

FOCUSING, CREATIVITY, AND PERSON-CENTERED DEMOCRACY IN GROUP SETTINGS

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Can a professional conference be truly stimulating of creativity and collaboration for all the participants? Or is it just a place for presenters to showcase already completed work? When we were organizing the workshop/conference Meeting at the Edge: Focusing in the Body-centered Professions that took place on the island of Ischia, Italy in May 2007, we asked ourselves this question. What I want to share with you is something of the *process-structure* that we used because it can be applied to other professional meetings and group contexts.

What do I mean by *process-structure*? I call process-structure a framework that helps structure interactions during a meeting, a conference, or a gathering. A process-structure directs our attention to ways of generating and processing information: like Focusing itself the emphasis is not on content, but on process. In formulating the process-structure for our professional meeting at Ischia we asked: what kind of process(es) can best facilitate not only the presentation of projects and ideas already well-established, but the very creation of new possibilities generated by meeting with other professionals?

Before you go on reading, you may want to think about the last professional conference you attended, and the kind of formats that were available for presentations and sharing.

In particular I would like you to notice: where there processing modes that fostered the collaborative birthing of new ideas and projects, and not simply the presentation of well-rehearsed and polished projects?

Most professional gatherings are organized around content and leave little creativity for process-structure. Professional conferences also tend to foster our caution in presenting new ideas: we privilege what we know well and what we have tested with our experience, knowing that our reputation is at stake and a solid knowing "needs" to be upheld. Often it is only well-recognized celebrities in the profession who can afford the risk of presenting their work-in-process--the edge of their knowing, the exciting new hints and ideas that they are nurturing.

We as a community of Focusers have developed the ability to follow the edge of our knowing, to let it emerge in the actual moment and be responsive to our living: we have learned to support a subtle process of explicating that which is still incipient, tentative at first, still forming, and still vulnerable to overwriting by stronger impulses and habits. Recognizing the power of the Focusing process and of Focusing partnership for protecting this incipient process of creation and explication can help us make room for Focusing in larger meetings and gatherings. An understanding of the creative/creating process involved in any project can further help us see the place of

Focusing in professional gatherings. Below I present what I consider essential phases in the realization of any project, and the ways in which our use or understanding of the Focusing process can help us in choosing process-structures that best support such phases.

Incubation: in this phase a person wants to work on something, wants to find her/his own place in a larger project or an individual project. S/he does not know yet what this project is/will be, and wants to find out. A definite yet vague urge to begin is there, and one needs to make room for this urge to unfold and find its own.

This phase of the creative process is best supported by Focusing partnerships. As Focusers we have learned to recognize and nurture a place of beginning that is characterized by an exacting openness. Exacting because it demands precisely its fulfillment, even while we are not yet clear of what that fulfillment will be. We inhabit a productive unwillingness that refuses to settle for the obvious or the habitual, undoing or rejecting the known so that we can follow the unknown. The known is not abandoned; rather it is suspended, so that something other can emerge.

Home Groups are also a good format that has become part of our Focusing tradition and that is well suited for this phase of the process and can be particularly helpful in large professional/group settings where Focusing is not a well-developed practice. In a Home Group a facilitator is available to help the forming of Focusing partnerships and further support small group sharing afterwards. Depending on the Focusing skills of the group, the facilitator may teach a bit of Focusing to enable the incubating exchange in Focusing partnerships, as well as be available for one-to-one sessions for those needing the extra support.

Exploration: in this phase of the creative process, a person already has a vision of what s/he want to do, and now s/he needs support in trying it out. This need for exploring is particularly felt in the humanistic professions where we do not work in laboratories to conduct strict tests and experiments. Rather we work with free-living people and part of our experiments is the setting up of particular situations of learning and experiencing. The collaboration of colleagues in the testing of our techniques and vision is particularly important to our professional growth.

During an exploration, the facilitator presents a proposal for something s/he will direct, albeit in an explorative manner. Participants understand that they are active agents in the exploration and agree to give gentle feedback.

If you are familiar with Thinking at the Edge you may think of this phase as “collecting of instances,” only here we are “creating instances.” By instances we mean situations that help us connect our knowing to a lived context, so that we can express our wisdom by finding the more that is always implicit in our living. Linking our thinking and creativity to real life situations not only keeps us humble and honest, but it helps us assure that our experiments will be meaningful to real people rather than “behave” well in laboratories or computer models but fail to help living individuals or groups.

In the exploration phase of a project we set up the conditions for our experiment--we literally create that from which we can learn. In the creating of the event we have specific questions in mind, and we look to the responsiveness of the group to build our knowing one step at the time. It is therefore important that the explorative phase allows plenty of time for participants' feedback. Participants can help us understand if the procedures and the variables we set up in our experiment lead us to the outcomes we were expecting, or they can give us hints to where such processes may lead.

The best format for explorations is a workshop led by the facilitator of the experiment with a group as large or as small as needed for the experiment.

Presentation: in this phase of the creative process, a person has a clear vision and a solid knowing of what s/he will present, perhaps offering it as a gift, seeking to materialize the effects of her/his creation into the social world.

We are used to sharing at this stage of project development, yet even at this stage we can make room for the creative influences of participants and for what Gendlin calls "crossing": the individualized fertilization that always happens when learning/meaning/understanding passes from one entity (person/group) to another. When the learning/meaning/understanding is genuinely felt, there is always something new that is occurring because each life/person is different from all the others, and so the making sense that is taking place in that life/person intrinsically means something new. What richness to be able to honor and discover these subtle differences! Too often presentations in professional settings are intended to foster the reputation of the presenter rather than to harness this invaluable creative fall-out that is part of sharing and transmission. Gendlin's Philosophy of the Implicit helps us not to by-pass this creative difference. The Focusing process has gifted us with the habit of making a huge space for the smallest of differences and the knowing that these subtle differentiating processes, when nurtured and honored, are the roots of change. So as Focusers we have the potential of helping in safe-guarding a space for this kind of processing right in the mist of presentations, if we can communicate the preciousness of cross-fertilization and cycle back the creative process to new incubations. The best format for this kind of process is a workshop led by the presenter.

In Ischia we called for participants to be willing to create our event together starting from a felt excitement and inspiration in the meeting of our energies and the beautiful environment of our temporary home in the island. Thus we did not produce a program ahead of time, but we let the content of the program develop from the process-structure we offered to participants. We offered a two-way entrance into the cycle of Incubation-Exploration-Presentation by using not only Focusing partnerships and Home Groups throughout the meeting (as safe incubators for each participant's vision) but also by providing ample space for Interest Groups, so that the inspiration offered by workshops, as well as new collective impulses could be explored further in collaborative groups. Through the use of index cards of different colors and large boards, the Interest Groups themselves were formed through a process that started from individual proposals, to a clustering of such proposals into affinity groups, to a clustering of people around a group of their choice. Once people gathered into a

group, they proceeded to (re)define the scope and motivation of the group toward a common line of inquiry. While this process was laborious and detailed on the first day of our meeting, taking a lot of trust, that initial effort provided a fluid program for the three days of our conference, only needing a little room for improvisation and revisions at the beginning of each day. I was moved by the grace of forty-eight people motivated to offer each other a safe place of learning and their willingness to embrace our possible failures as well as successes in doing so. I am convinced that part of this grace was cultivated by our shared practice as Focusers and the motivation of our Meeting at the Edge to transpose some of the lessons of the Focusing process to a group level.

As Focusers we have learned important lessons that we can contribute to professional settings and in particular to professional group meetings and conferences. By inserting the possibility of Focusing partnerships in professional conferences we nurture the first step of the creative process--incubation--and create a powerful new social space. As social groups we are not used to starting in the unknown. Especially at professional conferences where the need to make an impression is strong and our reputation is at stake, there is a tendency to privilege what we already know. Yet if we are to create new social forms and social processes, we need to make room for the new to arise. Too often professional gatherings become a hierarchical ordeal for status jockeying and the reward of stellar performances. By making room for Focusing dyads at professional gatherings we can contribute to the building of what I like to call a person-centered democracy. In this kind of democracy individuality is not sacrificed on the altar of common good, nor is it distorted into a privilege that only the most accomplished are afforded, or forced upon us as an imperative to distinguish ourselves from anonymity.

Individuality is allowed to naturally emerge, as it is a property of individual life. While this may seem obvious, as Focusers we know that a precious process is involved in this allowing of the self and the self-organizing tendencies of individuals to emerge. Focusing, by honoring each person in the intimacy and protection of the Focusing dyads and by valuing a place of beginning that undoes the known, creates the possibility for each participant to find their own creative edge and motivation in a group project or setting. Furthermore, because Focusing helps us pay attention rather than by-pass small and subtle internal shifts and sustain them gently in the face of stronger feelings and entrenched personal and social habits, it creates a space in which newness can be generated. Yet this newness is not for newness sake, but it is directed by and to our personal and social wellbeing.

The process of Focusing can also make an important contribution toward developing and maintaining professional ethics. In fact Focusing, by helping us pause deliberately and slow down, allows us to feel into the implicit consequences of our actions, emotions, and thinking. As such, it is a practice of responsibility and integrity, integrity also in the meaning of "whole," as the sensing into consequences that Focusing offers does not come from a compartmentalization between professional and personal life but embraces the individual as one ever-interacting process.

The attention that Focusing and Thinking at the Edge give to process rather than to content offers another entry-point into the building of a person-centered and

responsive democracy. We learn not to impose content but rather to support the natural caring and self-organizing processing of organisms, being individuals or groups. Moving back and forth between group process and personal process can help us disclose the limitations, gifts, and dangers of both. We may learn to mitigate the oppressive tendency of group-think by engaging with the idiosyncrasies that Focusing allows us, tapping into the specificities of our life histories and knowing. We may also learn the power of collaboration and cross-fertilization that professional gatherings can offer and support, addressing social concerns larger than any of our individual needs.

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