



EXPERIMENTS IN THE ART OF HOSTING IN THE PHILIPPINES

First Year Lessons from the Field

By Dr. Juan Kanapi Jr. and Miren Sanchez

Openness to diverging ideas and sharing divergent opinions are challenging to most Filipinos, who are conditioned at an early age not to be disagreeable, by sharing a different perspective, for example. Doing so may be deemed disrespectful, especially towards authority figures. This learned tendency has to change if we want the Philippines to become more developed in an inclusive, sustainable way. The ability to express and receive opinions appreciatively as a *service to one another* can be developed through the practice of *Hosting* meaningful conversations.

The first *Art of Hosting (AoH)* workshop in the Philippines was held on October 15-17, 2013, at the Walter Hogan Building, Ateneo de Manila University, under the sponsorship of the Gaston Z. Ortigas Peace Institute. This engagement was called by Dr. Juan A. Kanapi, Jr. and hosted by Australian practitioner Ms. Valmae Rose. Forty-seven participants—mostly peace workers, coming from all over the Philippines—joined this training program.

Since then, Ms. Miren Sanchez and Juan, co-founders of *Future By Design Pilipinas (FBDPilipinas)*¹, were able to co-host several engagements for different types of organizations. Eventually, two other classmates from the 2013 AoH class— Ms. Josephine Perez and Dr. Chona Sebastian—along with another friend, Mr. Tem Padla, became Learning Partners of FBDPilipinas. Tem was invited into the partnership, even if he did not have the benefit of being part of the class, because of his vast experience in promoting learning in big organizations.

This article is FBDPilipinas' first attempt to document lessons learned about AoH engagements in the Philippines, so that these lessons may be shared with other co-practitioners in the spirit of *community learning*.

Engaging the Caller

The process of engagement, which we have chosen to call *playshops*, begins when someone invites one of us to host an event. In most cases, this person becomes the Caller. The FBDPilipinas learning partners—usually us, the co-founders, or one of us and

¹ Valmae was the one who coined the name "Future By Design" as the name of her company in Australia. Upon request, Valmae gave permission to Miren to use the name when she set up her own consulting company in the Philippines. Future By Design Pilipinas and



one or two of the learning partners—go together to the first meeting (and other follow up meetings). As much as possible, there should at least be two different perspectives in understanding the client’s concern. When meeting the Caller, we take care to listen carefully to what is shared and observe the behavior of the Caller. We ask questions not only to understand the “presenting need,” but also to discern “where the Caller may be coming from.” Following are lessons we learned on the significance of the Caller and the process of calling for a conversation.

First, the credibility of the Caller impacts on the quality of participant engagement. The Caller must have credibility among the conversation participants. They must have some level of trust that the Caller is someone with integrity. Many Filipinos today tend to follow a leader whom they trust, even when they may not fully understand their leader’s vision. Conversation participants also invest trust in the Hosts, whom they meet for the first time, precisely because they believe that the Hosts have the trust of the Caller. This level of trust is what has emboldened our conversation participants to share truthfully, not only from their head, but also, more importantly, from their heart. The participants believe that the Hosts have the trust of the Caller so they become open to try out new methods for conversing with each other.

Second, the Caller must be involved, at the minimum, in the process of defining the Overarching Intention (OI) and the Calling Question (CQ). This is especially true in the case of large organizations, such as the Zuellig Family Foundation (ZFF), where the Caller is frequently the Executive Director (ED) but the conversations are designed with the ZFF’s institutional development team. During the actual engagement, the ED comes in only to share his thoughts briefly and not participate throughout the whole process.² And so, when this engagement generated new and significant ideas and insights, the ED sought clarification on the process, on how changes were made to the conversation design, and what prompted certain responses from the conversation participants. We realized that the involvement of the Caller in formulating the OI and the CQ would have helped avoid repetitive explanations about the process and data generated after the engagement.

Also, if the Caller is not involved at the beginning of the process, circles of conversations would less likely continue. Especially in large groups, the Caller must be involved to thoroughly appreciate the process of hosting, so circles of meaningful

² The conversations were designed this way because, aside from schedule concerns, the very presence of the ED, as an authority figure, throughout the engagement, would have had a “coercive” effect whereby open and meaningful conversation among participants may have been hindered.



conversations are carried beyond the initial engagement with FBDPilipinas. This also reduces the likelihood of FBDPilipinas being repeatedly asked to intervene and host subsequent conversations – which is not the point of hosting. We keep in mind that, ultimately, hosting intends to enable circles of conversations beyond the formal engagement. The ideal is for an initial circle of conversation (hosted by us) to lead to multiple circles of conversations (hosted by participants to the initial circle).

Third, for Callers who are not the main decision-maker of their organizations, clarity of and commitment to the intention underlying the call for the engagement can make or break the process. A case in point is Col. Bim Quemado of the Unified Western Command in Palawan. He is in charge of all operations, but reports to his AFP Commander, Vice Admiral Alexander S. Lopez. As the Caller, Bim was clear about the rationale for engaging FBDPilipinas to share AoH with the Palawan Youth. His boss was not. Two days prior to the engagement, the engagement almost did not materialize because the vice admiral was not clear about its significance. Persistence and commitment on the part of Bim, combined with side conversations of Miren with the vice admiral, helped the vice admiral appreciate the rationale and nature of the process. Eventually, conversations among the Palawan Youth, as well as subsequent conversations by the Palawan Youth with direct community stakeholders, were held. After the engagement, the vice admiral began consulting Bim more often on how to enhance multi-stakeholder conversations for greater awareness on peace efforts and the West Philippine issues.

Similarly, with the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), the Caller for the Street Dwellers' Conference was Assistant Secretary Ted Romo, but the recognized Caller of the engagement was Cabinet Secretary Dinky Soliman. Ted's persistence in ensuring the AoH process remained true to its principles (that is, by not allowing the traditional way for DSWD consultations and workshops to prevail) helped make the first Street Dwellers' Multi-Stakeholder Conversation³ for the National Capital Region a success. The success of the conversation was not only in the process adopted and the unique strategies generated, but also in involving other stakeholders in conversation. For the first time, the street dwellers themselves, both children and adults, were involved in the conversation with other stakeholders including the members of the business sector. The conversation surfaced new data on more appropriate responses to the situation of street dwellers in the National Capital Region. For example, the street

³ "Multi-Stakeholders' Summit, A Conversation: Ensuring that Street Dwellers are Not Left Behind" held on 27-29 October 2014 with concrete multi-stakeholder areas of collaboration defined, beyond the playshop.



dwellers explicitly expressed their preference for livelihood over housing (housing being the primary intervention of the Philippine government).

Fourth, four principles of engagement, defined by FBDPilipinas as its core tenets of engagement, must be clear and acceptable to the Caller, for him or her to continue sponsoring conversations beyond the formal engagement. We have observed that engagements will only revert to the “same-old-same-old” ways of doing things, if any of these core principles are not present. We make sure to communicate these principles very early in the entry and contracting phase of the conversation. We accept invitations to host only when we are sure that the Caller is supportive of these engagement principles.

Principle 1: The Caller must be open to new ways of doing things. The Caller must be willing to submit to the ambiguity of certain approaches because the AoH processes we use are often new and unfamiliar. Hence, the Caller must also trust the host team to ensure that the purpose of the engagement will be met.

Looking back at our engagements, we realize that this kind of trust is born out of the relationship (friendship or past work experience) the Caller has with us, individually. FBDPilipinas’ engagements in its first year were made possible because of our individual social capital. People (Callers) in our respective networks trusted us enough to allow us to experiment with new and ambiguous processes to create new possibilities.

The *good reputation of a practitioner* can also lead to invitations to host engagements. Newly elected Mayor Oscar Moreno invited Miren to help his team come up with a three-year strategic plan. Miren was the Program Manager of the Asian Institute of Management Mindanao Bridging Leaders Program, where Mayor Moreno was a Fellow. Mr. Godofredo Villapando, Executive Director of the Foundation for the Philippine Environment, invited Juan because of a strategic planning stint for the Peace and Equity Foundation, where Godof’s wife is a manager. Fr. Edwin Gariquez, Executive Secretary of the National Secretariat for Social Action (NASSA), invited Juan and Miren to host their strategic planning process, after his experience of being hosted as a member of the Board of the FPE. He invited them again to define the capacity building process needed for NASSA as a whole, which directly affects all the Diocesan Social Action Centers across the Philippines, after the strategic planning process. Miren continues to



act as coach and adviser to NASSA to ensure hosting is continually practiced within the organization.⁴

Principle 2: There is great value in tapping collective wisdom. Great wisdom can come from an individual or a group. We tap *group wisdom* when hosting conversations. As hosts, we do things *with* the Caller and the conversation participants and *not for them* (as is normally expected of “resource persons” or “experts”). The Caller and his/her team must actively participate in *co-designing the process*. In hosting conversations, we flow with the actual process of the participants and accept their output, as opposed to “facilitating” pre-determined outcomes (a.k.a. “facipulation”). The process is one of *discovery*. It starts with a *powerful question*, which is both relevant and interesting to the participants, and whose answer, which no one can predict, should naturally surface from the participants.

Although there is a co-created design at the beginning, the actual process is determined by the actual outputs and behavior of the conversation participants. The AoH is an experiential learning process. Thus, as hosts, we iterate the design as the playshop unfolds. The co-created design serves only as a guide, and we *tweak the design* depending on the unfolding needs of the conversation participants.

Principle 3: Appreciative Inquiry (Ai) is at the heart of hosting. Our hosting style is founded on the belief that everyone is born with unique goodness that can serve as raw material of what the group aims to build. Thus, conversations are focused on *strengths and opportunities* rather than on “weaknesses” and “threats.”

Principle 4: We celebrate diversity. We create a safe environment for divergent opinions. It is from diversity that new things can emerge. Converging too soon to avoid the discomfort of ambiguity can hinder the emergence of the “new.”

Finally, first-time Callers may need assistance in effectively calling people to meaningful conversation. *How the invitation is articulated* plays a major role in effectively calling for meaningful conversations. More often than not, Callers are limited by their *de facto* or knee-jerk ways of communicating. The whole process of hosting is new and requires a new way of calling. Miren often works closely with the Caller in crafting the invitation to prospective participants.

⁴ NASSA recently hired a human resource manager and the transfer of knowledge, skills, and practice to develop an organization culture of learning and hosting, has been initiated with the new HR Manager.



This was successfully done for DSWD, when they called for the Street Dwellers' Conference. It was the first time in the 64 years of the DSWD history that the Department involved their served sector in conversations about how they (street dwellers) could be helped. Other non-government stakeholders were also invited to participate in the conversation.

This kind of assistance was also extended to the local government of Cagayan de Oro City, the Ateneo Alumni Association, the Ateneo Law School Alumni Association, and the NASSA.

In addition to how the invitation is articulated, *who to involve in the conversation* is also a critical discussion point between the Caller and Host. Often, the need for diversity is not in the consciousness or viewpoint of Callers. We help our Callers identify the kinds of participants who can contribute to the diversity of perspectives so that true, meaningful conversation can happen. This is referred to as *bringing the system into the room*.⁵

Overarching Intention and Calling Question

A hosting engagement must be grounded on a co-owned *Overarching Intention (OI)* and *Calling Question (CQ)*.

The OI is the expression of what the Caller wishes to achieve in the long run beginning with an engagement. It is a one-line description of the much wider context for calling an engagement. For the DSWD's Harmonization playshop, the OI was: "Shared understanding of the DSWD vision, mission & goals that will guide strategic convergence of all DSWD work." For the initial engagement with NASSA, it was: "A strategic plan that would allow NASSA to be effective within the context of the 'new normal'." The engagement with the Palawan youth groups described their long-term intention as "Youth empowered to generate, support and sustain multi-sectoral collaboration, towards the co-creation of positive change in the nation."

The CQ is the "come-on" to motivate different stakeholders to participate in meaningful conversations about an issue affecting all of them. An example is "How can the various units of the DSWD effectively converge, recognizing the DSWD that is emerging, in the face of the 'new normal'?" for DSWD's Harmonization playshop. The CQ for the first engagement with NASSA was: "What is the new NASSA that is waiting to be

⁵ A reference to the idea of systems thinking based on Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline*.



born?” Among the Palawan youth, the CQ was: “What will it take to be transformative leaders, co-creating positive change in Palawan?” And, with DSWD-National Capital Region, the CQ was: “How can we, as co-stakeholders with⁶ street dwellers, empower each other to work together, towards creating and sustaining safe and healthy communities?”

We meet with a Caller (and/or representative) for an informal conversation, so that we may better appreciate why we are being invited to host an engagement. After an initial conversation, we design a prototype OI and CQ. If it is convenient for all, we meet again with the Caller and engage them in co-developing the prototype OI and CQ, until everyone (design participants) is satisfied with the wording of both the OI and CQ. The OI must accurately describe the long-term intent, and the CQ is inspiring enough and capable of inviting divergent points of view. If it is not convenient to meet face-to-face, the co-design of the OI and CQ is done through the exchange of emails.

After our engagements, someone would always point to the design of the questions as a factor that enabled meaningful conversations, “which were light but produced significant, considerable results.” They described the questions as “different,” “interesting,” and “empowering.”

Designing Powerful Questions

Consulting co-practitioners, who have more experience in the practice of the AoH, helped us a lot in our initial attempts at designing powerful questions. The two notable ones were Valmae and Dr. Bob Stilger, an American practitioner.⁷ After interviewing the Callers, we emailed our understanding of what the client needed to Valmae and/or Bob. They sent their thoughts on possible questions that could trigger meaningful conversations. Their questions were considered in the process of crafting the initial OI and CQ to be proposed to the client.

It takes a deliberate stance on our part to move away from thinking “objectives” in our initial wording for the OI and CQ. We have to remind each other to think “context,” based on what we learned from the Caller, in designing the OI and “what it would take for a divergent set of participants to be very interested in conversing with each other,” in coming up with the CQ. It takes us 45-60 minutes of exchange to come up with an initial OI and CQ. Another hour or so is spent engaging the Caller, before we

⁶ The word “with” presumes that street dwellers have unique talents and are capable of creating opportunities for themselves.

⁷ Bob is doing a lot of hosting work among the victims of the triple-disaster in Fukushima, Japan.



reach an agreement on the wording of the OI and the CQ. In one case, we had eight meetings with representatives of the Caller, before we agreed on the OI and CQ.⁸

There were times when the words we had “still did not feel right.” Later, we found out that it is good to “let go of trying” and spend some time away from the design effort, before going back to the drawing board. The *space of letting go* eventually revealed words that made the proposition (OI) and question (CQ) powerful. How much time did we need to “let go?” Sometimes it took just a few minutes of chatting about a different topic, or doing something else. Other times, it took a few days between design meetings or exchanges in cyberspace.

Aside from crafting a CQ aligned with the interests of the targeted participants, we found it important to make sure that it invites *divergence* of thoughts or opinions. Valmae gave the feedback that “Filipinos seem to avoid divergence in favor of convergence.” We have observed this to be so true. Culturally, Filipinos are inclined to avoid conflict. Hence, we tend to have little tolerance for divergent opinions, and try to find “common ground” soonest possible. By getting out too soon from the uncomfortable space created by divergent exchanges, we minimize the possibility of our becoming aware of “new, out of the box ideas,” which are necessary if we are to co-create new ways of doing things. Thus, the CQ must be designed in such a way that it is relevant to different stakeholders and invites many different perspectives.

The type of organization and the process of decision-making of the Caller must be taken into account in finalizing both the OI and CQ, before an actual playshop is run. A multi-tiered decision-making process means more time and more conversations are needed to ensure the OI and CQ are co-owned and committed to.

Harvesting

Harvest strategy is our next concern, after we agree on the OI and CQ. In how many different ways can we capture the key ideas from the conversations? How can these be made visible to the participants throughout the engagement? Given time constraints, what can co-hosts do to assist them in making meaning out of their “worthwhile ideas” or “gems”?

⁸ This specific case was that of a multi-tiered organization where discussions took place with a technical team tasked to assist the “consultants” but decision-making on final design and approach rested with an Executive Committee composed of various top-level managers. This case now serves as our point of reference in deciding how to engage similar organizations.



We were exposed to many harvesting methods during our AoH. Our recent experiences in the field also revealed strategies that were most helpful in enabling participants to recognize and make sense of key ideas surfaced through different forms of conversations.

An effective *harvest strategy* is one that helps the participants organize their *key ideas* through many rounds of conversations, until they are ready to converge towards co-owned answers to the CQ.

One of the hosts must focus on ensuring that key ideas, surfaced in each round of conversation, are made visible to the participants. In collaborative hosting, a member of the host team must take on this main role, as it requires much listening, focus, and a high level of data clustering. Miren usually takes on this role, even as she also initiates some rounds of conversations, and Juan, usually the lead host in FBDPilipinas engagements, helps in whatever way he can in the harvest. Other learning partners serve as co-harvesters and process guardians.

Harvesting is a key element of hosting meaningful conversations, in that some people are more able to articulate their thoughts when they can physically see their ideas. Thus, *metacards* is our main tool for immediately making key ideas visible to everyone, after each round of group conversation. Participants are usually invited to write down key ideas surfaced from group exchanges—one idea per metacard—five minutes before each conversation round ends. Right after a group member shares their gem in the plenary, the equivalent metacard of an idea shared from among the non-reporting groups is immediately posted on a wall, where everyone can see it. We ask the groups listening to a report not to repeat a similar idea and, instead, share another one that is not yet mentioned. Then, we draw out responses from group to group, each group sharing one gem at a time, round after round, until there are no more “worthwhile ideas” to share.

On certain occasions, Miren clusters data into themes and posts them on the walls real-time. The participants are given time to review the harvests and make changes where they think it is needed. By doing this, participants become *owners* of the themes. Moving data around is easy because they are written on metacards.

Taking *photos* of the ideas posted on the wall helps ensure that outputs are preserved. The location of the engagement may not always have a lot of walls onto which the developing outputs, through many rounds of conversations, are posted. Thus,



it becomes necessary to take out the posted outputs to make room for the new ones. Possibly, too, the schedule is such that there are days in-between rounds of conversations. Since much of the output is in metacard, it is possible that some of these metacards may fall off and get lost in the process of taking them off the wall and storing them somewhere. We take photos of outputs to ensure that they can be reconstructed for presentation when the group pulls it out of “storage.” This strategy is easy, considering the proliferation of phones with built-in camera.

Many of our early engagements were about strategic planning, involving a lot of data, which needed to be considered from a big-picture perspective. Not every participant, e.g. staff, in these engagements had the skill and experience to crunch a lot of data into meaningful information. They needed some help in *organizing the data into chunks that made “meaning making” easier* for them. Miren often did this task in-between sessions, e.g. over lunch, overnight, in-between Saturdays.

Strategic Planning taught in business schools organizes data using the S.W.O.T. framework: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. It is a linear and very cerebral process. For FBDPilipinas engagements, the *S.O.A.R.* framework is used: strengths, opportunities, aspirations, and results. It is a framework founded on the principles of *Appreciative Inquiry (Ai)*⁹ that consciously chooses to focus on the internal strengths of an organization to take advantage of opportunities in the external environment in order to achieve its desired future (aspirations), as expressed in measurable forms (results). From the very beginning, “gems” from different rounds of conversations are organized into a S.O.A.R. framework. For some reason, somewhere along the way, new strategies already reveal themselves from the surfaced ideas.

Is the SOAR framework better than SWOT? According to the participants, they appreciated the SOAR framework because it allows them to recognize what is naturally right about their organization and use it to tap opportunities in realizing their organizational dream. They were tired of having to struggle with problems they needed to solve every time they did strategic planning. Working with their natural strengths and resources made their conversations “buoyant” and “light,” even as they produced new ways of achieving their dream.

⁹ Appreciative Inquiry as developed by Dr. David Cooperrider.



Hosting

Hosting is anchored onto the principle that *people, of diverse persuasions, of diverse positions about a shared concern, must feel safe to engage in meaningful exchange.* It is the “twin” process of Harvesting. One cannot be applied effectively without the other. Hosting is providing a *space* or a virtual *container* that allows for meaningful conversations. The role of the *Host* is to *hold space* for the participants in the conversations. Hosting means creating a space so participants can more easily engage in a process of divergence-emergence-convergence. Intrinsic to this role is the awareness of the importance of allowing participants to start where they are coming from or from what they are able to handle, then moving towards a direction of their choice. Prominently posting the four principles and one law of *Open Space Technology*¹⁰ on the walls during playshops serves as good reminders to everyone of what it takes to respect and flow with group wisdom.

Hosting an engagement must never be done alone. Toke Moeller, a Danish practitioner who was the main teacher who introduced the Art of Hosting to Juan in October 2012, in Singapore, gave this advice, “Do not enter the forest alone, Juan.” Juan replied then that he had no choice, since he was the first Filipino to ever be trained in the Art of Hosting. Juan was indeed alone in his initial engagements. But, since 2013, after more than a year of practice with Miren (and eventually with other FBDPilipinas partners), it has become very clear that the twin tasks of hosting and harvesting, when done properly, is very demanding – physically, mentally, and emotionally – and must, at the minimum, be done by two people.

A host and partner harvester (co-host) cannot predict the output of a group after the Calling Question has been posed. Both have to focus all of their senses on the group’s dynamics. Both have to always be ready to recognize when tweaking the original design is needed or a better conversation strategy will be more helpful to the group. Without exception, we have had to make changes to our original conversation design, every night of every engagement day, with every group we have hosted. It is very difficult to do this effectively, when hosting alone.

Ideally, a third person should be part of the hosting team, to serve purely as a process guardian, to validate or mirror, to host and harvester, the necessary tweaks to a conversation design. However, based on FBDPilipinas’ experience, Callers do not always

¹⁰ 4 OST Principles: (1) Whoever comes are the right people, (2) Whenever it starts is the right time, (3) Whatever happens is the only thing that could have, (4) When it’s over, it’s over; 1 OST Law of Two Feet - If you find yourself in a situation where you are not contributing or learning, move somewhere where you can!



have the resources to accommodate three hosts. In fact, we even find ourselves often explaining, in detail, the value of having two co-hosts. This is primarily because majority of Filipino organizations are so used to lecture-type processes involving only one resource person or expert.

Tandem hosting is also important to secure delivery of the service of hosting. There are situations where personal concerns may arise, affecting the physical or mental condition of one of the co-hosts. It is essential, therefore, that tandem hosts possess both the capacity for hosting and harvesting. Moreover, for hosting to be effective, there should only be a maximum of thirty (30) persons per tandem hosting.

Aside from hosting in tandem, there are some other basic strategies to hosting which we have found effective in the Philippine context. Several strategies to host were introduced and explored in the October 2013 AoH training. Of the strategies shared, the following have been most effective in our engagements: *Circle*, *World Café*, *Open Space Technology*, and *Chaordic Stepping Stones*.¹¹ Although *Appreciative Inquiry (Ai)* was also presented to us, its basic processes were not explored in any of the workshops during the October training – not in the way FBDPilipinas has applied it in its playshops.

In hosting, the design of the physical space, where the conversation is held, can either facilitate or hinder learning. The “homier” the space (e.g. couches made available for participants to stretch their legs or be comfortable at certain times of the day, sunlight allowed into the room, visibility of nature from the room), the more candid the conversations are. This is also the reason why having a lot of wall space on which to post harvests is important. Being able to see the progression of learning gems on the wall make it easier for participants to put together what they personally learned from the different topics. It also strengthens their sense of pride about their own insights, motivating them to participate even more. While we always encourage our Callers to get a venue consistent with this ideal set up, hosting strategies must consider unique local conditions. Many times our clients do not have the resources to afford an “ideal” engagement space. We then have to host with whatever resources are available, but keeping faithful to the spirit of basic circle conversation.¹²

The space for engagement affects the use of a *Circle*, especially for plenary gatherings. It is not always possible to have a “real” circle, for example, in rectangular

¹¹ For most of its engagements in 2014, FBDPilipinas has shared a one-pager open source tool to conversation participants based on the Chaordic Stepping Stones.

¹² It has become a standard that “playshop space” is defined in each proposal or communication to the Caller along with standard playshop materials such as clay and art materials.



and narrow rooms. In one group, there was even a fixed, long, rectangular table in the middle of the room. In another case, we had round tables for small groups, but the room felt cramped, what with other furniture that could not be taken out. In such cases, we just did the best we could. We ensured, though, that there was some form of a *centerpiece* in the middle of a Circle. The centerpiece gives a *sense of equality* among the participants, because their seating position is equidistant to the centerpiece. The centerpiece that is easiest to provide is a large printout or artistic rendering of the CQ alongside a living ornament (indoor plant, for example).¹³ In other cases, symbols of why the participants had come to conversation, which they sculpted in clay, or a photo, which they brought with them and offered to the center of the circle, served as centerpiece.

One of the tools used in Circle practice is a *talking piece*. A host can use it to manage conversation in the face of dominant participants amongst more shy ones. Only the one holding the talking piece can speak, while everybody else is encouraged to listen. For some reason, the non-government groups we hosted were not fond of using this tool, even when encouraged to do so. It is as if it was more of a hindrance to, rather than a facilitator of, free-flowing conversations. However, in very structured or hierarchical organizations such as government agencies, the talking piece was most helpful in group conversations, allowing the lower-ranking personnel to have a chance and/or the time they needed to express their thoughts.

Designing Playshops

Theory U by Dr. Otto Scharmer has been very helpful in guiding the design of our hosting engagements. The basic framework shows three movements—*Sensing*, *Presencing*, and *Creating*—necessary to come up with new, implementable ideas. Thus, a usual three-day engagement can be organized along these three basic movements, while keeping the OI and CQ at the heart of the design. Day 1 is always dedicated to “sensing,” listening to different stakeholders share with the group “what they are already doing that is right” and “how else the group can be in order to be a delight to the stakeholder group.” Day 2 focuses on surfacing “new ways of doing things.” And, Day 3 is dedicated to identifying steps that can be taken to *prototype* new ideas.

The Theory U framework is also helpful in the design of engagements that run for less than two days. *Presencing*, however, is an important process that should not be skipped. There must be “rest” after *divergence* for *emergence* to happen. We always

¹³ These are primarily for engagements where there is no consensus on the centerpiece. Usually the centerpiece is an item agreed upon with the Caller.



ensure that such a space is part of our hosting design. For the Ateneo Alumni Association, the engagement was divided into two Saturdays. The first Saturday was used to listen to stakeholders. Towards the end of the day, the idea of “listening to new ideas that may surface during the week” was introduced. The week in-between engagement was “*Presencing* time.” Conversations on the second Saturday were dedicated to recognizing new ideas that may have surfaced and how they could be prototyped.

A *check-in* question or topic is always designed at the beginning of a day of engagement, with the intention of opening up the minds, and, more importantly, the hearts, of the participants. The opening of their connection to their heart is needed when we get to the creative play or *Presencing* portion. A consideration in the design of the check-in question or topic is how it can facilitate the thinking and conversing about the theme of each day. For example, in the initial engagement with NASSA, the CQ was “What is the new NASSA that is waiting to be born?” To prepare the participants to explore this question—through several forms of conversations in three days’ time—the check-in topic on Day 1 was “My most memorable experience / proudest contribution / greatest learning as a member / partner of NASSA.” The idea was to first appreciate their positive experiences of NASSA before they explore the “new NASSA that was waiting to be born.” Day 2 was focused on *Presencing* or *discerning* “how else NASSA can be.” So the check-in questions then were these: “How do I get in touch with my God?” and “What do I do to strengthen my connection to this Higher Intelligence?”

Exploring the topic of *whole-brain thinking* is done to enable the participants to more easily appreciate and practice the “creative thinking” called for by *Presencing*. Filipinos are naturally creative and symbolic thinkers, especially those who are not highly educated. But Filipinos are like fish that are not aware of the water they swim in. Exploring the concept of whole-brain thinking allows them to become aware that there is more to thinking than “logical thinking.” They become aware that focused silence can stimulate creative thought, which may manifest in symbolic images in their mind. Providing art materials, especially clay, and encouraging them to play with these tap the participants’ creative minds early in any of our engagements. Having tables covered with manila paper where they can doodle also helps in bringing out the inner child of our participants—something necessary to open their consciousness to new ways of thinking and doing.

Culturally, Filipinos need some form of permission from an authority figure, to be what they naturally are—playful—when play is made part of a “formal” activity. While



we provide the art materials and explain their purpose, we still need to encourage them to play, again and again, with the art materials. Beautiful objects and pictures are often produced once they feel comfortable to play. The process of play also makes it easier for them to work with symbolic imagery, a way of *thinking out of the box*, which we usually experiment with towards the latter part of an engagement. Calling our engagements *playsshops* instead of the usual “workshops” is our way of encouraging them to play as early as Day 1.

Theory U is not just about Sensing, Presencing, and Creating. More importantly, it is about *Co-sensing, Co-presencing, and Co-creating*. The “co” suggests interaction and relationships. Given the high power distance (i.e., the tendency to defer to authority figures) that characterizes Philippine culture, it is necessary to make conversations a *conversation among equals*. Aside from clay and doodle play, letting the participants to share their *leadership history* also makes the *conversation among equals* possible. The “leadership” nature of the sharing makes the participants realize that they are all leaders in their own right, manifesting in different forms, because of different historical contexts. It is a history they can be proud of. Sharing their story, parts of which they may hesitate to share with others unless asked, facilitates the *opening of their heart center*.

Ai has been one of the “best sellers” in our engagements. This topic is usually explored after the exchange on leadership history, and is meant to enable them to understand why the focus of conversations was and will be on what worked rather than on gaps or problems. The energy of the participants usually increases after comprehending that:

- *Words create worlds.*
- *The future is limited only by imagination.*
- *What we focus on—problems or opportunities—become more pronounced in our life.*
- *The moment you ask a question, change has begun.*
- *Positive questions lead to positive stories, which create positive affect and enthusiasm to participate in a change process.*

Conversations about *Ai* awaken the “appreciation” that is so natural among Filipinos. We have learned to be appreciative of whatever little we have, and are very creative in maximizing the use of our limited resources, finding gems even in what more developed economies consider as “trash” or “insignificant.” A good metaphor of this natural trait is the jeepney, which was originally a dull, grey-colored vehicle, used by



American soldiers, during World War II and was later transformed into a very colorful means of transportation. Another example is the head and tail of tuna, which is thrown away by fishermen who supply the Japanese market with the body of the fish. What used to be unwanted parts of tuna have been transformed into popular grilled dishes among Filipinos.

Mental Models is another very helpful topic explored in our engagements, which shows how our belief systems translate into behaviors that create consequences, both positive and negative. Desirable new consequences are sustainable only if behavior patterns change, which are rooted in mental models or belief systems. A significant change in mental models is needed to produce sustainable new behaviors and consequences. The participants can experience the reality and power of mental models through exercises such as “True North,” “Victim-Hero-Calling,” “Negative Self-Talk” and the basic elements of “Anger.”

The exercise on *I see, I think, I feel*, has significantly helped our participants separate *observable data* from their *opinion* or *interpretation* and their *emotional reactions* to opinions shared in Circle conversation. This simple exercise is needed in helping Filipinos, especially those who are not highly educated and/or coming from lower social strata, become more open to share their opinions in the course of conversation. Our history of being colonized again and again has made many Filipinos believe that there are people with “correct opinions” and others who better just shut up, listen, and follow. This exercise thus allows them to see that all opinions are “correct” given the assumptions underlying these. No one has the “correct opinion” all the time, no matter how intelligent or highly positioned in the social totem pole. The exercise is our way of drawing out marginalized Filipinos to express their opinion (I think) and support these with verifiable data (I see) so that others may understand where they are coming from.

Repeated exposure to anomalies in the process also allows for more openness to the hosting process. In a playshop, introducing something new every day — for example, the use of clay as a way to check-in, change in table cloth colors, a new art material they can experiment with, or the design of the space for the day’s conversation — helps participants become more and more open to divergence. Doing this is especially helpful for “loosening up” participants from very hierarchical organizations.

A *check-out* is done at the end of each engagement, whether whole day or just one session. It is meant to end the focus on whatever the conversation topic was, so that



participants could fully focus on something else. The question or topic is designed to get participants to look at the period of engagement that is about to end, and appreciate what was most helpful or significant to them. The design of the question or topic can also be a way of enabling them to *Presence* on a question through the night, in preparation for the theme of the conversations the following day.

We believe that *concrete experience, properly reflected on, is a powerful teacher*. Therefore, all of our processes are aligned with *adult learning principles*. Content or information about AoH is not downloaded or lectured in playshops. Participants are always provided with an exercise for them to experience a concept before the theory is shared, or an experience is provided to challenge a theory that has been shared. By doing these, we reinforce the idea that *learning*, generated through conversations, is about *making one's own conclusions about the world and acting on these*, rather than listening to and blindly following the ideas of "experts" which may have been developed from very different context.

Towards Trusting Our Giftedness

Filipinos are very gifted, living in a land that is naturally abundant. And yet, we continue to be an underdeveloped nation, because we have learned to doubt our giftedness. This "learned doubt," shaped a lot by our colonized past, have made many Filipinos surrender their power and right to shape their future to "leaders" whose interest are different from the *common tao*, or to foreigners whose idea of development is often alien and, ultimately, detrimental to Filipinos. We need to recognize and change our limiting beliefs about our country and ourselves if we expect to develop into the powerful nation that we truly are. Learning how to host and engage through meaningful, multi-sectoral conversations, is a powerful way of slowly but surely, co-creating a nation we can be truly proud of.



Dr. Juan A. Kanapi, Jr. is the founding practitioner of the Art of Hosting Meaningful Conversations in the Philippines – the practice of which has led him to uniquely develop and share the process of systematically hosting meaningful conversations among multi-sectoral stakeholders. Juan is also a pioneer practitioner of Organizational Development and BodyMind Wellness in the Philippines. As Co-Founder and Chief Learning Designer at Future By Design Pilipinas, he leads the team in designing and hosting meaningful conversations as a strategy for sustainable change.



Future By Design Pilipinas co-founder and chief engagement officer Ana Margarita "Miren" Sanchez leads operations in the Philippines and provides grounded practice of hosting conversations with multiple sectors to FBD Pilipinas. Miren is a communications and development practitioner with expertise in corporate social responsibility programs, corporate communications, research and technical writing, strategic planning, and a corporate network built from working with various conglomerates.