2.2.4**, below.

To me, the aspirations listed above have primarily to do with creating change in DAF, from a strategic, organisational and cultural standpoint; but an intention to develop more critical self-awareness is also present there ("reflect on and address the main forms of separation and oppression... as we inevitably carry them with us;" "become more in alignment with the Deep Adaptation mission of embodying and enabling loving responses to our predicament"), and is explicitly linked with the mission of creating safer spaces for everyone ("through this reflective process").

Therefore, I will begin this evaluation process by collecting effect data with regards to this twin ambition – i.e. that of creating change both "without" (in DAF at large, and perhaps wider afield) and "within" (in the hearts and minds of D&D circle participants). I believe both dimensions have been central to the reflective conversations taking place in the D&D circle since its creation, and thus point to two areas of value-creation to monitor, with regards to the following questions:

- **"Are we bringing about generative change for others (particularly BIPOC)?"**  
and
- **"Are we ourselves changing in generative ways?"**

We have prioritised these intentions differently over time, personally and collectively. Indeed, as I will discuss in **Section 2.2.4.2**, diverging interpretations of our original mission statement eventually became an issue within the circle. I point to the new

understanding that emerged for me (and the rest of our group) towards the end of this Annex.

### 3. *Evaluating social learning in the D&D circle*

#### 2.1 Effect data: What value has been created?

##### 2.1.1 Data sources

I have drawn my main sources of effect data from documents produced during the course of the following reflective activities:

1. our weekly "success stories" sharing rounds;
2. our monthly learning circles;
3. our October 2021 Conscious Learning Festival experience-sharing webinar;
4. our March 2022 Learning Circle experience-sharing session;
5. the research interviews that Wendy and I carried out with other members of the circle, and with each other.

Details on the files documenting these activities are listed in Table 5.

*Table 5: D&D Circle Main Sources of Effect Data ("the data set")*

Source description	Reference code	Date of conversation(s)	Number of words
The sections from the weekly D&D circle's meetings minutes file marked as "success sharing rounds"	SSR	25 February 2021 to March 14, 2022	4,392
Monthly learning circles minutes (first file)	LC1	October 2020 to May 2021	12,340
Monthly learning circles minutes (second file)	LC2	June 2021 to March 2022	6,553
Transcript of the D&D circle's Conscious Learning Festival webinar	CLF	October 5, 2021	9,836
Transcript of the D&D circle's Feb.2022 recorded	LCR	February 5, 2022	8,254

learning circle, which provided the footage for two new videos			
Transcript of a recorded research conversation between myself and two other members of the D&D circle	RC1	October 1, 2021	10,693
Transcript of a recorded research conversation between myself and another member of the D&D circle	RC2	March 8, 2022	13,851

### 2.1.2 Creating indicators of value-creation using a thematic analysis

Having clarified our aspirations, I will now start exploring in more detail what forms of value have been created within the D&D circle. This will involve considering whether we, in this circle, have been fulfilling our aspirations (which is the domain of “outcomes,” or “realised value”); but in order to answer more fully the research questions mentioned at the start of this chapter, I will also consider other cycles of value-creation that we often described to each other as important to us in the circle (for example: the joy of deepening our mutual friendships; the pain of dealing with conflict; the conditions enabling our learning; etc.).

In the interviews and events that led to the collection of value-creation stories on behalf of D&D circle members (see next section), Wendy and I generally made use of an iterative list of more fine-grained indicators, and associated questions, to probe the different kinds of value creation taking place for each of us - although this list by no means formed a structured interview process (see **Annex 5.1**). In turn, we often translated statements of value voiced during these interviews into new indicators to monitor, following the iterative "bottom-up" approach described by Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020, p.198).

In order to distinguish which of these indicators have been most meaningful to us in the circle, and therefore what effect data appears to speak most clearly to the value created within our social learning space for each value-creation cycle, I carried out a second round of thematic analysis on the data set.

I examined the data from a contextual constructivist epistemological position (Madill, Jordan and Shirley, 2000), which assumes that any phenomenon may be interpreted in multiple ways, depending on the researchers' position and the research context. As a

thematic analysis methodology, I made use of Template Analysis, as presented by King (2004, 2012) and Brooks and colleagues (2015). I considered this methodology appropriate for its flexibility, and its usefulness to analyse large volumes of diverse data (including transcripts from interviews or focus groups, or any other form of textual data) in a time-effective way (Brooks et al, 2015). Another reason for utilising this methodology is that it is a form of “codebook” thematic analysis (Braun *et al.*, 2019), which encourages the initial development of themes early on in the process, but also allows for iterative refinement of this framework through inductive engagement with the data in the process. It therefore appeared particularly well-suited to be integrated with the social learning value-creation framework forming the broader methodological umbrella of my research in DAF, as well as with the qualitative research philosophy I am following.

Template Analysis encourages the development of an initial template, made of a priori themes that are based on a sub-set of the data. The analysis then "progresses... through an iterative process of applying, modifying and re-applying the initial template" (King, 2012, p.430). I will define themes as "the recurrent and distinctive features of participants' accounts... that characterize perceptions and/or experiences, seen by the researcher as relevant to the research question of a particular study" (ibid, p.430-1). In Template Analysis, themes are hierarchically organized (groups of similar codes are clustered together to produce more general higher-order codes), and "the extent to which main (i.e. top level) themes are elaborated - in terms of the number and levels of sub-themes - should reflect how rich they prove to be in terms of offering insights into the topic area of a particular study" (ibid, p.431). However, themes can also be linked laterally, for example as integrative themes cutting across several main themes, as "undercurrents running through participants' accounts" (ibid, p.432).

As my aim was to identify forms of value-creation that appear to have been most present for us in the D&D circle for each of the value-creation cycles in the social learning framework proposed by Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020), I started off by creating a template with each of these cycles as the main top-level themes, associated with its own guiding research question<sup>63</sup>:

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63 These questions were inspired by Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p.98-122

1. IMMEDIATE: What has our experience been like?
2. POTENTIAL: What has come out of our experience?
3. APPLIED: What have we been learning in the doing?
4. REALISED: What difference have we been making?
5. ENABLING: What has made it all possible for us?
6. STRATEGIC: What has been the quality of our engagement with strategic stakeholders?
7. ORIENTING: How and where have we been locating ourselves in the broader landscape?
8. TRANSFORMATIVE: What have been some broader or deeper individual and collective effects of our activities?

For each of these top-level themes, I then considered what second-level themes might offer answers to these questions, as potential indicators of value creation for each cycle. I derived these tentative indicators from three sources:

1. The list of indicators and associated questions that Wendy and I developed iteratively in the course of our research interviews (see **Annex 5.1**);
2. The examples of typical indicators provided for each cycle by Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020, p.200-6);
3. Reading a sub-set of the data (CLF and LCR).

See this initial template in Table 6 below. I could not identify any relevant themes (indicators) for the Strategic or Orienting cycles.

*Table 6: Initial Template*

Cycle (top-level theme)	Indicators of value creation (second-level theme)
<b>IMMEDIATE VALUE</b> <i>What has our experience been like?</i>	statements indicating identification with the group
	discussions of serious difficulties, mistakes, failures
	statements reflecting difficult/painful learning

	statements on the quality of the space and relationships
<b>POTENTIAL VALUE</b> <i>What has come out of our experience?</i>	sharing of stories of practice and experience
	creation of documents, tools, and methods to inform practice
	shared resolutions / collective statements
	Statements indicating that new skills / awareness / capacity were acquired
	Statements of increased confidence / self-worth
	Statements indicating important new relationships
	Statements about sharing insights and information
<b>APPLIED VALUE</b> <i>What have we been learning in the doing?</i>	Sharing of value-creation stories looping experience of adoption of innovation/practices back to the space
	Statements indicating that errors were not repeated
	New initiatives / risks taken by participants because of their participation
	New reported collaborations based on connections made in the social learning space
	Statements indicating innovations, new solutions or approaches
<b>REALISED VALUE</b> <i>What difference have we been making?</i>	Indications of meaningful changes happening for others beyond the circle
<b>ENABLING VALUE</b> <i>What has made it all possible for us?</i>	Reflection rounds on what works well to support learning in the space
	Shared language about rituals and routines that serve social learning
	Presence of key enablers/facilitators
<b>STRATEGIC VALUE</b> <i>What is the quality of our engagement with strategic stakeholders?</i>	(no indicators)
<b>ORIENTING VALUE</b> <i>How and where have we been locating ourselves in the broader landscape?</i>	(no indicators)
<b>TRANSFORMATIVE</b>	Feeling able to express oneself in new ways

<i>What have been some broader or deeper individual and collective effects of our activities?</i>	Seeing oneself / the world in a very new way
	changes in one's identity beyond the space
	changes in mindsets or assumptions
	reworked boundaries
	new cultural norms

Once the initial template was ready, I then worked systematically through the entire dataset listed in Table 5, identified relevant sections of text, and marked them with one or several appropriate code(s). I did so by importing all documents into the software Quirkos and analysing them using this software. As inadequacies in the initial template emerged - for example, irrelevant a priori themes, or missing themes - I modified the template iteratively. After having read and coded all data twice, I decided that the template had developed into its final form. I created new second-level themes (indicators) in the process - including in the Strategic and Orienting cycles - and I merged or deleted others in the process. For themes that I felt were most present in the data set, where relevant, I broke them down into third-level-themes.

This analysis simultaneously yielded two critical components with regards to assessing Effect Data following the Wenger-Trayner value-creation framework:

- Second- and third-level themes functioning as indicators of value-creation;
- Codes gathered under the “umbrella” of these themes, functioning as Effect Data.

A third benefit of this analysis was that it allowed me to notice that several lateral relationships could be drawn between certain themes across value-creation cycles, thus forming "integrative themes" (King, 2012) infusing many conversations in the circle, and which thus seemed pertinent to highlight:

1. Conflict and tensions
2. Mutual support
3. How to do this work?
4. New awareness

See the final template in Table 7.

*Table 7: Final Template*

Cycle (top-level theme)	Indicators of value creation (second-level theme)	Sub-indicators (third-level theme)
<b>IMMEDIATE VALUE</b> <i>What has our experience been like?</i>	statements reflecting difficult/painful learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Experiencing the pain of our predicament</li> <li>- Difficulty of doing this work</li> <li>- Interpersonal conflict</li> </ul>
	discussions of serious difficulties, mistakes, failures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Challenges in DAF</li> <li>- D&amp;D practice challenges</li> <li>- External challenges</li> <li>- Conflict situations</li> </ul>
	statements on the quality of the space and relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A space of deep trust and safety</li> <li>- Expressions of love and mutual care</li> <li>- Voicing appreciation of one another</li> <li>- Appreciating D&amp;D circle as an open, relaxed, and democratic space</li> <li>- Strong relationships</li> </ul>
	statements indicating identification with the group, and/or a sense of personal and collective commitment	
<b>POTENTIAL VALUE</b> <i>What has come out of our experience?</i>	Statements referring to shared stories of practice and experience	
	Statements referring to shared insights and information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Recommended resources</li> <li>- Understanding systemic oppression</li> <li>- Cultivating discernment</li> <li>- Issues of language</li> <li>- How to do this work?</li> <li>- Personal stories</li> <li>- Ideas for new actions, processes or initiatives</li> </ul>
	Statements indicating that new skills, awareness or capacity were acquired	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improved discernment, refined awareness of self or world</li> <li>- New language</li> <li>- Refined understanding of D&amp;D work</li> <li>- New skills or capacity</li> </ul>
	Statements indicating increased confidence and inspiration to keep going	



	Statements indicating the creation of important new relationships	
<b>APPLIED VALUE</b> <i>What have we been learning in the doing?</i>	Sharing of value-creation stories looping experience of adoption of innovation/practices back to the space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ideas on improving our methods</li> <li>- Making use of shared resources</li> <li>- Making use of knowledge or inspiration</li> <li>- Building on relationships</li> <li>- Building on new skills</li> <li>- Building on confidence and commitment</li> <li>- Stories of other people making use of D&amp;D potential value</li> </ul>
	Statements indicating that errors were not repeated	
	New initiatives / risks taken by participants because of their participation	
	New reported collaborations based on connections made in the social learning space	
<b>REALISED VALUE</b> <i>What difference have we been making?</i>	Statements mentioning uncomfortable changes or experiences for stakeholders	
	Statements mentioning generative changes happening for others beyond the circle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Others are better informed</li> <li>- Others feel safer or better supported</li> <li>- Others express gratitude</li> <li>- Others are doing the work</li> <li>- Others are helping to spread awareness</li> </ul>
<b>ENABLING VALUE</b> <i>What has made it all possible for us?</i>	Reflection rounds on what works well to support learning in the space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Activity design</li> <li>- Processes and work culture</li> <li>- Useful containers</li> <li>- Attitude towards learning</li> </ul>
	Shared language in the group about rituals and routines that serve social learning	
	Spaces dedicated to learning are convened	
	Presence of key enablers/facilitators	
	Encouragements and mutual care in the group	
	Signs of external support from inside and outside DAF	
<b>STRATEGIC VALUE</b> <i>What is the quality of our engagement with</i>	Internal strategic conversations are taking place	

<i>strategic stakeholders?</i>	Conversations with strategic stakeholders are taking place	- Strategic individuals within DAF - Strategic groups within DAF - Strategic groups outside DAF
<b>ORIENTING VALUE</b> <i>How and where have we been locating ourselves in the broader landscape?</i>	Conversations take place about our personal and professional contexts are taking place	
	Collaborations are initiated with aligned networks or groups	
<b>TRANSFORMATIVE VALUE</b> <i>What have been some broader or deeper individual and collective effects of our activities?</i>	Statements referring to a capacity to see oneself or the world in a very new way	
	Statements referring to a capacity to express oneself in new ways	
	Statements referring to important changes happening in the group	

### 2.1.3 Considering complementary data sources

During the process of performing the Template Analysis, I also noted down ideas for complementary data sources I had access to, and which provide further information about the effect data that is mentioned in our conversations in the D&D circle. Some of these data sources constitute new indicators of value-creation in their own right.

In Table 8, I list these complementary data sources, and present the indicator of effect data that can be derived from them.

Complementary data sources were typically of four kinds:

- Artefacts produced by the D&D circle (text files, videos, etc.);
- Feedback form results from activity participants;
- Personal observations (including my own awareness, memory or notes from certain events);
- Research interviews I carried out with other stakeholders outside the D&D circle.

While obviously the Effect Data drawn from the Template Analysis above is only qualitative, some of the data I was able to collect thanks to these complementary sources is quantitative. Both types of data can be integrated within the Wenger-Trayner

framework, which can act as a boundary object bridging quantitative and qualitative methods (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2019).

I highlight new indicators not listed in the Final Template (Table 7) with an asterisk.

Table 8: Complementary Effect Data Sources

Cycle	Complementary data source	Indicator	Data type
<b>IMMEDIATE VALUE</b> <i>What has our experience been like?</i>	Minutes from D&D circle meetings Personal observations	<b>Level of participation and commitment to circle meetings and other activities over time*</b>	QUAN
<b>POTENTIAL VALUE</b> <i>What has come out of our experience?</i>	Personal observations	<b>Creation of documents, tools, and methods informing our practice in the circle*</b>	QUAL
<b>APPLIED VALUE</b> <i>What have we been learning in the doing?</i>	Personal observations	Sharing of value-creation stories looping experience of adoption of innovation or practices back to the space: Ideas on improving our methods	QUAL
	Personal observations	New collaborations based on connections made in the social learning space	QUAL
	Personal observations	New initiatives or risks taken by participants because of their participation	QUAL
<b>REALISED VALUE</b> <i>What difference have we been making?</i>	Feedback forms Other research interviews	Statements mentioning uncomfortable changes or experiences for stakeholders	QUAL
	Feedback forms Other research interviews	Statements mentioning generative changes happening for others beyond circle	QUAL
	Registration forms	<b>Number of participants in the activities of the D&amp;D circle*</b>	QUAN
	Personal observations	<b>Number of DAF participants coming from marginalised groups (esp. BIPOC)*</b>	QUAN
<b>ENABLING VALUE</b> <i>What has made it all possible for us?</i>	Personal observations	Reflection rounds on what works well to support learning in the space	QUAL
	Personal observations	Shared language about rituals and routines that serve social learning	QUAL
	Personal observations	Spaces dedicated to learning are convened	QUAL
<b>STRATEGIC VALUE</b> <i>What is the quality of our</i>	Documents summarising internal strategic conversations	Internal strategic conversations are taking place	QUAL

<i>engagement with strategic stakeholders?</i>	Official agreements Personal observations	Conversations with strategic stakeholders are taking place	QUAL
<b>ORIENTING VALUE</b> <i>How and where have we been locating ourselves in the broader landscape?</i>	Personal observations	Conversations take place about our personal and professional contexts	QUAL
	Personal observations	Collaborations are initiated with aligned networks or groups	QUAL

I will now present a summary of the Effect Data I have identified for each indicator, both under the shape of the codes and themes that I drew from the Template Analysis described above, and from my examination of the complementary data sources. Where relevant, I will quote excerpts from the codes highlighted during my Template Analysis process.

For each cycle, I provide a summary table of indicators and data sources.

#### 2.1.4 Immediate value: What has our experience been like?

*Table 9: Immediate Value – Consolidated Indicators and data sources*

Ref.	Indicators of value creation	Sub-indicators	Data source
I1	Level of participation and commitment to circle meetings and other activities over time*		Minutes from D&D circle meetings Personal observations
I2	statements reflecting difficult/painful learning	- Experiencing the pain of our predicament - Difficulty of doing this work - Interpersonal conflict	Template Analysis (TA)
I3	discussions of serious difficulties, mistakes, failures	- Challenges in DAF - D&D practice challenges - External challenges - Conflict situations	TA
I4	statements on the quality of the space and relationships	- A space of deep trust and safety - Expressions of love and mutual care - Voicing appreciation of one another - Appreciating D&D circle as an open, relaxed, and democratic space - Strong relationships	TA

I5	statements indicating identification with the group, and/or a sense of personal and collective commitment		TA
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The immediate value-creation cycle is about the sheer experience of participating in a social learning space - what may cause a person to stay, or on the contrary, to leave this space. All of our reflective conversations have pointed to the richness of our individual and collective experience, in terms of both positive and negative value-creation.

We often discuss the difficulty and even painfulness of engaging in the work of anti-racism, decolonisation of our ways of being, thinking, and doing in the world, and awareness-raising around such topics (what we generally refer to as "the work"). For example, realising that one has been exhibiting racist or colonial behaviours all one's life has been a source of shame and disorientation for many of us.

*"And so in this waking up process, there was deep shame. There was guilt, there was overwhelm." (CLF)*

*"So there was a lot of heartbreak and a lot of crying, a lot of shame and a lot of embarrassment for all the things in my life where I had not consciously never consciously contributed to that." (CLF)*

The strong emotions brought about by this work on oneself have at times led to strong tensions and conflict within the group and beyond.

*"There were some really difficult times for us personally, and then ... that did float into some difficulties in our group." (CLF)*

Besides, committing to this journey of learning led each of us to pay special attention to the injustice and inequity that is an integral part of the global predicament, which in itself can prove disheartening - for example when reflecting on one's government inability or unwillingness to recognise its racist and colonialist heritage.

Nonetheless, the circle has provided a space for us to openly discuss our painful emotions, along with other difficulties, and even mistakes and failures that arose for us - including situations of conflict, challenges in doing "the work," but also difficulties emerging in DAF and in our lives beyond the network.

*"It's like I'm getting a Masters' degree in conflict! What am I doing that keeps getting me into those situations? I'm doing things that are outside the frame, which makes people and myself uncomfortable."* (LC2)

*"[At my workplace] I started to feel like an impostor, and not feeling qualified to work here. So I shared that feeling with everyone, and broke the silence around that impression. This helps me to show up more fully now."* (LC2)

Indeed, as one of us reflected, this mutual support has often tended to take precedence over discussing "business items" during our calls:

*"I remember being in [D&D] meetings where in the check-in someone's having a bad time or is in a particularly difficult place, or showing up with difficult emotions, and the work gets pushed to one side."* (LCR)

The quality of the space we co-created together, and the strength of our mutual relationships, appear to have been critical in enabling us to "sit in the fire" - in other words, to remain with the painful emotions, the difficult learning, and openly discuss our challenges, mistakes and failures. We have often commented on the sense of deep trust and safety in D&D:

*"I think the openness that we've had in our circle, you know, as to really sensitive difficult topics... just being willing to lay oneself bare in a way... and just say, 'Look, this is what's with me at the moment' [has been very important]."* (RC2)

*"And, for me, this is one of my special groups, a safe space, very important. Does it mean it's not challenging? No, but it is a safe space that's important, that container. For me, a container of safety needs to be [there], and trust needs to be developed. So that we can be able to 'cook' the challenges and transform the challenges."* (LCR)

We have also voiced appreciation for the relaxed pace in the circle, the open-endedness of our work style, and its democratic "vibes":

*"It felt easy from the very beginning. And perhaps that's because we'd coalesced around a purpose or at the very least a curiosity, without any real picture of what that might mean or what that might be or what the end point was. And that's what... for me that made it*

*really easy to be part of the conversation. Because it wasn't prescriptive. It wasn't fixed." (LCR)*

*"I remember sometimes when we came in, and somebody initiated listening to music. And definitely my background was, you know, you don't listen to music at the beginning of a meeting! We are getting things done! So, I would have been quite nervous to do that. But I loved it when it happened." (LCR)*

*"I haven't noticed any of us dominating. There isn't a single leader, which is so beautiful, because that leaves loads of space for co-creation and for... creating in that moment, as a group of people." (LCR)*

We also practice expressing our affection, mutual care, and appreciation for one another. This has helped us create strong relationships.

*"There [is] a tremendous level of love and bond within this circle, which [has been] tested." (CLF)*

*"So we've built a very strong relationship between all of us." (CLF)*

As a result, we have also developed a sense of identifying with this group, along with a sense of personal and collective commitment to its mission.

*"And I think that's another thing that I really value and admire in this group, is that there's a shared desire, there's a shared mission, and that we really feel a commitment, a deep commitment to that mission, which helps to lift us out of some of the personal difficulties that we might have or somebody's style or, you know, what exactly we do next." (LCR)*

*"Being part of the circle, I often go back to difficult threads [in Facebook] and put a comment in because I feel like the circle needs to be present in some way to make those spaces safer. So very much embodying in action, this part of our... what I would call the circle's charter." (RC2)*

And although circle membership has evolved since its creation in August 2020, five of us (among the six circle initiators) remain committed at the time of writing. Between August 2020 and March 2022, we have been meeting three weeks out of four on average, and have taken part in 14 learning circles in 17 months.

## 2.1.5 Potential value: What has come out of our experience?

Table 10: Potential Value - Consolidated Indicators and Data Sources

Ref.	Indicators of value creation	Sub-indicators	Data source
P1	Statements referring to shared stories of practice and experience		TA
P2	Statements referring to shared insights and information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Recommended resources</li> <li>- Understanding systemic oppression</li> <li>- Cultivating discernment</li> <li>- Issues of language</li> <li>- How to do this work?</li> <li>- Personal stories</li> <li>- Ideas for new actions, processes or initiatives</li> </ul>	TA
P3	Statements indicating that new skills, awareness or capacity were acquired	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improved discernment, refined awareness of self or world</li> <li>- New language</li> <li>- Refined understanding of D&amp;D work</li> <li>- New skills or capacity</li> </ul>	TA
P4	Statements indicating increased confidence and inspiration to keep going		TA
P5	Statements indicating the creation of important new relationships		TA
P6	Creation of documents, tools, and methods informing our practice in the circle		Personal observations

Potential value refers to the insights, sense of confidence, connections, or resources that are generated in the social learning circle, on a personal or collective level. This is another cycle in which plentiful value has been created within the D&D circle.

This has been facilitated by regular moments dedicated to sharing insights, personal experience, and engaging in collective reflection. In particular, since October 2020, we have been convening monthly learning circles; and since February 2021, we have been starting each call with a brief round of "sharing successes" - referring to any instance of positive change in our lives or beyond, particularly in reference to the mission of our circle.



At times, these moments of sharing have also been the occasion to comment on insights and information received in other spaces (for example, courses and trainings), or to update one another on certain challenges and difficulties as we try to "do the work." Our discussions have tended to focus on a few recurring themes, including:

- The ontology and history of racism, colonialism, and other forms of systemic oppression - in other words: What is the object of our work, and how did it come about? How is it related to the wider global predicament? Etc.
- Cultivating discernment: How to distinguish and grapple with various forms of oppression? How do we become better at distinguishing our own assumptions, and recognising expressions of harmful patterns within ourselves? Etc.
- Issues of language: How does language help us or betray us as we try to create change? How does it affect how we see ourselves and the world? What vocabulary is most helpful to us to discuss our intentions with others? Etc.
- How to do the work: How to improve our practice? What pitfalls must we avoid? What attitudes or behaviours can support us? Etc.
- On occasion, we also share personal stories, dreams, and other musings that may or may not have a direct connection with our practice, but which often illuminate a conversation topic from a new angle;
- And we often recommend various resources to one another - including books, films, articles, etc. - to further our collective learning.

From these reflective conversations, ideas for new initiatives, practices or processes sometimes emerge. For example, during our July 2021 learning circle, one of us suggested we add a new recurring practice towards the end of each of our calls, to check whether anyone is withholding any discomfort. Since then, we have made a point to ask the question every time: *"Is there anything that needs to be said or heard?"* Occasionally, this has allowed uncomfortable feelings or comments to be voiced and heard.

These rich conversations and rounds of story-telling, along with various other activities undertaken as part of our involvement in the circle, have helped us to develop new skills

and capacity, and new forms of understanding. This includes a refined understanding of our practice, new language, as well as a refined awareness of oneself and the world.

*"I no longer feel a need to defend whether or not I am racist. Before I started in the circle, I wanted to defend, claim or at least think maybe I wasn't racist – or not very, or not deliberately – but since, when we went public, with the training in particular, I realised, in the course of our work together, I no longer need to defend whether I am racist or not – it shifts the dialogue." (LC1)*

*"I'm increasingly aware of how language is structured, and how it separates. In my life and work right now, I don't have much opportunity to address race, as I mostly interact with White (non-multicultural) people - but being in this circle has raised my awareness, particularly of privilege. And this is being reflected in my work." (LC1)*

*"[Participating in the circle] made me reflect on how... conditioned I've been to just ignor[e] conflict, and [how I] sort of minimize it and turn away from it." (LCR)*

Each of us has also reported an increased sense of self-confidence and self-worth as a result of being part of the circle. This has often inspired us to keep going with our work, or take it to new directions.

*"Now I feel I can reach out and create more space for people who don't feel heard." (LC2)*

*"I had taken the ecofascism workshop, and we'd had this all those conversations in the circle. So that gave me this sense of being having some competence with that topic." (RC2)*

*"We've been building safety and trust in this circle. Now we're ready to engage with various people and be prepared to invite input into our [Theory of Change tree diagram]." (SSR)*

Some of us have also reported creating important new relationships, particularly with people from marginalised groups, as a result of our work.

Finally, participating in the circle has led us to devise certain methods and processes to support our learning (e.g. the success-sharing round), and to co-create a number of publicly disseminated artifacts reflecting our learning and our intentions - such as:

- The D&D mission statement<sup>64</sup>;
- Our list of circle agreements<sup>65</sup>;
- Our theory of change diagram<sup>66</sup>;
- Several individually or collectively authored blog posts and videos documenting various aspects of our learning, for example on the topics of self-organisation, or conflict resolution - including individual "learning journeys" containing the value-creation stories that I will present in the next section ("Contribution Data")<sup>67</sup>.

### 2.1.6 Applied value: What have we been learning in the doing?

Table 11: Applied Value - Consolidated indicators and data sources

Ref.	Indicators of value creation	Sub-indicators	Data source
A1	Sharing of value-creation stories looping experience of adoption of innovation or practices back to the space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ideas on improving our methods</li> <li>- Making use of shared resources</li> <li>- Making use of knowledge or inspiration</li> <li>- Building on relationships</li> <li>- Building on new skills</li> <li>- Building on confidence and commitment</li> <li>- Stories of other people making use of D&amp;D potential value</li> </ul>	Personal observations TA
A2	Statements indicating that errors were not repeated		TA
A3	New initiatives / risks taken by participants because of their participation		Personal observations TA
A4	New reported collaborations based on connections made in the social learning space		Personal observations TA

Applied learning has to do, on the one hand, with putting into practice potential forms of learning (such as the ones mentioned above), and reflecting on the results; it is also

64 See <https://bit.ly/3LzbeH3>

65 See <https://bit.ly/3v2UDF1>

66 See [https://miro.com/app/board/o9J\\_lJEo774=/](https://miro.com/app/board/o9J_lJEo774=/)

67 See the Conscious Learning Blog for several examples:  
<https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info>

about "creatively engaging in practice" in trying to "address a particular challenge, situation, or opportunity" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p.90). Both kinds of applied value are present in the data-set.

We have been sharing with one another many stories illustrating our use of potential value - be it knowledge, skills, self-confidence, resources created or shared, etc. - thus "looping" the learning back into the social learning space, enabling us to further our collective learning.

*"I was recently invited to take part in a great initiative for woodlands protection. I think it's an important and meaningful project; but I discovered that I'm the only woman being invited to take part. So I've decided to not get involved until more positions of responsibility are given to women and/or BIPoC in this project."*  
(LC1)

*"I had a conversation with a friend who is very disturbed by climate change but who is reluctant to face the truth of it. I was able to share a link with her from our Conscious Learning blog and she received this with much appreciation."* (SSR)

On occasion, some of these stories also specifically refer to us learning from previous mistakes discussed in the circle - for example, around conflict management - and avoiding making these same mistakes.

We have also been creatively engaging in our practice. Firstly, by initiating new collaborations based on connections made in our social learning space. For example, a newsletter specifically focused on the topics discussed within D&D ("The Composting Times") was launched in May 2022, in collaboration with a DAF volunteer.

Secondly, our circle collectively initiated a number of new initiatives as a result of our participation in the circle, including two anti-racism trainings, five workshops, calls with participants in these activities, etc. Individual members of the circle also provided other educational activities on similar topics, within DAF and elsewhere, with varying degrees of support from and collaboration with their fellow members. For example, two of us collaborated on bringing an anti-racism training to an environmental organisation in the UK, which had encouraging results (see **Annex 5.2, Story #1**).

Feedback from participants in these new activities has often been a source of useful insights, be it in terms of how to better design educational spaces, but also as regards developing our sensitivity to a very complex field (see below).

### 2.1.7 Realised value: What difference have we been making?

*Table 12: Realised Value - Consolidated indicators and data sources*

Ref.	Indicators of value creation	Sub-indicators	Data source
R1	Statements mentioning uncomfortable changes or experiences for stakeholders		Feedback forms Personal observations Other interviews TA
R2	Statements mentioning generative changes happening for others beyond the circle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Others are better informed</li> <li>- Others feel safer or better supported</li> <li>- Others express gratitude</li> <li>- Others are doing the work</li> <li>- Others are helping to spread awareness</li> </ul>	Feedback forms Personal observations TA
R3	Number of participants in the activities of the D&D circle		Registration forms Personal observations
R4	Number of DAF participants coming from marginalised groups (esp. BIPOC)		Personal observations

Realised value speaks to the difference one is trying to make by participating in a social learning space. In the D&D circle, as mentioned in the previous section, I believe we have remained consistently focused on the following (broad) intentions from the beginning:

1. Bringing about generative change for others (particularly BIPOC) in DAF – with a particular focus on finding ways to share our experience of participating in the circle as we do so;
2. Allowing ourselves to change in generative ways – especially by attempting to decolonise our ways of being and doing and to co-create a new culture.

I consider that indicators speaking to the second kind of value-creation can already be identified in other cycles - particularly as Potential and Transformative Value.

Therefore, I will not further elaborate on these aspects here.

There are two main data sources as regards realised value corresponding to the first objective:

- Responses to anonymous feedback questionnaires following D&D activities;
- Informal feedback from stakeholders affected by D&D activities, conveyed to members of the D&D circle who then relay it to the circle.

I will first examine negative forms of value creation, then turn to positive value.

### ***Uncomfortable changes or experiences for stakeholders***

Testimonies in the data set and from other interviews carried out as part of this research project speak to episodes of discomfort experienced by several stakeholders beyond the circle as a result of our individual or collective activities.

For example, following "Dismantling Racism," the first anti-racism training we organised in November 2020 and in which 32 DAF participants took part, two respondents to the feedback questionnaire (n = 17) voiced dissatisfaction with the training approach. In the report I wrote and shared with training participants based on the responses to this questionnaire (Cavé, 2021), I mentioned that their criticisms focused on:

- The fact that the training was only geared towards White participants, and discouraged participation from BIPOC, which one respondent experienced as segregating; and
- The general training approach, which one respondent experienced as preventing a more open-ended way of engaging with the topic of racism.

A third training participant relayed their impressions to one of us in the D&D circle privately. They regretted the lack of safety agreements (concerning confidentiality, ways of interacting and listening, etc.) for the breakout rooms in which participants were invited to discuss their insights from the training - as well as a lack of nuance in terms

of defining racism and presenting people's experience of discrimination. They also expressed their familiarity with the topic, and felt they had not learned anything new.

Another instance of negative feedback was voiced during another workshop three of us co-organised, in June 2021, on the topic of silenced stories of oppression. On this occasion, a participant identifying as BIPOC also complained of experiencing faulty facilitation and a lack of safety in a breakout room. This led us to reconsider how to structure such activities in the future, particularly for spaces bringing together White and BIPOC participants (see **Annex 5.2, Story #5**).

Besides, in two interviews carried out as part of this research project (and not included as part of the data set for this section), two former DAF participants indicated that they had chosen to withdraw from actively participating in the network, partly as a result of their discomfort around the framing we adopted in the D&D circle with regards to the topics of racism and colonialism (see also **Chapter 5, Section 3.2**). Both of them considered that this framing did not feel relevant to their respective cultural backgrounds.

Therefore, it appears that the work of our circle has had some non-generative impacts on certain stakeholders in DAF. To a certain extent, we were expecting this when we started our work, as we expressed during some of our reflective sessions:

*"Even though I went into [this work] with an idea of how challenging it might be... it has also been way more challenging than than I thought it would be." (CLF)*

*"People might not like us, they might not be comfortable with the things we do. It happens everywhere." (RC1)*

While mistakes were made in the circle, and harm may even have been caused, I believe we collectively came to the conclusion that given the difficulty of doing this work, pain and discomfort are to be expected for everyone involved.

*"We were entering into a very difficult subject, right? Diversity, decolonizing... Why environmental movements are so white, and... it's a difficult, difficult, uncomfortable topic." (LCR)*

## ***Generative changes or experiences for stakeholders***

I will now turn to signs indicating more generative changes have been experienced by people from outside the D&D circle as a result of our activities.

### **1. Feedback on D&D workshops and trainings**

#### ***Dismantling Racism training***

To begin with, I would like to draw attention to other findings from the report I wrote to present participants' feedback on "Dismantling Racism," the November 2020 anti-racism training organised by the D&D circle (Cavé, 2021). There were 17 respondents to the feedback questionnaire, representing 53% of training participants.

In the "Key takeaways" section (p.3), I wrote that my key findings were...

- That the majority of training participants seem to have been successfully disturbed out of their usual ways of thinking and being, brought to acknowledge their privilege and racism, and connect emotionally with the impact of systemic racism on BIPoC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour);
- That this awakening has brought most attendees to consider various ways in which they might change their practice and/or start new initiatives in order to help dismantle racism, within or outside of DAF (although several were unsure what they could or should do);
- That feedback on the training and especially the facilitators was overwhelmingly positive, although three respondents didn't connect with the approach that was chosen and voiced constructive criticism about the training.

In particular, many respondents mentioned experiencing discomfort as they awakened to difficult truths around their own racism and privilege - which often manifested as shame.

*"It may sound odd, but I guess a kind of innocence, a blithe way of being, has died within me. Except that innocence is something pure and wholesome, which this wasn't. It's difficult to explain. They say ignorance is bliss but in this case I feel nothing but profound dismay and shame at my ignorance."*



*"[What died for me was] My sense of myself as an essentially 'OK' person"*

This discomfort was often mingled with empathy for the painful life experience of BIPOC around the world, which was vividly expressed by the facilitators during the training. This emotional resonance appears to have facilitated many respondents' acceptance of their limited awareness of the topic and complicity in systemic oppression.

*"I learned how heavy this burden is for BIPOC, and how much I have justified that through my life, I learnt that is not ok to call myself progressive and not be laser focussed on racism."*

As a result, several respondents expressed a wish to inform themselves better, or to explore other avenues for generative change as a result of the training - including by creating shifts in their current practice or starting new activities and projects.

*"I am so grateful as the training has raised many relevant concrete doorways for me where I can go forward with this dismantling racism work inner and outer. Eg questions about how I am in my projects both those involving people of many races and those just with WP. eg I work with asylum seekers and while I dont believe I respond differently to the BIPOC asylum seekers than to the caucasian ones that is now one area to explore for me."*

A number of respondents also made specific mention of their wish to experiment with new practices, bring extra mindfulness of the topics of racism and privilege, and go deeper into anti-racism work - within the context of DAF:

*"I have goals...to run a movement meditation space on the 4 R's for PDA (but this is not a new goal) and I can only imagine it would be a safer space than it would have been before I began my own race work two years ago...this, for both BIPOC and whites I hope, as I know how personally challenging this territory can be."*

Therefore, while the Dismantling Racism training drew some criticisms, overall its results were largely encouraging to me and, I suspect, to the rest of the D&D circle. Importantly, this participant feedback shows that experiencing difficult emotions in "doing the work" of addressing systemic oppression does not prevent one from wanting

to create generative change - and in fact, it may even be an important condition for this commitment to emerge.

### ***Other workshops and trainings***

Other events organised by the D&D circle since November 2020 have taken place on a smaller scale. And while participant feedback has been requested on every occasion, low response rates to the questionnaires makes it more difficult to gauge the overall impact of these initiatives. On some occasions, oral feedback was privately transmitted to D&D circle members.

I will briefly present feedback received for two other initiatives:

- The Silenced Stories workshop (June 19 to July 3, 2021) - 10 participants
- The Ubuntu anti-racism training (March 5 to 12, 2022) - 8 participants

These attendance figures may seem small, with regards to the overall number of participants in DAF (see **Chapter 5, Section 4**). They are also three times lower than the attendance of the first “Dismantling Racism” training. However, I would not conclude from this that interest in D&D circle activities diminished over time. The first anti-racism training was strongly promoted toward the DAF volunteer community, with the full support of the Core Team, which was not the case of subsequent events. Besides, based on my observations, such attendance figures are well within the average range for events and workshops in DAF, which tend to be free and have much lighter demands (both workshops above were paid events, and required multi-week commitment from participants).

We received responses to the feedback questionnaire from 3 participants to the former, and from 4 participants to the latter event. Each questionnaire included four categories of questions, about:

1. the format and structure of the workshop;
2. any important insights that may have emerged from the process;
3. any particular curiosity that may have been awakened, and/or new intentions, goals or objectives;

4. respondents' involvement and/or self-identification with any particular role in DAF.

In terms of the workshops' format and structure, questionnaire responses on both events were overwhelmingly positive, though some suggestions for improvement were voiced. However, oral feedback from two participants in the Silenced Stories workshop mentioned a feeling of lack of safety in the (non-facilitated) breakout rooms.

As regards personal insights and understanding, four questionnaire responses mentioned improved awareness of one's own behaviour, assumptions, and/or personal history; and three responses spoke to better understanding of systemic oppression.

*"Throughout this training, my blindness to privilege, power and rank really came into my awareness. Also reflecting on my personal privileges and conflicts within the system of power and rank within white culture society."*

*"My understanding of oppression in all forms was greatly expanded, as well as my understanding of how racist oppression in particular manifests."*

Three respondents also mentioned improved self-confidence and more inspiration to take action as a result of their participation.

*"[What is being born for me is] More of an openness to getting involved. I think one of the things this did was removed the unknown and the scary from racism issues. I feel more comfortable with it."*

Seven respondents expressed ideas of new projects they wanted to undertake, and/or new goals or objectives they had set for themselves as a result of their participation.

*"I've taken back up a personal memoir project I started about 5 years ago, having realized how much I'd like to know more about the now silenced voices of my dead parents and their parents."*

Finally, five responses made mention of the facilitators' quality of presence, openness, and vulnerability as key elements that enabled participants to lower their own defences, and therefore engage in deeper learning.

*"How do individuals talk with one another about vulnerability and need, without feeling attacked? I saw good examples of facilitation that allows this in the context of the workshop."*

It therefore appears that like Dismantling Racism, Silenced Stories and Ubuntu have also had generally generative impacts on participants. And while there is much less documented feedback for the other activities initiated by the D&D circle, minutes from our meetings show that what feedback we received (generally orally, or in private messages) has been very positive. It is therefore tempting to conclude that generative changes similar to the ones documented for Dismantling Racism, Silenced Stories, and Ubuntu, have occurred for participants in our other workshops and events.

## **2. Other data on generative changes for stakeholders**

Besides organising online events, we in the D&D circle have also been bringing the practice and awareness developed within the circle into various areas of DAF in which we are present, but also into our personal and professional lives, on an everyday basis. From our self-reports, mainly in our learning circles and our success sharing rounds, it appears that we have also been creating generative change around ourselves in this way - notwithstanding the situations of conflict that have erupted between us, and the other forms of discomfort mentioned in the previous section.

Firstly, by sharing resources and information with others in our respective circles, we have been able to spread or enhance their awareness of systemic oppression. For instance, one of us reported helping a close family member to become better aware of their unconscious racism as a result of difficult conversations with them; and a DAF participant shared this testimony with us during the Conscious Learning Festival webinar we organised to reflect on our learning and activities:

*"I've been aware of racism, environmental damage, anti democratic forces, capitalism, entrenched inequity, the taking away of rights, colonialism, injustice, gender inequality, but they were in silos and not fully in my life. The full understanding of the intersectionality has been a very slow progress, and especially the awareness in my everyday life has taken a great step forward with participation in this circle. And experience of the principles of DA and action in DA meetings in general have made me aware of ways I have not*

*practiced the awareness of these intersectionalities in everyday life."*  
(CLF)

Our activities have also helped inspire others to engage in continuous activities to further their own learning on the topic of systemic oppression and decolonising. For example, following the anti-racism training that two of us brought to a UK environmental organisation, a learning circle was initiated by the training participants, who have kept convening and furthering their learning ever since.

There is also anecdotal evidence that as a result of our presence in DAF, the network might be becoming more literate in terms of our topics of interest, and that others are helping to spread this awareness. For instance, as a result of taking part in our workshops, at least two participants have written blog posts documenting their learning and shift in awareness and shared them broadly in DAF.

Another indicator worth mentioning is the number of DAF participants taking part in the workshops and other activities organised by the D&D circle. See Table 13 below for the number of registrations to several workshops and trainings<sup>68</sup>.

*Table 13: Participation in D&D circle workshops*

<b>Workshop title</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Number of registered participants</b>
Dismantling Racism	November 2020	32
Silenced Stories	June – July 2021	12
Indigenous Perspectives on Decolonial Futures	October 2021	23
Ubuntu anti-racism training	October 2021	0 (aborted)
Ubuntu anti-racism training	March 2022	8

Success on this level is difficult to gauge. The initial Dismantling Racism training drew over 30 participants, but attendance in later workshops has fluctuated strongly.

However, not all of these events were promoted on an equal footing. While the Dismantling Racism training was officially endorsed by the DAF Core Team, who proactively and personally invited all active volunteers throughout the network to take

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<sup>68</sup> NB: Only activities designed by the whole circle, and co-hosted by three or more D&D circle members, are displayed in this table. Other events and workshops on topics related to systemic oppression have been offered to DAF participants by circle members on a more individual basis, without extensive support from the circle, and therefore less data is available about their attendance.

part in it, later efforts were advertised no differently than other online events in DAF. This may help to account for their comparatively lower attendance (together with other factors, such as workshop length, donations being strongly encouraged, event visibility, etc.).

Besides workshops and trainings, the D&D circle has also convened community discussions in DAF, with the aim of establishing an informal circle of supporters and enablers for our activities (see "Strategic Value" section, below). See Table 14 for attendance data.

*Table 14: Participation in other D&D circle activities*

Activity title	Date	Number of participants (besides D&D circle members)
Community Connectors call	Nov. 10, 2021	6
Open meeting	Nov. 29, 2021	3
Open meeting	Dec. 27, 2021	6
Open meeting	Jan. 31, 2022	5
Open meeting	Feb. 28, 2022	7
Open meeting	Mar. 28, 2022	6
Open meeting	Apr. 28, 2022	4
Open meeting	June 27, 2022	8

These monthly calls have been regularly attended by a steady number of participants expressing a strong interest in the work of our circle. Some of them spontaneously started new initiatives related to our circle's topics of interest within DAF, which is a positive sign of engagement likely catalysed by these gatherings.

However, issues have also emerged in the course of these meetings, which led us to rework their scope and purpose (**Section 2.4.4.1**). Therefore, it is difficult to assess whether “on balance” these monthly calls might have had a more positive or negative effect within DAF as a whole.

### ***Are DAF spaces safer?***

Finally, given that the original goal of the D&D circle "to make DA spaces safer for everyone, particularly people identifying as Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour," how to assess whether our presence and activities have helped to further that goal?

The data set shows a few instances of D&D circle members explicitly supporting people identifying as BIPOC, within DAF and elsewhere, and seeing this support acknowledged and validated.

In spite of this anecdotal data, given the absence of comprehensive data on DAF membership - particularly regarding ethnicity or other forms of systematic oppression - it is very difficult to answer this question. However, it may be telling to notice that at the level of "network leadership" (including the DAF Core Team, the Holding Group, and the most actively involved volunteers), representatives of marginalised social groups do not appear to be more present - as of March 2022 - than they were in August 2020<sup>69</sup>.

It should also be mentioned that a BIPOC affinity group was launched by several DAF participants in early 2021, with the active participation of a former member of the D&D circle. Unfortunately, following an episode of conflict, the group ceased to actively engage in DAF, although one of its participants stated that it kept meeting regularly several months later.

Another member of this group stated that there was too little active attention placed on countering the effects of racism and colonialism within DAF, particularly in the DA Facebook group, which made it less safe as a result (see **Annex 5.2, Story #6**). She recommended the development of more small affinity groups to form across the network in order to engage in more mutual education and support in countering unhelpful cultural patterns in DAF.

My personal observations lead me to conclude that the demographic makeup of DAF remains overwhelmingly White, Western, and middle-class. This alone is not enough to deny that our spaces may have become safer, especially for BIPOC or other marginalised groups. Nonetheless, until a more thorough investigation is carried out in this regard, my assessment is that this is an area in which our circle has likely had little influence overall.

It is worth noting, on this matter, that bringing more BIPOC into DAF, or raising awareness of Deep Adaptation among BIPOC, outside of the current membership, is not in

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<sup>69</sup> Since the creation of the D&D circle in August 2020, two new Holding Group members identifying as BIPOC have stepped up, but the influence of our circle in this process is unknown and likely irrelevant.

the D&D Circle's remit – and, as a result, we haven't been doing anything to make this happen. Therefore, this may point to an area of future action for the circle.<sup>70</sup>

## 2.1.8 Enabling value: What has made it all possible for us?

*Table 15: Enabling Value - Consolidated indicators and data sources*

Ref.	Indicators of value creation	Sub-indicators	Data source
E1	Reflection rounds on what works well to support learning in the space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Activity design</li> <li>- Processes and work culture</li> <li>- Useful containers</li> <li>- Attitude towards learning</li> </ul>	Personal observations TA
E2	Shared language in the group about rituals and routines that serve social learning		Personal observations TA
E3	Spaces dedicated to learning are convened		Personal observations TA
E4	Presence of key enablers/facilitators		Personal observations TA
E5	Encouragements and mutual care in the group		Personal observations TA
E6	Signs of external support from inside and outside DAF		Personal observations TA

Enabling value can be described as "learning how to enable learning" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p.98). In other words, it has to do with the extent to which a social learning space becomes a more effective container for social learning to happen. It has an internal dimension - whereby participants in the space are proactive in learning how to learn, or take a facilitative attitude - as well as an external dimension - when various resources or other forms of support are provided from outside the space, for example by an external facilitator or a budget (ibid, p.98).

Within the D&D circle, enabling value has been created internally in different ways. First of all, as I have mentioned previously, regular conversations and reflection rounds have been taking place among us to reflect on the conditions that support the learning we are trying to bring about. This involves reflecting on the design of our public-facing activities, both retrospectively - by considering comments and feedback received from participants - but also prospectively. For example, ahead of the Silenced Stories

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<sup>70</sup> I thank Wendy Freeman for bringing this matter to my attention.



workshop, which I co-facilitated, I was coached by another circle member who, as a proficient facilitator, shared much precious advice with me on how to make the space safer.

Besides activity design, our conversations on how to enable ourselves and others to learn and change have mainly revolved around three key questions:

1. What processes and work culture have been helpful to us?
2. What containers are most useful for people to do this work?
3. What attitude is most generative in doing the work?

In reflecting on these questions, we referred to certain rituals and processes that have assisted us in learning together. I will provide some insights from our circle to each of these questions, and about these rituals and processes, in **Section 2.1.12** below.

These conversations have taken place in spaces dedicated to our learning and reflection. This includes, first and foremost, our circle's weekly meetings. Indeed, besides allowing us to discuss operational matters relevant to the projects we undertake, these meetings also make space for "success sharing rounds" that enable us to gain a clearer awareness of the broader effects of our participation in the circle. Other spaces dedicated to learning and reflecting have also included the D&D Conscious Learning Festival webinar, our monthly learning circles, and the retrospective sessions that took place between September 2021 and January 2022 (see "Strategic Value" below).

But other important spaces focused on "learning how to learn" have also included two conflict transformation processes, convened by two different facilitators, to help resolve tensions and conflict between members of our circle. These processes seem to have created deeper trust and mutual affection between all parties involved.

This episode points to another important indicator of Enabling value-creation in our group, which we often reflected on: the presence of "key enablers." I use this term to refer to circle participants who have played a particularly important role in facilitating our collective learning.

*"Nontokoza's been great, she's been able to hold a space of holding us accountable. And also being able to feel her love. And that is not*

*an easy thing. I feel I've that find it very rare. But she's been pretty clear with us at times when we really needed to act up and call someone to get that damn plumbing fixed." (CLF)*

The rest of us in the circle, too, have been instrumental in fostering our collective learning - and it appears that our mutual care and encouragements played an important part, especially at moments of tension.

*"Thank you to everybody that I've worked with in this circle for being so gentle and so compassionate and so incredibly supportive." (CLF)*

Finally, enabling value was also created for the circle thanks to external support. In particular, the DAF Core Team strongly supported the D&D circle from the very beginning. This sponsorship - for example, by allowing the circle to have its own page on the DAF website<sup>71</sup> - helped the circle gain legitimacy, for example when inviting DAF volunteers to the Dismantling Racism training. Communication and trust-building was facilitated by several Core Team members (including myself) being simultaneously part of both the Core Team and the D&D circle.

*"Thanks to the core team, that really is, for me an example of where the DAF governance structure has worked tremendously well." (CLF)*

### 2.1.9 Strategic value: What has been the quality of our engagement with strategic stakeholders?

Table 16: Strategic Value - Consolidated indicators and data sources

Ref.	Indicators of value creation	Sub-indicators	Data source
S1	Internal strategic conversations are happening		Personal observations TA
S2	Conversations with strategic stakeholders are happening	Strategic individuals within DAF Strategic groups within DAF Strategic groups outside DAF	Personal observations TA

<sup>71</sup> See <https://www.deepadaptation.info/daf-diversity-and-decolonising-circle>

Strategic value has to do with "the extent and clarity of conversations and relationships that help clarify the direction and usefulness of a social learning space" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p.106). Like Enabling value, it can be created internally - through strategic conversations among participants - as well as externally - by engaging with external stakeholders. In the case of the latter, this involves "processes by which participants adopt, renegotiate, or resist external expectations and figure out how they can realistically adopt, contribute to, or subvert external goals" (p.107).

This type of value creation has been less of a focus within the D&D circle, compared to other cycles. However, I believe such value has also been created, both internally and externally.

Our internal strategic conversations mostly took place in the process of co-authoring several strategic documents:

- Our initial Mission Statement, first published in August 2020, which was then revised and expanded in October 2021;
- Our Theory of Change diagram, first published in March 2021, and then revised and expanded on several occasions since then. This diagram lays out the current shared intentions of our circle as regards the change we aim to bring about, and the main directions and activities through which we hope to enact this change. Since late 2021, the monthly D&D open meetings have also invited the co-creation of this diagram on behalf of stakeholders beyond the D&D circle.
- Our Circle Agreements, first drafted in February 2021, and finally agreed upon in October 2021. This document details the shared intentions of our circle as regards the way in which we wish to do carry out our work together.

Another important strategic conversation was our 2021 retrospective (September 2021-January 2022). Facilitated using an online tool, and inspired from an Appreciative Inquiry process, these sessions enabled each of us to anonymously express:

- What we enjoyed about working in our circle;
- What else, what more we wanted to do;
- What we felt we should stop doing;

- Ideas for actions based on the three first questions.

This process enabled us to share honest feedback with one another, and thus gain a better sense of how to improve what we do. It also led us to vote on the suggested actions that emerged, to create a set of 12 priorities for our circle in 2022. These priorities are now displayed in a new document, which we have been sharing in our monthly open meetings, to invite new collaborations.

Noteworthy external strategic conversations, so far, have mostly involved two types of stakeholders:

1. Strategic individuals within DAF;
2. Strategic groups within DAF.

The first type of conversations have been most prominent. Since late 2021, they have mostly featured online calls with DAF participants who took part in our workshops, trainings, and other activities (see "Realised Value" above), and whom we have been inviting to collaborate and strategise with our circle ("Community Connectors" call and monthly Open Meetings). This has led to important new input into the our work. For example, one regular participant in our monthly open meetings has been suggesting many improvements to our Theory of Change diagram, which has led to rich conversations. Another person decided to create a newsletter about the activities of our circle.

Conversations with interested parties also regularly take place by means of the #diversity-and-decolonising discussion channel, within the DAF Slack workspace. This channel was initiated by D&D circle members in June 2021, but is not moderated by our circle.

In early 2021, a strategic interaction also took place between the D&D circle and an influential DAF participant. We pointed out that a video recently produced by the latter contained some statements we viewed as problematic, and invited this person to a discussion. As a result of this conversation, they decided to remove that segment from their video (see **Annex 5.2, Story #5**).

In early 2021, conversations also began between the D&D circle and two groups of external stakeholders:

- a group of BIPOC participants in DAF;
- a network of Global South scholars and activists from outside DAF.

However, as a result of a situation of conflict within DAF at the time (involving some members of the D&D circle and of the DAF Core Team), both groups stopped interacting with DAF spaces in February 2021. No further conversations with these groups have taken place since then.

The stakeholder group with which we have had the most conversations is the DAF Core Team, which plays a stewarding role within DAF. As mentioned above (see "Enabling value"), the Core Team has provided various forms of support to the circle since its creation. In recognition of the D&D circle's strategic importance within DAF, a Memorandum of Understanding "providing outlines for extra support and collaboration between [the circle] and other important stakeholders within DAF" was agreed between the two groups in May 2021.

Overall, external strategic value-creation appears to be an area towards which the D&D circle has only recently started to focus on more fully. It may be the case that important conversations needed to take place internally, for more collective clarity to exist, before sustained engagement with external stakeholders could happen. There is certainly much unexplored potential in this area.

### 2.1.10 Orienting value: How and where have we been locating ourselves in the broader landscape?

*Table 17: Orienting Value - Consolidated indicators and data sources*

Ref.	Indicators of value creation	Sub-indicators	Data source
O1	Conversations about our personal and professional contexts are happening		Personal observations TA
O2	Collaborations initiated with aligned networks or groups are happening		Personal observations TA

Whereas strategic value addresses "relationships with people who have a direct stake in the effect of [the] learning" that is taking place in a social learning space, orienting

value reflects "a general orientation to any relevant aspects of the broader landscape" of which that social learning space is part of (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p.114). Here again, both an internal and an external dimension may be present. Internally, orienting value is about the participants taking the time to discuss similarities and differences of their respective contexts, which they bring into the space as part of their identities and practices. Externally, it has to do with reaching out and better understanding the broader historical, cultural, and political landscape that it is inscribed in - and which includes other spaces, but also institutions, practices, relationships, individuals, etc. (ibid, p.114)

Within the D&D circle, the trust and strong relationships that have emerged for us (see Potential Value section), as well as the learning spaces we have convened (see Enabling Value section), have led to many conversations enabling us to better understand our respective backgrounds, life stories, identities, and professional contexts. For example, stories of deep personal trauma were shared with the circle on several occasions, translating the topic of systemic oppression into vivid personal experience.

*"Sometimes, when someone with privilege brings up my lack of privilege, it can become a very vulnerable conversation. I can feel as if the person is feeling sorry for me - so I don't want to talk about it. Even if I did want to talk about it, I wouldn't want to if there was a possibility for the person feeling sorry for me." (LC2)*

A situation that enabled us to become much more familiar with one another was the conflict that erupted between two of us in early 2021, and which led to one of us leaving the circle for several weeks. As mentioned above (see "Enabling value" section), another member of the circle volunteered to hold a conflict-transformation process. Although the process took a long time, and was difficult and painful, this process enabled both parties to understand each other's perspective much better, and to become reconciled.

*"And... [we] took quite a bit of time, actually spending time trying to sort out what had created a conflict. And it wasn't a meaning-making as I thought it would be like, it wasn't, 'Oh, we misunderstood this. And if we only...' It actually turned out we had different working styles, different ways of thinking. And in the process that we were led to very skilfully by Katie Carr, that became clear to me that we have*

*different ways of thinking, and [I] quit trying to make the person think like me, and just gave them more space." (LCR)*

Externally, orienting value has mostly been created through collaborations initiated on the occasion of some of our workshops and trainings. Two other networks (Permaculture CoLab and Radical Joy for Hard Times) provided support for promotion and funding on several occasions; and collaborations with external workshop facilitators took place on two occasions. Besides, one of us (Sasha) started to facilitate workshops on topics of systemic oppression outside of DAF, through their collaboration with another group of facilitators. It is likely that this will soon lead to these workshops being offered within DAF.

Overall, as with strategic value, external creation of orienting value has not yet been a strong focus of the D&D circle - contrary to internal orientation. However, our recent efforts to document and disseminate our learning and practices, particularly through videos, as well as our initial collaborations with other networks and groups, may soon provide occasions for more such value being created.

### **2.1.11 Transformative value: What have been some broader or deeper individual and collective effects of our activities?**

*Table 18: Transformative Value - Consolidated indicators and data sources*

Ref.	Indicators of value creation	Sub-indicators	Data source
T1	Statements referring to a capacity to see oneself or the world in a very new way		TA
T2	Statements referring to a capacity to express oneself in new ways		TA
T3	Statements referring to important changes happening in the group		TA

This last type of value-creation is the most difficult to recognise, as it is generally unplanned, and deciding what counts as "transformative" is "a matter of judgment" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p.120). Transformative value is about broader or deeper changes happening for participants in the learning space, and/or

further afield, often as an unexpected side-effect of the social learning taking place in other cycles.

In this cycle, too, this value can manifest internally or externally, depending on where the transformation manifests - not where it originates. Internal transformative value is about "an internal transformation in the social learning space that takes place because of a radical or disruptive change" (ibid, p.119). Conversely, external transformative value refers to "something happening in the space that causes a transformation outside the space" (ibid). Both types can be about changes experienced by participants in the learning space: for example, it can lead them to reconsider the difference they are trying to make, or it may reflect an important change in a person's trajectory, their identity, and the way they interact with the world.

Within the D&D circle, each of us has expressed undergoing deep personal transformations as a result of our involvement, on several occasions. While it often seems difficult for us to pinpoint precisely what these shifts have been, three recurring themes in our discussions on this topic may be indicators of transformative learning occurring.

The first one is about considering oneself and/or the world from a very new perspective. Some of us, particularly with a more privileged background, expressed how the work we have been doing in the circle has enabled us to become much more deeply aware of systemic oppression and our role in perpetuating it. For one of us, this realisation completely shifted her idea of what the work of this circle was about.

*"When you invited me to join the circle, I was naive, and definitely came into it with an attitude of, 'I can learn better skills to make the spaces I host more accessible and more inclusive.' And definitely ignorant about my own embedded white privilege and internalized oppression and racism and that, you know, that I inherited as being part of this modern culture..." (CLF)*

*"And so for me being part of this circle, and the early work that we were doing in the run up to and then in response to the anti racism training was deeply, deeply, deeply transformational, for me personally, because I started to really understand systemic racism and just how blind nearly everybody is to it unless they are suffering because of it, unless they are a marginalized group unless they are black or indigenous." (LCR)*



One of us also stated that coming to terms with this awakening of their role as perpetrators of oppression was particularly difficult. A crucial aspect of it was to understand the difference between personal and collective responsibility.

*"If you buy a house, and the plumbing is bad, you're not to blame for the plumbing, but don't you want to get it fixed? ... We're all responsible, but we're not to blame. And I think that this is one of the really big obstacles of trying to get through this work, is trying to get through that thing of it landing in your body that you've that I, I have benefited massively, from a system of white supremacy. I didn't create it. And I don't consciously want to perpetuate it. And I need to really pay attention to how I might inadvertently, and I need to use my voice, as somebody who stands in the system, to say, 'We really need to change this, this plumbing really is leaking, and it's leaking on other people's heads. I'm in the top apartment, and they're living underneath me'." (CLF)*

Several of us also explained how engaging in the work of the D&D circle has enabled us to gain a clearer, deeper awareness of our own experiences of oppression (particularly those of us who self-identify as women), and how this may have constrained our ways of being and acting in the world.

*"Transformative aspect of this work: an opening into my own ways of experiencing oppression. Working on behalf of people who have experienced more oppression than me enables me to look at my own experience without drowning in victimhood." (LC1)*

One of us, who identifies as a Black and Indigenous person, testified she found a depth of safety and trust within our circle, among White people, unlike anything she ever experienced elsewhere. This has enabled her to be more fully herself, and showed her that it is possible for Black and White bodies to form such spaces together. She expressed it was critical for more people to know that this is even possible.

*"If I had to study what happened... in our group, I will say that the most incredible thing happened is that we created... for me, a space of safety with white people was created. Where I can speak about racism, I can speak about... I can just be myself without all the complications and all the reactions that I had received in the other organization that I was in... And even when I made mistakes, I could speak loudly about those mistakes. ... So it's so profound... I don't think I have Western words to describe that. ... You know, more people need to just be witness to this, that it is possible... not just*

*showing it to other white people... it's showing it also to the BIPoC people who are so wounded, who were rightfully hurt and angry and looking for justice, that there are other ways. You know, there are other ways, and these ways involve us being able to just relax and be able to heal and not having to fight so much. Yeah, like we can create those spaces. Spaces of trust, right?" (RC1)*

As a second indicator of transformative value-creation, several of us spoke of important changes that took place in the group, largely as a result of the challenges we faced - especially conflict - and of our perseverance in overcoming these challenges, which led to much deeper trust (as expressed above) and mutual understanding between us. In particular, the conflict transformation process that reconciled two of us appears to have played a very important role.

*"I think [as a result of this process] we then backed off and reoriented on our work. And that gave us a pause, enough where there could be healing and growth. And then we could come back together with more understanding, and great affection, and trust that we could handle really difficult experiences." (LCR)*

Finally, several of us mentioned having become empowered by our participation, especially as a result of learning new ways of expressing ourselves and overcoming our internalised oppression.

*"This work has been deeply transformational. For me. I almost feel like I've got a fluency and the language that will allow me to speak up anywhere." (CLF)*

*"I've benefited so deeply from taking a look at how oppression works. Because... for myself, I'm both the oppressor and the oppressed. And when I can get the attention off my own pain and pay attention to how it is impacting other people, I get the benefit of understanding how it's playing out in my life. And I get better at speaking up when I'm in a situation that I need to defend myself." (CLF)*

While most of these statements appear to put the emphasis on internal transformative value, it is likely that some of these changes - by affecting our identities and ways of being in the world - also have external ramifications within the other learning spaces in which we participate.

What broader conclusions can we draw from the value that has been created in these different cycles for us in the D&D circle?

### **2.1.12 Four integrative themes**

I will end this section on Effect Data with a discussion of some of the most important learnings that I believe have occurred for us in the D&D circle, organised in four integrative themes. I see these themes as forming the main "undercurrents" of the conversations we have had in the D&D circle, as we reflected on our practice and the changes that happened in our lives as a result:

1. Conflict and tensions
2. Mutual support
3. How to do this work?
4. New awareness

These themes will connect many of the areas of value-creation presented above. For me, they bring to light important answers to the research questions I am exploring in this chapter.

The insights below are "my story" of what our group has experienced and (un)learned - although I draw much of this understanding from the two recorded group conversations convened by our circle to reflect on our experience: in our Conscious Learning Festival webinar (Oct. 2021); and in our recorded Learning Circle (Feb. 2022).

#### ***1. Conflict and tensions***

Conflict has been very present in the discussions of our circle, particularly during the first half of 2021.

Tensions around the work of the circle started to occur in the run-up to the Dismantling Racism training, the first event organised by the D&D circle, in November 2020. Some of us took on the responsibility to extend personal invitations to all the active participants in DAF, and experienced a backlash from several of them - particularly White males - in this process. Thereafter, a few participants in the training voiced their disapproval with certain aspects of the training (see section "Realised value").

In late January 2021, a series of difficult interactions happened between several members of our circle who were also working together in the DAF Core Team. One of the Circle members, who identifies as a Person of Colour, experienced others as exhibiting white supremacy behaviour patterns, but other people's interpretations of the issues causing the conflict, were different - and resolution proved unachievable. For the Person of Colour this unresolved conflict resulted in them ceasing to be part of both the D&D circle, and the DAF Core Team. As a secondary impact, relationships between the Circle and two other groups of stakeholders were also interrupted (see section "Strategic value"). Following reflection within the D&D circle, and the Core Team, people involved in the conflict published statements acknowledging responsibility for harmful mistakes. However, these were not successful in mending relationships.

Parallel to this, for some of us in the circle, the Dismantling Racism training brought about a deep awakening to our complicity in systemic oppression. On top of this, other strong emotions were evoked by the conflict mentioned above. This situation appears to have contributed to inflamed tensions between two of the remaining members of the circle, which led to the departure of one of them. However, a conflict resolution process facilitated by a third member of the circle led to reconciliation and to the return of the member who had left.

Besides, at various points in time during and after the main two conflict episodes above, other tensions emerged for some of us in other groups we are or were part of, and were discussed in our circle.

While interpersonal conflict appears to have been a source of very difficult emotions - or negative Immediate value - for most of us in the circle (it certainly has been the case for me), it also has been a source of very rich learning and change, individually and collectively, particularly in the process of exploring conflict transformation within our circle. Many insights and changes emerged from our collective reflection on this topic, and space does not allow me to touch on them all here.<sup>72</sup> Suffice to point out this statement, voiced as a piece of advice to other groups by one of us who took part in the conflict-transformation process mentioned above:

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<sup>72</sup> I refer the reader to the video on conflict produced by our circle in April 2022, and which I edited, for further details (*Self-organisation: What works? The DAF D&D circle - Part 2: Conflict Transformation*, 2022)

*"Welcome conflict! Don't create it, but welcome conflict, and welcome that as an opportunity for the group to shift. Because our circle became so much more intimate after we'd gone through that process. I do think I do think a lot of things shifted." (LCR)*

Another important aspect I will draw attention to is that it appears that in nearly all of the cases of tensions or conflict we discussed in our circle, these tensions seemed related at least partly to our topics of interest - i.e. addressing systemic forms of separation and oppression. This may be a sign that working on such topics is likely to bring about frictions with others, particularly in a context of increasing social polarisation. It may also be an indication that members of our circle are more consciously "facing into conflict," and therefore living by our Agreements (DAF D&D Circle, 2021), which state the following:

We understand that conflict avoidance is an aspect of white supremacy culture, and that it plays a key role in keeping various structures of oppression in place within society. As such, we commit to placing a special emphasis on acknowledging conflict as an opportunity for deep cultural change, and to do so tenderly and with dedication. ...

We recognise that our social and cultural conditioning brings unconscious behaviours that are expressions of systemic racism, white supremacy and other patterns of oppression. We are committed to identifying these patterns in self and others and commit to inviting and providing feedback when these patterns emerge in the spirit of learning.

My assessment is that interpersonal conflict, as an object of reflection, and as an impetus for generative group processes and renewed mutual understanding (when we succeeded in doing so!), has ultimately been a major source of positive Potential, Enabling, and Transformative value for the D&D circle.

This was confirmed in 2022, as the outcome of a second round of conflict-transformation in our circle (**Section 2.2.4.2**).

## **2. Mutual support and trust**

As we have often reflected on, an essential factor enabling our group to keep going, in spite of the difficulty of the work we set out to do, and the magnitude of the challenges we faced - particularly with regards to conflict - has been the strong relationships, deep trust, and psychological safety that we have been cultivating in the D&D circle.

This appears to have been enabled by such things as the relaxed pace, and the open and democratic atmosphere of our calls, which has made it pleasant for us to keep attending them week after week; the many occasions we created to get to know one another better, including our respective personal and professional contexts; our willingness to prioritise mutual care above project outcomes - while still paying attention to the latter; the emphasis in our circle, as elsewhere in DAF, to connect with our emotions, and voice our mutual affection and gratitude to one another; etc. Much positive Immediate value was created as a result, including our feeling of commitment and identification with the group.

The presence among us of key facilitators, bringing with us essential skills, wisdom and processes - thus generating Enabling value - was also critical to provide a more structured container for these bonds and this atmosphere to be continuously nurtured.

This container of safety and trust provided the critical foundation enabling us to keep attending the places we convened in which to focus on our own learning, for example by transforming our conflicts, or discussing our challenges, difficulties, and other stories (often of a very personal nature). It has also been a source of self-confidence, and of inspiration to experiment with new initiatives or engage in new collaborations, which yielded generative (and sometimes, painful) changes for others. In this way, Immediate and Enabling value helped us generate Potential value, which in turn led to Applied and Realised value.

For many, and perhaps all of us, this space of trust has even been a direct source of Transformative value: in and of itself, being part of it has been a uniquely rewarding experience in our lives, despite the challenges we have faced and keep facing.

Therefore, I see this foundation of trust and mutual care as an essential enabling condition for everything we have done, and even for the very existence of the D&D circle.

### **3. How to “do the work”?**

Previously, I mentioned that an important aspect of Enabling value-creation in our circle has come from discussions on how to enable ourselves and others to learn and change.

As this topic directly addresses my Research Question 2.b, for each of these questions I will provide a brief summary of some insights that have emerged from our recorded conversations on these topics - particularly from the Conscious Learning Festival webinar, and in the Learning Circle session we organised specifically to reflect on our work and insights.

➤ **What processes and work culture have been helpful to us?**

**Some general principles**

First of all, several of us have stressed the importance of pace: we have found that *slowing down* is both an antidote to the modern productivist ethic focused on efficiency, and that it affords us the possibility of developing more trust and weaving stronger relationships among ourselves. For example, during our meetings, we have normalised setting aside our formal meeting agenda to take care of one of us going through a difficult personal time. This may take the form of an informal Wisdom Circle process, during which all members of the circle listen to that person sharing their thoughts, feelings or dilemma, reflecting back what we heard, and optionally offering counsel.

This is not to say that we haven't given attention to projects helping to further the aims of the circle; rather, we have been trying to *find a balance between being efficient, and getting to know and take care of one another*. This can also involve us laying back and listening to someone playing music once in a while! Such practices may be particularly important in an online setting like ours, in which occasions to make friends "outside of the project" can be hard to find.

*"And I think getting - also in the Zoom space, intentionally creating those times when you get to know other people. Because as other people have said, you're not meeting at the watercooler, you're not taking a moment break while you drink some coffee, you come into a meeting, and then you leave the meeting. And that's so, you know, creating those moments, and whether it's that you connect with each other outside of the specific meaning space, meeting space in other ways, or in the meeting, you take time to just get to know - who are*

*these people? And how do they think? that's really been important."*  
(LCR)

On several occasions, some of us have mentioned the importance of *regular attendance* of our online calls. Doubtless, present members' commitment to the group (as described in **Section 2.1.4**) has been helpful for us to develop better mutual understanding.

*We encourage leadership to be distributed*, with each of us stepping up at times to take the initiative on certain projects or activities. This has allowed our group to avoid relying on a single leader, and therefore, may be helpful for more co-creation and mutual accountability to happen among us.

We have also been trying to allow ourselves to be frank with one another, and thus *deal with the conflict aversion* that the dominant culture has trained us in. Considering how deeply ingrained this attitude is in most of us, since July 2022, we have decided to dedicate specific time and space for discussions of uncomfortable feelings – even very minor – in our calls, so as to encourage such frank conversations (**Section 2.2.4.2**).

*"A culture of being able to name what you're observing is really powerful in any group I think, permission for a member to say, 'I'm noticing...' or 'I feel...' and be able to actually speak it into the space, is really powerful."* (LCR)

Similarly, we try to become more comfortable with uncertainty, and with making mistakes, to *deal with our perfectionism*.

*"Maybe for other white people who might be watching this, and who might be wanting to do this work or hesitating to do this work: it's okay not to know, it's okay to make mistakes."* (LCR)

Other important principles are listed in the D&D circle Agreements (DAF D&D Circle, 2021).

Of course, all of these principles are part of a long process of individual and collective unlearning which we are only just beginning. To help us as we put them into practice, we rely on certain processes that we routinely use in nearly all our calls, and which I will describe now.



## How do our calls unfold?

An important part of our calls has to do with *bringing our attention back to our whole being, including our affective and somatic states*. As is commonly done in DAF, we begin our calls with a moment of "grounding," which is a moment of collective meditation.

*"The grounding means different things to different people, and depends on who in this group feels like doing it on a particular day... Sasha very often reminds us of gravity and our feet on the floor, our connectedness through through the planet. And that's really, really helpful, because Zoom is such an esoteric, mind-based thing, to bring us back into our bodies, but then also remind us that these bodies that we're looking at on the screen are actually connected in some way. And just a whole lot of lovely stuff around that. And I think for me, that often brings me out of the work mode, 'I'm going into a zoom call to achieve something.' And back into, 'I'm sharing a space with these other beautiful human beings who have wonderful intentions.' And actually just sharing the space with these and other wonderful beings is actually enough." (LCR)*

The grounding is followed by a check-in, in which each of us in turn express where we are in our day and in our lives, and can touch on such personal issues as health, bereavement, mental health, etc.

We make a point to *rotate roles and responsibilities* in our circle. Therefore, after check-ins, we negotiate who will facilitate, who will take notes, and who will be the "vibes-watcher" paying attention to the energy in the call and pointing out tensions when necessary.

The first "work item" on our calls tends to be a round of *success sharing*. In this round, each of us is free to tell the others about positive changes in our lives or in the world, generally in relation to our topics of interest.

As an outcome of our work on conflict transformation (**Section 2.2.4.2**), we then open up some space for a round of "*hot spots*," in which anyone is invited to express feelings of discomfort or dissatisfaction with the work of the circle or with any individual circle members, for collective exploration in a spirit of compassion, curiosity and respect.

The call then proceeds from there, with agenda items being selected from the circle backlog document and suggested by whoever is present.

Towards the end of our call, the facilitator asks everyone *whether anything needs to be said or heard*. This provides another occasion for any unvoiced discontent or friction (or, indeed, positive feelings) to be expressed. If necessary, the group (or some of us) may decide to stay longer on the call to address the issue more fully.

Finally, we end our calls with a round of *check-outs*, which are similar to check-ins.

➤ **What containers are most useful for people to "do the work"?**

Our discussions have led us to consider several important aspects to the design of a container that may enable difficult conversations around systemic oppression to take place, for maximum individual and collective learning.

The issue of *psychological safety* often comes to the fore in such matters. As we have seen above, for us in the D&D circle, this feeling of being in a "safe enough" space - and our sense of trust in one another - have been critical in enabling us to be more present with one another, and to support each other as we worked through considerable tensions and difficulties. For one of us, this feeling of safety even appears to have been transformative. (See **Annex 5.2**, Story #2)

*"[Doing this work] is really about making people safe enough to envisage alternate possibilities." (LC1)*

Therefore, one type of container that appears most likely to foster this sense of deep trust and safety, as a result of strong mutual relationships and mutual appreciation, would be that of a *small group of people* doing what we did in the D&D circle - i.e. committing to regular meetings, gathering around a clearly stated intention, and finding ways to engage in a common journey of learning while holding each other accountable. Developing strong facilitation skills as part of this journey may also prove particularly useful<sup>73</sup>.

However, most people are not fortunate enough to be part of such a group, and might only engage in work around systemic oppression within the confines of a short workshop or training. How to bring enough of a sense of safety within such a space?

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<sup>73</sup> This is an important reason for the initiative that began in DAF in April 2022, to foster the creation of small, mutually supportive "crews."

Following expert advice shared within our circle, event facilitators may help to create a safe-enough space through such practices as:

- Giving participants a sense of agency to do what's best for themselves, including choosing when and how much sensitive personal information to share with others;
- Articulating clear requests on issues of confidentiality, within and outside the workshop;
- Letting participants know exactly what they are going to be experiencing from the start, to avoid any surprises;
- Inviting everyone to travel to their "tender edge," with one foot outside their comfort zone - and to assume that everyone else is at their tender edge. This can encourage more mutual kindness;
- etc.

However, creating this sense of safety is an art, and cannot be reduced to a simple to-do list. In the D&D circle, we are trying to continuously *learn from our mistakes* in this regard. For example, we found out that inviting workshop participants to make themselves vulnerable and share very personal stories with complete strangers may feel unsafe without the presence of a facilitator.

In particular, inviting the sharing of *stories of personal oppression and trauma* requires special care and attention, due to the charge underlying this topic. While we have found that finding space to voice such stories can be liberating, safeguards should be in place to elicit respectful attention from the audience, instead of objectification, expressions of empathy, or even dismissal as part of "oppression Olympics" reactions. This extends to the need for confidentiality around repeating or commenting on personal issues outside the space where such aspects may have been voiced.

Much of the art of facilitating such difficult conversations seems to revolve around a difficult balance: that of inviting others to *remain at the edge of their comfort zone* long enough for personal growth and transformation to occur - but not to venture completely outside this zone. Otherwise, it is likely that people will shut down or turn away from

such conversations.

➤ **What attitude is most generative in doing the work?**

In our conversations, we often came back to the importance of bringing *humility and loving kindness* to all work around systemic oppression. Given the complexity of the topic, no one can ever pretend to mastery of it; and everyone is entangled in the suffering it brings.

Personal commitment and dedication to *transforming one's way of being and doing* are also important - as opposed to hoping for more inclusive policies, or a reform of the justice system. On the group level, particularly during certain conflicts that rocked our circle, this sense of a shared mission was also very precious.

*"So for me radical change comes from inside as well, so I want to work with people that are doing the work inside of themselves, not just saying okay, I'm not going to say this because if I say this I'm going to get fired because there's a policy - no, real people know that I can't say this because it's not the right thing to say." (RC1)*

*"We really feel a commitment, a deep commitment to that mission, which helps to lift us out of some of the personal difficulties that we might have or somebody's style." (LCR)*

We also stressed the importance of *patience, perseverance, and courage* - including the courage to make mistakes - in doing work of cultural transformation that is likely generational.

*"It takes time. It takes patience, it takes courage, it takes relationship building. It takes those moments that we were talking about of where we disagree with each other... and having to find loving responses to our disagreements. And that is learned. And it's like sitting in the fire. Because the fire will always be there." (CLF)*

Finally, the role of *anger* emerged in several occasions for us. We acknowledged that anger may be righteous, and that it is fully understandable coming from individuals and collective groups living with a daily experience of oppression that is not being met by corresponding reparations or policy changes. We also recognised that anger can act as a source of strength and courage. Nonetheless, some of us expressed scepticism as to the

effectiveness of acting from anger alone in the course of seeking social justice - and stressed the importance of trust-building and mutual healing as an alternative.

*"You have a right to be angry. But the way you go about it, is it bringing you results? Is there another way to address these issues that isn't seen as taking care of white people's fragility? How do we make these spaces more visible - spaces that are safe for both black, and white people?" (LC2)*

The reflective conversations that we have had on the topic of how to carry out the difficult work of anti-racism and decolonisation have led to the creation of much Potential and Enabling value for our circle. Sharing our insights on these questions has certainly helped us build up our skills, and to simultaneously maintain our circle as a social learning space, while providing better spaces for others to learn in (thereby creating Realised value).

#### **4. New awareness**

Thanks to the mutual care and trust within our circle, and to the other features of the containers we co-created as part of our social learning space, we have been able to engage in a continued individual and collective process leading us to voice new insights and information, share stories of practice and experience, undertake new initiatives and interact with various stakeholders. Thanks to our regular meetings, and the various occasions we created for sharing and collectively processing our thoughts and feelings on all of the above, we have been developing various skills, and new kinds of awareness.

This awareness covers many domains: from learning about systemic oppression, recognising its various shapes and forms, and acquiring new language to talk about this domain of practice, all the way to new forms of understanding ourselves and the complexity of our entanglement with systemic violence, oppression and separation. We have crystallised some of this newfound information or awareness into various artefacts, such as blog posts and videos - and on occasion, we have heard back from others who drew value from these creations. A virtuous cycle of Potential, Applied and Realised value was thus allowed to unfold.

Where these insights have been most profound, they have even contributed to deep shifts happening within us (Transformative value), allowing for new identities to emerge, as well as new ways of being in the world, and expressing ourselves. In turn, this probably is enabling us to become more skilled at the work we do, and therefore, to ultimately bring about more generative change around ourselves.

## **2.2 Contribution data: How is the learning space contributing to the value-creation?**

While the effect data presented above accounts for the creation of value in various cycles, a second part of this evaluation process needs to look more closely into how each of us consider our learning as attributable to our activities in the circle (as opposed to other causal factors). This requires contribution data – that is to say, cross-cycle data taking the form of value-creation stories. These stories “connect specific activities to outcomes by going through each intervening value cycle, with each cycle marking a rhetorical move in the story” (Wenger-Trayner et al. 2019, p.10-1). This helps one to “build a plausible case that the intervention [or social learning space] contributed to changes in practice that made a difference” (ibid, p.11).

Cross-referencing effect data and contribution data allows one to build a more robust picture of the value of a social learning space. Effect data “corroborate statements in stories, and... amplify a story’s significance by linking it to the bigger picture”, while contribution data “give meaning to numbers and... provide plausible claims of contribution to effects by social learning” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p.192).

### **2.2.1 Value-creation stories as expressions of social learning flows and loops**

Another important aspect of value-creation stories is that, because they bring the participant’s experience of agency into the evaluation, they “reflect the lived logic of generating, recognizing, and translating value in order to make a difference” (ibid, p.208). This logic is manifested through the flow of social learning between one cycle and the next. “Social learning happens not just within cycles, but more importantly when value flows across the cycles – and in the process, gets translated into new forms”

(ibid, p.128). This flow is social learning itself – what enables someone to make a difference by translating one type of value into another.

For example, a new insight emerging from a conversation (Potential value) might lead to a person changing something about their practice (Applied value), and therefore obtaining better results (Realised value). The reason why value-creation stories are so important is that the Wenger-Trayner social learning framework views participants “as both carriers and the witnesses of the flow of value creation across cycles” (ibid, p.130). It is therefore crucial to hear participants’ stories.

Stories are also useful as vehicles to spread further afield the learning taking place in a social learning space, by inviting the listener’s identification with the storyteller, and by “captur[ing] the concrete experience and uncertainty involved in practice, which makes it easier to use them to learn concretely how to make a difference” (ibid, p.131).

Nonetheless, it is better for stories to be “taken with a pinch of salt,” as they may contain what other practitioners might consider to be exaggerations and distortions; therefore, it can be useful to invite people familiar with the context of a particular story to consider its *plausibility*. This feedback can then help the value-creation detective to go back to the storyteller with more clarifying questions, eventually leading to a more nuanced picture of the created value.

When a participant’s story of value creation is fed back into a shared social learning space that played a role in generating some of this value, a *learning loop* is created – as “a value flow that returns to its origin or an earlier point in the flow – enriched with additional learning gleaned along the way” (ibid, p.133). This loop can take the form of a verbal account, but also be expressed in the shape of a video, text, piece of data, etc.

Loops play a critical role in terms of optimizing the learning taking place in a social learning space:

Since paying attention is a key component of a social learning space, loops are a crucial element: they bring back something to pay attention to. While any flow through the framework can represent valuable social learning and make a difference, loops accelerate, deepen, and widen learning. The question for cultivating a social learning space is how to systematically transform flows into

loops. Becoming adept at designing activities and creating the conditions for loops is a key skill for facilitating social learning. (ibid, p.133)

These loops can be *short* – as a flow of learning looping between two cycles, often iteratively. For example, a pleasant and thought-stimulating conversation will likely create a short loop between the Immediate and Potential cycles. Such loops help propel the social learning by giving it “interactive momentum” (ibid, p.139).

As for *long loops*, they provide the context for the shorter loops. They are longer flows of value, traversing several cycles along the way, and help participants in a social learning space to get a clearer idea of what difference – if any – is being made as a result of their individual and collective learning (ibid, p.135).

Both kinds of loops can be identified in value-creation stories.

### **2.2.2 Collecting and sharing the value-creation stories**

Value-creation stories are articulated by the participants in the social learning space themselves. The role of a “value detective” is to help participants elicit such stories, record them, and check with the participant whether the story corresponds to their experience.

See **Annex 3.3** for more details on the process of collection and analysis of value-creation stories in DAF.

With these criteria in mind, I collected (or co-produced) five value-creation stories with each of the members of the D&D circle, myself included. This process lasted between October 2021 and early March 2022, and was carried out mostly through research interviews, group calls, and follow-up emails with each participant. I wrote my own story (see **Annex 5.2, Story #5**) in February 2022 as a first-person narrative, on the basis of a conversation with my co-researcher Wendy Freeman. Each story was elicited by the question: “What have been some important experiences, changes or learnings for you, as a result of taking part in the D&D circle?”

Once every participant felt satisfied with the way their story was written, I offered them to publish it openly on the Conscious Learning Blog, as a way to share our learning with the rest of DAF. Every person agreed to do so<sup>74</sup>.

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74 See <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/category/learning-journey>



### 2.2.3 Stories and effect data indicators

This process was completed before I carried out the Template Analysis referred to in the previous section. However, I had already begun collecting certain effect value indicators prior to and during the conversations that led to the compiling of these stories (see this list of initial indicators in **Annex 5.1**). Monitoring these indicators prompted me to ask questions that affected how the stories were articulated. And ultimately, some of these indicators became part of the Initial Template which I first relied on in my Template Analysis – following the methodology presented by Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner (2020, p.190-2, 224-5), which relies on the dynamic integration of indicators and stories:

- *Indicators to stories*. If an indicator becomes salient (strong or weak, positive or negative), it suggests the need to collect some stories that refer to that indicator to understand what is happening and see how the social learning space contributed to it.
- *Stories to indicators*. A good story usually mentions some interesting effect at one or more cycles. If there is no indicator being monitored for that effect, the insightfulness of the story may well suggest the need to derive an indicator and to monitor it more systematically. (ibid, p.225. Emphasis in the original)

In this section, I will present five value-creation stories that, in my role as a value detective, I have been collecting from – or co-producing with – each of the members of the D&D circle, myself included. For each story, I will show which of the effect data indicator(s) listed above is being referenced (if any)<sup>75</sup>, and point out the learning loops that are present within the story. This will help provide a clearer image of how the D&D circle has been creating value for each of us.

#### ***What value-creation cycles have been most present for us?***

Among the value-creation cycles I identified in Stories #1 to #5, the Immediate, Potential, and Applied cycles were most present (see Table 19). Two of these stories have featured Immediate cycles most prominently; two others have stressed the importance of the Potential cycle; one has focused more on Applied value-creation, while another laid more emphasis on Enabling Value.

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<sup>75</sup> NB: Each indicator is referred to by its reference code, as listed in Tables 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 12, 13, and 14.

On the other hand, Strategic and Orienting value are barely present at all, such cycles occurring only in two stories. As for Transformative value, it is rare too, but I saw instances of it occurring in every single story.

This accounting is necessarily reductive, and of limited usefulness: indeed, these five stories are of very different lengths and degrees of complexity; and these figures refer to the entirety of these five stories, which all include cycles predating the creation of the D&D circle as a social learning space. Nonetheless, I chose to include these statistics in order to compare them with my assessment of the overall effect data created for each cycle. They seem to confirm that Immediate, Potential, and Applied forms of value-creation have been most present for us in the D&D circle, and with Strategic and Orienting value-creation least frequently referred to.

*Table 19: Proportion of cycles represented in Stories #1 to #5*

	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	Total
<b>Immediate</b>	17%	<b>29%</b>	<b>24%</b>	21%	25%	<b>24%</b>
<b>Potential</b>	17%	<b>29%</b>	17%	21%	<b>35%</b>	<b>26%</b>
<b>Applied</b>	8%	14%	17%	<b>29%</b>	22%	<b>20%</b>
<b>Realised</b>	17%	14%	3%	11%	12%	<b>10%</b>
<b>Enabling</b>	<b>25%</b>	0%	17%	11%	4%	<b>10%</b>
<b>Strategic</b>	8%	0%	0%	0%	0%	<b>3%</b>
<b>Orienting</b>	0%	0%	10%	0%	0%	<b>2%</b>
<b>Transformative</b>	8%	14%	10%	7%	2%	<b>6%</b>

### ***What indicators do we most frequently refer to?***

Integrating effect and contribution data enables one to “make a robust case for the value of the social learning space and the difference it has made to practice” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p.224):

On the one hand, stories make indicators more meaningful by anchoring them in the experience of participants in a social learning space. On the other hand, the plausibility of story is enhanced by reference to monitored indicators that corroborate its statement... In addition, a large indicator can also amplify a story’s significance by suggesting that it is not an isolated anecdote. An indicator

shows how representative the story is likely to be of the contribution to a broader effect.

What then are the effect data indicators most consistently “traversed” by these five stories? And what are those which aren’t referred to? Answering these questions may help to sketch the outlines of commonalities and differences between our respective stories and experiences.<sup>76</sup>

Table 20 presents a list of all indicators that are referenced by Stories #1 to #5, sorted by decreasing degree of presence (as measured by the number of stories referring to them, and the total number of references).

*Table 20: Indicators referenced by Stories #1 to #5*

Indicator	Number of references per story					Total number of references	Number of referencing stories
	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5		
<b>R2</b> - Statements mentioning generative changes happening for others beyond the circle	2	1	1	2	3	9	5
<b>I2</b> - Statements reflecting difficult or painful learning	1	1	4	1	2	9	5
<b>A3</b> - New initiatives or risks taken by participants because of their participation	1	0	3	6	9	19	4
<b>P3</b> - Statements indicating that new skills, awareness or capacity were acquired	2	0	1	5	8	16	4
<b>E4</b> - Presence of key enablers or facilitators	1	0	3	3	2	9	4
<b>T1</b> - Statements referring to a capacity to see oneself or the world in a very new way	0	1	3	1	1	6	4
<b>I4</b> - Statements on the quality of the space and relationships	1	0	1	2	0	4	3
<b>R1</b> - Statements mentioning uncomfortable changes or experiences for stakeholders	0	1	0	1	2	4	3
<b>E3</b> - Spaces dedicated to learning are convened	0	0	1	2	1	4	3
<b>T2</b> - Statements referring to a capacity to express oneself in	1	1	1	0	0	3	3

<sup>76</sup> I should stress here that these stories don’t pretend to provide a totalising summary of anyone’s experience in the D&D circle, which is impossible to do. Rather, they might be considered “snapshots” of some important moments of social learning that happened for each of us.

new ways							
<b>P2</b> - Statements referring to shared insights and information	0	0	2	0	5	7	2
<b>I5</b> - Statements indicating identification with the group, and/or a sense of personal and collective commitment	0	0	0	1	1	2	2
<b>P4</b> - Statements indicating increased confidence and inspiration to keep going	0	1	0	1	0	2	2
<b>A4</b> - New collaborations based on connections made in the social learning space	1	0	0	0	1	2	2
<b>E5</b> - Encouragements and mutual care	1	0	1	0	0	2	2
<b>E6</b> - Signs of external support from inside and outside DAF	0	0	1	1	0	2	2
<b>T3</b> - Statements referring to important changes happening in the group	0	0	1	1	0	2	2
<b>P6</b> - Creation of documents, tools, and methods to inform practice	0	0	0	0	3	3	1
<b>I1</b> - Level of participation in circle activity and continuity over time	0	0	0	1	0	1	1
<b>P5</b> - Statements indicating the creation of important new relationships	0	1	0	0	0	1	1
<b>A2</b> - Statements indicating that errors were not repeated	0	0	0	1	0	1	1

Interestingly, only two indicators are referred to by all five stories:

- “R2 - Statements mentioning generative changes happening for others beyond the circle” and
- “I2 - Statements reflecting difficult or painful learning”

This confirms an assessment of the social learning taking place thanks to the D&D circle that was already present in my analysis of the effect data presented in Section 1.2.1 – namely, that much of this learning has been painful and difficult for us (which one story – #3 – makes particularly clear), but that we think we have created positive value for others nonetheless (as my story seems to emphasise).

The two most frequently traversed indicators overall are:

- “A3 - New initiatives or risks taken by participants because of their participation” and
- “P3 - Statements indicating that new skills, awareness or capacity were acquired”

Although they are only referred to by four out of five stories, and much more prominently by two of these (#4 and #5), both of these aspects appear to have been central to our experience of value-creation in the D&D circle.

Two other indicators are referenced in four stories out of five:

- “E4 - Presence of key enablers or facilitators” and
- “T1 - Statements referring to a capacity to see oneself or the world in a very new way”

Each of them is a prominent indicator of effect data, as we have often remarked on in our rounds of sharing (see Section 1.2.1). To me, this confirms that “developing the capacity to see oneself and/or the world from a very new perspective” is the clearest marker characterising transformative personal change happening in our circle; and that most of us view this change as having been facilitated (at least partly) by key enablers among us.

Broadly speaking, the other indicators referenced in Table 20 as less present in our stories tend to correspond with scarcer effect data. However, there are some important exceptions. Several of the indicators of value-creation that appeared important to me in the previous section are not referred to (or barely) in any of our stories – most notably:

- “P1 - Statements referring to shared stories of practice and experience”
- “P4 - Statements indicating increased confidence and inspiration to keep going”
- “A1 - Sharing of value-creation stories looping experience of adoption of innovation or practices back to the space”
- “E1 - Reflection rounds on what works well to support learning in the space”

I would tentatively account for the absence from our stories of three of these indicators (P1, A1, and E1) by pointing out that they refer to the “bread and butter” of the

conversations taking place in the D&D circle. Could it be that they refer to activities that, while useful to our learning, have become so normalised as to be invisible?

### ***Has there been more positive or negative value produced?***

A quick examination of Stories #1 to 5 is enough to ascertain that they overwhelmingly point to positive value-creation overall – although every story does include instances of negative value being produced, largely captured by the following indicators:

- “I2 - Statements reflecting difficult or painful learning” and
- “R1 - Statements mentioning uncomfortable changes or experiences for stakeholders”

The latter was often present simultaneously (within the same cycle) with its positive counterpart R2.

I did not identify any cycle in our stories that could be characterised by an absence of value creation. This may be due to a subconscious intention, on my behalf, to present the activities of the D&D circle in a positive light; it may also be due to the guiding question that elicited these value-creation stories in the first place (i.e. “What have been some important experiences, changes or learnings for you, as a result of taking part in the D&D circle?”).

### **What are some characteristics of the learning flows and loops in our stories?**

Moving from the discrete learning cycles to the stories they compose allows us to venture several observations.

First of all, Stories #1, #3, #4 and #5 can be seen as composed of several shorter value-creation stories, which I will refer to as “**subplots.**” Sometimes, the learning flows explicitly from one of these shorter stories into a subsequent one; at other times, the flow is less explicit.

For example, in Story #3, cycles 1 through 11 can be understood as a subplot on “How the idea of the D&D circle came about”; this led directly to cycles 12 through 14, in which we learn more about “how the circle was launched”; cycles 15 through 18

describe “the circle’s first activities, and an episode of conflict that emerged at that time.” From this point on, two parallel subplots branch off:

- cycles #19 through #24 are about Loretta Ross’s course;
- cycles #25 through #28 are about the facilitated conflict-resolution process which happened in parallel;
- both of these subplots then seem to converge into cycle #29, although this is not made explicit in the overall story arc.

Secondly, as might be expected in a small, close-knit group like the D&D circle, some subplots are explicitly present in more than one story, thus speaking to the **shared history of learning** in our group. For example, the conflict-resolution process is featured in Story #3 (cycles 26 to 28), Story #4 (cycles 21 to 25) and Story #5 (cycles 27 and 28).

Thirdly, examining the social learning spaces into which the learning has been “flowing” shows that each of us has been **bringing this learning into various spaces beyond the confines of the D&D circle** – often as a result (or by means) of an Applied learning cycle. This cross-boundary flow can be referred to as an “outgoing branch” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p.143). For example, in Story #4, the Applied learning cycles 13, 14, 18, 19, 26 and 27 are all instances of learning branching into other social learning spaces.

Several of our stories also tend to hint that the flow of learning likely continued, as a result of these branches, in the lives of the **other participants in these social learning spaces**. For example, Story #1 mentions several activities taking place in various professional contexts (including a national environmental movement, and the UK National Rivers Trust) that led other participants to starting their own learning groups on the topic of anti-racism and decolonisation.

Charting these flows of learning therefore enables us to visualise more concretely how the activities of the D&D circle seem to be creating some of the changes that motivated the creation of the circle (see also **Section 1.2.1, “Realised Value”**).

It can also be useful to look at where flows of learning come to form loops within value-creation stories – as these loops are crucial elements of any social learning space (see

above): “While any flow through the framework can represent valuable social learning and make a difference, loops accelerate, deepen, and widen learning. The question for cultivating a social learning space is how to systematically transform flows into loops” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p.133). So what learning loops can be identified through these stories of the D&D circle?

Interestingly, few loops appear immediately obvious in our stories. As for short loops, the most frequent iterations seem to involve (mostly negative) Immediate value-creation followed by (mostly positive) Potential value-creation – for example:

- cycles 4 to 7 in Story #1;
- cycles 4 to 5 in Story #2;
- cycles 16 to 19 in Story #3;
- cycles 10 to 11 in Story #4;
- cycles 22 to 24 in Story #5.

This confirms the close relation between uncomfortable, or even painful experiences, and useful insights for us in the circle.

In terms of long loops (which traverse a series of cycles before coming back to their origin), they tend not to be explicitly mentioned in our stories, save a few exceptions – most notably perhaps, the results of the conflict-resolution process mentioned in Stories #3, #4 and #5: following this process, a conversation took place in our circle (as mentioned in Story #5, cycles 27-28), which “looped back” into the social learning space our respective insights about the process and its outcomes (this even led to the creation of a new video).

In fact, what is not remarked on in any of our stories is that when they were published on the Conscious Learning Blog, barely any of their content was news to any of us. Nearly every subplot had already been mentioned and discussed within our circle on some occasion or other – be it during one of our webinars, our learning circles, or rounds of success-sharing at the beginning of each call. In other words, all of these learning flows had already been looped back into our social learning space, thus fostering and feeding into our collective learning.



I take this as a sign of the vitality and usefulness of the D&D circle as a social learning space: even though our stories do not touch on critical indicators of value-creation such as P1 (“Statements referring to shared stories of practice and experience”), A1 (“Sharing of value-creation stories looping experience of adoption of innovation or practices back to the space”) or E1 (“Reflection rounds on what works well to support learning in the space”), as I mentioned above, we do have a solid container in place which enables such long loops to form, and our learning to deepen.

#### **2.2.4 The plot thickens: Two reframing loops**

In April 2022, a few weeks following the co-creation of this group’s value-creation stories (and the writing of the sections above), two events took place that led us to reflect critically on the circle’s activities. First, an incident occurred during one of our monthly “open meetings. And secondly, some tensions re-emerged within our group.

Each of these uncomfortable events have been an occasion for a productive reconsideration of our intentions and vision concerning the D&D circle. Indeed, I will argue that they triggered useful *reframing loops* (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, p.154-5). While the other long loops referred to above have helped to bring back to our learning space some information about the content of what we had learned, these other learning loops prompted us to critically reconsider:

- unspoken assumptions as regards the outcomes of our collective learning, particularly concerning our ability to deal with problematic situations; and
- our collective aspirations for the work of this circle.

I will conclude this case study by presenting an overview of the learning that emerged for our group on each of these occasions.

##### **2.2.4.1 How to structure our open meetings?**

In the April 2022 “open meeting” of the D&D circle, a conversation unfolded on the complex and fraught topics of human population growth, family planning, as well as on “anti-patriarchal” and ecofascist forms of discourse. During the discussion, comments were made that were unacceptable to the only Person of Colour on the call, who decided to leave. Most importantly, while one White person who articulated these comments had been challenged over them, other White participants then came to their help. The call

ended ahead of time, and the D&D circle offered apologies to the Person of Colour who had left.

Among other things, this incident led our circle to realise that:

- we were hosting these publicly advertised open meetings, on ostensibly charged topics, without requesting any prior fluency with these topics from participants – nor, for our part, being sufficiently prepared for situations in which offensive statements might be made that would be harmful to others on the call;
- while we had hoped that these open meetings might enable more collaborations to form between D&D circle members and other DAF participants, or new initiatives in DAF, in order to extend the scope and impact of the circle’s work (**Section 2.1.7**), there were too few signs that these aspirations were truly being met.

As a result, we agreed on a “damage control” process we could follow, in case any similar situations happened on future calls.

We also decided to transform the format of these open meetings. Instead of a free-flowing conversation, we invited rounds of sharing (without discussion) following a modality shared by a participant from a similar group that formed in another context: the “Deep Decolonising Recovery Circle.”

This carefully structured format aims to “connect personal, relational and social change and healing” by “bring[ing] together the personal and political, the inner and the outer” by means of allowing each circle participant to share vulnerably with others how they feel their everyday existence has been colonised by forms of systemic oppression and harmful ideologies.<sup>77</sup>

Our experiments with this format so far have led to very good results, as they have led to meaningful conversations. It remains to be seen whether or not this modality will stay as a structuring feature for our open meetings, going forward. Nonetheless, the incident that prompted this change in our way of hosting these meetings has been the occasion to discover a useful new process to enable important conversations around difficult topics, and to improve our collective capacity to host such conversations.

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<sup>77</sup> This format bears appears similar to the decolonial “Depth Conversations” invited by the GTDF Collective (GTDF, 2021)

#### **2.2.4.2 Another round of conflict**

Around the same time, and in an unrelated way, tensions re-emerged within the D&D circle. That they did so between the two circle members who had gone through the conflict-resolution process mentioned in Stories #3, #4 and #5, made us wonder whether that process had been as successful as we thought it had been. Had we been fooling ourselves? Had we just papered over some deep disagreements that remained present, in order to be nice to one another?

This learning loop prompted us to critically reconsider certain assumptions as regards the outcomes of our collective learning around conflict.

We approached this situation with curiosity. In order to get to clarify things, we invited another experienced conflict resolution facilitator to “hold space” for two in-depth group processes. In the course of these conversations, what emerged were three important realisations:

1. That as a group, we did not fully agree on the purpose of the D&D circle;
2. That we needed better ways of organising and structuring our work, in order to carry out our initiatives; and
3. That our calls did not provide enough occasions to voice feelings of discomfort.

I will briefly present some learning outcomes that followed this realisation.

#### **Reframing the work of our circle**

First of all, we discovered that the framing of our social learning space, as we understood it, had not been exactly the same for all of us. Some of us agreed that the framing was such as I expressed it in Section 1.2.1.1, above – i.e. that our circle had the twin ambition to create generative change for others beyond the circle (in DAF at large, and perhaps wider afield), as well as “within” (in the hearts and minds of D&D circle participants) – and that learning achieved in the process of pursuing change in one of these areas would also help us create change with respect to the other area. But for one of us, this was much less clear. As this person expressed during a reflective call, following this new round of conflict resolution:

*“I think my vision was quite narrow - we do initiatives, and then we go on to the next initiative.”*

This led to misunderstandings and tensions between them and other members of the group, who considered that although they were less directly involved in particular initiatives launched by the circle, they were playing their part by actively carrying the learning of the group into other social contexts – for example, their professional environment, or the DA Facebook group. As another one of us put it:

*“Our group is a lot about personal change and transformation that we then want to bring to other spaces. ... [We are] committing to starting new stuff, starting new experiments once in a while, and just seeing what kind of new challenges we bump into and what - and try[ing] to make new mistakes.”*

Our group realised that this framing was in fact more tacit than it should have been, which we agreed was a breakthrough. As for the person who did not have this twin framing in mind originally, they decided that it was in fact a useful way to envision the work of our circle. As a result, in this same reflective conversation, we decided to amend the circle’s mission statement in order to make this twin framing more explicit – to ourselves and to others.

Instead of simply changing the wording of the statement, however, we seized the opportunity to engage in a deeper process of collective reflection on our circle’s mission and vision. This process, led by one of our circle members, focused on answering several questions inspired by the work of the Gesturing Towards Decolonising Futures collective (GTDF, 2020c):

- What is our work (really) about?
- Who is benefiting the most from this work?
- What are we doing this for?
- Who are we accountable to?
- What do we want our work to move in the world?

It was through the emergent collective process of answering these questions that we co-created a new document presenting our new mission statement, which now appears on

the DAF website (DAF D&D Circle, 2022). The following paragraph was added as part of this new text:

“We take action by convening workshops and training sessions, but also by creating spaces in which to share insights on these topics with one another and with people beyond our circle. These learning spaces help us pursue our mission, individually and collectively, both within and outside DAF.”

The process also led us to agree on new priorities for the foreseeable future, by answering this extra question:

- *What are the steps we need to take in order to be where we want to be - as persons, as a group (D&D), and as a network (DAF)?*

At the time of writing (August 2022), circle members are actively working on taking action within DAF to materialise some of these new priorities.

### **Better organising and structuring our work**

Another important realisation from our conflict-resolution process was organisational. We understood that in our calls, we easily generated ideas for new initiatives, but struggled to clarify who would handle the concrete tasks necessary to bring about these projects, and by when. As a result, we often failed to hold each other accountable with regards to carrying out these tasks, which at times was a cause for resentment: some circle members experienced the feeling of being left to “pull all the weight,” but felt unable to express their discomfort given that tasks and roles had not been formally agreed.

As a result of this realisation, our circle decided to adopt a new project management spreadsheet that might help us to overcome such difficulties in the future, by laying out clear tasks, responsibilities, and deadlines.

### **Allowing more fully the expression of discomfort**

Finally, a third insight that emerged from this conflict transformation process was that although our calls did feature time towards the end for voicing feelings of dissatisfaction (**Section 2.1.12**), these time slots were not being used to our satisfaction. This might have been because our calls often run overtime, thus creating extra pressure

on whoever experienced discomfort among us to remain quiet, instead of “opening a new process” which would compel everyone to stay on the call beyond its end time. As a result, unhappy feelings had been left unaddressed in some of us, which contributed to the emergence of tensions.

In the hope of giving more conscious awareness to such affects within our group, we decided to alter our weekly meeting schedule and make time for a round of “hot spots”<sup>78</sup> early in the call. During this time, anyone is invited to express feelings of discomfort or dissatisfaction with the work of the circle or with any individual circle members, for collective exploration in a spirit of compassion, curiosity and respect. If no such feelings are present, the meeting simply moves on to business items.

Having experimented with this new meeting format, at the time of writing, we have found that it seems to be better enabling us to welcome and address difficult feelings. It may therefore help us to enact more rapid learning loops, and to defuse tensions before they are allowed to grow.

### **Reflecting on this second conflict resolution round**

The above leads me to venture several conclusions.

First, the new conflict resolution process was not simply a rehash of the issues that were discussed during the first round. While the first round enabled two of our circle members to understand one another better, and for the whole group to develop more skilfulness in our approach to tensions and conflict, the second round uncovered a different set of issues altogether – around the framing of the circle’s work, ways of carrying out our projects, and the expression of difficult feelings. Therefore, it seems incorrect to say that the first process had been unsuccessful: on the contrary, it may be that it enabled our group to develop the capacity to surface and explore areas of disagreement which otherwise might have remained hidden.

Secondly, each of these conflict transformation processes were occasions for very rich learning within our group. They became occasions for reframing loops. In the first case, two circle members discovered that their communication was problematic, and that they

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<sup>78</sup> The practice of paying attention to “hot spots” originates in Process Work methodology (Audergon, 2006)

had different thinking and working processes, which led them to reframe their working relationship (Stories #3 and #4). In the second round, several circle members found that we had different tacit assumptions as to what the purpose of our circle was about. This realisation led us to rewrite our circle's mission statement, review our action priorities, and adopt new tools.

Thirdly, these processes have showed us that while we are learning about conflict resolution and transformation through our continued engagement, we still draw precious help from mediators who are not actively involved in the circle in order to work through our difficulties. In fact, I believe it was due to this realisation that our circle agreed to invite the mediator from our second process to meet with us on a regular basis (every three or four months), going forward.

## ***4. Discussion and conclusion***

### ***4.1 Summary of findings***

I have argued that the D&D Circle was launched with two main goals. First, to bring about generative change in "the Deep Adaptation movement and spaces," by "reflecting on and addressing the main forms of separation and oppression that characterise our modern industrial societies" - and in the process, "mak[ing] DA spaces safer for everyone, particularly people identifying as Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour." And secondly, to develop more critical self-awareness among circle participants with regards to these issues.

In view of these two goals, taking stock of the circle's activities and achievements strikes me as particularly important in order to answer my research questions: indeed, I contend that these goals speak directly to the possibility of radical collective change, as they have to do with enacting profound changes of consciousness as a way of addressing the current global predicament. Besides, as I mentioned, in terms of its role within DAF the D&D circle may be perceived as a fractal image of DAF itself in the wider social context - both aim to bring about radical collective change by means of social learning. Therefore, while the D&D circle remains a small group of people compared to the much wider system it is "nested" within, understanding what has

worked or not for us in this small circle may help inform ways of structuring or envisioning social learning processes taking place in DAF.

I have investigated the social learning taking place in the D&D circle by means of an evaluation process combining the collection of effect data - documenting the creation of value in each value-creation cycles of the Wenger-Trayner framework - and of contribution data - via the co-creation and analysis of value-creation stories, which can attribute more strongly the social learning to a given space.

In the effect data, I found signs that the D&D circle has been producing generative changes for stakeholders beyond the circle, in DAF and beyond, although the depth and extent of these changes remain difficult to assess. In particular, whether or not DAF spaces have become safer as a result of the D&D circle's existence, particularly with regards to BIPOC participants, remains unclear. Nonetheless, the steady attendance of public online events set up by the circle is encouraging, as it may indicate that more DAF participants are supporting the circle's action in the network. The data also shows that the circle's presence and activities have been a source of discomfort for several DAF stakeholders, some of which even decided to stop engaging in the network as a result. Nonetheless, negative feedback on our activities appears to be more than balanced by more positive feedback.

The effect data also displays signs that deep, and even transformative changes have been occurring for each of us participating in the circle. In particular, several of us mentioned having come to see ourselves and/or the world in very new ways; having acquired a proficiency in expressing ourselves on topics of systemic oppression; and having experienced profound changes in the circle, as a group, due to our participation in it.

The four integrative themes I identified in the data-set, which I believe can be viewed as the main "undercurrents" informing our social learning, may help explain how the changes above came about. First, conflict and tensions have occurred within the group and between the group and our wider social setting. While these frictions have of course been a source of pain and discomfort, they have also allowed generative group processes and deeper mutual understanding to emerge for us. In this respect, as a second point, our strong focus on fostering mutual support and trusting relationships within the



group - sometimes at the expense of "getting things done" - has helped us to prevent tensions from tearing the group apart, to create a space with enough safety for us to discuss our individual and collective challenges, and to build self-confidence to undertake new initiatives or engage in new collaborations. The role of key enablers in the group, helping to maintain this container of trust, appears to have been critical.

Thirdly, our circle has been very intentional on systematically reflecting on our work and our learning, by setting aside time in our weekly calls, and convening spaces dedicated to reflective conversations. These conversations on "How to do the work?" have led us to be more conscious of the principles, processes, containers and mindsets we find most useful, both to our own learning and change, and to encourage such change in others - for example, by means of workshops and trainings. The videos we recorded on such topics, as well as documents such as our list of circle agreements, are important artefacts crystallising these reflections into a coherent whole. Besides, they also constitute encouraging signs that our circle has been actively focused on pursuing its aspiration to "spread awareness and share our experience."

Finally, the painful and difficult learning, the trust and mutual care, and the reflective conversations we have had have all enabled us to build new skills and awareness, which we bring not only to our activities in the circle but also beyond, into our personal or professional spaces.

The value-creation stories each of us published, to share some of our experiences and insights that have emerged in the process of engaging in the circle, confirm many of these conclusions. In particular, they stress the importance of the Immediate, Potential and Applied value created in our social learning space, reflecting both the pain and the joy, the new insights, and the strong intention to make a difference - in our lives and the lives of others. Indicators of Realised learning in these stories point to several instances of making that difference, no matter how big or small; and signs of Enabling value-creation confirm the importance of key enablers providing guidance to the whole group, and convening new spaces of learning when necessary - for example, in order to help transform conflict. However, learning leadership has never been the exclusive domain of such enablers: our stories and the effect data show that our group has empowered each of us to lead on certain initiatives, in a distributed way.

Our stories also confirm the relatively low priority we have granted so far to strategic conversations, or to explorations of our circle's action within the wider landscape of social change. I believe this points to new horizons to explore within the perspective of the change we are trying to bring about, particularly beyond the boundaries of the circle itself: indeed, while our learning has "flowed" into other social learning spaces on many occasions, becoming more strategic about these interactions may be a critical component of us further exploring the D&D circle's leadership role, going forward.

More recent developments in the life of the circle, as exemplified by the two reframing loops described above, also point to two other important areas of learning that our group is beginning to explore: firstly, inviting difficult conversations with others beyond our circle in ways that enable learning while reducing harm; and secondly, becoming better able to voice discomfort and disagree with one another. This points to the possibility of better inviting generative failures, as expressed by Stein (2021, p. 492):

While we remain accountable for the harmful implications of our mistakes, failure can be an important site of learning from those mistakes if it is treated 'as an educational moment and learning opportunity' ... In fact, it is often the case that the deepest learning becomes possible when we fail. However, generative failure requires strategies for honesty and self-reflexivity about where we are in the learning process (note: we are often less advanced than we would like to think), and clearly discerning the true extent of the challenges we face (note: we tend to underestimate their scope and scale).

## 4.2 A community of practice?

In this chapter, I have referred to the D&D circle as a "social learning space." Indeed, I view this group as displaying the characteristics that define a social learning space (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2020) – i.e. a social space in which:

- participants care to make a difference;
- engage their uncertainty;
- and pay attention to the feedback they receive.

However, with regards to the evolving theory of social learning from which this concept has emerged, it may be useful to consider the extent to which the D&D circle may have become, over time, something slightly different: a community of practice.

E. and B. Wenger-Trayner define communities of practice (CoP) as “sustained learning partnerships among people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2021).

The defining characteristics of CoPs and social learning spaces are presented in Table 21 below (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p.32).

*Table 21: Comparing communities of practice and social learning spaces*

<b>Communities of practice</b>	<b>Social learning spaces</b>
Identification with a shared domain	Focus on people and their participation
Commitment to plying, developing, and improving a shared practice	Participants drive the learning agenda
Longevity and continuity as a social structure	Learning is rooted in mutual engagement
Definition of a regime of competence over time	This engagement pushes the participants' edge of learning
Recognition of membership and construction of identity based on a regime of competence	Meaning and identity remain central but are based on caring to make a difference rather than competence in a social practice

The D&D circle began as a particular social learning space. We who co-founded the circle came together of our own accord, propelled by our respective desires to create a difference in DAF, and valuing the existing or emerging relationships between us (as clearly demonstrated by Stories #1 to #5).

However, over time, through our sustained activities and engagement, a particular *regime of competence* emerged from our learning – i.e. a set of (often tacit) criteria and expectations defining conditions for competent membership in the group (Wenger, 1998, 2010). For example, awareness of the pervasive presence of systemic racism in society would constitute a key element of the repertoire of practice constitutive of this regime of competence. Moreover, this prolonged engagement with one another – and with other interested parties beyond D&D itself – led to solid relationships and to a

sense of belonging and identification with our group (Section 2.1.4). The conditions therefore seem met to consider D&D as a CoP.<sup>79</sup>

Nonetheless, because D&D circle members continue to “engage with each other to address difficult issues, solve problems, and push the practice” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020, p.33), the circle’s regular calls still function as an active social learning space. In particular, on several instances, we have shown willingness to challenge our regime of competence and avoid the ossification of our practice. This is exemplified by the instances of conflict that have occurred within our group, and which have led to evolutions in our repertoire: notably, the introduction of “success-sharing rounds,” and later, “hot spots rounds” to our weekly calls – which respectively speak to the importance of appreciating generative changes taking place in the world thanks to us or to others, and to the need to make space for the exploration of interpersonal tensions. In other words, we have transformed our regime of competence as a result of the change in alignment between this regime and our experience.

These results support emergent findings from the field of transformative education. Discussing the outcomes of a course aiming at fostering transformative learning towards sustainability by means of a relational and justice-oriented approach, Walsh and colleagues (2020) show that communities of practice (as “a group of supportive and like-minded people to learn and practice with” – p.1600) were very helpful in enabling participants to grapple with issues of social justice and to feel supported in taking action on these issues.

Could it be that the circle’s double function, as both a social learning space and a community of practice, has allowed for greater innovative capability than if it were only one or the other?

Wenger (2009) outlines several fundamental characteristics that condition the social learning capability of a social system. I consider that each of the following generative characteristics can be identified in the D&D circle:

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<sup>79</sup> This social structure is likely wider than D&D. Several non-D&D members who have been regularly taking part in the circle’s monthly “open meetings” should also be considered part of this CoP, to the extent that they have been co-defining the regime of competence with us, and that they identify with it. As for these monthly calls *per se*, they are undoubtedly social learning spaces.

- The production of *livable knowledge*, or “knowledge that is meaningful because it enables new forms of engagement in the world” (ibid, p.4); and the ability for circle participants to express our experience of practice and who we were in this experience – e.g. through very personal forms of storytelling;
- *The commitment to candor* in sharing our challenges and struggles, which has deepened with time together with mutual trust – thanks in no small part to our cycles of conflict-transformation – and our “shared commitment to an open inquiry” (p.6) in our mutual engagement;
- The presence of *learning citizenship* – or the ethical commitment to our own learning and that of others – through our extensive engagement in the work of the circle, our convening of new learning spaces such as workshops or monthly open meetings, and our brokering between the circle and other spaces in DAF and beyond (e.g. with groups of moderators on DAF platforms).

Through our sustained engagement with each other, a shared history of learning has emerged in the D&D circle, along with a regime of competence that we began to identify with. However, this evolution did not prevent us from continuing active explorations, in a spirit of open inquiry, commitment, and mutual trust, out of our comfort zones. This led us to make many mistakes, and we have been faced with conflict on several occasions, but in this process we have produced much livable knowledge that keeps enriching the social learning spaces we convene or take part in.

### 4.3 Systems conveners in a landscape of practice

The circle has been attempting to raise awareness around anti-racism and social justice within DAF. However, as mentioned in Annex 5.4, the network framing has not incorporated these themes until fairly recently as part of its focus, which has likely made the work of the D&D circle more difficult.

The circle’s leadership role on these issues can be understood using the notion of *systems conveners* (B. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Systems conveners (SC) seek to reconfigure a social system, in order to create new configurations of people and activities, which will bring about new capabilities. They seek to create lasting

change, by brokering between various stakeholders to encourage participation in new endeavours and activities from people with different interests and expectations.

By convening educational events on the topics of anti-racism and decolonisation, and in several instances, sending invitations to representatives of various DAF stakeholder groups (e.g. Facebook group moderators, Facilitators, etc.), the D&D circle has attempted to change the configuration of DAF so that these topics may become a more central area of interest and action, and to enlist support in doing so from various areas of the network – or rather, the DAF landscape. Indeed, as mentioned elsewhere (**Chapter 3**), DAF can be viewed as *a complex landscape of practice* composed of various communities of practice, including the one initiated by the D&D circle itself (E. Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015b).

Garnering support for new configurations, however, requires difficult *identity work* on behalf of SC:

The only way conveners can get people to join them is to allow them to make the endeavor their own - part of who they are and what they want to do. Conveners need to offer people new ways of seeing and experiencing themselves in the landscape. They have to go beyond simply inviting people into a project; they invite them to reconfigure their identity to become part of a reconfigured landscape. (ibid, p.106)

Indeed, what the circle has been trying to do has been to invite more and more DAF stakeholders to *personally identify* with the work of anti-racism and the decolonising agenda, and by so doing, to develop a sense of accountability to the new configuration. According to B. and E. Wenger-Trayner (ibid.), achieving such a reconfiguration of identity requires doing work through the three main modes of identification that characterise social systems:

- *Imagination*: SC need to tell a new story (express aspirational narratives) about the landscape, in a way that may generate buy-in. For example: “Deep Adaptation is also about anti-racism and international solidarity.” Others should identify with this story, or at least part of it, from their own perspective.
- *Engagement*: SC must find locations in the landscape where new forms of engagement across boundaries of practice could be productive, then “facilitate

meaningful encounters where people from relevant locations in the landscape can negotiate who they are to each other and what they can do together" (ibid, p.107). Boundary activities should be designed that help participants "stretch their understanding while also addressing key current concerns from their existing contexts" (p.107). Indeed, "The most successful learning activities tend to engage people in doing something concrete relevant to stakeholders' practice and calling for collective engagement in negotiating significant issues" (ibid). For example, a useful boundary activity might be a workshop in which the D&D circle would invite members of the DA Facilitators community of practice to reflect on decolonising facilitation.

- *Alignment:* For changes in practice to be sustained in time, they need to involve a realignment of practice across the landscape. This calls for SC to "propose aspirational narratives ambitious enough to transcend specific locations in the landscape" (p.109). In order to reach effectiveness at scale, they need to challenge everyone – not just specific stakeholders.

It appears that so far, the D&D circle has not succeeded in bringing about such a wide-ranging reconfiguration of identification in DAF. This could be explained by the lack of attention placed on some of the dimensions above, coupled with too little co-creation.

For example, the circle has organised anti-racism workshops to which various DAF stakeholders were invited. These constitute boundary activities (the work of engagement), enabling encounters across boundaries of practice. Some of these activities have been well-attended. However, my understanding is that mostly these activities were framed without specific concern for the particularities of the practice characterising the various parts of the landscape that participants hailed from. Anti-racism workshops, for instance, were designed "for White people to better understand their own racism" instead of "for Facilitators to enact anti-racism in their practice." In other words, they may not have sufficiently addressed the concrete challenges and concerns faced by various DAF stakeholders in their daily practice.

As for the narrative on anti-racism and decolonisation championed by the circle (the work of imagination), it has not been - for the most part - co-created with other stakeholders across the landscape, which may explain why it seems not to have gained

much traction: “Telling the narrative must be an invitation to a variety of stakeholders to share in its creation” (p.106). At the time of writing, there were signs that we in the circle had improved our ability to “refine and rehearse the telling and retelling of the aspirational narrative” (p.107) by engaging in a more wide-ranging consultation process with various stakeholders over the topic of ecofascism.

Finally, while several efforts in the circle have attempted to disseminate skills and awareness at all levels of the network (the work of alignment), the lack of participation in some of these efforts could signify that these activities were not perceived as relevant value propositions. “The convener’s push for alignment does not displace people’s agendas; on the contrary it embraces these agendas to make them more ambitious, more connected, and in the end more likely to be effective” (p.109). This, of course, points to a fundamental challenge in convening reconfigurations in the domain of anti-racism, particularly among White participants: such work is generally very challenging and confronting, in many ways – and it can be difficult to relate it with concerns for “effectiveness”... particularly in a social context (DAF) in which proficiency with these topics may not be considered essential to one’s practice.<sup>80</sup>

In summary, systems convening initiatives such as the D&D circle might need to pay closer attention to the social learning process for *reconfiguring identification* – “identification with a broader, more ambitious endeavour with other players in the landscape and with effectiveness to be achieved across practices and at multiple levels of scale at once” (p.110). This likely requires more in-depth consideration of current characteristics and challenges of practice across the landscape, and the co-creation of aspirational narratives that would invite the creation of new relationships, synergies and capabilities. More and more people should be invited to appropriate the vision for themselves, and in so doing, engage in new forms of participation within the reconfigured landscape.

This section, by assessing and articulating the impact of the circle on DAF as a landscape, is a contribution to the emerging discipline of systems convening.

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<sup>80</sup> Indeed, critical race theory scholars have long pointed out that excessive concern for effectiveness is a hallmark of white supremacy culture (e.g. Okun, no date).



## 4.4 A transformative, collaborative inquiry group on anti-racism and decolonisation

The D&D circle can also be usefully considered a self-directed, collaborative inquiry group focused on facilitating learning and social action in the field of anti-racism and social justice. According to John Bray and colleagues (2000), Collaborative Inquiry (CI) is “research based in personal experience” (p.38) and “a fully collaborative method for practicing inquiry into questions of shared importance among all the participants” (p.46), based on a philosophy of knowledge that honours the full range of human sensibilities and various ways of knowing (including experiential, and presentational knowing). It is carried out through a “systematic process... consisting of repeated episodes of reflection and action” (p.6) led by a “group of peers” who “bring a diverse set of skills and experiences to the group” (p.39).

Besides, as Lyle Yorks and Elizabeth Kasl explain, “CI is democratic... links learning to lived experience, values action, and is often emancipatory in its intent” (2002, p. 93). And while such groups are often convened with the help of an educator, they may also “bootstrap themselves into existence” (p.101). This “systematic structure for learning from experience... is especially appropriate for pursuing topics that are professionally developmental or socially controversial or that require personal or social healing” (Kasl and Yorks, 2002, p. 3).

All of the above characteristics apply to the work of the D&D circle, which appears to qualify as a “bootstrapped” CI group. Indeed, the circle alternates between cycles of reflection and action through the succession of regular “business-oriented” weekly calls, monthly community calls, and monthly learning circles.

Importantly, CI groups strive to give attention to four different kinds of knowing that form the extended epistemology theorized by John Heron and Peter Reason (Heron, 1996; Heron and Reason, 2008) – including: *experiential* (knowing through empathy and attunement with present experience); *presentational* (a form of knowledge construction expressed in graphic, plastic, moving, musical, and verbal art forms); *propositional* (knowing expressed in the form of formal language); and *practical* (the ability to change things through action).

In this regard, presentational knowing has received less attention than the other three dimensions above in the life and practice of the D&D circle. Although the circle has strived to co-create resources – such as videos – to document our learning and share it with others, we have not devoted a lot of attention to nurturing forms of knowing “rooted in the imaginal and expressed through intuition and imagery” (Yorks & Kasl, 2002, p.6).<sup>81</sup> This points to a potentially fruitful area of exploration and co-creation to be investigated by the circle.

This aspect notwithstanding, I consider that as a method for learning and action, CI corresponds very closely to the experience of the D&D circle, and the latter can therefore be usefully compared to other documented instances of CI learning groups. One relevant example is the bootstrapped CI group described by Martin Leahy and Sue Gilly (2009). They describe their collaborative group as focusing on four commitments or ways of being (p.26):

1. “being intentional about creating the time and space hospitable for both persons and transformative learning;
2. being willing to struggle, to step into the space between us and stay there without rushing prematurely to answers;
3. being determined to do this together, that is, meeting, including, and connecting with others and all aspects of ourselves; and
4. being in inquiry around questions that matter.”

They also stress how “at the center of all four of these commitments was relationship.” (ibid)

Although this group focused on different concerns than the D&D circle, the commitments underlying their work – and especially, the “willingness to struggle together in the space between us” (p.39) – strongly echoes the intentions and practice of the circle.

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81 An exception would be the 24-minute educational video *A Silenced History: Climate, Race, and Colonies*, co-directed by myself and Yuyuan Ma in late 2022. This video attempts to integrate multiple insights that have emerged for us thanks to the work of the D&D circle, in a creative and accessible form. It invites deeper reflection and proactive action on these topics on behalf of viewers identifying as White, Western, and involved in the environmental field. The video is available online: <https://bit.ly/3U0C115>

Steven Schapiro (2009) integrates the characteristics mentioned by Leahy and Gilly with findings from other settings, and outlines five common themes or characteristics of transformative learning spaces, which seem to aptly describe the D&D circle (p.111-2):

1. “learning happens in relationships
2. in which there is shared ownership and control of the learning space
3. with room for the whole person
4. sufficient time for collaboration, action, reflection, and integration
5. to pursue a process of inquiry driven by the questions, needs, and purposes of the learners.”

He describes transformative learning spaces as “relational spaces characterized by affirmation, challenge, and creativity,” in which “the learning relationship and process are primary, the content secondary.” (p.112) Because we, in the circle, have made a point to foreground relationships in our practice (Section 2.1.12.2), this points to the possibility of investigating the work of the D&D circle from the perspective of transformative learning theory.

In later work, Schapiro, Wasserman and Gallegos (2012) introduce a useful framework to investigate groups centring their practice on group work and dialogue, and consider how various kinds of groups may provide a context for transformative learning. They argue that the following qualities are vital to successful transformative dialogical groups:

- continuity in members' commitment and motivation
- curiosity and openness
- emotional engagement through storytelling, and
- reflection and mutual sense-making

Again, these qualities all correspond to critical aspects of the life of the D&D circle, as presented above.

Further, these researchers present a typology of transformative groups, based on the main developmental outcomes they are designed to provoke:

- personal growth and awareness;
- relational empathy across differences; or
- critical systemic consciousness.

A single group may attempt to bring about several of these outcomes at once. Indeed, the authors argue that groups that enable the emergence of all three outcomes have the most potential to bring about deep personal and collective change.

Although space does not allow me to fully compare this model to the experience of the D&D circle, suffice to say that while enabling personal growth and group relational empathy have been important elements of the life and practice of the circle, D&D has been more centred on the development of critical systemic consciousness (among its members and others beyond it). Indeed, D&D explicitly foregrounds forms of dialogue aiming at bringing social-emancipatory learning, by “understanding and changing group members’ social realities, locations and context” and exploring ways in which “the personal is political” (p.366).

This social-emancipatory approach is characterised by an attention to praxis – “a continuing process of action, critical reflection, and dialogue” (ibid), which is another prominent feature of the D&D circle. As the authors point out,

Although such dialogue can lead to an awareness of how individuals have unconsciously internalized the rules and norms of the hegemonic status quo, the focus is not on our individual psyches alone, but on the necessarily concurrent transformation of our individual consciousness and our social contexts at various system levels—small group, organization, society, and even planetary ... the emphasis here is not on personality integration but rather on unpacking and transforming our internalized oppression and domination. (p.367)

Therefore, I contend that the D&D circle can be viewed as a self-directed Collaborative Inquiry group, focused on fostering critical systemic consciousness in its participants and other stakeholders while integrating an attention to personal growth and group relational empathy in the process, with the intention of effectuating transformative personal and collective change. Its shared history and experience is worthy of further investigation, in order to better understand the challenges this group has faced, and the

positive change it has brought about. The perspective of transformative learning theory appears to be a useful one to adopt in this regard.

In conclusion, I want to express how my personal experience as a part of this circle has enabled me to fully agree with the following statement by Schapiro, Wasserman and Gallegos:

There is an ineffable element of mystery to the transformative power of group experience, and it is at that nexus—where our individual, group, and systemic levels of consciousness come together—that we have the opportunity to change in the most profound ways. (p.368)

## **4.5 Who has benefited the most from the work of the circle?**

Over the course of a reframing process that took place in the first half of 2022, it appeared that for some of us in the D&D circle, our purpose was mainly to enact change as directly as possible within DAF, particularly with regards to issues of systemic injustice, by means of educational activities – as part of our role as systems conveners. For others, such “outer” change was important, but equally so were activities leading to “inner” change within each of us, and enabling us to bring useful insights individually to the various groups and social learning spaces we participated in – within DAF and elsewhere (Section 2.2.4.2).

As a result of this process, we reached a new agreement on the second perspective, which was reflected in a rewritten D&D mission statement. In this text (DAF D&D Circle, 2022), we acknowledged the following:

“So far, the clearest benefits [from D&D circle activities] seem to have come to us in the group, individually and collectively, thanks to the learning and personal growth we have experienced in this circle. However, we have also been bringing these insights into other groups and spaces, in this network and beyond, and there are signs that others have benefited from our conscious interventions or involvement. We aspire to make our work much more visible, and for this work to spread further afield.”

It is important to reflect critically on this assessment.

First of all, each of us in the circle has mentioned undergoing deep personal changes due to our participation in it. To what extent may our stories be showcasing a flattering and reassuring image of personal and collective change, for our own and others' consumption?

Scholars from the field of decolonial studies, such as Vanessa Machado de Oliveira (2021), point out that we – as individuals immersed within the context of modernity-coloniality – are “unreliable narrators of our own experience” (p.75) and that we must therefore cultivate self-reflexivity and remain suspicious of our own subconscious motivations and desires to “feel good,” “look good,” and “move forward” (p.113). Similarly, according to Sharon Stein (2021, p. 491),

There is a common misconception that if we say we are doing something differently, then this means we are already doing it. In reality, despite our best intentions, we often fail, because the well-worn grooves and ditches of our existing system pull us back in.

Therefore, we should be very cautious not to exaggerate any personal changes and “decolonising” that we, as individuals, may have undergone.

Furthermore, as we acknowledge in the excerpt above, it would seem that the impact of the circle's activities in terms of addressing forms of systemic injustice within DAF has been quite limited (see Section 3.2 above). For example, it does not seem that DAF spaces have become “safer” for participants identifying as Black, Indigenous or People of Colour, although lack of data makes this an area difficult to assess. Besides, the circle has not attempted to engage directly as a group with representatives of marginalised communities since an episode of conflict that took place in the first half of 2021 (Section 1.2.1.9).

One could therefore charge that the circle, so far, has mostly been a conduct for personal development for its (mostly privileged) members, and that it has done too little work to address structural forms of oppression, which is something that may qualify as “radical collective change.” It would even be possible to consider this part of a performative strategy aiming at reclaiming a degree of innocence with regards to systemic oppression – i.e. “If we are talking about it, then we are not as implicated in it!”<sup>82</sup>

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82 I think such a criticism would be somewhat unfair, however – see **Chapter 6** for more details.

Indeed, as Thompson (2003) points out, for white educators to demonstrate any degree of interest in antiracism can help to make them stand out as “disinterested, citizen-minded individuals” (p.18). Due to the moral economy of white liberal framings, “the very acknowledgement of our racism and privilege can be turned to our advantage” (p.12). Teel (2016, p. 33) agrees:

If I ignore whiteness, I experience no obvious ill effects; I get to feel good about myself, as is white people’s modus operandi, and put all my energy to advancing the cause of me. If I fight whiteness, I get to feel good about myself, as well as sometimes receiving accolades and admiration from people of color and white people who (aspire to) ‘get it’, which also advances the cause of me.

Because studying the tools of whiteness can even provide white people like me, a doctoral student, with “ways to *further* exploit [our] white privilege” (Thompson, 2003, p.16), my decision to include this case study within this thesis, in itself, could be a particularly egregious case of my own “advancing the cause of me.”

We, in the D&D circle, may have been wanting to feel like “good white persons” (ibid, p.13) as a result of our personal growth and self-actualization occurring in our learning spaces. For this reason, one could argue that political action has taken second space in the work of our circle. As the D&D circle is mostly composed of white people, to what extent have we been engaging in this work in order to assuage our feelings of guilt? Have our activities truly been part of “a conscious strategy to disrupt the operations of... the racial system” (Owen, 2016, p. 164)? Or have we just been seeking to obtain our “good White people medals” (Hayes and Juárez, 2009)?

Because modernity-coloniality has conditioned us to want to “feel good, look good,” and have a sense of “moving forward,” we members of the circle ought to be considering our subconscious drives for taking part in its work with suspicion, and exercise renewed self-reflexivity. Indeed, “this threat of acting out of self-interest can neither be eliminated nor overcome; it is a constant companion for white people who seek to perform authentic antiracist practices” (Owen, 2016, p.164).

One way to conceptualise the work of the circle is that of aspiring “allies” – i.e. “people who work for social justice from positions of dominance” (Patton and Bondi, 2015, p. 489), such as white people engaging in anti-racist work within a racist society. Many

scholars (e.g. Patton and Bondi, 2015; Kivel, 2017b, 2017a) have pointed out the tendency for aspiring allies to fail to address institutional inequities, and avoid placing themselves in contentious relationships with those in power, by focusing on the “micro-level, leaving larger issues unaddressed” (Patton & Bondi, 2015, p.505). Following the model developed by Edwards (2006), to attempt becoming “allies for social justice” (and venture beyond being mere “allies for self-interest” or “allies for altruism”) would involve the D&D circle becoming more deeply involved in building social justice coalitions with marginalized persons, and directing more of our attention to oppressive systems and processes.

Besides, the intention to embody “allyship” itself is not altogether unproblematic. As Kluttz, Walker and Walter (2020) point out, the word “ally” can insinuate that one has achieved a certain status, a permanent identity end goal (“I am an ally”). This label, particularly when self-granted, can all too easily become a pretext for absolving oneself of any implication in systemic harm. So instead of claiming allyship, members of the circle might choose to engage consciously in practices resonant with *decolonising solidarity* – that is to say, “a strategy for as well as a process towards decolonization” (Boudreau Morris, 2017, p. 469) that involves both enacting deep and unconditional solidarity with Indigenous struggles, and critical reflexion on how to decolonise the solidarity effort itself. A key aspect of doing so is that of “taking active steps towards building ‘right’ relations, with a commitment to both naming and righting the material, epistemic, cultural and political injustices of present and past” (Kluttz, Walker and Walter, 2020, p. 56). Indeed, this approach is predicated on building “purposeful, positive relationships” (ibid.) as a goal in itself, while developing tolerance for the discomfort and messiness that this relational work often entails. Some of the more recent initiatives taken by the circle seem to point in this direction – for instance, the launch of a page on the DAF website designed to support international solidarity projects (DAF Core Team, 2022e).

However, when referring to “decolonisation” (including in its name), the D&D circle has mostly pointed to the aspiration to “decolonise the mind.” This has exposed the circle to critiques from DAF participants positioned within a settler colonial context. Like Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012), they argued that “decolonisation is not a metaphor”: while these authors recognize the importance of the cultivation of critical



consciousness, they warn against “allow[ing] conscientization to stand in for the more uncomfortable task of relinquishing stolen land” (p.19). They consider this a “settler move to innocence,” that is to say, one of the ways that non-Indigenous people have used to alleviate the historical impacts of colonization, by attempting to “reconcile settler guilt and complicity, and rescue settler futurity” (p.3). Given that for most of its history up to the time of analysis, the D&D circle had been mostly composed of white British, French, US, and South African members, in other words representatives of national groups heavily involved in the violent history of settler colonialism, this critique carries a particular sting.

Philosophically, the work of the circle has drawn from scholarly work in the field of decolonial studies (**Chapter 2**), which often centres the need to “interrupt modern/colonial patterns of knowing, desiring, and being” (Stein, V. de O. Andreotti, *et al.*, 2020, p. 5) over considerations of representation, recognition, and redistribution – although the two are not antithetical. Nonetheless, this last critique is another reminder that the D&D circle may consider enacting deeper involvement in more political efforts aiming towards forms of reparations for historical harms. Doing so while trying not to reproduce destructive patterns would likely require starting by cultivating relationships based on decolonising solidarity with groups of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour, while foregrounding consent, trust, accountability, and reciprocity (Whyte, 2020). This could enable the circle as a whole, and its individual participants, to bring about more generative external action in the pursuit of its mission, and simultaneously to enable deeper social learning with regards to what the difficult work of solidarity actually entails. Indeed,

learning towards decolonising solidarity is not simply a cognitive process, and it does not happen in isolation. It is instead active and takes place through the informal learning that occurs through collective experiences of taking social action. (Kluttz et al, 2020, p.62)

## Annex 5.4

# Participants' aspirations in DAF social learning spaces

This annex explores some of the key aspirations and intentions that participants have been expressing within the Deep Adaptation Forum (DAF). This is a critical question to investigate as part of using the Wenger-Trayner social learning methodology (**Chapter 5**).

In order to usefully investigate this question, I will first examine some important elements of discursive framing that the founder and Core Team have used to describe the network's purposes, during its launch and beyond – in other words, the conveners' intentions; then, I will turn to the aspirations voiced by various participants and stakeholders in the network, following its creation.

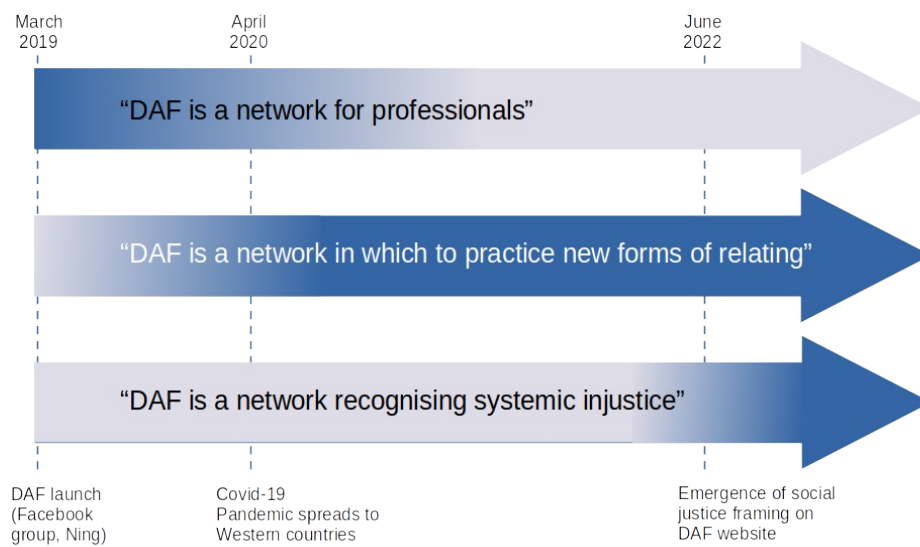
### *1. Evolution of the DAF framing*

In this section, I will argue that DAF's official framing, as presented in various communications published by participants in the network leadership (especially the DAF Core Team) has evolved over time.

I consider that DAF has been presented following three main discursive framings:

- “A network for professionals”
- “A network in which to practice new forms of relating” and
- “A network recognising systemic injustice”

Figure 16 below charts the relative presence of these three main framings, based on my observations, cross-referenced with a few key events. I then proceed to explain how I have perceived this evolution, below.



*Figure 16: Relative presence of three main discursive framings within official DAF communications (dark blue indicates a stronger presence)*

### 1.1 A network for professionals

To better understand how DAF has been framed since its creation, we should look at the texts presenting it to the world. This includes articles written by the founder and other strategic communication pieces authored by the DAF Core Team.

An important text is the first blog post about DAF published by founder Prof Jem Bendell, on March 6, 2019 (Bendell, 2019c). In it, DAF is introduced primarily as an online space in which to engage with the DA ethos and the topic of societal collapse from the perspective of organisations and professional fields of activity:

To extend the glide of our societies and soften the crash, the goal must be for every professional association, think tank, trade union, and research institute, to develop their own work on collapse-readiness. Before that happens, we can connect around the world and support each other to play a role in our professions and locations when the time arrives. It is for these reasons that today we launch the Deep Adaptation Forum.

This blog post also lays an emphasis on DAF enabling collaborative activities, such as hosting online calls, gathering useful knowledge resources, and maintaining an event calendar.

Importantly, this text also mentions the possibility of using DAF to “explore collapse-readiness in all its potential forms, from the practical, to political, emotional and spiritual,” which hints at non-professional contexts. Nonetheless, its general focus remains on individuals wishing to “join regular webinars, seek advice and co-create shared resources for [their] field of expertise.” The text invites the readers identifying with this aspiration to join what may be deemed an epistemological community (Assiter, 1995), rooted in a shared awareness and acknowledgement of the reality of the global predicament:

There is no need to wait for your fellow professionals to wake up to our predicament. There is no need to spend much time justifying yourself. There is no need to rage against ignorance. Instead, we can start to live our truth together now.

A closing paragraph also points to other places in which to carry out conversations on Deep Adaptation, while underlining their characteristics:

Note that the Forum is the place for professional collaboration. If you simply want to see the latest posts from professionals in this field, join our LinkedIn Group. If you have a general interest but don't work on it, then join our Positive Deep Adaptation group on Facebook.

This shows that two other online groups dedicated to conversations on DA, hosted by important social media platforms (LinkedIn and Facebook) also existed at the time of the Deep Adaptation Forum.

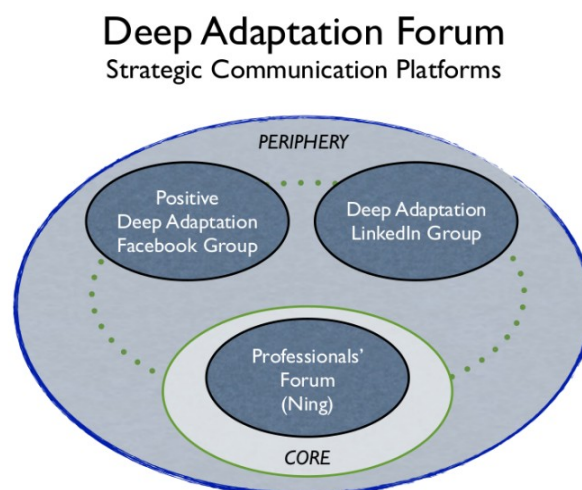
In order to make sense of this context, it is essential to go back to the history of DAF (see **Chapter 5**). What is referred to as "the Deep Adaptation Forum" in this blog post is in fact the online space (hosted on the platform Ning.com) which, from October 2019, would be renamed as “the Professions' Network of the Deep Adaptation Forum.”

Prior to the launch of the Deep Adaptation Forum on Ning, Prof Bendell created the Deep Adaptation LinkedIn group in January 2018, and the Positive Deep Adaptation

Facebook group a few days before the Ning space. However, from the early days of their work in March 2019, DAF Core Team members referred to all of these platforms simultaneously under the name “Deep Adaptation Forum,” including in the process of producing a “Strategic Overview and Planning” document from July to August 2019 (DAF Core Team, 2019a), which served as the basis for DAF’s first fundraising proposal.<sup>83</sup>

Within this strategic document, the Ning space is referred to as the “Professionals’ Forum” (Figure 17) and as a space enabling “Professional Dialogue & Collaboration” (Figure 18). It is also depicted as forming the core of a network of strategic communication platforms also including the Facebook and LinkedIn groups, and as an informational hub connected with various other broadcasting channels.

DAF’s strategic communication platforms are presented as serving to enable specific activities, towards pursuing five main strategic aims (Figure 19): “Enabling community online”; “Professional development”; “Advocacy & education”; “Organisational advisory”; and “Enabling community in-person.”



*Figure 17: DAF Strategic communication platforms (August 2019)*

<sup>83</sup> At the time of writing, DAF remains unincorporated. The name “Deep Adaptation Forum” appears on the Memorandum of Understanding which was signed in October 2019 between Prof Bendell and a representative from the Schumacher Institute, a registered UK charity. This document established the Schumacher Institute as DAF’s main fiscal sponsor, managing the receipt and dispersal of funds received by DAF.

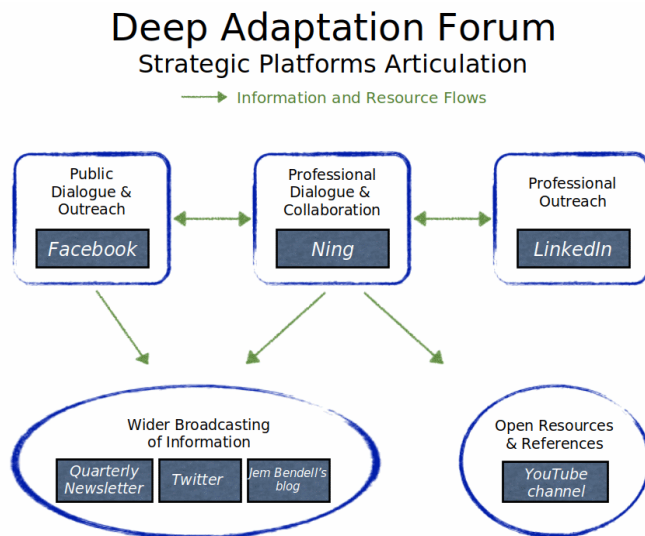


Figure 18: DAF Strategic platforms articulation (August 2019)

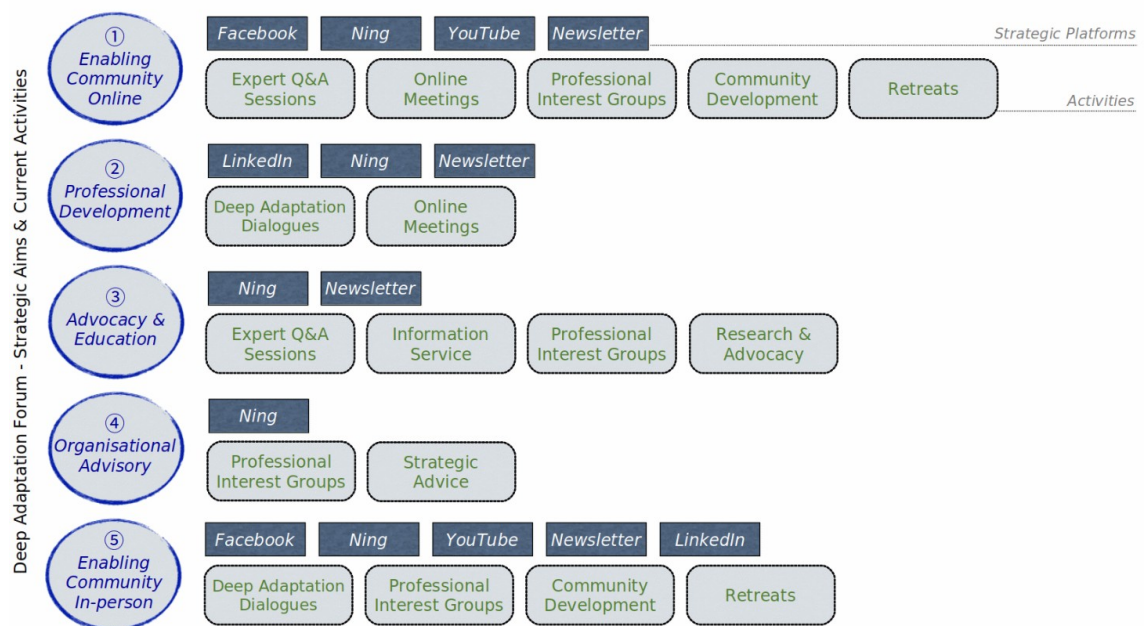


Figure 19: DAF Strategic aims & current activities (August 2019)

As for the Facebook group, it is described (p.20) as “a a crucial and very active platform for people all over the world to connect as their awareness develops regarding our climate predicament, and the Deep Adaptation framework.” It enables “mutual emotional support” and “an open dialogue,” and inspires the creation of local or

regional groups and initiatives. Finally, the LinkedIn group is framed as “a peripheral layer of the DAF’s strategy to enable deeper conversations in all professional fields around Deep Adaptation Ideas” and as a channel to “guide more participants into the Professionals’ Platform (Ning).”

Examining the early articulation of strategic aims and activities in the “Strategic Overview and Planning” document is important because it highlights the main elements of framing articulated by the DAF Core Team in the early days of the network. Besides, this document and framing were shared with all DAF volunteers as an official communication piece, which was discussed in volunteer calls at the time. Its key messaging – including the organisational aims and charts above – were also incorporated into the “DAF 101,” an introductory online document shared with all newcomers to the network, mainly between March 2020 and January 2021 (DAF Core Team, 2020).

While this framing includes areas of activity such as online and offline community-building, as in the blog post examined above, it is centred on needs and activities relevant to professionals. “Mutual emotional support,” for instance, is shown as merely belonging to the more “peripheral” Facebook group. This explains the early conflation of the name “Deep Adaptation Forum” with what then became known as the “Professions’ Network”<sup>84</sup>.

## **1.2 Cultivating new forms of relationality**

Nonetheless, in parallel to this focus on enabling communications among professionals, another important framing was also cultivated: that of fostering new forms of relationality between DAF participants and beyond.

The earliest text bringing this to light is another blog post by Jem Bendell (Bendell, 2019b), published two months prior to the one mentioned above. In it, the author presents current and future suffering brought about by societal collapse as an invitation to

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<sup>84</sup> And therefore, in my experience, a lasting confusion for many participants in DAF’s Facebook group, who continued to think of “the Deep Adaptation Forum” as referring exclusively to DAF’s Ning space, long after the latter was renamed to specify its specific focus area.

turn away from frantic chatter or action, relax into our hearts, notice the impermanence of life, and let love for this momentary experience of life in all its flavours flood our being and shape our next steps.

According to him, “Expressing that aspiration in our words, actions and inactions may invite people who are fear-driven to put down their microphones for a time and join people living from love.”

Bendell encourages the reader to embody this aspiration by embracing “radical” hope (as opposed to more “passive” or “magical” hope, for example with regarding to the possibility of avoiding collapse); engaging with spiritual perspectives on the global predicament, including the acceptance of death and impermanence; and highlighting the notion of reconciliation as a necessary additional pillar within the DA framework and ethos, and a way to practice an “inner adaptation to climate collapse” without which “we risk tearing each other apart and dying hellishly.”

This framing is further developed in another blog post, published less than two weeks after launch of DAF, and co-authored by Jem Bendell and another DAF Core Team member, Katie Carr (Bendell and Carr, 2019). In this article, titled “The Love in Deep Adaptation – A philosophy for the forum,” the authors present DA as a process involving both “collapse-readiness” and “collapse-transcendence”:

Collapse-readiness includes the mental and material measures that will help reduce disruption to human life – enabling an equitable supply of the basics like food, water, energy, payment systems and health.

Collapse-transcendence refers to the psychological, spiritual and cultural shifts that may enable more people to experience greater equanimity toward future disruptions and the likelihood that our situation is beyond our control.

As part of the latter, the authors identify the need to relinquish the widespread delusion in modern societies that every individual is a self-contained being, separate from other human beings and from nature. Because of a process of cultural indoctrination into this mindset of separation, modern humans tend to “other” people and the natural world. This process of “othering” leads to “dampen[ing] any feelings of connection or empathy to such a degree that we can justify exploitation, discrimination, hostility, violence, and rampant consumption.”

The need to let go of this delusion and the harmful relational attitudes it begets is all the more urgent that they are linked to the psychological need to “map and control reality in



pursuit of feeling safer or better.” As a result, the authors express concern that if many people start believing they are “entering a period where there will be more disruption and less ability to control,” for example due to societal breakdown, they are likely to seek safety by means of an increasingly violent process of othering. The remedy to this is “to feel and express love and compassion,” cultivating a “loving mindset” by which “we experience universal compassion to all beings.”

Bendell and Carr conclude their article by framing this form of “collapse-transcendence” as a philosophy to be practised within DAF. This should be done by following the three principles of “return[ing] to... compassion... curiosity... and respect.”

Since its publication, “The Love in Deep Adaptation” has been widely shared and cited as a foundational text by volunteers within DAF (Freeman, 2021) – as well as mentioned in subsequent texts co-authored by either or both of its authors (e.g. DAF Core Team, 2019b; Bendell and Carr, 2021). Indeed, as its title suggests, this article encapsulates the core values and principles that DAF participants have since then been invited to use as inspiration and guidance in their engagement, alongside the “4 R’s” of the DA framework (see **Chapter 5**). For example, a link to this blog post appears in the welcome message seen by new members joining the DA Facebook group, and in the group’s “Rules and guidelines” file.

But the influence of this framing makes it much more than a mere code of conduct. For example, it is clearly reflected in DAF’s mission statement, displayed on all platforms and presentation documents: “Embodying and enabling loving responses to our predicament.”

Besides, as presented by Bendell and Carr in a later publication (Bendell and Carr, 2021), these values and principles have also constituted the foundation for establishing – shortly after the launch of the network – an influential community of practice within DAF, focused on “group facilitation in the face of disruption.” The facilitators within this group, initially under the leadership of Katie Carr, have been experimenting with and developing various facilitation modalities enabling groups of participants to address the mindset of separation, and to foster the “loving responses” that are a central part of the network’s mission statement. Since its creation, DAF facilitators have been regularly

hosting several free online gatherings centred on practising these modalities – such as Deep Relating or Deep Listening circles – which seem to have had a lasting impact on a number of participants (see **Chapter 5**).

Gradually, particularly over 2020 to 2021, DAF’s official framing came to place an increasing emphasis on relational aspects. However, this is not to say that “collapse-readiness” was entirely discarded in favour of “collapse-transcendence.”

For example, DAF’s main introductory page, first published on the DAF website in November 2020 (DAF, 2020b), presents DAF as a network open to all, and barely mentions professional fields of expertise as a key focus area any longer. Nonetheless, it still introduces DAF as enabling various forms of collaboration, dialogue, community-building, and peer support groups. Compared to the earlier purpose statements, it highlights the importance of “connection, dialogue, and generative collaboration, rather than just information sharing.” It also speaks to the need to address the “extreme forms of collective ‘othering,’ or even fascist responses” which could arise from fear and anxiety in a context of collapse.

From what I was able to observe, the evolution of DAF’s framing beyond addressing the needs of professionals can be ascribed to a variety of factors, most importantly:

- changes in network leadership, including core team staffing;
- the stronger focus placed on group facilitation processes within DAF, in response to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic; and
- decreased member engagement on the Professions’ Network, possibly due in part to intractable issues with the user interface (see Cavé, 2022b), as opposed to more robust activity on the much larger DA Facebook group.

### **1.3 Towards more attention for social justice**

Finally, a third noticeable inflexion in the network’s started taking place from mid-2022, toward a clearer acknowledgement of the social justice aspects of the global predicament, and of the differentiated impacts of societal disruptions it brings about around the world. This evolution took place as a result of a combined intention on

behalf of the DAF Core Team and other active participants in the network, including Holding Group and D&D circle members.<sup>85</sup>

In June 2022, a new webpage was created on the DAF website specifically to call attention to underfunded grassroots initiatives, mostly in the Global Majority world, in need of direct support (DAF Core Team, 2022e). Any network participants could sponsor a particular project for it to be listed on the page, as long as met the specified criteria, which would also lead to the initiative being advertised in monthly DAF newsletters. Updates on the project were to be shared with the rest of the network on a quarterly basis.

The following month, two Holding Group members teamed up to produce another webpage, with the purpose of foregrounding “invisibilised voices on collapse” – i.e. lived experiences of societal collapse (Virah-Sawmy and Jiménez, 2022). These stories are told by individuals and collectives who have experienced various forms of collapse as a result of the history of European colonialism since the 15<sup>th</sup> century. They constitute a vivid reminder that the potential collapse of the modern industrial society cannot be disentangled from the traumatic history of conquest, slavery, genocide, exploitation and ecocide that has enabled this society to establish its domination around the planet. They are also a testimony to the resilience and resourcefulness of people in the face of centuries-long oppression and the breakdown of their traditional ways of life.

Simultaneously, and most significantly, the main section on the website introducing DAF was also revisited (DAF, 2022c). For the first time since the creation of the network, it laid a strong emphasis on the experiences of collapse of racialised and Indigenous communities, and of non-human species, as a result of the aforementioned history. It also expressed the wish to stand in solidarity with all affected, and to interrupt processes perpetuating this injustice.

Finally, later that year, another section on the website was launched to provide rebuttals to certain comments that were occasionally voiced on the DAF Facebook group, by participants often unaware of the political implications of their words. The page, titled “Avoiding authoritarian responses to our predicament” (DAF Core Team, 2022a),

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<sup>85</sup> In speeches and writings, DAF Founder Jem Bendell has explicitly linked issues of social justice and solidarity to the DA framework on several occasions (e.g. Bendell, 2019d, 2020a). However, these issues were not prominent in the initial framing of DAF.

provided resources enabling readers to understand why advocating population reduction efforts or curbs on individual freedoms, for instance, was not coherent with DAF's ethos and mission statement.

As I will mention below, there are signs indicating growing support and awareness for this framing within DAF as a community. However, it is unclear at the time of writing to what extent this evolution was translated into action, given that data collection through surveys and interviews occurred largely prior to it. It is worth mentioning that in spite of much communications efforts, direct support for the solidarity projects publicised through these channels had remained limited up to the time of writing.

## ***2. Participants' aspirations***

What have been some of the main aspirations voiced by network participants? To what extent do they correspond to the framing articulated in DAF's official documents?

I will answer these questions by examining several instances of collectively articulated aspirations.

### **2.1 A conversation in the DA Facebook group**

Anyone spending time in the DA Facebook group, DAF's largest and most dynamic platform (about 15,000 members at the time of writing) will soon realise the diversity of participants' topics of interest.

A particularly revealing example was a rich conversation in the DA Facebook group, initiated on September 16, 2021, and which involved 31 people posting 111 comments<sup>86</sup>. Of these participants, eight could be considered volunteers actively involved in the network; the others were not active as DAF volunteers, but a significant proportion of them took active part in the discussions on the Facebook group.

The opening poster expressed regret at the energy spent in the Facebook group on "accommodating new participants who ask cycles of common questions," instead of engaging in more productive collective endeavours, such as providing "an instrumental theory or critical commentaries on solutions" with regards to various issues (from

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<sup>86</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/deepadaptation/posts/1873718309482395>

“resilient communities and food systems” to “reimagining kinship and family patterns”), and creating more “active study and affinity groups” researching specific concerns before publishing recommendations broadly. He also wondered whether DA should “becom[e] a cohesive movement.”

The conversation that followed exemplified the variety of aspirations and understanding of DA among DAF participants. Important themes that emerged were:

- DA as a vehicle to “move through the emotional (or spiritual...) dissonance that comes in living at the conclusion of industrial civilisation,” providing safe spaces for individuals to express their feelings of grief and vulnerability, reconcile themselves with death, and find solace;
- DA as “a problem-filtering hub that contains multitudes of ‘solutions’ based on individuals and their local context,” non-prescriptive, and built on the foundation of a common framework and ethos that encourages personal initiative, collaboration and self-organisation;
- DA being fundamentally a democratic, anti-authoritarian framework;
- DA being about “adapting and working within or around local institutions” such as municipalities and community organisations, and developing crisis leadership in order to “[think] ahead about the implications of the obsolescence of conventional institutions”;
- The need for more people in DAF to articulate “structural analysis of the known avenues to a better world” with “an immediate jump into radical actions to make any of it real, extend the glide, man the lifeboats and save lives”;
- The importance of providing professionals with tools and resources to disseminate the DA ethos and thinking within their industry;
- DAF as a container for “spiritual inner work”;
- DAF as providing a wealth of informational resources to its participants, although these resources should be better organised and catalogued;
- The need to document the various initiatives undertaken by DAF participants as an inspiration for others in and outside the network...

Interestingly, while was present the theme of action within given professional and organisational fields, that of cultivating new forms of relationality was not. Instead, many participants lay the emphasis on DAF as a vehicle for self-organisation, local activism, and practical forms of action aiming at reducing harm.

In order to gain more clarity on the main aspirations of DAF participants with regards to their involvement, I will examine the results of several consultation processes that took place over the past two years, as well as a summary of relevant information I collected in this research project by means of several surveys.

## **2.2 Consultation processes**

### ***Strategy Options Dialogue (2020)***

Since DAF's creation, several strategic consultation processes have been carried out within DAF, in collaboration between volunteers and Core Team, with the aim of surfacing participants' aspirations for the network.

The first of these efforts was the 2020 Strategy Options Dialogue, which took place between February and April 2020. Through a combination of written submissions and live group calls following an emergent "Open Space Technology" format, involving nearly a hundred participants, this process aimed at investigating the three following questions:

1. What range of activities should be pursued under the Deep Adaptation (DA) umbrella, and what are the different possible rationales for pursuing those activities?
2. What specific role could an emerging international network play in this context, and on what kind of timescale?
3. What are the key strengths of existing structures that can be deployed to serve these objectives (including, possibly, implications regarding organisation, governance, and funding)?

The outcomes of these conversations were summarised by volunteers into a document (DAF, 2020a) presenting the dialogue participants' main aspirations for the network.

The latter were grouped into six main strategic themes, alongside list of potential action items. These themes listed below in decreasing order of importance for participants:

1. Development, Training, and Dissemination
2. Community-building
3. Collaboration and networking
4. Leadership and governance
5. Evolution of consciousness
6. Collapse-readiness

In terms of the two areas of official DAF framing discussed in Section 1.1 above, the “relational” aspects of DA generated more discussion and enthusiasm among participants, while “professional” areas of activity were less popular.

We in the Core Team then reviewed this summary document, and published a response highlighting the action item ideas that appeared most feasible for us to support actively, in view of available time and resources – as well as other ideas on which we invited volunteers to take the initiative. The Core Team’s response primarily featured action ideas in the realms of:

- emergent and decentralised governance (e.g. self-organised circles and local groups)
- knowledge production and dissemination (e.g. peer support and training)
- co-production and dissemination of ideas (via a new collaborative DAF Blog)
- spirituality
- anti-racism and other forms of social injustice

Various new initiatives took place in the network as a result of this process, with various degrees of success – for example, the D&D circle was created shortly thereafter, as was the DAF Blog. The results of a follow-up questionnaire which I sent to all dialogue participants at the end of the process (Cavé, 2020) spoke of participants’ increased awareness of the diversity of perspectives and opinions with regards to what main areas of focus should be within DAF. However, the dialogue also led several respondents to

doubt the network's "capacity to be a conduit for leadership" or its focus on practical solutions to the global predicament.

### ***Learning and (un)learning, and Strategy Options Review (2021)***

The following year, two new consultation efforts took place. In March 2021, volunteer Kimberley Hare led a process involving 60 DAF participants, which aimed at identifying key aspirations among the DAF community. Its focus was on practical actions, within the general theme of "learning and (un)learning." Among other findings, her report (Hare, 2021) highlighted that a "small but vocal minority felt that DA was overly focused on the 'inner' aspects of DA and [that] much more support was needed in the practical dimensions" (p.6) and that the Core Team should encourage more real-world action within the purview of DAF. Respondents also expressed a wish for more participation diversity and less elitism, as well as better signposting and resource libraries.

Importantly, a large number of respondents asked for more "spaces and places for connecting, relating and listening" in DAF, both online and offline. The number of suggestions of this type appears to correspond with the evolution of the official DAF framing towards encouraging deeper forms of relationality, which was taking place at the same time (**Section 1.3**).

The results from Kimberley Hare's report were integrated into a second consultation process, which followed soon after: the Strategy Options Dialogue Review (April-May 2021). This effort, initiated by the DAF Core Team, aimed at examining each of the six themes that had emerged from the 2020 Strategy Options Dialogue. DAF participants were invited to co-create a shared document charting existing initiatives for each theme, as well as those that they aspired to see.

The review process confirmed the relevance of the six existing themes, and a seventh one also emerged ("Communications"). Its outcome was the creation of a new interactive page on the DAF website (DAF, 2021), featuring a map listing each of these themes along with potential self-organised affinity groups which could be formed by anyone willing to do so, to meet the aspirations of the community. Guidelines for such "DA Circles" were published simultaneously. The webpage included instructions to join the DAF Slack workspace, which had by then developed into the network's primary



space for connection among volunteers. Unfortunately, the complexity of Slack as a tool and the lack of adequate training resources severely limited the creation of new circles.

These two consultation efforts showed that in the first half of 2021, there was high demand for online and offline spaces in which to practice new forms of relationality, as well as several existing regular offerings provided within DAF to address such needs. In comparison, there was little to no demand for more active engagement with various professional or organisational fields. Unmet needs included:

- more informational resources and learning-oriented spaces;
- more attention toward local and practical forms of collapse adaptation;
- more external- and internal-facing communications;
- and easier ways to set up self-organised project or peer support groups.

New initiatives aiming to address these aspects emerged subsequently (such as DA Circles, or the DAF Conscious Learning Blog). Local and practical dimensions of collapse anticipation remain less central than relational and psychological aspects within DAF, at the time of writing.

### ***“Dreaming and visioning” strategic process (2022)***

Another consultation was organised between April and July 2022 by the Core Team, with support from a DAF volunteer. This process involved a series of strategic conversations within the Holding Group, the Core Team, and in a gathering of volunteers and Core Team members. It also included four polls published in the DA Facebook group, asking for people’s thoughts on the value they had drawn from DAF thus far, and what functions they were most hopeful DAF might fulfil in the future.

From the results of one of these polls, it appeared that respondents were most keen to:

- more easily connect with other DAF participants locally;
- share and learn about practical aspects of DA; and
- collaborate with other participants on inspiring projects.

On the other hand, these respondents were least keen to:

- find and give emotional mutual support;

- engage in activism with other participants; and
- bring DA into their profession.

Although the polls did not collect information as to respondents' degree of involvement in DAF, the number of responses to this particular poll (191 votes) suggests that most of them came from more peripheral DAF participants. This makes these results interesting, as the other consultation efforts mentioned above, on the contrary, tended to involve more active DAF volunteers and participants.

These results confirm those gathered through the “DAF Collapse Awareness and Community Survey,” to which I return below: indeed, more peripheral participants (who do not take on volunteering roles) tend to have greater interest in practical forms of adaptation to the prospect of societal collapse than to deeper relating or activism.

This information was shared with the network volunteers, over twenty of whom then took part in a follow-up process over videoconference, during July 2022. The purpose of the call was to surface, by means of a somatic and relational process, these participants' aspirations regarding the future of DAF. The Core Team then distilled the proceeds of this call into a series of “commitments to action and being,” comprising several suggested orientations (DAF Core Team, 2022c):

- **Connect with individuals, networks, and grassroots organisations doing important DA-aligned work around the world**, particularly in marginalised and/or Global South contexts, in order to bring about mutual learning between them and DAF participants, and foster respectful support for their initiatives (including materially and financially);
- **Liaise with sister networks and organisations that are aligned with the DAF charter**, in order to explore how the modalities and ways of organising developed within our network may travel, like spores or seeds, and be adopted/adapted within other contexts and groups... while paying attention to what these counterparts may offer in return;
- **Engage proactively with the needs of younger generations**, particularly around integrating eco-anxiety and finding ways of generatively responding to our common predicament;

- **Support the emergence of many more locally rooted collectives around the world** that explicitly bring the DA ethos of mutual support and compassionate action into their lives, livelihoods and projects;
- **Encourage the start of new educational and peer-support endeavours** on behalf of DAF participants, by relying on an emerging e-learning platform and other means (e.g. public events), in order to foster more creativity and deeper learning within our community.

These proposed orientations were then discussed in another call to which all volunteer participants in the strategic process were invited, to invite feedback. There appeared to be broad agreement with these suggestions. Considering the prominence among these of concerns for various forms of solidarity, particularly across generations and social classes, these results support my view that an attention to issues of social (in)justice gradually became more present within DAF.

## 2.3 Survey results

Beyond the aforementioned consultations, two surveys created within the research team I have been part of within DAF have also queried participants on their aspirations about the network. One of these surveys focused more specifically on further distinguishing differences between the aspirations of DAF participants, depending on their degree of engagement in the network. Another investigated whether the idea of “radical collective change” meant anything to participants, with regards to their engagement in DAF.

### ***Do people’s aspirations vary, depending on their degree of involvement in the network?***

Through the “DAF Collapse Awareness and Community Survey,” between June 2021 and January 2022, the research team gathered responses from 58 DAF participants (of which 33 self-identified as non-volunteers) to the question of the reason for their involvement in the network, among other topics. In particular, this survey examined areas of overlap and difference between three types of respondents:

- those who were most actively involved in DAF (as very active volunteers or members of the Core Team);
- more occasional volunteers;

- and those who were not volunteering in the network.

I will present here a summary of some key findings from this survey. For more details, please read the full report in Cavé (2022a).

### **Key purposes for being in DAF**

Across all three categories of respondents, the two purposes that were most important overall were “To find a sense of community and belonging” and “To be well informed and make sense of the topic of societal collapse.” The two purposes that were least important overall were “To discuss societal collapse from the perspective of political change” and “To discuss societal collapse from the perspective of [one’s] professional activity.”

The purposes that most volunteers and active participants had in common were “To be of service to others,” and - in equal proportion - “To take part in local forms of community-building,” “To connect deeply and meaningfully with others,” and “To engage in the inner work of personal transformation.” These last three purposes were much less present for non-volunteers.

Volunteers and active participants were also much more interested in “online forms of community-building” than non-volunteers; but they were less keen to “find out how to prepare [themselves] and/or [their] family for societal collapse” or “to be well informed and make sense of the topic of societal collapse” than non-volunteers.

The most actively involved participants also had preferences that were slightly distinct from those of most volunteers: “To be of service to others” and “To connect deeply and meaningfully with others” were the top priorities, while “To find a sense of community and belonging” and “To take part in local forms of community-building” were less important than for volunteers.

From this data, it seems likely that most active volunteers in DAF tend to have different purposes for being in DAF than non-volunteers: they have a stronger focus on being of service, connecting meaningfully with others, and engaging in inner work as well as community-building.

As for non-volunteers, they are more likely to seek information, as well as guidance on how to prepare in practical terms for societal collapse.

## **A sense of community and belonging**

Responses to other questions in the survey showed that all volunteers and active participants said they experienced a sense of community and belonging in DAF, and that this feeling was very important to them. Interestingly, this was also the case for non-volunteers: they, too, experienced a high sense of community and belonging, which was very important to them.

As for those who didn't experience a sense of community and belonging (8% of all respondents), most of them feel "somewhat" or "very much" keen to do so. Only a small minority had no interest in being part of DAF as a community.

It seems safe to conclude that a very important aspect of respondents' participation in DAF has to do with experiencing DAF as a community, or wishing to do so. This confirms the predominance of "finding a sense of community and belonging" as a key purpose for participants to engage in this network.

## **Types of community**

Finally, another question investigated whether respondents were most keen to be part of a community of "engagement" (based on a sense of active involvement with others); "imagination" (based on a sense of belonging to a larger picture or landscape); or "alignment" (based on a sense of common ways of behaving in the world, or coordinated action in view of a common purpose).

Interestingly, each broad category of respondents placed the emphasis on a different mode of belonging:

- Non-volunteers were overwhelmingly more interested in "being part of a network of people with similar values, interests, and visions of the future" (Imagination), which is perhaps not surprising given that by definition such respondents tend not to regularly connect or coordinate their activities with others in DAF;
- Volunteers had more widely distributed preferences, with slightly more interest in "being part of a network of people coordinating our efforts for a common purpose" (Alignment);

- As for the most active participants, they largely favoured the statement “regularly connecting with people I appreciate in forum discussions, online calls and/or shared projects” (Engagement). Again, this might not be surprising, considering that these respondents tend to be most actively involved in leadership roles within DAF, and as such, take part in a number of projects and conversations on a regular basis.

These survey results confirm that DAF participants’ aspirations for being in the network and forming part of the same community vary depending on their degree of involvement. They also corroborate the data from consultation processes that showed a strong interest among non-volunteers for more local and practical forms of adaptation to societal collapse, while active volunteers have a stronger interest in collaborative activities and in cultivating deep and meaningful relationships with others. Finally, this survey shows a lack of interest overall in more professional or political forms of engagement from respondents, in contrast to the importance of being well informed, and feeling part of a community.

***Do participants aspire to bringing about radical collective change through engaging in DAF? If so, what kind of change might this be?***

Through the “Radical Change Survey,” between February 8 and March 22, 2022, the research team gathered responses from DAF participants to questions exploring their approach to the notion of “radical collective change,” and whether this notion was relevant to them with regards to their involvement in DAF. There were 15 respondents, of which 10 were “active participants or volunteers,” 3 were “occasional participants or volunteers,” and 2 were “very occasional or rare participants.”

I will summarise here some interesting findings from this survey. For more details, please read the full report (Cavé, 2022d).

When asked to describe their conception of what radical collective change would be needed in the world in the face of the global predicament (regardless of whether it could be achieved or not), respondents to the RCS questionnaire voiced three main types of aspirations. In decreasing order of importance, these were:

- Orienting towards connection, loving kindness and compassion towards all living beings: such change would be about more compassionate ways of being

and relating, involving the creation or restoration of fairer communities, as well as reaching better attunement to other-than-humans and the Earth;

- A transformative shift in worldviews and value systems: such change would involve reaching a recognition of the deep flaws, injustice and destructiveness permeating modern societies, new ways of finding meaning, and humanity embracing less arrogant and more biocentric perspectives;
- A radical reshaping of political and economic structures: such change would bring about radically new economic and political systems, from the global level to down to a renewed reliance on local, autonomous and democratic communities, detached from unfair and destructive global systems.

For each of these main aspirations, a majority of respondents considered that their involvement in DAF was helping - if even on a tiny scale - to bring about such forms of radical collective change. Besides, most of them also tended to consider themselves as actively contributing to this change taking place, notably through engaging in a process of personal “unlearning.”

It therefore appears that a large number of the most active participants in DAF view the pursuit of radical collective change as an important aspect of their engagement in the network, although they tend to emphasise the small scale on which any such change may be taking place thanks to DAF and/or their own participation. It is also important to note that the primary form of change that such participants are pursuing corresponds to the second category of framing (“cultivating new forms of relationality”) I have identified as prevalent in early DAF communications (**Section 1.2**).

However, a minority of respondents found the question of radical collective change irrelevant, meaningless, or impossible to address. As most of them self-identified as active DAF participants or volunteers, this seems to indicate that people may choose to become actively involved in DAF regardless of any wishes or expectations for social change.

### 3. Conclusion

I have shown that the purpose of DAF was originally introduced by its founder using two main framings: as a network in which to engage with the DA ethos and societal collapse from the perspective of organisations and professional fields of activity; and as a space in which to cultivate new forms of relationality, overcoming separation, and fostering compassion and loving kindness.

The former reflected a strategic intention to structure the core of DAF activities around a particular platform, initially named “The Deep Adaptation Forum,” and which later became “The Professions' Network.” However, this platform did not fully live up to its mission. Partly as a result, the second framing gradually grew in importance within official communications in DAF.

This relational framing was later complemented with a third one, focused on addressing aspects related to the effects of global systemic injustice.

In parallel, participants engaging in the various DAF platforms expressed an interest in a number of topic areas. While some were very much aligned with either of the two main framings described above, others also voiced aspirations that did not readily fit within either of these topics. In particular, more peripheral participants especially expressed a desire for more local community-building efforts, and wished to find more spaces in which to learn about forms of practical preparedness to societal collapse.

This is not to say that none of these other topics have ever been explored and acknowledged as relevant within DAF's official channels. However, they were originally less central within DAF's official framing, which has gradually evolved to incorporate a greater variety of concerns. Besides, the outcomes of various consultation processes between 2020 and 2022 indicate aspirations for more attention to these areas within the network. These outcomes also show the low interest for forms of intervention within professional and organisational fields on behalf of most participants, in contradiction with the network's original framing.

The history of these strategic consultations speaks to a continued intention, on behalf of the DAF Core Team, to foster self-organisation and support a wide variety of endeavours throughout the network, following a particular ethos - as opposed to driving



participation towards meeting any particular set of goals. However, the complexity of this mode of organisation (which breaks from more conventional social movement or non-profit practices) has been reflected in the difficulty for spontaneous groups to emerge and persist in time.

Another important finding, originating from the results of two surveys investigating participants' aspirations, is that intentions for engaging in DAF vary depending on one's degree of involvement in the network.

Non-volunteers tend to be more interested in being well-informed about societal collapse, and learning about practical ways to prepare themselves and their loved ones. For them, feeling they are part of a network of people who have similar values, interests, and visions of the future (a "community of imagination") is an essential reason for being in DAF. Very active participants, on the other hand, are keen to be of service, and to connect deeply and meaningfully with others. Regular occasions to connect with others they appreciate, in forum discussions, online calls, or shared projects (a "community of engagement") is much more important to them.

Overall, regardless of one's degree of involvement, finding a sense of community and belonging is an essential reason for being in DAF. However, for deeply involved participants, cultivating important relationships in the network is a particularly critical aspiration in this regard. Many of these participants have also articulated a deep commitment to facing issues of systemic injustice part of their involvement in the network, which eventually opened a third area of discursive framing for the network.

Besides, the results of another survey show that for many active participants, being in DAF aligns with a pursuit of radical collective change, in the form of enabling oneself and others to orient towards connection, loving kindness, and compassion towards all living beings. This aspiration overlaps closely with DAF's relational framing, which has become more fundamental to the network's mission than that of fostering professional or organisational change. Other participants also aspire to generate transformative shifts in worldviews and value systems, or - to a lesser extent - helping to radically reshape political and economic structures.

Nonetheless, a number of active DAF participants and volunteers do not find it relevant to frame their participation as part of an aspiration for radical collective change. Further

research would be needed in order to better understand the key narratives by which such participants justify their involvement.

# Annex 5.5

## Case Study: The DAF Research Team

This annex presents an evaluation of the social learning processes that took place within the research team (RT) that initiated the Deep Adaptation Forum action research project, from October 2020 to May 2022 (see **Chapter 5** and **Annex 3.3**).

Similarly to **Annex 5.3** (on the Diversity and Decolonising Circle), the results of this evaluation are presented as a social learning space case study in four part. First, I start off by introducing the learning space. Secondly, I present participants' intentions and aspirations. Thirdly, I lay out the results of the evaluation process, starting with effect data and then moving on to contribution data. Fourthly, I present a discussion of findings.

### *1 Introducing the social learning space*

As part of the Participatory Action Research carried out within the Deep Adaptation Forum (DAF), the research presented in this chapter was carried out in collaboration between myself (Dorian) and Wendy Freeman.

Wendy and I were among the six co-initiators of the DAF Decolonising and Diversity Circle (D&D), which was launched in August 2020. Prior to that, Wendy had been involved as a volunteer in DAF, for instance as a moderator on the DA Facebook group. But we had not had many occasions to interact prior to our collaboration within D&D.

Shortly after the launch of the circle, Wendy contacted me privately to inform me of her strong interest in questions of learning. A few year earlier, she had written a dissertation on transformative learning within a permaculture design course (Freeman, 2016), as part of her MSc degree in Education for Sustainability at London South Bank University. We decided to collaborate on the research project I had begun in DAF earlier that year (see **Annex 3.3** for more details), to further its goals of answering the question:

“How can online networks enable radical collective change through social learning?”

In this case study, I will present the results of the social learning evaluation we carried out on our own role as a Research Team (RT), and as people attempting to catalyse social learning in ourselves and in DAF.

The social learning space we created (comprised of the two of us) has largely been maintained through regular calls between us, and through asynchronous conversations over email and a secure instant messaging platform. In our conversations, we have mainly reflected on our learning and the various initiatives we started, shared useful resources with each other, and planned next steps in our collaboration.

Beyond our collaborative social learning space, we have taken on a double role of **conveners of social learning spaces** and of **creators of open learning assets**, in collaboration with a number of DAF volunteers. Please refer to Table 22 for a summary of the outcome of our action, and to **Sections 2.1.1** and **2.1.2** for more details.

*Table 22: Outcomes of the RT as systems conveners (as of December 2022)*

Social learning spaces convened	Open learning assets created
44 Research conversations (interviews) 7 Conscious Learning Festival calls (group discussions) 1 Transition US Summit feedback call (group discussions) 14 D&D learning circles (group discussions)	Research reports: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>DAF ‘Dismantling Racism’ training final Survey Results (Jan. 2021) – see Cavé (2021)</li> <li>DAF Collapse-Awareness and Community Survey report (Feb. 2022) – see Cavé (2022a)</li> <li>DAF 2020 User Survey report (June 2022) – see Cavé (2022b)</li> <li>Views on Unlearning and Radical Collective Change (Sept. 2022) – see Cavé (2022c)</li> </ul> DAF Pathways Route Map <sup>87</sup> Platform: The Conscious Learning Blog

<sup>87</sup> This is a guidance document mainly compiled by Wendy, in order to support newcomers in DAF to find their way through the network (Freeman, 2021). It can be accessed here: <https://bit.ly/3L5MyVW>

	<p>Published texts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 20 “learning journeys”</li> <li>• 6 “insights”</li> <li>• 16 other resources</li> </ul> <p>Multimedia content:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 14 videos, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ 11 webinar recordings, and</li> <li>◦ 3 self-produced educational videos</li> </ul> </li> <li>• 1 sound file</li> </ul>
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## 1.1 Conveners of social learning spaces

What were the main social learning spaces that were initiated by the RT?

### Research conversations

First of all, we initiated 44 research conversations as online calls with 36 individuals. Of these conversations, 15 involved Wendy, myself and another person; 1 involved Wendy and another person; 26 took place between myself and another person; and 2 involved only Wendy and myself<sup>88</sup>. 7 of these calls were scheduled as follow-up conversations, between six and ten months after the first one.

What I refer to as “research conversations” here might also be called “semi-structured interviews”: indeed, these conversations mostly aimed at eliciting information from another party with the aim of answering the Research Questions; they were recorded; Wendy and myself (or one of us alone) took on a role of interviewer asking questions; and some of these questions were informed by – although not limited to – the growing list of value-creation indicators we built iteratively (see **Annex 5.1**). However, in practice, in many or most of these calls we engaged our own uncertainties with our interviewees, making space for them to ask us their own questions, discussing with them ideas that were emerging from our research, etc. Therefore, I consider that many (or most) of these calls did in fact open up social learning spaces, as we allowed the formal boundary between interviewer and interviewee to break down, or at least to remain flexible.

<sup>88</sup> I include here the 16 research conversations that I initiated before Wendy joined me as co-researcher.

## The Conscious Learning Festival

Secondly, between July and October 2021, we initiated the first DAF Conscious Learning Festival<sup>89</sup>, a series of online activities advertised in DAF as “an invitation to all participants in the Forum, to pay closer attention to what changes may be arising, and what learning may be occurring for us, as a result of participating in Deep Adaptation events, groups and spaces” (Cavé and Freeman, 2021). The various activities organised as part of this Festival aimed at publicly surfacing more of the social learning taking place in DAF, in the hope of fostering more social learning inside and outside the network; and at encouraging DAF participants to become more self-aware of their own learning, in the hope of facilitating deeper personal transformations. Therefore, it aimed quite directly at pursuing the aspirations we had set for ourselves (see above).

Another important goal of the Festival was to call attention to and celebrate the contributions of volunteers, groups, and other DAF participants to the collective learning taking place in the network.

As part of the Festival, we convened a series of live group calls, open to any participant in and outside DAF, recorded, and designed to function as spaces for collaborative inquiry and mutual learning – including:

- An opening call, which introduced the Festival, and invited the involvement of attendees as co-creators of the offerings and resources emerging from the Festival;
- Four Q&A sessions, respectively featuring:
  - Two DAF volunteers who played a critical role in structuring the DAF Facebook group, as moderators;
  - A researcher whose work involved DAF participants, and members of the Deep Adaptation-influenced collective he worked with locally;
  - A self-organised group of active DAF volunteers (the D&D circle).
- A discussion on the topic of the Wenger-Trayner theory of social learning;

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<sup>89</sup> <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/conscious-learning-festival-2021/>

- A closing call, inviting participants to reflect on their experience of the Festival and any insights or outcomes that may have emerged out of it.

Each of these calls (except the opening call) lasted 90 minutes. The first 60 minutes were framed as the “main” Q&A or conversation time. In the last 30 minutes, participants who chose to stay on were invited to reflect and comment on any insights that may have arisen for them in the course of the first hour. In this way, attendees were able to engage their uncertainty in the presence of others, as regards the difference they cared to make in the world, and hear feedback from others.

Anyone in DAF was also explicitly invited to offer to host their own webinar or live event, as part of the Festival, which led to two volunteers deciding to do so (see below).

From October to December 2022, in answer to requests from fellow DAF volunteers, we co-organised a second edition of the Conscious Learning Festival (Cavé & Freeman, 2022). At the time of writing, seven webinars had been scheduled by ourselves and others, as part of this new effort.

## Other social learning spaces

In October 2021, I also convened a group call on the topic of the 2021 Transition US Summit. A week earlier, several DAF volunteers had collaborated to introduce the Deep Adaptation framework to the Transition US network. I invited them to share their thoughts with me on their experience and the insights that came out of it.

Finally, the D&D circle’s monthly Learning Circle (see **Section 1.2.1**) is a social learning space that was convened as a result of a suggestion voiced by Wendy and me, with the explicit aim of being more intentional about the social learning taking place in the D&D circle.

## 1.2 Creators of open learning assets

Besides initiating social learning spaces, we also openly published a number of learning resources aiming at encouraging more personal and collective change in DAF.

The start of the Conscious Learning Festival was accompanied by the launch of the Deep Adaptation Conscious Learning Blog<sup>90</sup>, hosted on the DAF webserver. This

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<sup>90</sup> <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/about/>

website aimed to offer the visitor insights into the social learning taking place in the various DAF groups, platforms, and events, in the hope of fostering even more social learning inside and outside the network. An important assumption in doing so was that this information might encourage more self-awareness in DAF participants – and thereby facilitate deeper personal transformations.

The blog enabled anyone to create an account and post content onto it, or comment on existing posts – although any new content needed to be approved by the admin (mostly me). New content could also be published by first being sent over to Wendy or myself over email, or to me via the website’s contact form.

As described on the blog, three main types of content were welcome to be published on this platform:

- “**Insights** are shorter testimonies or reflections, concerning ‘aha!’ moments when your views or understandings took a sudden big shift – or other noteworthy short musings or reflections – that happened for you as you engaged in Deep Adaptation Forum spaces and groups. This can be clear changes in your views, a brainwave you experienced in a particular (spoken or written) conversation, your learning from participation in a group event, a deep connection made during an online Q&A, etc.
- “**Learning journeys** are longer accounts of personal learning through some period of time, and personal observations of inner changes, generally shaped as stories. Each story has a main character (you!), and follows a relatively logical narrative sequence.
- “**Resources** include links to key personal teachers, texts, videos, tools or other sources of insights and inspiration that are part of people’s learning journey in DAF. We hope to eventually compile them into a self-directed ‘Deep Adaptation 101’ course, offering guided access to the most popular resources identified in this way to the wider membership of Deep Adaptation.”

The rules for engagement, which every user was asked to agree with prior to publication, were the following:



- **“Confidentiality.** Do not mention anyone by name in your posts, except if you have explicitly checked with them that they are comfortable with you doing so.
- **“Kindness and respect.** Please follow the Deep Adaptation Forum charter<sup>91</sup> in posting any content here. This does not mean that everything you publish has to be positive, feel-good material: difficult experiences can also be sources of rich insights and learning. But please remain kind and respectful.
- **“Research involvement.** By having any content published on this blog, you agree to let the researchers (W. Freeman and D. Cavé) analyse and quote from the material you publish for the purpose of their academic research project, under condition of maximum anonymity. However, if you decide to publish any content under your real name on the blog, please note that you will be forfeiting the possibility of anonymity for that particular content. Please refer to the Research Participation Information Sheet<sup>92</sup> for more details. To have your material removed from the scope of this research, please delete it from this blog (or request its deletion, if you didn’t publish it yourself) by December 31, 2021.”

As part of the process of collecting and processing value-creation stories, I systematically asked research participants with whom I co-created a new story whether they felt comfortable publishing it on the blog (as a new “learning journey”) – and if so, under what conditions. Some stories were not published on the blog, but their authors accepted that they be appended to this thesis (**Annex 5.2**). Occasionally, when hearing a DAF participant mention an interesting insight or resource, I invited them to publish it on the blog, and offered to do it for them if they preferred.

Recordings of the Conscious Learning Festival webinars were published as new video resources on the blog, with the consent of all participants. Other multimedia content we created and published on the blog includes:

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91 <https://www.deepadaptation.info/about/daf-charter>

92 <https://engramseeker.wordpress.com/daf-participant-information-sheet/>

- Two videos on the topic of self-organisation, co-created with the D&D circle<sup>93</sup> and the Collaborative Action Team<sup>94</sup>;
- A video on conflict transformation, co-created with the D&D circle<sup>95</sup>;
- The recording of an interview I carried out in person with Etienne and Bev Wenger-Trayner in Portugal, in August 2021, on the topic of the social learning theory they developed, and which plays an important role in this research<sup>96</sup>. The recording and transcript of this conversation served as the prompt for a reflective public conversation, as part of the Festival (see above).

## *2 Identifying our intentions*

What are the intentions that have guided our work, within the RT, as we convened social learning spaces and created open learning assets?

From May to October 2021, we carried out an in-depth and iterative framing process to make it more explicit what we wished to accomplish through our participation in our social learning space, for each individual cycle in the social learning framework, following the guidelines in Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2020, p.167-179). This involved:

1. Scoping a frame – i.e. deciding a set of cycles for which we wanted to act intentionally to ensure value creation;
2. Laying out our aspirations for each of these cycles;
3. For each cycle, framing our uncertainties, or “the circumstances under which a given aspiration may not be achievable or may create negative value” (p.171);
4. And finally, framing our attention to feedback, in other words discussing the indicators we would pay attention to in every key cycle, to decide whether any value was being created.

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93 <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/2022/03/04/self-organisation-what-works-part-1/>

94 <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/2022/03/16/self-organisation-what-works-collaborative-action-team/>

95 <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/2022/07/21/self-organisation-what-works-dd-circle-part-2-conflict-transformation/>

96 <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/2021/09/04/a-conversation-with-etienne-bev-wenger-trayner/>

The results of this process are documented in **Annex 5.6**. We decided to pay special attention to the Potential, Applied, Realised, Enabling, and Orienting cycles.

This framing exercise allowed us to articulate the following overarching intentions (i.e. the kind of Realised learning we hoped to achieve), with respect to this research project:

*“Through this research project...*

*... let’s amplify and spread learning/changes, in individuals and groups within DAF, that may be relevant to radical social change;*

*... let’s facilitate additional/improved functionality and interactions within DAF, relevant to people facing collapse, so that people choose to participate more in the forum;*

*... let’s foster learning citizenship in DAF, and invite people to join a ‘learning citizens’ group (creating interest in the potential for learning as citizens).”*

Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) describe systems conveners as people who “spot opportunities for creating new learning spaces and partnerships that will bring different and often unlikely people together to engage in learning across boundaries” and thus “forge new learning partnerships in complex landscapes” (p.99). Seeking to “reconfigure social systems through partnerships that exploit mutual learning needs, possible synergies, various kinds of relationships, and common goals across traditional boundaries,” these conveners “view their work, explicitly or implicitly, as an endeavour to generate new capabilities in their landscape” (p.100).

The description above corresponds quite well to the way we envisioned our collaboration. Therefore, I consider that we attempted to pursue the three goals listed above by taking on a role of systems conveners.

## 3 Evaluating the social learning enabled by the RT

### 3.1 Effect data: What value has been created?

#### 3.1.2 Creating refined indicators of value-creation

In May 2022, once we were confident that the data collection process was complete, we began evaluating in earnest the value-creation that had taken place as a result of our research activities.

Similarly to the evaluation process of the D&D circle's activities (see **Annex 5.3**), this new evaluation took place using a combination of Template Analysis (TA) and of complementary data sources. However, in this case, there was relatively little textual data at our disposal to carry out the TA, and this data was only relevant to evaluating the creation of Realised value ("What difference have we been making?"). See Table 23 for a summary of this new data set.

*Table 23: RT Main Textual Sources of Effect Data*

Source description	Reference code	Date of conversation(s)	Number of words
Transcript of the Conscious Learning Festival webinar with Sarah Bittle	SBW	August 9, 2021	15,363
Transcript of the Conscious Learning Festival webinar with Jane Dwinell	JDW	August 21, 2021	11,550
Transcript of the Conscious Learning Festival conversation on "Learning to Make a Difference"	LTMAD	September 14, 2021	10,398
Transcript of the Conscious Learning Festival webinar with Chris Tröndle and Camp Collapse	CTW	September 30, 2021	11,755
Transcript of the Conscious Learning Festival webinar with the D&D Circle	CLF	October 5, 2021	9,836
Transcript of the Conscious Learning Festival recap call	RC	October 8, 2021	13,098
Transcript of a voice message from a Conscious Learning Festival participant	VM	October 8, 2022	3,766
Email received from a Conscious Learning Festival participant	EM	October 8, 2022	414

When reading these documents, for sources SBW, JDW, LTMAD, CTW and CLF, I paid special attention to the last 30 minutes of each transcript. Indeed, the final half hour of each of these calls was the moment during which every participant was invited to share insights and other forms of value creation that had occurred for them as a result of the first 60 minutes of the call.

Following an initial examination of the data, I refined the initial template – which was based on the framing conversations mentioned previously, and documented in **Section 3 of Annex 5.6** – to create a final template of analysis for Realised value-creation. See Table 24 and Table 25.

*Table 24: Initial template (RT Realised value)*

Cycle (top-level theme)	Indicators of value creation (second-level theme)
<b>REALISED VALUE</b> <i>What difference have we been making?</i>	In interviews, blog posts or social media, people describe moments of deep learning and changes thanks to our research
	People join the network and mention stories of learning heard from others as a motivation to join
	A group of ‘learning citizens’ is formed in DAF

*Table 25: Final template (RT Realised value)*

Cycle (top-level theme)	Indicators of value creation (second-level theme)	Sub-indicators (third-level themes)
<b>REALISED VALUE</b> <i>What difference have we been making?</i>	Statements mentioning uncomfortable changes or experiences for stakeholders	
	Statements mentioning generative changes happening for others beyond the RT	Others say they are better informed about DAF, other DAF participants, enabling factors of learning, social learning, etc.
		Others express a deeper sense of commitment or interest in DAF
		Others express gratitude
	New public learning assets are created by others as a result of our initiatives	
	New social learning spaces are convened by others as a result of our initiatives	
	New projects or collaborations are initiated by others as a result of our initiatives	
	A group of regular attendees take part in	

	the learning-focused events we organise and express the wish to go deeper into those conversations	
	Others engage in brokering between DAF and other learning spaces, or between existing learning spaces in DAF, as a result of our initiatives	

Using the indicators listed in this final template, I then worked systematically through the entire dataset listed in Table 18, identified relevant sections of text, and marked them with one or several appropriate code(s). I did so by importing all documents into the software Quirkos and analysing them using this software. I created new second-level themes (indicators) in the process. This analysis enabled me to refine the second- and third-level themes functioning as indicators of value-creation, and to gather effect data for each of these themes.

Finally, in May 2022, ahead of my writing this annex, Wendy and I fully revisited **Section 3 of Annex 5.6** (“Framing our attention to feedback”), integrating the new Realised value-creation indicators above, in order to come to a definitive list of indicators of value-creation for all cycles. We then discussed the forms of value-creation (i.e. effect data) that we had noticed for each indicator in each cycle.

I will now present a summary of the Effect Data we have identified for each indicator, both under the shape of the codes and themes that I drew from the Template Analysis described above, and from our personal observations. Where relevant, I will quote excerpts from the codes highlighted during my Template Analysis process.

For each cycle, I provide a summary table of indicators and data sources, which also shows the aspirations that we agreed upon for each value-creation cycle during our framing process (see **Section 2.2.1.1**).

### 3.1.3 Immediate value: What has our experience been like?

Table 26: Immediate value - Consolidated indicators and data sources (RT)

Aspirations	Ref.	Indicators of value-creation	Data sources
<i>“Let’s be clearer as regards the tasks and activities that each of us feels most meaningful and engaging”</i>	I6	We use a common to-do list to keep track of our tasks and responsibilities	Personal observations
	I7	We experience strong mutual trust	

<i>“Let’s try to meet up and discuss this project in person”</i>  <i>“Let’s remain committed to relationship-building as core to this work”</i>	<b>I8</b>	We met in person and spent time discussing the project face-to-face
	<b>I9</b>	We feel satisfaction as regards the extent of our respective involvement and ownership of this research
	<b>I10</b>	We want to continue working on this project together after Oct.2022

In reviewing our experience of working together as part of the RT, Wendy and I agreed that we had developed a very good working relationship in the course of our research. Certain tools (such as instant messaging and a shared task-list) have helped facilitated our collaboration, and our regular research conversations have enabled strong mutual trust to develop. Although our collaboration has almost entirely taken place online, we did manage to meet in person, over the course of a week, which we also found helpful. Besides, our common involvement in other DAF social learning spaces – most notably, the D&D Circle – has also been important for us to know each other better.

This trust, respect and friendship that formed between us enabled us to keep working together even when one of us felt less able to contribute, as a result of health issues. Another reason for our participation not being on a perfectly equal footing was that I initiated this research project, and began shaping it, on my own – including with regards to its theoretical framework – well before Wendy joined me. However, we both voiced satisfaction with the flexibility of how we articulated our respective contributions to this project. Indeed, we wish to continue our collaboration beyond this project’s completion (after I submit my PhD thesis), and to explore in more depth certain important questions this study has raised.

### 3.1.4 Potential value: What has come out of our experience?

Table 27: Potential value - Consolidated indicators and data sources (RT)

Aspirations	Ref.	Indicators of value-creation	Data sources
<i>“Let’s gain some clarity as regards the forms of social learning that are taking place in DAF, and figure out how these forms may be relevant to radical social change”</i> <i>“Let’s gain an awareness of how these</i>	<b>P7</b>	We are starting to have an idea of how to answer our main research questions	Personal observations
	<b>P8</b>	We can use various ways (including graphs, text, events etc.) to share our research findings	

<i>changes happen, and figure out if/how they can be replicated (identifying flows and potential loops, etc.)”</i>	<b>P9</b>	We have created public learning assets
	<b>P10</b>	We have become better at noticing moments that indicate a radical change taking place

Our collaboration has enabled us to start answering our main research questions. For example, through our analysis of the DAF Collapse Awareness & Community Survey (Cavé, 2022a) and the value-creation stories we co-created with other research participants (**Annex 5.2**), it is becoming increasingly clear to us that many DAF participants have undergone important personal changes as a result of their involvement in this community; and the collective reflection processes we carried out within the D&D Circle have also been shedding light on certain aspects of leadership, and certain characteristics of a social learning space that may be in favour of such changes taking place.

In fact, the entire **Chapter 5** of this thesis, including its various annexes, are a testimony to the creation of such potential value. We plan to share our findings more broadly in the forum, through blog posts, interactive diagrams, and events. These will constitute a logical continuation of the social learning spaces we have been convening, and the public learning assets we already created as scaffolding for our ongoing research (see above).

We also noticed that our involvement in the RT has helped us develop a new skill: that of becoming more perceptive of signs indicating that meaningful changes may be happening, in ourselves or in others. This enables us to become better value detectives, and engage in more immediate follow-up investigations.

### 3.1.5 Applied value: What have we been learning in the doing?

Table 28: Applied value - Consolidated indicators and data sources (RT)

Aspirations	Ref.	Indicators of value-creation	Sub-indicators	Data sources
<i>“Let’s do some experiments to try and amplify and spread changes that may be relevant to radical social change (transforming flows into loops, etc.)”</i>	A5	We have undertaken new initiatives as part of our research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gift questions</li> <li>• Conscious Learning Festival</li> <li>• Conscious Learning Blog</li> <li>• DAF 101 resource collection</li> </ul>	Personal observations



<p><i>“Let’s share our insights in the forum more broadly and frequently to invite constructive feedback and participation”</i></p> <p><i>“Let’s experiment with more public conversations around personal journeys of learning, where the public acknowledging and documenting of people’s individual learning creates models and pathways inviting others”</i></p>	A6	We have been gauging the extent to which our initiatives have been successful		
	A7	We have created a platform enabling others to learn and share their learning		
	A8	We have convened new social learning spaces in DAF		
	A9	We embody the Action Research ethos and awareness as much as possible wherever we interact		

Building on the new insights and skills that had emerged for us through our research, and in keeping with our Participatory Action Research perspective, we undertook several creative interventions within DAF in order to fulfil our aspiration to “amplify and spread changes that may be relevant to radical social change.” However, as we reflected on these initiatives, it became obvious to us that only some of them had been successfully executed.

For example, an early intervention we conceived was that of crafting a “gift question” for every DAF participant who had a research conversation with us. These questions were to be communicated privately with each person, as a personalised invitation to reflect deeply on their trajectory of learning in DAF, and as a prompt for retrospective conversations in the future. Although we did begin preparing such questions, we only succeeded in sharing them with a handful of participants (including each other). This appears largely due to capacity issues on our behalf.

Another important intervention was the series of activities we dubbed the “Conscious Learning Festival” (see above). While we did not fully meet our stated objectives (see following section), we did succeed in carrying out the main activities that we had set out to accomplish – most notably: creating the Conscious Learning Blog; publishing useful resources on the Blog; and hosting several webinars and live conversations on the topic of social learning. We found that the Festival’s opening and closing calls, which we

convened and hosted, led to particularly rich conversations in terms of insights for this research project, and as regards future editions of the Festival.<sup>97</sup>

Other social learning spaces we convened have met various degrees of success. For example, the D&D Circle's monthly Learning Circles have remained an occasion for meaningful sharing and reflection. However, while we hosted many calls on the topic of creating useful resource and learning repositories in DAF (beyond the Conscious Learning Blog), and lately with the aim of launching an online course on Deep Adaptation, these efforts over the past year have met with much more limited success in terms of practical achievements – although conversations are still ongoing.

### 3.1.6 Realised value: What difference have we been making?

Table 29: Realised value - Consolidated indicators and data sources (RT)

Aspirations	Ref.	Indicators of value-creation	Sub-indicators	Data sources
“Let’s amplify and spread learning or changes, in individuals and groups within DAF, that may be relevant to radical collective change”	R5	Statements mentioning generative changes happening for others beyond the RT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Others say they are better informed about DAF, other DAF participants, enabling factors of learning, social learning, etc.</li> <li>Others have ideas for new projects and initiatives</li> <li>Others enjoy the time they spend with other participants in our initiatives</li> <li>Others express a deeper sense of commitment or interest in DAF</li> <li>Others express gratitude for our efforts</li> </ul>	Template Analysis (TA)
	R6	Statements mentioning uncomfortable changes or experiences for stakeholders		TA Personal observations
“Let’s facilitate additional or improved functionality and interactions within DAF, relevant to people facing collapse, so that	R7	A new platform is created that brings about more participation in DAF		Conscious Learning Blog statistics
	R8	New public learning assets are created by others as a		Personal observations

<sup>97</sup> All of the Festival’s recorded calls can be watched in the video resources section of the Conscious Learning Blog: <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/category/resource/video/>

<i>people choose to participate more in the forum.”</i>		result of our initiatives		
	<b>R9</b>	New social learning spaces are convened by others as a result of our initiatives		TA Personal observations
	<b>R10</b>	New projects or collaborations are initiated by others as a result of our initiatives		TA Personal observations
<i>“Let’s foster learning citizenship in DAF, and invite people to join a ‘learning citizens’ group (creating interest in the potential for learning as citizens)”</i>	<b>R11</b>	A group of regular attendees take part in the learning-focused events we organise and express the wish to go deeper into those conversations		TA Personal observations
	<b>R12</b>	A group of regular learning-focused event attendees reflect on the conditions that best enable social learning		TA Personal observations
	<b>R13</b>	Others engage in brokering between DAF and other learning spaces, or between existing learning spaces in DAF, as a result of our initiatives		Personal observations

### ***Amplifying and spreading social learning***

The first type of results we aspired to obtain through this research project had to do with “amplifying and spreading learning or changes, in individuals and groups within DAF, that may be relevant to radical collective change.”

With regards to the general impacts of the interventions we carried out, the thematic analysis I carried out on the data set (see **Section 3.1.2** and Table 23) yielded a number of statements indicating generative changes happening for various stakeholders.

First of all, several participants in the Conscious Learning Festival webinars mentioned feeling better informed thanks to their involvement. In particular, several found that the Festival enabled them to gain a deeper understanding of DAF as a community, including its history, and the lives of its participants.

“I learned more about the history of Deep Adaptation through - how did this, how did the Facebook group happen? And, and what does it mean for Jane to be a moderator? And what is her life? What were the life choices that brought her to this moment? It feels like, like a picture that was maybe 85 pixels, went up to 200 pixels or something like that.” (RC)

Hearing other participants share their stories during the webinars also led certain participants to reflect on the differences between what they heard, and their own lives, contexts, and perspectives on the community.

“And [this call] has helped me think about along with what you said, Jane, sort of think about what can I do now? That is outer work as well as inner work. So I appreciate it.” (JDW)

“It just was very rich, to hear more about how these people who were played important roles, just hear how they formulated things, which is different than how I formulate them. And I wouldn't have, I wouldn't have been able, from the place I'm in to guess how they would have formulated things. So and there was something about this setting that was very free of judgment. So their story was just their story. And it's not my story. And a lot of their choices are not my choices, but I didn't feel any sense of needing to make their choices, my choices. So that was a very enriching experience as well.” (RC)

In most of these calls, participants celebrated the contributions that others – particularly long-term volunteers, and other influential participants – had made to the network as a whole, voiced gratitude, and mentioned feeling inspired by their achievements. This happened both in the presence on the call of said contributors, and in their absence.

“It also seems like, at least from my perspective, you [Sarah] really set set [the DA Facebook group] on a good path. So because... you know, it was the ethics that Jem brought about a loving response, but that you moderated in alignment with that, so that, so that it's come forward. So gratitude again.” (SBW)

“I'm more and more seeing [Nenad's] influence through the network. And I think it comes from Nenad, this thing around, 'We do relationships first, and the work arises after that.' It's very much the center of this meeting that he has on a weekly basis with Kat and Sasha. And then the open space has come out of that.” (RC)

“That's the thing we do brilliantly here [in DAF] is the reflecting. And it's because we've been trained by Katie first, to be open to really hearing what we're hearing, rather than filtering it through... filtering it through our own stuff. So we really do hear it. And then we're able to compassionately reflect, so the person gets another perspective.” (RC)

These conversations also led several participants to reflect on the importance of the social learning spaces in DAF that benefited from the presence of these “key enablers,” be it in their own life or in that of others.

“Ah, the Facebook thing really did help me give me a little thread of sanity on which I could cling, because I just thought I was bonkers. And it's like, well, at least there's a bunch of other people that's as bonkers as me. Dear Lord, you know, that's a few years ago. So God bless your heart for doing that.” (SBW)

“I've been reflecting on when I did come into Deep Adaptation, which was fairly early on after the paper, I also was in that place of like, like deep anguish and feeling that I couldn't talk to anybody or even people who maybe agreed with me really didn't want to talk about it. And finding the events like, like Deep Listening, and Death Cafe was amazing. For me, I just was able to move through so many layers of grief, that not only has it helped me with the whole concept of Deep Adaptation it's just helped me feel like more at home, in my skin. And in my life.” (SBW)

Perhaps as a result, several participants mentioned a sense of renewed sense of being part of DAF as a community, and the desire to become more deeply involved.

“I think [the Festival] was a really nice way to get to know some people and to see what's happening and I am very glad to continue participating in things like that in the future and have a bit more of a collaboration going.” (RC)

“I realized that, for me, it really seemed to be about deepening my - deepening my relationships, both both to just the collective, I think more to the collective than to individuals.” (RC)

“I... shared a sense of warmth and community, even though I was never in a live Zoom, in not only knowing there are others around the globe who are looking into this abyss and finding life, but in being able to feel them more in hearing their stories and hearing them interact.” (EM)

For two participants, the Conscious Learning Festival appears to have provided them with a renewed clarity as to how to better integrate the difficult topic of collapse within their lives, while remaining “sane” (see also **Annex 5.2, Story #7**).

“So it'll help that feel a little less bizarre, that the piece that we were just speaking to, about the future, you know, ‘Is it going to be like this? Is it going to be like that? Is it going to be like the other...’ is just a reflection of how life is - even collapse - isn't being talked about? You know, I know, my life is going to end but I've no idea when, I have no idea how. And that's just - that is how that is. And the best, you know, my the best I personally can make of that is to be as present in the minute of life that I've got now. This little sliver that's happening right in this very second. If I can keep myself as often as possible anchor to that, I reckon I'll be all right. And not worry about whether they all lived happily ever after or not. Ah, big breath. Yeah,

yeah. Thank you for letting me put that in my space in my head, if nowhere else.” (SBW)

“In preparing to write my contributions I revisited in myself how I felt when I first read Jem's original paper. I was nervous about doing so, as I'd had such a strong reaction and I wondered if this might happen again. But having the impetus to name and describe my fears to myself (which came indirectly from already watching/ reading to some of the material on the Conscious Learning Blog) led me to realise that I'd been unconsciously assuming that 'collapse' meant only complete obliteration. In having the foundation in myself to re-engage with a collapse scenario, that time, and hearing other's journeys brought, I could look into the abyss again - and indeed it looked back! I now know deeply in my being that as long as there is a flame of loving consciousness in any human being then it is not the end; I know that I will never stop trying.” (EM)

Importantly, our interventions aiming at amplifying and spreading social learning have also, on occasion, been a source of discomfort which may have been counter-productive and deterred individuals from wishing to further engage in DAF social learning spaces.

The first such instance of negative value-creation happened during the Festival webinar which explored the very rich life journey of Jane, a veteran moderator in the DA Facebook group. One participant, during the feedback round at the end of the call, voiced feelings of shame and unworthiness.

“I wish that I had a life like Jane's, but I, my life is very different. And I, it's really hard for me to just sit here and listen. Without playing that inner tape of self criticism, which just goes on and on and on. And it makes me want to disengage. And I have been fighting that impulse, I want to disengage I want to just I mean, every single thing you said has a has an echo in my life of failure. Almost everything. I mean, everything you've done, I have either tried to do and failed, or not even tried to do in the first place.” (JDW)

Thankfully, another call participant (a mental health professional) promptly answered that he, too, often had similar experiences when comparing himself with people who apparently were more successful at living in accordance with their values. His intervention, which included practical advice he had found helpful in engaging with such feelings and appreciation of the first speaker's self-awareness, appeared to be well received by the latter. Nonetheless, this example shows that the process of self-orientation and self-reflection mentioned above, which was a source of positive value-creation for others, appears to have led to a feeling of alienation in this particular instance.

Another example of negative value-creation took place as a result of another webinar. Having watched the recording of that event, one DAF participant who had initially accepted to be featured on another Q&A in the Festival decided to cancel the event immediately, after finding fault with several statements they had heard in the webinar recording that they watched. They expressed a loss of trust in the process they had been invited to take part in, and opined that a portion of the webinar recording should be deleted. After consulting the speaker featured in that webinar, as well as several DAF Core Team members and volunteers, Wendy and I decided not to do so. For a few weeks, this episode led to difficult tensions between this person and us.

This was a reminder to me that due care should be exercised when convening and facilitating public-facing events, particularly when such conversations are being recorded and shared online. While conveners and participants may feel secure in their good intentions, it is always possible that careless statements will be voiced that may be unintentionally harmful to persons or groups beyond the temporary social learning space that is being convened – particularly in the context of an increasingly fraught, polarised, and oppressive political landscape worldwide.

Notwithstanding these two instances of negative impact we are aware of, overall, the feedback we have received seems to show that through the Conscious Learning Festival, we in the RT have at least partially met our first aspiration.

### ***Improved functionality and interactions***

Our second aspiration was about facilitating “additional/improved functionality and interactions within DAF, relevant to people facing collapse, so that people chose to participate more in the forum.”

An important way in which we have been hoping to accomplish this has been through the Conscious Learning Blog, which is a platform on which anyone can create an account and publish content related to one’s journey of learning about Deep Adaptation and DAF (see Section 1.2)<sup>98</sup>. Unfortunately, although a dozen user accounts have been created on the Blog, and over 60 posts have been published so far (May 2022), at the time of writing nearly every single one of these posts had been created and published by

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<sup>98</sup> Interested parties are also invited to share by email the content they wish to publish with the RT, if they prefer not to create an account.

me – although 15 are attributed to various authors, as content created or co-created by other DAF participants.

Therefore, while the Blog – as the only platform in DAF that is explicitly dedicated to learning and research – has arguably brought additional functionality to DAF, it does not seem to have fostered more participation. This is confirmed by the low number of comments on the published content (20 comments from 5 users in total).

Interestingly, according to the statistics compiled on the server that hosts the Blog, the platform seems to have drawn on average 906 unique visitors per month during the period of the Conscious Learning Festival (July-October 2021), compared to an average of 318 unique visitors per month since then (November 2021 to April 2022). This seems to indicate that the Festival drew readers to the blog. However, while more readers were drawn in the first period, they only read 5.2 pages per visit on average, compared to 7.5 pages per visit during the second period. This may suggest that an increasing number of readers with a deeper interest in the Blog's content have been visiting it since November 2021. However, in the absence of more comments or other forms of qualitative feedback, it is difficult to assess how much value has been generated by the Conscious Learning Blog.

The Conscious Learning Festival also included an invitation for DAF participants to host their own webinars, under the Festival's banner, as social learning spaces useful to the whole network. As a result of their participation in the Festival's opening call, two DAF volunteers decided to host workshops on the topic of the "4 Rs" of Deep Adaptation. They initiated a total of 7 online group conversations between July and September 2021. One of these event conveners drew a number of substantive and procedural insights from the process, which he documented in detail and shared with us in the Festival's closing call (see **Annex 5.2, Story #8**); this led him to devise a new event format to enable in-depth conversations, which he shared within DAF, and later, to start a new YouTube channel (see below). The other convener recorded her workshop, and shared it on the Conscious Learning Blog<sup>99</sup>.

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99 <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/2021/09/10/call-recording-4rs-workshop-with-da-facilitators-and-volunteers/>



The collaboration, interactions, learning assets and social learning spaces that emerged as a result of these calls are therefore direct – and encouraging – results of the Conscious Learning Festival.

### ***Learning citizenship***

Our third aspiration, in terms of the impacts of our interventions in DAF, had to do with “fostering learning citizenship in DAF, and inviting people to join a ‘learning citizens’ group.”

Learning citizenship refers to the ethical dimension of social learning, which comes to the fore once a participant in a social learning space gains awareness of the local and systemic effects of their participation – which may, for example, affect the learning capability of a whole landscape of social learning spaces (Wenger, 2009). As Etienne and Bev Wenger-Trayner explained to me, a learning citizen “feel[s] an accountability to the quality of learning” that happens in the social learning spaces they are involved in, and recognises their own identity – as the embodiment of a trajectory of learning through a landscape of practice – as a “learning lever” which can trigger new kinds of learning in these spaces (Wenger-Trayner, Wenger-Trayner and Cavé, 2021).

Upon launching the Conscious Learning Festival, Wendy and I invited to our events the 28 DAF participants whom we had interviewed at the time. Although these events were also open to anyone in the network, and broadly advertised, we were curious to see whether being invited to take active part in the webinars and the other activities we organised might encourage a group of “learning citizens” to emerge. We found that of the 26 persons who attended at least one of the 6 online events we hosted, 18 were interviewees; of these, 12 attended at least two events, 6 attended 3 events or more, and 3 of them attended 5 or 6 events.

Besides, 5 of the 6 most involved participants attended the Festival’s closing call, which was a conversation aiming at reflecting on the whole Festival, and drawing lessons from it. Unprompted by Wendy or myself, several attendees on the call mentioned they would welcome the Festival becoming a yearly event in DAF, as an important occasion for collective reflection and a renewed sense of community.

“Because of our intentions about how Deep Adaptation forum will grow over time, because of this aspiration to have a non-centralized, you know, a

completely decentralized, emergent system; there is real power in repeating this exercise every year.” (RC)

“And taking that time to invite stories of personal learning and personal journeys. It's, it's a reflection of the history of where did this begin? And how did we start, and what happened? And so... it's like storytelling around the fire in a tribal context, right? Everyone stops, they sit down, they listen to the stories, and that somehow, there's magic in that moment of hearing the stories. People are re-inspired, they're reinvigorated, they are reassured, they feel a sense of commitment and connection that can be missing in the business of, of the day-to-day. So I just wanted to speak to that. I think that there's a very intimate and personal part of this for me that actually as an organism, as a community as a network, however you think about the DAF ecosystem, it has power. In that context. It's something that can bring people together around the shared stories and the shared experiences and I would love to see it repeated!” (RC)

“I also was going to suggest that this is something that needs to happen regularly, and I assume that you won't be writing more dissertations after this one, so we do need to find ways to do the recording because we all have to learn somehow from this process and from each other's stories so thank you all so much!” (RC)

Therefore, although the Conscious Learning Festival events did not draw as many participants as I would have hoped, a small core of regular attendees did form who attended most webinars, acknowledged the importance of fostering collective reflection within the network, and expressed a collective wish to engage in more social-learning focused activities in the future. To me, these are signs indicating the emergence of a group of “learning citizens” in DAF as a result of the Festival – although the extent to which this interest in social learning, for these participants, has come primarily a result of the Festival, remains to be further clarified; and the extent to which this interest is long-lasting – not to mention, become a part of one’s self-identity – would also need to be confirmed, for example by considering these participants’ involvement in the next edition of the Festival.

Another indicator which may speak to the emergence of learning citizenship is that besides recognising the importance of social learning, this core group of participants also expressed a strong willingness to actively reflect on the conditions, containers and forms of leadership that may enable social learning within the network – particularly during the Festival’s closing call (see **Section 3.1.11**). This willingness to consider how to better foster social learning throughout the landscape of DAF may speak to a sense of

accountability with regards to the social learning spaces they are part of, which is a hallmark of learning citizenship.

Finally, as a result of the Festival, several types of brokering took place between DAF and other landscapes of practice. According to Wenger (2009), brokering is a form of learning citizenship that involves “importing or exporting significant insights or challenges across the boundaries between spaces,” and which “thickens the weave of a social learning system” and may foster innovation (p.7). As I will further discuss in Section 3.2 (see also **Annex 5.2, Stories #7 and #8**), in follow-up conversations, two of the Festival’s six most actively involved participants expressed a clear logical continuity between their experience of the Festival, and subsequent initiatives they undertook that constitute clear examples of “brokering” between DAF and other landscapes of practice: one of them wrote an article for a major news outlet on Deep Adaptation, among other activities, while the other started a new YouTube channel on the topic of collapse.

Another instance of brokering happened when Christian S. Tröndle invited us to convene, together with him, a Festival webinar focused on his recent Master’s research on Deep Adaptation, but also featuring several of his colleagues from the Berlin-based Camp Collapse interdisciplinary group<sup>100</sup>. The conversation enabled new interpersonal connections to form and stories of practice to be shared between participants in DAF and Camp Collapse.

### 3.1.7 Enabling value: What has made it all possible for us?

Table 30: Enabling value - Consolidated indicators and data sources (RT)

Aspirations	Ref.	Indicators of value-creation	Data sources
“Let’s introduce into DAF certain formats and processes enabling more conscious learning to crystallise.”	E7	We connect regularly to reflect and share our thoughts on how we are doing with respect to our goals, and what we have been learning	Personal observations
“Let’s convene social-learning-focused online events.”	E8	We convene online learning-focused events, and they are well-attended	
“Let’s create more public research-dedicated spaces in the forum (including a new platform).”			

100 <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/2021/10/01/call-recording-qa-with-chris-trondle/>

<p><i>“Let’s inspire more people to join the research effort and design strategies to amplify the learning.”</i></p> <p><i>“Let’s foster learning citizenship in DAF.”</i></p> <p><i>“Let’s have in-depth conversations with interviewees as regards their ‘gift questions’, a few months from now”</i></p> <p><i>“Let’s make personal transformative change more visible in the network”</i></p> <p><i>“Let’s put together a public database of value-creation stories that may help people situate themselves in the landscape of change and learning”</i></p> <p><i>“Let’s record what others have found to be transformative information/resources”</i></p>	<b>E9</b>	A new platform and other research-dedicated spaces are created in the forum	
	<b>E10</b>	Others join us to reflect on how to amplify and deepen social learning in DAF	
	<b>E11</b>	We embrace the diversity of experiences and perspectives that people bring to social learning	

When considering processes that have enabled us in the RT to carry out our interventions and reflect on them, the importance of maintaining steady communication between us has obviously been critical. Wendy and I did so through ongoing instant messaging and emails, through various channels, but also by means of (mostly) biweekly online calls. This is also what enabled us to carry out our research framing exercise (see **Annex 5.6**), as well as the evaluation exercise which is summarised in this section.

Thanks to our regular communication, we were able to plan and carry out activities such as the Conscious Learning Festival. The Festival was the occasion to introduce a new Action-Research event format within DAF, by inviting participants in a group call to dedicate the last 30 minutes of this call to reflecting on any new insights that emerged for them during the previous hour – which fulfilled our two first aspirations of “introducing into DAF certain formats and processes enabling more conscious learning to crystallise” and “convening social-learning-focused online events.” Inviting other DAF participants to organise their own learning-oriented webinars and events under a common banner was also relatively novel within the context of DAF<sup>101</sup>. The online events convened by us and others as part of the Festival have been fairly well attended,

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101 Participants in the DAF “DA Facilitators” community of practice regularly host their own online events using common processes, practices and terminology, but these are not focused on social learning.

with a number of participants (not including us) ranging between 5 and 14 people (average: 11), which is on a par with most online events organised in DAF.

The Conscious Learning Blog, while it has not generated as much activity as we hoped for (see previous section), still constitutes DAF's only research- and learning-dedicated platform at present. We have helped to initiate social learning spaces that have come to play an important role in the life of certain groups in DAF, such as the D&D monthly learning circle; we have also formed temporary social learning spaces enabling others to make a difference – for example, one of us helped a DAF participant to produce a video documenting the use of “circling” as a process, which was then shared in other spaces.

An important aspiration that we have mostly failed to fulfil has to do with inspiring other DAF participants to join the RT, and co-design the research process (or at least, discrete interventions) with us. Although several people responded proactively to this invitation during the opening call of the Conscious Learning Festival, we did not succeed to build on this momentum, and interest rapidly receded. Nonetheless, two of these call participants did host workshops as part of the Festival, which constituted very valuable contributions to our effort.

Besides, as previously noted, a group of learning citizens seems to have formed during the Festival webinars we organised, and expressed a keen interest in reflecting on how to better amplify the social learning taking place within DAF. Given the importance of learning citizenship as a factor of a social systems' social learning capability (Wenger, 2009), such signs of emergent learning citizenship are encouraging indicators of positive enabling value-creation taking place thanks to our research project.

Finally, in reflecting more broadly on the ways in which we enabled social social learning to occur – both within the RT and beyond – it occurred to us that maintaining an open and receptive stance towards the various forms of learning and the diversity of aspirations manifested by DAF participants has likely been critical. For example, in regular conversations with another participant around their new initiatives, one of us has been providing feedback that was very positively received by the other party in shaping their project and becoming better able to make the difference they were seeking. Similarly, we have been providing support to several people and groups within DAF whose intentions were as varied as writing manifestos, setting up arts-focused

discussion groups, or exploring forms of indigenous knowledge as pathways for decolonisation.

This acceptance and inclusiveness when approaching the diverse forms of value-creation within DAF have likely also enabled us to remain sensitive to many aspects of social learning worth investigating as part of our research, and perhaps even to become better learning citizens as we strove to be accountable to DAF as a community in all its diversity.

### 3.1.8 Strategic value: What has been the quality of our engagement with strategic stakeholders?

Table 31: Strategic value - Consolidated indicators and data sources (RT)

Aspirations	Ref.	Indicators of value-creation	Data sources
<p><i>“Let’s gain a clearer understanding of what groups/areas/activities in DAF seem to be generating the deepest learning, to gain better insights”</i></p> <p><i>“Let’s invite other social learning researchers to an online event in DAF”</i></p>	S3	We are starting to have an idea of which groups/areas/activities generate the deepest learning in DAF	Personal observations
<p><i>“Let’s connect with people who left the network (or appear to have done so)”</i></p> <p><i>“Let’s make sure the whole network is informed about other networks or communities benefiting from DA awareness as a valid perspective to consider collapse”</i></p>	S4	We are able to meaningfully connect with people who left DAF and understand the reasons they left	

The research conversations we have had with several dozen DAF participants have certainly been useful to us, from the point of view of strategic value-creation, in order to gain a clearer sense of certain areas of the network (and forms of engagement within) which seem to have been most conducive to profound personal and collective changes taking place. These insights will be discussed in **Section 4**.

Of course, such a statement should be qualified by pointing out that we haven’t had the possibility of continuously monitoring the social learning taking place in every single social learning space within DAF, which would be impossible for such a small team as

ours. At the most, our conversations with a variety of stakeholders, coupled with the results of the surveys we shared in the network, have enabled us to capture glimpses of important personal changes taking place thanks in part to certain groups.

Another category of strategic stakeholders we aspired to connect with and hear from have been DAF participants who disengaged from the network. Indeed, it seemed equally critical to us that we not only better understand what factors appear to have encouraged meaningful change to happen for DAF participants, but also what other factors can account for such changes not happening. As part of this aspiration, we were able to initiate research conversations with nine persons who have disengaged from DAF for various reasons. Some of them stopped interacting with DAF social learning spaces altogether, while some merely retreated to more peripheral forms of involvement.

Our conversations with these stakeholders have proved useful for us to start better understanding what made them – and potentially, others – reduce their involvement in DAF. However, as with the previous indicator, due caution should be exercised in generalising from these examples, due to the small size of the sample. Besides, as social learning spaces in DAF tend to be voluntary, spontaneous and informal, it is often difficult to identify the act of “disengaging” with much confidence. Nonetheless, these conversations have yielded us with some food for thought, particularly when triangulated with responses we received to a questionnaire sent to everyone who clearly disengaged from a particular DAF platform (i.e. members of the Professions’ Network who chose to delete their account). I summarise these insights in **Chapter 5, Section 3.2**.

### 3.1.9 Orienting value: How and where have we been locating ourselves in the broader landscape?

*Table 32: Orienting value - Consolidated indicators and data sources (RT)*

Aspirations	Ref.	Indicators of value-creation	Data sources
<i>“Let’s have in-depth conversations with interviewees as regards their ‘gift questions’, a few months from now”</i>	O3	We learn about social learning evaluation projects taking place in other contexts, and gain inspiration from them	Personal observations

<p><i>“Let’s make personal transformative change more visible in the network”</i></p> <p><i>“Let’s put together a public database of value-creation stories that may help people situate themselves in the landscape of change and learning”</i></p> <p><i>“Let’s record what others have found to be transformative information/resources”</i></p>			
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Table 32 displays four main aspirations that emerged as part of the RT’s framing exercise (see the beginning of this section), between May and October 2021. We discovered only much later that they did not constitute a very good match for the category of orienting value-creation: indeed, they can be read as translating an aspiration, on our behalf, to better *help others orient themselves* within DAF and beyond. In other words, were we to meet these aspirations, orienting value would be produced for others. However, as orienting aspirations voiced within the framing process are about the production of value for us (the RT), as part of our involvement in this social learning space, the aspirations in Table 11 can be more usefully read as concerning the production of enabling value by our circle (as they are about enabling others to orient themselves). Therefore, I copied these statements into Table 30, above.

The orienting value-creation cycle has not been a strong focus for the RT in this research project. Nonetheless, in reflecting on the outcomes of this project, we found that some orienting value-creation was produced for us through our interactions with participants in another social learning space of “systems conveners”: the Camp Collapse group, including researcher Christian S. Tröndle.

Christian’s MA research (Tröndle, 2021) is an anthropology project dedicated to investigating the topic of Deep Adaptation. As a project initiated from a participatory stance, it has involved the in-depth participation from several members of the Berlin-based Camp Collapse collective. As Christian explained in the Festival Q&A event which was dedicated to their work<sup>102</sup>, this collective is dedicated to raising awareness around the climate crisis by means of workshops, performances, installations, games and storytelling. In other words, Camp Collapse is about convening social learning

102 <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/2021/10/01/call-recording-qa-with-chris-trondle/>



spaces focused on the topics that are at the heart of Deep Adaptation. Besides, Christian’s research was focused in large part on exploring “personal stories of how people came to Deep Adaptation” (p.5). As such, his project bears many similarities to ours.

Although it is difficult to assess the extent to which our encounter with Christian and Camp Collapse may have influenced our own project, the research conversations and the webinar that took place, as well as reading Christian’s MA thesis, were certainly helpful for us to better understand commonalities and differences between our respective methodologies and approaches – both in terms of academic research, and of convening social learning spaces – thus allowing for the creation of useful orienting value for the RT.

### 2.2.1.10 Transformative value: What have been some broader or deeper individual and collective effects of our activities?

Table 33: Transformative value - Consolidated indicators and data sources (RT)

Aspirations	Ref.	Indicators of value-creation	Data sources
<p>“Let’s bring about deep, life-changing experiences in DAF participants”</p> <p>“Let’s figure out ways to spread these forms of transformative changes to other networks”</p> <p>“Let’s make it OK to be engaging with the topics of death and collapse publicly”</p>	T4	Others report having life-changing experiences/insights thanks to our research	Personal observations

The transformative value-creation cycle was not an area of strong focus for us in the RT – if only because it seemed unlikely that a part-time, two-person research team may be able to bring about particularly deep or broad effects on others, during a period of merely a few months.

Nonetheless, it does appear that our project, and in particular one of our interventions – the Conscious Learning Festival – may have had an especially generative impact on one of the Festival participants (see **Annex 5.2, Story #7**). This person was one of the more

actively involved participants; at the end of this series of events, they shared with us how their experience of the Festival had been helpful to them:

“[Thanks to the Festival] I was able to experience a sense of deep connection and fellowship with other participants, who were all complete strangers. I found regular spaces in which to acknowledge my painful feelings related to our predicament, and feel understood. Being in these spaces also made me realise that in spite of the dire situation, I was alive! For example, I was very inspired by Jane Dwinell’s Q&A, during which she described building tiny houses on her land, and helping refugees in Lesbos. This pulled me out of my sense of helplessness and hopelessness, and prompted me to reflect deeply on what kind of generative action I might do with my own life.”

As a result, several interesting developments happened for this person as a result of their involvement: they wrote an article on Deep Adaptation for a mainstream news outlet; added a module on Deep Adaptation to the university syllabus they are teaching; decided to convene climate cafés for the students taking the new module; started working on an online course touching on these topics; and have begun writing a book chapter incorporating the themes of Deep Adaptation into their area of academic specialisation.

They concluded their testimony with these words:

“I feel quite keen to crack on with these endeavours. Knowing that I am not alone in this mindset and intention helps me to keep going. I’m done with leaving emotions like terror, guilt, or shame, are in my driving seat. It’s fine for them to be in the car, but I’d rather they be passengers. I think cautious optimism may now be in the driving seat – optimism about the beautiful aspects of humanity, and the desire to embody these qualities and fight for them.”

It therefore appears that for at least one person, the Conscious Learning Festival was an important occasion for coming to terms with their painful emotions, and finding a renewed motivation to take generative action without obliterating these emotions. As mentioned in this testimony, a sense of deep connection and fellowship with other people experiencing similar feelings, as well as occasions to learn about inspirational role models in the network, seem to have played an important role in facilitating this personal change.

### 3.1.11 Integrative theme: What factors seem to best enable social learning in DAF?

I will conclude this section on Effect Data with a summary of some insights that have emerged in the course of this research on the question of the factors that appear most conducive to facilitate social learning in the context of DAF. These comments were voiced by DAF participants themselves in the course of the various research conversations and webinars convened by the RT, and particularly during the concluding call of the Conscious Learning Festival.

A recurring theme was that of the importance for social learning spaces to provide a measure of *psychological safety* in order for social learning to take place. That is because it makes it easier for people to dare to make mistakes. In this regard, the importance of a *sense of community* was also mentioned as being helpful to support that sense of safety.

“It’s useful to... be in such a safe space where everybody is doing their very best to meet every point of view with love. That allows us to make mistakes, because somebody else will come in and make mistakes, and when you make a mistake, and somebody else will come in and kind of back you up and fill in what needs to get filled in and has a different idea. ... We learn so much more in safe spaces because we’re not geared up to be frightened... An awful lot of [the learning] is just being in the presence. It takes longer sometimes, but... But yeah, it allows you to practice again, in a community where you know that if you make a mistake, and, you know, step on somebody’s toes accidentally, people will forgive you, and you will learn how not to step on people’s toes and when the right time to do things is and just by example.” (RC)

Several participants also commented on how *the presence of mentors or elders*, within DAF as a community, had benefited their learning and was an important factor in their deciding to engage in DAF.

“And there were some people who whether consciously or not then functioned as models and mentors... Actually, probably most people here [on this call]. And... I think that my, for me, that’s one of the values in [DAF] is it attracts people that that I admire. There’s something about this topic [of Deep Adaptation] that attracts people that have qualities that I really admire. And and then we we get to share those so maybe some people learn from me, but then I learned from them things that I might not have known how to do myself.” (SBW)

*Being prompted to reflect on one's own learning*, as the Festival aimed to invite participants to do, was also regarded as a rare and useful occasion to develop more awareness and clarity on one's learning journey. Several comments also stressed the usefulness of being able to do so in a *dialogical format*, by explicitly considering any participant as both a teacher and a learner able to share their experience and choices with others.

"I could never have imagined what my journey would have been like. And I suspect that had you not invited ... this extended period of reflection, I never would have considered that journey, I would have just kept cutting the trees, to put the shoes on the children and the food on the table. And so that extended period of pause is really powerful to invite people to bring their attention to just what their personal learning, learning journeys have been."  
(RC)

*"What the Conscious Learning Festival has done, and what the conversations that David has hosted have done, is to demystify that, to decolonise that - it's not one expert imparting all of their wisdom and telling everybody the answers. It's learning through dialogue and explore and exploration with others."* (RC)

Conversations we hosted during the Festival also touched on the particular *challenges that come from social learning taking place online*. In this respect, several comments mentioned features of dominant social media – platforms such as Facebook or Twitter – that constitute obstacles to social learning, and to developing deeper forms of relatedness such as those encouraged in DAF.

"What we are trying to implement [with the new DAF platform] ... goes against the trends of social media, which is to, right, just enable those sound bytes of information and to polarize people so that they keep, you know, being placed in this camp or placing themselves in this camp or that or that camp, not hearing the other side, and and drifting further and further apart. And I think this is how we are being trained, all of us users of social media."  
(RC)

The theme that reoccurred in nearly every reflective conversation during the Festival was that of *stories as powerful vehicles for personal and collective learning*. This is not altogether surprising, considering that the Festival was largely structured around events during which individuals were invited to share with others what their personal experience of learning had been, around the topics of collapse-awareness and Deep Adaptation.

“I’ve become more and more convinced stories are like where it’s at because people... they’re graspable, but they need to be story-like, there are elements of stories that are different than other kinds of information, beginning / middle / end, progression, a challenge, a down point, meet the challenge, and move on. That’s what drama is, and I think we need to use that to frame our enterprise [of Deep Adaptation].” (RC)

Besides discussing the usefulness of stories of personal experience, our conversations occasionally also broached the wider topic of *developing more conscious awareness of collective narratives as encapsulating particular worldviews and values*, be they counter-cultural or in service of dominant ideologies. For example, a webinar participant referred to Ursula K. Le Guin’s essay “The Carrier Bag of Fiction” (1986), which discusses the place of the (often male, and aggressive) hero in narratives, as compared to more feminist orientations.

Stories can also function as means of *passing down socio-cultural elements of that are deemed worthy of being carried forward*. For instance, a Festival participant quoted Chief Chevez, from the Lenca people of El Salvador, according to whom stories could provide vital help to a people and culture to sustain itself and pass through periods of societal collapse<sup>103</sup>.

As regards learners’ qualities and behaviours that tend to be conducive to deeper personal and collective learning, the importance of *remaining curious and open to exploring the unknown* was a topic that emerged on several occasions.

“There’s this liquid state... which is really the calling into something we don’t know, that we don’t know, we just have a feeling that this is the place to lean into. It’s the place that we’ve been trained all our lives to avoid. It’s the uncertainty, it’s the mystery. It’s the terrifying unknown. And each, each of you in your own way... There’s a way in which each of you... it seems like you’ve got your own version of a liquid state that you’re describing.” (CTW)

On one occasion, a Festival participant who is a university lecturer mentioned their disappointment at how few of their students were genuinely keen to learn, and even more so, how few of their colleagues in academia were ready to question the foundations of their own knowledge and worldview, and *be open to unlearning*.

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103 This participant subsequently created a new entry on this topic in the Conscious Learning Blog: <https://consciouslearning.deepadaptation.info/2021/10/15/the-lenca-in-el-salvador-encourage-us-to-share-our-own-valued-stories/>

“Teachers, academics, professors, scholars, we read all the time we learn all the time. We're not unlearning, though. We're just adding stuff on top of stuff on top of stuff. I've seen this many, many times. We, you know, we read a book together, we talk about it, we say, oh, okay, that's interesting. We invite a speaker and that speaker say something mind-boggling. And they say, ‘Oh, wow, this is so great.’ But we don't unlearn what that requires. And so we continue doing what we have always done, even after learning all that.” (LTMAD)

## 3.2 Contribution data: How is the learning space contributing to the value-creation?

I will present here some value-creation stories that may clarify the extent to which the activities taking place within RT, as a social learning space, can be explicitly linked with the creation of value for certain stakeholders.

In this case, two stories (**Annex 5.2, Stories #7 and #8**) display clear causal links between the activities of the RT and personal changes that happened for the speakers. As the only stories that are available to us that speak to some value created thanks to this research project, and as stories originating from stakeholders beyond the social learning space, they only corroborate a very partial array of the overall value-creation that the effect data points to; however, they are still worthy of being explored.

### 3.2.1 Stories and effect data indicators

Examining the value-creation indicators that are referenced in these stories can help us integrate them, as contribution data, with the aforementioned effect data presented in **Section 3.1**.

Table 34 presents a list of all indicators that are referenced by Stories #7 and #8, sorted by decreasing degree of presence (as measured by the number of stories referring to them, and the total number of references).

Table 34: Indicators referenced by Stories #7 and #8

Indicator	Number of references per story		Total number of references	Number of referencing stories
	#7	#8		
<b>R5</b> - Statements mentioning generative changes happening for others beyond the RT	6	10	16	2
<b>R9</b> - New social learning spaces are convened by others as a result of our initiatives	1	8	9	2
<b>R10</b> - New projects or collaborations are initiated by others as a result of our initiatives	4	2	6	2
<b>R8</b> - New public learning assets are created by others as a result of our initiatives	1	4	5	2
<b>R13</b> - Others engage in brokering between DAF and other learning spaces, or between existing learning spaces in DAF, as a result of our initiatives	2	1	3	2
<b>T4</b> - Others report having life-changing experiences/insights thanks to our research	1	0	1	1

First of all, it is important to note that these indicators speak to value-creation taking place from the perspective of the social learning space - in this case, the RT. For example, a new insight happening for the protagonist in one of those stories (as part of a Potential value-creation cycle) corresponds to an achievement for the RT (thus, part of Realised value-creation cycle), when it happens as a result of the RT's activities.

The indicator that is most frequently traversed by these stories is **R5** - "*Statements mentioning generative changes happening for others beyond the RT.*" These generative changes mainly include:

- finding a sense of community with other participants in the Conscious Learning Festival, and feeling encouraged to engage in meaningful new activities as a result (Story #7);
- being inspired by participating in the Festival to experiment with a new meeting format, to facilitate deep conversations around the topic of Deep Adaptation –

and gaining a wealth of substantive and procedural insights in the process, including a better understanding of DAF as a community (Story #8).

As a result of these generative changes, the speakers in these two stories decided to convene new social learning spaces (R9 - “*New social learning spaces are convened by others as a result of our initiatives*”). This includes the group and podcast conversations described in Story #8, as well as the climate cafés envisioned in Story #7.

Besides these new social learning spaces, other new initiatives were undertaken by the speakers (R10 - “*New projects or collaborations are initiated by others as a result of our initiatives*”) – particularly in Story #7, which points to no less than:

- the writing of an article on Deep Adaptation for a mainstream news outlet;
- the creation of a module on Deep Adaptation in a university course;
- the launch of climate cafés for the students on that course;
- the conception of an online course; and
- the writing of a book chapter on topics related to Deep Adaptation.

In the case of Story #8, a new podcast project was born as the next step of a continuous process of inquiry that unfolded through the social learning spaces previously convened.

These social learning spaces and new projects have often led to the creation of freely available media (R8 - “*New public learning assets are created by others as a result of our initiatives*”) – including documents summarising insights from the conversations convened, and the publication of new podcasts, in Story #8; as well as the aforementioned newspaper article in Story #7.

Some of these new projects also constitute clear cases of brokering between social learning spaces within DAF, and with other spaces (R13 - “*Others engage in brokering between DAF and other learning spaces, or between existing learning spaces in DAF, as a result of our initiatives*”). For example, the new module on Deep Adaptation in the university course, and, likely, the new online course on parenting mentioned in Story #7; and the new YouTube podcast, explicitly framed in Story #8 as featuring conversations with “interesting thinkers from the field of collapse-awareness (not just from Deep Adaptation, which is a subset of that field)”.



Finally, Story #7 appears to show an example of Transformational value-creation (T4 - “Others report having life-changing experiences/insights thanks to our research”): as a result of their participation in the Conscious Learning Festival – and in particular, after being inspired by the personal life story featured in one of the Festival events – the speaker reported feeling able to leave terror, guilt and shame in the passenger’s seat, and to give more space to cautious optimism. The story arc shows how this inner change enabled them to undertake a variety of generative new projects as a result.

### **3.2.1 Learning flows and loops**

Stories #7 and #8 were collected from (or co-created with) the speakers at the end of the Conscious Learning Festival. Story #7 was shared with us orally in a voice message (VM), and later more details were provided by email; and Story #8 was composed from the written journaling of the activities described, from a Festival call (RC), and later in a follow-up research conversation.

Due in part to these different creative and narrative processes, and in part to more detailed sharing from one of the speakers, these two stories have different shapes:

- Story #7 shows a much more direct and “streamlined” flow of learning from the beginning to the end (Immediate and Potential cycles lead to Applied and Realised cycles, and eventually a Transformative cycle), while covering many different endeavours;
- Story #8, on the other hand, only focuses on two projects, described in rich detail. The first project forms a first “subplot,” which then flows into a second one, corresponding to the second project.

Both stories constitute cases of learning being “looped” back into the social learning space of the RT, as these speakers proactively shared their learning journeys with us at the end of the Festival. Importantly, such learning loops might not have fully formed had we not convened a final reflection call as part of the Festival (in which much of Story #8 was shared), or asked every participant in our events to share any feedback with us (which is how most of Story #7 was narrated).

The fact that we were only able to gather two value-creation stories from the activities of the RT may indicate that we could have devoted more attention and efforts to

collecting such stories (including from ourselves). It may also be a sign that although effect data was generated, episodes of learning flow taking place as a result have been too few, or have had too little impact, to be recorded.

## *4 Conclusion*

Over the course of this participatory action research project, the RT has taken on a dual role of systems conveners, and open learning assets creators. The first role was accomplished by convening a number of social learning spaces, through our research conversations, our learning circles, and the annual Conscious Learning Festival we hosted. As we collaborated in convening these spaces and reflected on the insights we gathered, we were able to co-create a number of open learning assets together with other participants in DAF - including research reports, videos, and other learning resources.

In carrying out these activities, we pursued three main aspirations. First, that of "amplifying and spreading learning and changes, in individuals and groups within DAF, that may be relevant to radical social change." In this regard, the Conscious Learning Festival calls appear to have been useful to several participants, who gained a deeper understanding of the community, insights into their own involvement within it, and inspiration from others' participation - as can be witnessed from the two value-creation stories we collected. We have much less information about the value participants may have drawn from the various open learning assets we co-created.

Our second goal was "to facilitate additional or improved functionality and interactions within DAF, relevant to people facing collapse, so that people choose to participate more in the forum." We aimed to fulfil this aspiration mainly through the Conscious Learning Blog that we created, and our Conscious Learning calls. Although the new Blog proved useful as a central location in which to publish the new learning assets that originated from our collaboration, little interaction has taken place through it. As for the Conscious Learning Festival, it seems to have facilitated conversations from which participants drew value. In particular, the Festival enabled one participant to innovate by inventing a new meeting format as he convened conversations on this occasion.

However, there is no data indicating that these activities brought about increased participation in DAF.

Our third goal was "to foster learning citizenship in DAF, and invite people to join a 'learning citizens' group." A small group of such committed learners emerged in the course of the first Conscious Learning Festival, and actively reflected on their and others' learning processes, including conditions that seem to facilitate mutual learning. And several of them undertook brokering activities with other learning spaces as a result of the Festival, which is another encouraging sign. Due to enthusiasm for these activities, a second edition of the Conscious Learning Festival was planned for late 2022. Although it has not been possible to include it within our data collection due to time constraints, future research might illuminate the extent to which the group of learning citizens we identified in 2021 remained deeply involved in 2022.

In conclusion, it seems to us that we have partially achieved each of the goals we set out for ourselves as we convened the social learning space of the RT. Most importantly, the deep trust and friendship cultivated between the two of us have enabled us to actively reflect on our own learning processes and those of others, and to co-create a number of rich learning journeys (value-creation stories), which shine a light on many paths of learning and unlearning that DAF participants have followed in the network. These stories, and the reflections they gave rise to with regards to the seeds of change, the enabling soil, and the action of sowers (described in **Chapter 5** of this thesis), are certainly the most precious outcomes of our social learning space.

# Annex 5.6

## RT Research Stream:

### Framing And Reframing Our Aspirations And Uncertainties

*Why are we doing what we're doing?*

*What do we hope to achieve?*

*What are the risks?*

*What assumptions do we base our work on?*

This document is the result of an iterative framing process that took place within the DAF action research team (Wendy Freeman and Dorian Cavé), as a means for us to be more intentional and self-conscious about these questions, and others, as we carried out our research activities.

A first version of this document was produced from May to October 2021. We then revisited it in May 2022, after the end of our data collection phase, to reflect critically on how our assumptions and aspirations evolved over time. Finally, in December 2022, we edited this document to make it fit for publication, as an annex to Dorian's thesis.

#### ***1. Scoping a frame and our own aspirations***

In order to scope a frame of evaluation and identify our aspirations in the learning circle, we used the “working backwards” approach mentioned by Wenger-Trayer and Wenger-Trayner (2020, p.177), starting with Realised value-creation. We did so by considering the initial ground narrative (our view of the situation) for each value-creation cycle, and wrote down our corresponding aspirations (how we wished the situation to evolve).

***What is the change we want to see happening as a result of this research project?  
(Realised value)***

“Through this research project...”

	Initial ground narrative	Aspirations
<i>Realised</i>	... we have generated interest and awareness around this project through our interviews, online event and blog post	<p>... let’s amplify and spread learning/changes, in individuals and groups within DAF, that may be relevant to radical social change</p> <p>... let’s facilitate additional/improved functionality and interactions within DAF, relevant to people facing collapse, so that people chose to participate more in the forum.</p> <p>... let’s foster learning citizenship in DAF, and invite people to join a ‘learning citizens’ group (creating interest in the potential for learning as citizens)</p>

***What practices or new collaborations need to happen for that change to take place? (Applied value)***

“Through this research project...”

	Initial ground narrative	Aspirations
<i>Applied</i>	<p>... we have been sharing value-creation stories with participants for feedback and comments</p> <p>... We have been providing a space to people to clarify their own DA journey, and make their own process more visible (to them and us)</p>	<p>... let’s do some experiments to try and amplify and spread changes that may be relevant to radical social change (transforming flows into loops, etc.)</p> <p>... let’s share our insights in the forum more broadly and frequently to invite constructive feedback and participation</p> <p>... let’s experiment with more public conversations around personal journeys of learning, where the public acknowledging and documenting of people's individual learning creates models and pathways inviting others</p>

***What sorts of insights/tools/methods/connections could we produce that will lead to these changes in practice? (Potential value)***

“Through this research project...”

	Initial ground narrative	Aspirations
<i>Potential</i>	<p>... we have been collecting value-creation stories showing how people have learned in DAF, what is working for them or not</p> <p>... we have been collecting survey results providing extra data and information on the kinds of learning that people are getting out of their participation</p> <p>... We have been using Nextcloud (and other open-source software), Otter.ai...</p>	<p>... let's gain some clarity as regards the forms of social learning that are taking place in DAF, and figure out how these forms may be relevant to radical social change</p> <p>... let's gain an awareness of how these changes happen, and figure out if/how they can be replicated (identifying flows and potential loops, etc.)</p> <p>... let's find out what resources have been most useful for people on their learning journey</p>

***How should we engage with each other to give ourselves a meaningful experience of working together to produce these kinds of resources? (Immediate value)***

“Through this research project...”

	Initial ground narrative	Aspirations
<i>Immediate</i>	<p>... we have been maintaining regular and generative communication, by meeting on a fortnightly basis, sharing insights and documents, and communicating using Nextcloud</p> <p>... We have been following the DA meeting protocols</p>	<p>... let's be clearer as regards the tasks and activities that each of us feels most meaningful and engaging</p> <p>... let's try to meet up and discuss this project in person!</p> <p>... let's remain committed to relationship-building as core to this work</p>

***What are the broader, transformative effects we may hope to bring about? (Transformative value)***

“Through this research project...”

	Initial ground narrative	Aspirations
<i>Transf.</i>	<p>... We have found other people willing to discuss the topic of collapse</p>	<p>... let's bring about deep, life-changing experiences in DAF participants</p> <p>... let's figure out ways to spread these forms of transformative changes to other networks</p> <p>... let's make it OK to be engaging with the topics of death and collapse publicly</p>

***What can we do to help people find their way toward self-transformation?  
(Orienting value)***

“Through this research project...”

	Initial ground narrative	Aspirations
<i>Orienting</i>	<p>... we have begun to put together “gift questions” tailored to each interviewee</p> <p>... We wrote a blog post about this research</p>	<p>... let’s have in-depth conversations with interviewees as regards their “gift questions”, a few months from now</p> <p>... let’s make personal transformative change more visible in the network</p> <p>... let’s put together a public database of value-creation stories that may help people situate themselves in the landscape of change and learning</p> <p>... let’s record what others have found to be transformative information/resources</p>

***What can we do to enable people to better “learn how to learn”?  
(Enabling value)***

“Through this research project...”

	Initial ground narrative	Aspirations
<i>Enabling</i>	<p>... we have started convening online events</p> <p>... We wrote a blog post about this research</p>	<p>... let’s inspire more people to join the research effort and design strategies to amplify the learning</p> <p>... let’s create more public research-dedicated spaces in the forum (including a new platform?)</p> <p>... let’s convene other online events</p> <p>... let’s foster learning citizenship in DAF</p> <p>... let’s introduce in DAF certain formats and processes enabling more conscious learning to crystallise.</p>

***What key stakeholders must we engage with to make this happen?  
(Strategic value)***

“Through this research project...”

	Initial ground narrative	Aspirations
Strategic	... we have been identifying important social learning spaces in the network to decide who to interview (D&D, Core Team, Facilitators, Moderators, Advocates, Task Group Initiators...) ... we have been interviewing volunteers, core team members, and a few regular participants ... we have been spreading questionnaires in the wider membership	... let's gain a clearer understanding of what groups/areas/activities in DAF seem to be generating the deepest learning, to gain better insights ... let's invite other social learning researchers to an online event in DAF ... let's connect with people who left the network (or appear to have done so) ... let's make sure the whole network is informed about other networks or communities benefitting from DA awareness as a valid perspective to consider collapse

Following this stage, we decided that the key value-creation cycles we wished to focus on were: **Potential, Applied, Realised, Enabling, and Orienting** value-creation.

## ***2. Framing our uncertainties***

Then, we moved on to consider the circumstances that might prevent our aspirations from being achieved, or even create an opposite negative effect.

We reflected on:

- **Conditions**, which need to be in place for aspirations to be achieved;
- **Risks**, or negative unintended consequences that may arise, even if aspirations are achieved;
- **Assumptions**, which may lead us to be mistaken as regards our aspirations, the conditions required, and the risks involved.

The following is an attempt at exploring those for the aspirations listed above. Aspirations identified in the previous step appear in the first column of the table.



	Aspirations	Conditions	Risks	Assumptions
<i>Immediate</i>	<p>... let's be clearer as regards the tasks and activities that each of us feels most meaningful and engaging</p> <p>... let's try to meet up and discuss this project in person!</p> <p>... let's remain committed to relationship-building as core to this work</p>	<p>... Good communication</p> <p>... Regular documentation and recording</p> <p>... Common intentions, we're on the same page</p>	<p>... We could spend too much time discussing who should do what</p> <p>... Conflict could happen between us</p> <p>... Not enough time to learn; missing activities</p>	<p>... We think that we are committed to this project</p> <p>... There will be learning (fun, rewarding time...) coming from this collaboration</p> <p>... Meeting up will be helpful to the research</p> <p>... The relationship between us being created by the regular meetings and sharing, enables the action research work, but is also its own reward and provides benefits to all of us</p>
<i>Potential</i>	<p>... let's gain some clarity as regards the forms of social learning that are taking place in DAF, and figure out how these forms may be relevant to radical social change</p> <p>... let's gain an awareness of how these changes happen, and figure out if/how they can be replicated (identifying flows and potential loops, etc.)</p> <p>... let's find out what resources have been most useful for people on their learning journey</p>	<p>... Good relationships with people willing to be interviewed</p> <p>... Time and energy to collect and make sense of the data</p> <p>... We must be open to spotting trends and new possibilities not described in the W&amp;T model - be sensitive to what is changing, and try to capture anything that may not fit existing models</p>	<p>... We could be blinded by our prejudices or leap to conclusions, and thus not reach useful understandings of anything</p> <p>... We could alienate people who we haven't interviewed</p>	<p>... We have the skills and knowledge to make sense of the data we're collecting</p> <p>... Social learning can be tracked and mapped</p>
<i>Applied</i>	<p>... let's do some experiments to try and amplify and spread changes that may be relevant to radical social change (transforming flows into loops, etc.)</p> <p>... let's share our insights in the forum more broadly and frequently to invite constructive feedback and participation</p> <p>... let's experiment with more public conversations around personal journeys of learning, where the public acknowledging and documenting of people's individual learning creates models and pathways inviting others</p>	<p>... No major conflicts happening in the community, which could prevent experiments/sharing to happen</p> <p>... The community will keep going, with available spaces for connection and platforms fostering productive interactions</p>	<p>... Experiments could lead to breaches of confidentiality</p> <p>... Some people could feel triggered by content shared in public conversations</p> <p>... We misinterpret what is working, and push in a direction that doesn't work</p>	<p>... Experiments will yield useful results</p> <p>... There is enough appetite for the topic of social learning in the forum for the project to receive feedback and attention</p>

<i>Realised</i>	<p>... let's amplify and spread learning/changes, in individuals and groups within DAF, that may be relevant to radical social change</p> <p>... let's facilitate additional/improved functionality and interactions within DAF, relevant to people facing collapse, so that people chose to participate more in the forum.</p> <p>... let's foster learning citizenship in DAF, and invite people to join a 'learning citizens' group (creating interest in the potential for learning as citizens)</p>	<p>... The community will keep going, with available spaces for connection and platforms fostering productive interactions</p> <p>...</p>	<p>... The network might grow too much, too fast, thus losing its identity and cohesion</p> <p>... The learning angle might be considered too abstract/academic and reflect poorly on our research/DAF</p>	<p>... There is enough appetite in the topic</p> <p>... Social learning is relevant to radical social change</p>
<i>Enabling</i>	<p>... let's inspire more people to join the research effort and design strategies to amplify the learning</p> <p>... let's create more public research-dedicated spaces in the forum</p> <p>... let's convene other online events</p> <p>... let's introduce in DAF certain formats and processes enabling more conscious learning to crystallise.</p>	<p>... The community will keep going, with available spaces for connection and platforms fostering productive interactions</p>	<p>... Disagreements could break out regarding what type of learning is desirable</p> <p>... Online events could feel unsafe to some people</p>	<p>... Online events and research spaces are useful to people's learning</p>
<i>Strategic</i>	<p>... let's gain a clearer understanding of what groups/areas/activities in DAF seem to be generating the deepest learning, to gain better insights</p> <p>... let's invite other social learning researchers to an online event in DAF</p> <p>... let's connect with people who left the network (or appear to have done so)</p> <p>... let's make sure the whole network is informed about other networks or communities benefiting from DA awareness as a valid perspective to consider collapse</p>	<p>... We have access to strategic stakeholders (e.g. people who left the network)</p> <p>... Other social learning researchers have a favourable impression of our work and of DAF</p>	<p>... Revealing why some people left the network could lead more people to learn about certain issues, and leave</p> <p>... Reputational risks for other researchers, who may not want to be associated with a collapse-aware community</p>	<p>... The people who left the network are willing to be contacted</p>

<i>Orienting</i>	<p>... let's have in-depth conversations with interviewees as regards their "gift questions", a few months from now</p> <p>... let's make personal transformative change more visible in the network</p> <p>... let's put together a public database of value-creation stories that may help people situate themselves in the landscape of change and learning</p> <p>... let's record what others have found to be transformative information/resources</p>	<p>... Access to tools for broadcasting and documenting our findings</p>	<p>... Stories of transformative change could bring about unwelcome attention from suspicious gov't agencies</p> <p>...</p>	<p>... Transformative change is happening in the network</p> <p>... Access to stories of change and resources is useful to people's learning</p>
<i>Transformative</i>	<p>... let's bring about deep, life-changing experiences in DAF participants</p> <p>... let's figure out ways to spread these forms of transformative changes to other networks</p> <p>... let's make it OK to be engaging with the topics of death and collapse publicly</p>	<p>... Other networks are willing to connect and/or be associated with DAF</p>	<p>... we alienate people, who then leave the network</p> <p>... Too much engagement with topics of death and collapse makes people commit self-harm</p>	<p>... It is possible to experience transformative change thanks to DAF</p> <p>... Topics of death and collapse can bring about deep changes in people</p>

### *3. Framing our attention to feedback*

In this third step, we considered the question of how we would know that an aspiration had been achieved – in other words, what effect data indicators would indicate progress, or lack thereof.

Through our iterative cycles of reflection on this question, our lists of indicators kept evolving. The ones listed below are the final ones we agreed to, in our May 2022 review, prior to my writing the full case study presented in **Annex 5.5**. On the same document, each of us also wrote comments, asynchronously, on the value-creation we considered had taken place through our social learning space, on the basis of these indicators. These comments are summarised in the third column below, preceded with a "+" for positive value-creation; "-" for negative value-creation; and "0" for the absence of value-creation.

Value-creation cycles that appear in grey are those we have not considered within our primary scope (see **Section 1** above).

	Aspirations	Indicators	Assessed value-creation
<i>Immediate</i>	<p>... let's be clearer as regards the tasks and activities that each of us feels most meaningful and engaging</p> <p>... let's try to meet up and discuss this project in person!</p> <p>... let's remain committed to relationship-building as core to this work</p> <p>...</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We use a common to-do list to keep track of things</li> <li>• We experience strong mutual trust</li> <li>• We met in person and spent time discussing the project face-to-face</li> <li>• We feel satisfaction as regards the extent of our respective involvement and ownership of this research</li> <li>• We want to continue working on this project together after Oct.2022</li> </ul>	<p>+ We've managed to build trust among us and keep building our relationship through this research – for example by meeting in person!</p> <p>- Our participation in this project has been unequal, due to different availability in terms of time and energy levels, but also due to different degrees of involvement</p>
<i>Potential</i>	<p>... let's gain some clarity as regards the forms of social learning that are taking place in DAF, and figure out how these forms may be relevant to radical social change</p> <p>... let's gain an awareness of how these changes happen, and figure out if/how they can be replicated (identifying flows and potential loops, etc.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We are starting to have an idea of how to answer our main research questions</li> <li>• We can use various ways (including graphs, text, events etc.) to share our research findings</li> <li>• We have created public learning assets</li> <li>• We have become better at noticing moments that indicate a radical change</li> </ul>	<p>+ We have started to identify some important factors that favoured social learning in the D&amp;D circle (and perhaps further afield: role of relationship-building, small teams, etc.)</p> <p>+ The data is clear (e.g. from the CAS survey): change is obvious</p> <p>- What is the level of changed awareness for research subjects? We can't specifically connect collapse "processing" with being in our research - but we did find volunteers process to a deeper level of collapse...</p> <p>+ We are starting to get an idea of some things that have been making people want to leave the network</p>

<p><i>Applied</i></p>	<p>... let's do some experiments to try and amplify and spread changes that may be relevant to radical social change (transforming flows into loops, etc.)</p> <p>... let's share our insights in the forum more broadly and frequently to invite constructive feedback and participation</p> <p>... let's experiment with more public conversations around personal journeys of learning, where the public acknowledging and documenting of people's individual learning creates models and pathways inviting others</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We have undertaken new initiatives as part of our research</li> <li>• We have been gauging the extent to which our initiatives have been successful</li> <li>• We have created a platform enabling others to learn and share their learning</li> <li>• We have convened new social learning spaces in DAF</li> <li>• We embody the Action Research ethos and awareness as much as possible wherever we interact</li> </ul>	<p>+ We have been successful in the D&amp;D circle, and with Conscious learning interviews/blog, which may be the process that led to the DA Academy Circle?</p> <p>+ Feedback we received on the first, last, and D&amp;D meetings (in the Festival) were excellent. Maybe this was a “failure” leading to a change – we might have got the most learning doing a group review (of our own learnings from the whole Festival) than from the individual/presentation sessions?</p> <p>+ We have had success initiating some public events on learning as part of the Festival, thus potentially transforming some flows into loops</p> <p>0 We didn't succeed in our “gift questions” intervention (lack of time/energy?)</p>
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<p><b>Realised</b></p>	<p>... let's amplify and spread learning/changes, in individuals and groups within DAF, that may be relevant to radical collective change</p> <p>... let's facilitate additional/improved functionality and interactions within DAF, relevant to people facing collapse, so that people chose to participate more in the forum.</p> <p>... let's foster learning citizenship in DAF, and invite people to join a 'learning citizens' group (creating interest in the potential for learning as citizens)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Statements mentioning uncomfortable changes or experiences for stakeholders</li> <li>• Statements mentioning generative changes happening for others (e.g. better informed; grateful; deeper commitment to DAF)</li> <li>• New public learning assets are created by others as a result of our initiatives</li> <li>• New social learning spaces are convened by others as a result of our initiatives</li> <li>• New projects or collaborations are initiated by others as a result of our initiatives</li> <li>• A group of regular attendees take part in the learning-focused events we organise and express the wish to go deeper into those conversations</li> <li>• Others engage in brokering between DAF and other learning spaces, or between existing learning spaces in DAF, as a result of our initiatives</li> </ul>	<p>+ Many tools and meetings were set up during our research and different blog posts shared.</p> <p>0/- Did people participate more in the forum thanks to us? Did people take some of the unlearning and leave?</p> <p>+ A few stories from people saying they benefited from our research activities</p> <p>- We generated discomfort in one "influential DAF participant" as a result of our activities</p> <p>0 The Conscious Learning Blog hasn't drawn much attention apparently (few comments, few contributions outside those we actively invited)</p> <p>0 The public conversations we initiated don't seem to have encouraged many other people to do the same</p> <p>0 Nobody saying they joined DAF thanks to what we produced: Not sure our "learning assets" travelled further outside of DAF?</p>
<p><b>Enabling</b></p>	<p>... let's inspire more people to join the research effort and design strategies to amplify the learning</p> <p>... let's create more public research-dedicated spaces in the forum (including a new platform?)</p> <p>... let's convene social-learning-focused online events</p> <p>... let's foster learning citizenship in DAF</p> <p>... let's introduce in DAF certain formats and processes enabling more conscious learning to crystallise.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More people join us to design strategies meant to amplify and deepen the learning</li> <li>• A new platform and other research-dedicated spaces are created in the forum</li> <li>• We convene online events, and they are well-attended</li> <li>• We connect regularly to reflect and share our thoughts on how we are doing with respect to our goals, and what we have been learning</li> <li>• We embrace the diversity of experiences and perspectives that people bring to social learning</li> </ul>	<p>+ Regular audience in the D&amp;D learning circle and at conscious learning calls</p> <p>0 Did people feel enabled enough – did they have the tools, meeting admin, Zoom, event planning skills etc, to setup more similar events, on their own?</p> <p>+ A new blog dedicated to learning now exists in DAF</p> <p>0 Few people actively joined us as co-researchers</p>

Strategic	<p>... let's gain a clearer understanding of what groups/areas/activities in DAF seem to be generating the deepest learning, to gain better insights</p> <p>... let's invite other social learning researchers to an online event in DAF</p> <p>... let's connect with people who left the network (or appear to have done so)</p> <p>... let's make sure the whole network is informed about other networks or communities benefitting from DA awareness as a valid perspective to consider collapse</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We are able to have conversations with interviewees about their gift questions, and they report meaningful insights from these questions</li> <li>• We can state with confidence which groups/areas/activities generate the deepest learning in DAF</li> <li>• An online event with other social learning researchers is organised</li> <li>• We are able to meaningfully connect with people having left DAF and communicate on the reasons they left</li> </ul>	<p>+ We noticed Earth listening has a strong effect. Also, from our D&amp;D circle (and others), that meeting style seems to have an effect on enabling unlearning...</p> <p>does relationship forming lead to the safety to learn? And watching live interviews seemed very popular ?</p> <p>+ We have connected with people who left DAF</p> <p>0 Do we actually know exactly why people left DAF? And was their unlearning "complete"?</p> <p>0 Unsure which groups/areas are generating the deepest learning in DAF</p> <p>0 Little interaction with other social learning researchers</p>
Orienting	<p>... let's have in-depth conversations with interviewees as regards their "gift questions", a few months from now</p> <p>... let's make personal transformative change more visible in the network</p> <p>... let's put together a public database of value-creation stories that may help people situate themselves in the landscape of change and learning</p> <p>... let's record what others have found to be transformative information/resources</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We learn about social learning evaluation projects taking place in other contexts, and gain inspiration from them</li> </ul>	<p>+ We did have some of the gift question calls – and some additional input from emails about the gift questions</p> <p>0 More could have come from gift questions? Perhaps us having more relationship with subjects, so they committed to pay attention to the gift questions? To use them for unlearning – or unpacking learning?</p> <p>+ A database of value-creation stories now exists</p> <p>0 Is the CL blog useful to people?</p> <p>0 Transformative change is not more visible thanks to us?</p>

Transformative	<p>... let's bring about deep, life-changing experiences in DAF participants</p> <p>... let's figure out ways to spread these forms of transformative changes to other networks</p> <p>... let's make it OK to be engaging with the topics of death and collapse publicly</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People report having life-changing experiences/insights thanks to our research</li> <li>• We develop a set of guidelines/methodologies on transformative change that is shared within other networks</li> <li>• People engage publicly with the topics of death and collapse in other networks/spaces, and refer to our research in doing so</li> </ul>	<p>+ One report of a possibly life-changing experience occurring thanks to our research</p> <p>0 We did not progress to a “guidelines/methodologies” level – not from lack of attention (is this even possible?).</p> <p>0 We haven't influenced other networks/spaces yet</p>
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## 4. What we had missed

In May 2022, we also reconsidered the list of aspirations, conditions, risks, and assumptions that we had laid out previous (Sections 1 and 2), to reflect on what we had missed.

Firstly, we found that even though we did foresee the risk of our public events being a source of discomfort for some participants (or non-participants), this still happened unexpectedly on one occasion (see **Annex 5.5, Section 3.1.6**). This showed that we could have exercised more caution in managing this risk.

Secondly, in launching our initiatives, we seem to have overestimated our own capacity to carry out the various ideas we had in mind (e.g. the “gift questions” project).

Thirdly, we also realised that the aspirations we formulated for the Orienting cycle were not, in fact, reflective of “Orienting value-creation” as defined in the Wenger-Trayner theory of social learning. Therefore, in writing up the case study analysis, I moved these aspirations into the “Enabling” category (**Annex 5.5, Section 3.1.7**).



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