Toward the Digital Wilds:
Experiments in social learning with
‘Fiery Spirits Community of Practice’

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Abstract

The thesis presents and inquires into a first person research story about the development of a ‘Community of Practice’ for asset-based rural development practitioners from across the UK and Republic of Ireland. It includes an account of how geographically remote members of the CoP were supported to come together over eighteen months to co-produce an online handbook called ‘Exploring Community Resilience’ (included as Appendix 1).

Findings include:
- Social networking and social media technologies can be powerful enablers of third and second person inquiry;
- A compass tool (included here) can help hosts and curators make good design and facilitation choices as they host the emergence of complex, large scale social learning architectures (which this thesis calls ‘Digital Forests’);
- Action researchers can benefit from developing skills as digital curators, producers of social media, and hosts of transformative learning processes;
- Future generations of social media are likely to challenge the assumptions, methods and findings of this thesis. As we navigate our way into this fast changing future, it will be helpful to inquire into their impacts of new generations of digital technologies on our personal and collective psychological, cultural and social wellbeing.

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Thank you

Tara, who has lived, breathed and persevered through this journey with unflinching love, encouragement and belief in the possibility of its fulfillment.

Eisean and Oran who have sparkled into the world during the writing of this story. May your lives be overflowing with play, music, laughter, inquiry and community.

David and Gwen for believing in me, always.

Geoff, Peter, Gill, Kate, Margaret, Dave and the many more colleagues in my CARRP supervision groups over seven years of inspirational supervision.

Colleagues from the Fiery Spirits Community of Practice and Carnegie UK Trust, past and present.

Friends from the Centre for Human Ecology, Art of Hosting, Integral without Borders and Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice communities of inquiry, practice and (growing!) influence.
1 Prologue

**Note to reader:** This prologue is intended to set the scene for the questions this thesis follows. It is written as a narrative in the first person, with the intention of bringing readers close to an experience that helped to frame choices I have made with my partner, Tara O'Leary, about what kind of life we want to live, and my choice to pursue a doctorate action research as a way to pursue this.

1.1 Call to Adventure (Ladakh, 2000)

In his address to the Bioneers conference of April 2007, Paul Hawkin held the rapt attention of his audience as a list of tens of thousands of organisations scrolled at speed up the screen behind him. As he spoke, the list sped up, until it seemed to fuse into one stream of bright, white light:

> It is my belief that we are part of a movement that is greater and deeper and broader than we ourselves know, or can know. It flies under the radar of the media, by and large. It is non violent, it is grassroots; it has no cluster bombs, no armies and no helicopters. It has no central ideology. A male vertebra is not in charge. This unnamed movement is the most diverse movement the world has ever seen. The very word movement, I think, is too small to describe it. No one started this world view, no one is in charge of it, there is no orthodoxy... It is global, classless, unquenchable and tireless. The shared understanding is arising spontaneously from different economic sectors, cultures, regions and cohorts; it is growing and spreading worldwide with no exception. It has many roots, but primarily the origins are indigenous culture, the environment and social justice movements. Those 3 sectors and their sub sectors are intertwining, morphing, enlarging… it is marked by kinship and community and symbiosis…it's the earth talking back, waking up...

*Paul Hawkin addressing Bioneers gathering, April 2007*

In early 2008, on a cold February day in Fife, Scotland, I sat riveted to the YouTube clip. It seemed to sum up so much of what I wanted to make some contribution towards. In my excitement, I decided to open the next session of a Centre for Human Ecology module I was leading at the time with the clip. The sense of an emerging global movement that Hawkin described was visceral - it brought back memories of many, many organisations and people my wife Tara and I had visited during an eighteen month round-the-world journey we‘d made following our wedding in early January, 2000.

We had spent long spells of the trip volunteering with community development organisations in South and North India, Mindinao (Indonesia), northern New South Wales (Australia) and North Island Aotearoa (New Zealand). When we returned to Scotland from our travels in 2001, we mounted an exhibition reflecting on the we had visited, and on how we observed a pattern that many of the people we had the privilege to meet were attempting to cope with the impacts of neoliberal economic globalization, ecological collapse following industrial monoculture devastation of previous virgin forests (Indonesia) and, arguably, early impacts of climate change (in northern New South Wales, for example). The exhibition had excerpts from our

---

1 see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N1fiubmOqH4
diaries, photos, drawings, and a ‘sound walk’ of songs we had written – and learned - en route.

I was really happy with how one song in particular had turned out. It seemed to capture an essence of learning from our journey, rooted in our experience of staying with a farming family in a remote village in Ladakh. I made up a poster of the lyrics for our ‘coming to our senses’ exhibition:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before the trucks came,</th>
<th>But when the trucks came,</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the mountain spirits knew where we belonged</td>
<td>we began to doubt what we'd known all along</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Before the trucks came,</td>
<td>When the trucks came, we were told</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the bubbling streams were the focus of our homes</td>
<td>we were poor, we were dumb, we were wrong!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>It all started in ’69 when they opened up the borders ...</th>
<th>They took our children to train in schools that stole their mother tongue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Over high passes and into our land came folks from every quarter</td>
<td>They took our young men into an army that turned them into automatons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some were amazed to see the scenery,</td>
<td>And I heard today that in a monastery three Buddhist monks were killed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some were entranced by our Buddhist philosophy</td>
<td>Now the town's death quiet with a brittle curfew - Just as the zealots willed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But we came face to face with the ghosts of an age that didn't sing our songs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the final years of the century resistance began to grow

Thousands of women from across the land remembered what they already knew.

'We'll take pride in who we are... our customs, food and land

We'll meet this global storm with spirit, we'll lead our children to a conscious land'

Now the mountain spirits know where we belong

And the bubbling streams are the focus of our homes

We no longer doubt what we've known all along

We tell this tale as a warning to what can go wrong!

I had written the song towards the end of our stay in Ladakh, where we’d been participating in a farm-stay programme organised by the UK based International Society for Ecology and Culture (ISEC):

When I saw a brass pot replaced by a pink plastic bucket, yak-hair shoes thrown out in favour of cheap modern ones, my initial reaction was one of horror. But I would soon find myself thinking that I had no right to impose my aesthetic preferences or tell people what was good for them. The intrusions of the modern world might seem ugly and inappropriate, but surely they brought material benefits. It was only after several years that I began to piece these individual instances together and see them as aspects of a single process: the systematic dismantling of the Ladakhi culture. I began to see the minor incremental changes in everyday life - a new pair of shoes, a new concrete house - as part of the bigger picture of economic dependence, cultural rejection, and environmental degradation.

Norberg-Hodge (1991:142)

The book had been written by Norberg-Hodge in the late 1980s after she had witnessed, over twenty years, the impacts of modernity on this previously isolated mountain region. It was a compelling story and one that had helped shape our plans for the 'trip of a lifetime' in the first place. We were curious though – was the picture...
really as Hodge had claimed? Wasn’t it a bit romanticized? Could traditional Ladakhi life - as the ISEC narrative claimed - really hold some clues about the dynamics of sustaining genuinely resilient and sustainable communities in other places?

Norberg-Hodge explicitly advocates for this transferability of lessons in her work – the key lesson being that “people need to feel connected, a relationship with the place they live, the Earth under their feet… And they also need to feel a firm sense of identity that they get through long-term relationships with other people.” (transcribed from the film Learning in Ladakh). ISEC’s invitation was to visit Ladakh on a ‘farm stay’ programme where both local hosts - and their foreign guests – might learn something from each other:

Ladakh, or “Little Tibet”, is a wildly beautiful desert region high in the Western Himalayas. Villages are composed of anything from a few houses to more than one hundred, set in emerald oases in a rugged, mountainous desert, at altitudes ranging from 10,000 to 14,000 feet (from 3,000 to 4,300 m). Ladakh is a place of few resources and has an extreme climate, yet it was home to a thriving culture for more than a thousand years. Traditions of frugality and co-operation, coupled with an intimate knowledge of the local environment, enabled the Ladakhis not only to survive, but also to prosper…

Participants [in the farm stay programme] have the rare opportunity to immerse themselves in the ancient culture of Ladakh, while gaining a deep understanding of the changes wrought by globalization. The workshops put the participants’ experience in Ladakh into an international context and help them to see the overall economic, environmental and psychological costs of the global economy. Participants also learn about the positive effects of strengthening local culture, community and knowledge and about inspiring initiatives both in Ladakh and around the world.

Source: http://www.localfutures.org/ladakh-project

During our time in Ladakh we came to broadly accept that the observations in Learning from Ladakh were accurate. If anything, our time there showed up the tensions more intensely. ‘Before the Trucks Came’ was an attempt to communicate this intensity – the line about the army, for example, refers to a point where we passed an enormous Indian army encampment over miles of dry desert not far from the village where we were staying. They were on high alert in case violence escalated on the Pakistani border further down the Zanskar valley. I couldn’t imagine a bigger contrast with the previous days when we had hiked up to the high pastures, carrying baby goats and staying in huts almost indistinguishable from the mountainside they were grafted into.

The song, however, was also a statement of intent and hope for the work we wanted to do now we were back in the UK. It chimed with the broader message of our exhibition – that we had seen for ourselves how the kinds of dynamics that Norberg-Hodge was talking about are playing out everywhere… but that with creativity and collaborative learning people in places could become more conscious of the dynamics of ‘colonisation of the mind’ (a term popularized by Indian activist Vandana Shiva), and through this process making real a slogan of the global justice movement that ‘another world is possible’.
2 About this Thesis

2.1 Research Question and thesis overview

This thesis introduces and pursues a central research question, being

- **How can digital social technologies augment and enhance traditional social learning approaches to the design and development of a Community of Practice (CoP) for widely dispersed rural resilience practitioners?**

The story of developing a Community of Practice for rural resilience pioneers (‘Fiery Spirits’) shows that new media and information sharing technologies can be used to generate and pursue novel forms of second and third person inquiry.

The story suggests that it is important for action researchers developing such systems to pay inquiring attention to both the design of the social learning architecture as a purposeful, safe and welcoming learning container; as well as to encouraging and enabling ‘catalyst’ facilitators within this container to create and inhabit online spaces confidently and authentically - as this can then help others to do likewise.

We have learned that in this way, diverse voices can start to share their (multi-media) stories, and skillful curation can then enable inquiry participants to make sense of patterns between and across their stories through the act of generating multi-media resources intended to communicate learning onwards.

2.2 A note on the structure and form of the thesis

*However much we name and frame what we think we are doing... form is a meta communication, analogically ‘framing’ that digital attempt at clarification, which thus may be contradicted or rendered meaningless.*

*(Marshall 2008: 682)*

The primary consideration I have taken account of in developing an appropriate structure and form for this thesis is of a desire to communicate as clearly as possible with my reader a research story that has taken many years. Sometimes, the research journey has been tangled, messy, confused and disrupted; at other times, elements flowed with purposeful and focused vigour. My intention is that the form of this thesis is able to allow my reader to taste and witness and enter into an inquiry with me across a range of these qualities, held by a structure that is clear and well signposted enough to offer a satisfying read where figure emerges clearly from ground.

Below, I offer a summary chapter-by-chapter guide showing how the material it contains helps to develop the research questions outlined above. The intention is that alongside signposting within each chapter, this table will help my reader maintain an overview of the thesis as a whole and how its constituent parts relate and build upon one other.
2.3 Chapter Summary

The Prologue (Chapter 1) has set the scene for a story of inquiry that occupies the central chapters of this thesis with an account of a trip to Ladakh in 2000.

Chapter 2 (this chapter) invites my reader alongside a world-view and way of being (ontology) that has informed the research process from the outset. It makes explicit why and how I came to decide to follow an action research approach in this research; and shows how my early years as a doctoral student influenced me to attempt to embody as well as encourage co-researchers to experiment with listening simultaneously to ways of knowing through ‘heart, hands and head’ (that is, an extended epistemology). This discussion is the context for an introduction to the research methodology I developed to pursue the research questions.

Chapter 3 introduces the context of the research by introducing resources, references and inspiration points that helped to shape the research question and foci of this thesis. The chapter points to places in the practice accounts of later chapters where these theories were tried out, tested, revised and left behind.

Chapter 4 comprises a reflective practice account that begins with the story of a first person inquiry into the ‘starting conditions’ for the FierySpirits CoP; continues with the story of convening a second person inquiry into ‘hosting’ the CoP during 2009 and 2010, with a particular focus on learning emerging from our efforts to construct and bring to life an online social networking hub. In the light of this learning, we reflect on some learning emerging about the early design and facilitation moves we made in establishing the CoP.

Chapter 5 focuses into a co-inquiry hosted within fieryspirits into community resilience (the ‘domain’ of the CoP). It shows how this inquiry involved several hundred contributors at face-face and through multimedia and social networking, towards co-producing a handbook called Exploring Community Resilience. The publication itself is included in the Appendix 1 of the thesis, enabling the reader to experience the format and presentation of this social-media enabled publication, as well as coming up close alongside CoP members’ stories, insights, and a some new theory emerging from these about how social learning systems such as fieryspirits.com can be helpful for people who are wanting to build the resilience of their own local communities.

Chapter 6 harvests learning emerging from the thesis as a whole and asks ‘so what’ does this mean in relation to our research questions, as well as methodologically? The chapter is structured through a new iteration of the compass mnemonic that foregrounds four dimensions and three spaces of ‘digitally augmented social learning/action research’ practice.

An Epilogue draws on a series of inquiries conducted within the CoP during 2011 and 2012 to offer a view on what action research in the ‘digital wilds’ might look like in the future; and

An Endnote brings us full circle, connecting with the prologue and the experiences of visiting Ladakh that it contained, and asking once again how we might live meaningfully at this time, supporting the flourishing, resilient human communities of place, interest and practice.
2.4 A note on fonts and formats used
I have adopted the following conventions throughout this thesis:

The main narrative of the research story and inquiries within this is presented in Helvetica Neue font (this typeface) as it is an unfussy and clear typeface that I hope my reader will find easy on the eyes.

All quotes from data or sources are inset, as here.

*With a source listed immediately below, in italics and right-aligned.*

In addition, I have put a box around extended quotes being used as evidence or data when there are no significant edits to this original source.

*All Diary entries are inset as well, and presented in italics.*

Pictures and graphics are placed in line with - or as near as possible to – the text which refers to them. Occasionally – due to size – they occupy a page on their own.

Up to five levels of Headings are used (numbered with roman numerals) to aid navigation between chapters, sections and sub-sections. These headings are presented in different sizes of Blue Calabri font.

Material in the Appendices diverges from these formatting conventions as they are to be treated as raw ‘data’ and – as part of this ‘data’ is the presentational qualities of the material – we have retained the original formatting.
2.5 Ontology and theories of change

We are now living, it seems, in a time of simultaneous ecological, social, political and economic shock. It is a central assumption of this thesis that we have choice about how to live with this knowledge: to bury our heads in the sand, or to attempt to take a more inquiring, conscious path: to find ways to join together to learn whether it might be possible to build communities resilient enough to survive – and even thrive – through whatever the future holds.

This context represents a profound ontological challenge: we collectively have an opportunity to transition toward embodying a participatory world-view that senses and understands the implications of the capacity of our planet’s ecologies to sustain life for humans and most of the other species that co-inhabit earth with us today.

The Journal *Ecology and Society* has often carried papers reflecting our dawning understanding of this challenge in systems language. A recent example concludes:

> the interaction of strong global drivers, increased potential for the propagation of disturbances across systems, and the heightened likelihood of policy responses in one region affecting other regions can lead to a concatenation of crises. Scientific capacity for the early detection of dangerous and potentially propagating crises needs to be advanced, as does understanding and awareness of feedbacks and interdependencies that can lead to impacts spreading to other systems. Globally coherent strategies for the management of large crises, supported by a mind-set that uses crises as an opportunity for learning, are required.


Whilst systems thinking – and the more recent emergence of complexity science – can help to describe some of the dynamics of the massively inter-dependent web of life, it can only point to the urgency of answering questions like ‘how did we get into this mess?’ and more importantly ‘how do we get out of it?’.

My CARRP MPhil transfer paper (2007) told a story – in some depth – of arriving into the field of action research hoping that it might lead me closer to some answers to these questions. I wrote about how a series of inquiries focusing on existential questions of purpose had helped me to articulate what being a ‘change agent’ was about. In the concluding paragraph, I wrote:

> My core purpose is to help cultivate resilient, life-giving communities of place and practice, as part of a wider movement for ecological sustainability and global justice.

*December 17th 2007*

In this passage I was attempting to voice a way of being positively alive amidst a growing awareness of the devastation that we humans are wreaking. When all else falls away, I was asking myself, what are the anchors that I draw on? What is my ontological ground?

2 Available at [http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol16/iss2/art27/](http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol16/iss2/art27/)
2.5.1 Meeting Joanna Macy

As this inquiry continued, I remembered a ‘deep ecology’ workshop I had attended with Joanna Macy3 in 1994. I decided to re-connect with Joanna Macy and attended a workshop she offered – and was struck by the grace and depth of her teaching there. In particular, I heard an emphasis on practicing gratitude at realizing the gift of participating in a living, evolving cosmos. Joanna called this ‘our opportunity to participate in Gaia’s self-healing’: becoming more and more emotionally and spiritually present to ecological collapse and simultaneously noticing how this awareness is a fervent call to love – and serve – life. This language seemed particularly helpful for me at the time; a way to get closer to teachings of nondual consciousness, unified fields and other languages of spiritual awakening. Joanna has written:

In early Theravada Buddhism the term bodhisattva refers to the earlier lives of Gautama the Buddha. He had lots of them, and in each he practiced and grew in compassion and wisdom. These are the hallmarks of a bodhisattva: compassion and insight into the interconnectedness of all beings. And he developed those capacities not just in human lives, but also in nonhuman lives.

…. unconditional presence is the first and essential act we must make. Simply to be there with open eyes, open ears, open heart. All else flows from that.

In the earliest Mahayana texts, the Perfection of Wisdom scriptures, the bodhisattva is portrayed as flying on two wings. These sutras explain at length that the bodhisattva doesn’t have any place to stand, because there is no turf, views or possessions that she can call her own. Nor is there a solid self, or an unchanging identity, or any security, as we understand security. What security can there be for the bodhisattva, if you take seriously the Buddha’s teaching of the nature of the self?

**Spirituality and security: Joanna Macy, Sulak Sivaraksa, and Alan Watts**

on interconnection, compassion, and living without guarantees

*Whole Earth, Fall, 2002*

Today, Joanna’s invitation to follow the way of the Bodhisattva continues to provide an ontological grounding and aspiration to more fully accept an invitation, with grace, to access a consciousness of radically inter-connectivity and, with it, hope. ‘Reweaving the web’, I try to remind myself, can be a conscious, active participation in a co-creating cosmos – helped by learning to notice when I’m in the flow, or getting in the way of, this cosmic impulse flowing through all things.

3 “Eco-philosopher Joanna Macy PhD, is a scholar of Buddhism, general systems theory, and deep ecology. A respected voice in the movements for peace, justice, and ecology, she interweaves her scholarship with five decades of activism. As the root teacher of the Work That Reconnects, she has created a ground-breaking theoretical framework for personal and social change, as well as a powerful workshop methodology for its application.” – from [http://www.joannamacy.net/aboutjoannamacy.html](http://www.joannamacy.net/aboutjoannamacy.html)
It is this ontology that underpins my confidence that it is possible to transform communities and cultures still dominated by reductionist mindsets; and that these transformations are much more likely if they are supported by congruent ways of being, seeing and knowing. This implies that it will be worthwhile to make an effort towards epistemological and methodological experimentation even within systems that seem apparently resistant to transformational practices. This is the type of context where the research that this thesis reports on was conducted.

2.5.2 Towards an extended epistemology

In the early years of the twentieth century, Scotsman Patrick Geddes advocated that learning could be best achieved through a balance of ‘heart, hand and head’ intelligences:

First Heart, engaging their curiosity and sense of wonder;
next Hand, touching, feeling, and working directly with a subject;
and finally, Head, conceptualisation and internalisation of ideas derived from experience and reflection.

Source: Patrick Geddes Trust website

Geddes was thus an early advocate for an extended epistemology as an integral part of his ‘Scots Generalism’ that informed his work as an architect, planner, teacher and general polymath. It was during a ‘Geddes walk’ led by Murdo McDonald of Dundee University around Edinburgh’s Old Town in 1994 that I first heard the phrase ‘heart, hand and head’ – and realized how this pedagogy could have a direct impact on the design of communities.

Early in 2004, I joined a community of action researchers at the Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice at the University of Bath on the basis of a gut instinct that this was a community of scholars sympathetic with Geddesian holism. I had applied to CARRP inspired primarily by Peter Reason’s proposal in Participation in Human Inquiry (1994) for a cosmology of ‘conscious participation’, and the direct link with collaborative inquiry methodologies. As I later read my way deeper into the notion of an ‘action turn’ it became clearer that the CARRP school of Action Research tended to position AR as a stance on inquiry, particularly emphasizing an embeddedness of first, second and third person approaches; and that this nested holarchy of inquiring had striking implications for where, and at what, an action researcher would look. Research through this lens would be less a solitary, backward looking attempt to construct theory from past cases; and more a positive, collaborative and forward-looking practice of living more inquiringly in the present moment:

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4 Taken from Patrick Geddes Trust website: http://www.patrickgeddestrust.co.uk/articlespapers.htm
5 This walk had been organized as part of the introductory programme for a Masters’ Degree in Human Ecology, being run by the Centre for Human Ecology (CHE) at Edinburgh University. Geddes’ framework had a key shaping influence on the entire course. Over the following ten years, I went on to become a Director and Lecturer on the programme – and in 2012 colleagues and I collaborated to tell a story of the CHE comprising several chapters of a textbook called Radical Human Ecology, published by Ashgate (Williams, Roberts and McIntosh eds. 2012). As this material offers additional contextualization for the narrative developed by this thesis I compiled chapters written by CHE contributors (including my own) into a PDF: http://nickwilding.com/publications/RadicalHumanEcologyCHEContributions.pdf

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Action research is a family of practices of living inquiry that aims, in a great variety of ways, to link practice and ideas in the service of human flourishing. It is not so much a *methodology* as an *orientation to inquiry* that seeks to create participative communities of inquiry in which qualities of engagement, curiosity, and question posing are brought to bear on significant practical issues.

*Reason and Bradbury 2008*

The purpose of inquiry is ... to forge a more direct link between intellectual knowledge and moment-to-moment personal and social action, so that inquiry contributes directly to the flourishing of human persons, their communities and the ecosystems of which they are part ... inquiry after the action turn aims at timely, voluntary, mutual, validity-testing, transformative action at all moments of living ...

*Reason and Torbert 2001: 6*

It was thus through Reason, Torbert, and framers of a post-positivist action research that I began to experiment with adopting a language of inquiry and action logics for establishing communities of inquiry rooted in wider communities of place and practice - that resonated with my gut intuition that this was exactly what was needed for building more sustainable and resilient communities.

I started to crystallise a sense of how these communities of inquiry (or of ‘learning and practice’ as I began to call them) could be the mechanism by which many groups might learn to see and sense the evolutionary change dynamics of our lives, organizations and projects ... and to tasting the paradigm shift towards a participatory cosmology sitting underneath these dynamics.

As I immersed myself in CARRP’s culture of learning I discovered a language of ‘extended epistemology’ as a route toward ‘tasting’ – and from their coming to embody (or ‘walk the talk’) of this paradigm shift.

In *Participation in Human Inquiry (ibid.)*, Peter Reason draws attention to the possibility of

> A form of consciousness rooted in concrete experience and grounded in the body; characterized by self-awareness and self-reflection; experience is ordered through a sense of pattern and form rather than by discrete objects; there is a much deeper appreciation of the alienating power of conceptual language and more active and aware use of imagination and metaphor.

*Reason 1994*

This amounts to an invitation to make space within research for intelligences of the senses beyond those of the rational brain. The invitation is a challenging one as it asks us as action researchers to make active choices to include as evidence, or data – and therefore foreground – hunches, gut instincts, and otherwise marginalized voices which within ‘normal’ research remain undifferentiated as background ‘noise’.

It follows that the more ‘normalizing’ the context of the research, the more challenging it becomes to win and sustain such space. These are the kinds of contexts inhabited by the researching reported on throughout this thesis: places
where modernist assumptions of rationality continue to go unrecognized as assumptions; and where emotional range and psychological literacy amount to aberrations in otherwise starkly ‘productive’ organizational landscapes.

To survive as an action researcher in such a context is not straightforward – and in my experience has necessitated developing strategies to prevent a kind of ‘numbing out’ and forgetting of the possibilities of this richness of knowing thriving at or beyond the margins of the mainstream. I have come to realize that if I am not ‘numbed out’, then I am likely to be experiencing the pain of the disconnection between an intent to embody extended epistemologies and stifling pressures of organizational immune systems.

The choice I have faced through this work is to therefore try to stay in touch with and inquire into and through this pain; and by staying present with it to allow it to give energy to repeated attempts to open up and deepen more inquiring research spaces. Before I elaborate on some of the methodological tactics that colleagues and I evolved through these attempts, it will be helpful to draw from a story of first person inquiry from my early years at CARRP. It introduces a set of questions, informed by developmental psychologists Carol Gilligan and Terence Real, about some ways in which dissociation (of head from heart, for example) comes about in the experiences of girls and boys; and shows how these questions have helped me learn to stay more present when under pressure - and therefore potentially better able to stand up for – and open up – the kinds of richly catalytic learning spaces I propose can support paradigmatic transformations in people and organisations. As well as deepening our exploration of this idea of ‘presence’ and the necessity – in the emerging theory of change proposed here – of first person inquiring to support this, this story serves to point toward a significant investment of energy and first person inquiring that has gone into underpinning the second and third person research stories which are foregrounded in this thesis.

2.5.3 Knowing voices and third person action research as developing ‘sounding boards’

in the fields,
unexpected, after a terrible storm,
opening a purple
mouth to the rain,
with not a thought to the future,
ignorant of the grass and the graveyard of leaves around,
forgetting its own beginning.

Love should grow like a wild iris
but does not.

Love more often is to be found in kitchens at the dinner hour,
tired out and hungry, lingers over tables in houses where
the walls record movements, while the cook is probably angry,
and the ingredients of the meal are budgeted, while
a child cries feed me now and her mother not quite
hysterical says over and over, wait just a bit, just a bit,

love should grow up in the fields like a wild iris
but never does
really startle anyone, was to be expected, was to be
predicted, is almost absurd, goes on from day to day, not quite
blindly, gets taken to the cleaners every fall, sings old
songs over and over, and falls on the same piece of rug that
never gets tacked down, gives up, wants to hide, is not
brave, knows too much, is not like an
iris growing wild but more like
staring into space
in the street
not quite sure
which door it was, annoyed about the sidewalk being
slippery, trying all the doors, thinking
if love wished the world to be well, it would be well.

Love should
grow up like a wild iris, but doesn't, it comes from
the midst of everything else, sees like the iris
of an eye, when the light is right,
feels in blindness and when there is nothing else is
tender, blinks, and opens
face up to the skies.

Griffin (1998) - Love Should Grow Up Like a Wild Iris in the Fields

Early in the CARRP process I found myself inquiring into the quality of my presence
in challenging contexts – and in particular, to learn how to notice the quality of my
voice as an indicator of how present or not I might be. I wanted to be a better active
listener, able to pick up the energies and atmospheres of a room and a group in
order to be able to better serve the fulfillment of that group’s potential.

This inquiry led me to pay particular attention to the qualities of my own presence. I
learned to hear when a taught, constrained voice appeared to cut head from the rest
of the body (heart/hands/feet/guts) and constrain epistemological possibility; and
through this noticing developed a conscious practice of breathing to reconnect
these body intelligences again in service of serving better the work in the world I
was engaged with.

In my CARRP Diploma and MPhil transfer papers, these stories were developed at
length. I included images of disembodiment; and stories of moments – tense
meetings concerned with institutional politics; moments of educational trauma;
moments when facilitating groups – that showed how this breathing/voice practice
seemed to help me to hold ground in service of more participatory paradigms that
have long stood as a guiding aspiration for my professional practice.

I showed how I had developed a short-hand that equated ‘love’ with that sense of
well-voiced connectedness; and ‘fear’ with disembodiment and disconnectedness. I
developed this epistemological shorthand as a way to remind myself that a choice
to be more present – and therefore more human - always exists.

In this way, I have come to claim this first person practice of tuning into the
dynamics of love and fear within myself as a way to learn how to better pay
attention to them in others as an integral part of ‘Nick’s action research
methodology’. Although the focus of this thesis is not on developing more effective
first person ‘presencing’ practices, the methodology I have developed rests on and
has developed from this earlier work; and resonates with Susan Griffin’s suggestion that love ‘comes from the midst of everything else’.

As I experimented with – and read into others’ experiences with – embodied voice work, I began to appreciate in particular a metaphor of ‘voicing over’ used by Carol Gilligan in *The Birth of Pleasure* (Gilligan 2002). This work built on her earlier work proposing a psychology of women’s development (Gilligan 1993) that proposed how ‘women’s’ ways of knowing’ were different from the dominant construction/understanding of more masculine forms of knowing (characterized and valorized as linear and rational).

In a passage that Gilligan wrote that particularly grabbed my attention, she articulates a theory that psychic dissociation (voicing over) may have profound implications beyond the self, and into the social/political sphere:

> The psyche resists dissociation, surviving beneath this effective but costly evolutionary adaptation to survive trauma. Recovering this voice can be seen as a form of radical political action….

> Trauma is the shock to the psyche that leads to dissociation; our ability to separate ourselves from parts of ourselves, to create a split within ourselves so that we can know and also not know what we know, feel and yet not feel our feelings. It is our ability, as Freud put it in *Studies on Hysteria*, to hold parts of our experience not as a secret from others but as a ‘foreign body’ within ourselves….

> The sudden high incidence of depression, eating disorders ranging from anorexia to obesity, problems in learning and destructive behavior amongst girls at adolescence parallels the heightened risk to boys’ resiliency in the late years of early childhood, roughly around the age of five - the time Freud marked as the Oedipal crisis.

*Gilligan (1993:4-10)*

What, I wondered, are the political implications of girls and boys experiencing dissociation of passionate, feeling-ful, intimate selves early in my/our development? And as I started imagining out these implications, I found Mikel Brown writing that

> The girls who do so [become silenced] ... risk losing the capacity to locate the source of their pain and thus to do something about it. They risk losing the potential for a once original, healthy resistance to turn political. Without anger there is no impetus to act against injustice done to them. If we take away girl’s anger, then, we take away the foundation for women’s political resistance.

*Brown (1998)*

I discovered that Carol Gilligan had gone on to work with a voice coach offering workshops where mothers and daughters aimed to encourage each other towards re-discovering their ‘authentic voices’. Elsewhere in *The Birth of Pleasure*, Gilligan describes her work with couple counselor Terence Real and recounts his suggestion that boys experience pressures to ‘voice over’ even earlier than girls – he suggests age four or five – and that some of the strongest impacts of this voicing over emerge as boys become men and attempt to sustain loving relationships with their partners. Gilligan writes
“From years of listening to people in therapy, Terry Real has an acute ear for the silences surrounding traumatic experiences. To our work with couples, I brought an understanding of the resonances that encourage women to speak freely, especially in the presence of men, and also a map of development drawn from my research with adolescent girls and young boys. My ear was tuned to the voice of pleasure – not the remembered voice but the actual voice from those times in development that typically precede the onset of dissociation.”

(Gilligan, ibid.)

As I encountered this material, something clicked deep inside. These stories rang true to my experience working with breath, releasing the throat and unlocking greater fullness of my physical voice whilst acting in stressed contexts, and related work unlocking held-nesses – that I came to understand as ‘armouring’ – in my muscles. I started to understand how this might matter in the world at large; and why an extended epistemology that attends to healing dissociations of mind and body can be so powerful – and so threatening to domination structures and mindsets whose resilience depends on the perpetuation of these splits.

This ‘clicking’ resulted set in train a new inquiry line – to attempt to hear and amplify my own and others’ ‘authentic’ voices – understanding ‘authenticity’ to be the unique synthesis of each persons’ multiple intelligences. During this inquiry I attended a workshop called the Art of Hosting. We now briefly join the workshop during a ‘peak experience’ as I came to notice and name what this synthesis felt and looked like within myself. Through this, I started to consciously connect two hitherto separated intelligences – that of the musician, and that of the group facilitator. I became more aware of an ever-present call to rhythm and melody; and I started experimenting more consciously in my action research writing, facilitation and intention-setting with using metaphors and a vocabulary that facilitated these intelligences to connect more easily (for example, ‘tuning in’, ‘playing’, ‘rhythm’, ‘timbre’).

2.5.4 On ‘Resonance’: Art of Hosting workshop (2006)
The Art of Hosting is a four day workshop offered by an international collaborative of facilitators interested in how complex adaptive systems thinking can inform leadership development and ‘hosting’ practice. On our third evening together, we were invited into the drawing room of Hawkwood House for a ‘fireside chat’. I remembered the session in the following way in a diary entry a week later:

Joan has opened his ‘fireside chat’ with a question, ‘remaindered’ from today’s open space, where earlier we asked what it was we needed to learn about hosting conversations that matter. He asked ‘what makes us tick? Why are we involved in this work?’; I offered to share some fiddle playing then. As we sat, Joan invited me to play something – ‘perhaps Bach?’ – to start us off.

6 The ‘Art of Hosting’ website and course details are found at: http://www.artofhosting.org. Some of these colleagues have gone on to work at Reos Partners with Adam Kahane whose book Power and Love (2010) also explores the place of working with archetypal energies similar to those summarized by ‘order and chaos’ (or we might say the masculine and feminine principles) in facilitating complex, messy and ‘stuck’ systems.
The up-bow comes down with a crunch, almost at the tip, an ice-breaking ship ploughing into a choppy, cool sea. The low G doesn’t have a moment before I hammer down my first finger to make an A, still over that note, the bow now gliding more fully, racing along, the long note it draws out beginning to fill out the room, an earth fire spluttering against an arctic breeze.

Before the turn, a fleeting musky hint of wobble, a vibrato birth but a story overtaken the climbing notes that scale a D where the vibrato shades in fractionally earlier and the warmth begins to lap the curtains. My side arches as the arm and bow curve, outlining another climb, a resolution and rolling surf to the next G in the scale. As soon as it arrives the open string beside it starts its call and now there’s rhythmic welling pitcher of waves that cycle energy in spiral pulses that attend to each other as their harmonics intertw ine as the bow swings down again and announces a repeat of the pattern, down the octave, capturing the G, A, B, D, E, D, E, G until we can settle on a low E long enough to allow the vibrato to engulf me and my foot taps and all the flow state is here...

The silence lingers more. Gathering moments, curls of weightless intention brooding, rising, pre-sensing. I feel calm, I’m entering another place now, an entrance that I have grown familiar with, a gateway into a way of being present that I haven’t, until now, connected with language.

When I put the fiddle down after about twenty notes say something like: “This note – it’s incredible resonance – is just like what we’re doing here. Playing the violin, I’m all here, present, in my body, alive. This presence feels like what we’re talking about here, in the work of hosting space for life, of tuning into a path on the edge of chaos and order. Just here, now. The waves of sound are waves of energy that I tune into. I sense those waves rippling out from here, us together amplifying each other, out of this room, rippling in sympathy with the leaves on the trees and the clouds in the sky. That’s my sense of how it is with the music, and how it is with this hosting. It’s just the same. That’s what makes me tick”.

I put the violin down and glance, quickly, at some of the faces in the room that I hope will be hearing me. Maria, Sarah, Amanda, Joan. Over the next day some people offer me feedback. I am practicing hearing this kind of positive feedback because I am not used to really hearing it.

Diary

Two hitherto compartmentalised parts of my world, music-making and facilitation, had come together that evening. It was as if I had tasted more life than I was used to, and rejuvenated in a yearning to learn how to be a good ‘host’ of learning community, fiddle in hand.
The workshop fired me up and I began to reframe the work I was doing at the time through the language of ‘hosting emergence’ rather than as ‘facilitation’ or ‘training’ as I had tended to do before. This was a language of ‘learning containers’ and ‘creating the conditions for emergence’; of seeking ‘the simplicity beyond the complexity’ and aspiring to ‘authenticity’ and ‘congruence’ as a ‘host’; and of ‘enabling’ groups to ‘self-organise’ by ‘tuning in’ to a balance of energies of ‘order’ and ‘chaos’. This new language seemed to cast what I had hitherto found as a rather dry theoretical realm of complex adaptive systems in a more poetic light which I found fitted well a new identity as a ‘host’ of learning that I began to try out.

As I played with the new language of ‘hosting’ – which showed how large groups could work together through ‘world café’ and ‘open space’ technologies - and reflected on the political implications of Gilligan and Real’s developmental psychology in terms of the work of giving authentic voice to marginalized voices - I started to become curious about how a practice – as a network builder – of resonance building and might be effective in catalyzing a shift from second person action research (that is, inquiries conducted by relatively small groups of people who come to know and trust one another), into third person action research.

In a violin, a sound-post is a tiny piece of wood used to provide a sound bridge between the back and front sides of the instrument. If it is just the right size, and in just the right place, the sound-post can make a massive difference to the power and resonance of the instrument – enabling it to reach as far as the back of a grand concert hall. The sounding board on a piano performs the same function: with just the right physical properties, its sympathetic resonance multiples the harmonic properties across sustaining chords such that the richness, timbre, reach and voice of the instrument can become highly textured and individual. Playing such a piano seems somehow much easier than one that doesn’t have this sense of taut, resonant balance: it is as if the reverberant confidence of the instrument infects the player, and vice versa.

As a metaphor for effective action research, it seemed to me that ‘resonance’ had huge potential, suggesting a combination of voices reaching a full authenticity in their perspectives on truth and thereby helping to reveal to a whole the further collaborative possibilities. And without this resonance built into third person action research designs, voices – like those of a violin that is poorly set up – risked being drowned out, inaudible, receding into silence.

This intuition about the importance of resonance in the context of constructing effective ‘sounding boards’ was a significant inspiration behind my decision to attempt to play a stronger role in supporting the emergence of stronger community-based networking – in service of the wider unfolding of the local/global community-based sustainability movement.

As this intuition was forming, I was invited to support Carnegie UK Trust in its own learning journey about how best to support rural community development practitioners. This helped to frame a question: could - I asked myself – this be an opportunity to research an emerging practice as a developer and tuner of networks as ‘sounding boards’ capable of allowing the unique voices of local stories to be heard whilst also supporting their amplification alongside many others into a chorus of symphonic proportions? What kind of orchestration would we need – and what, if any, is the conductor’s role?
2.5.5 An emerging first person inquiry practice

We now review some of the first person inquiry practices that have yielded the data and learning that sits across the core narratives of this thesis.

As we have seen above, my early first person inquiries had come to focus on becoming more ‘present’ as a key to becoming a more effective facilitator of group work. In particular, I had evolved both written and in-the-moment methods for listening to an extended range of voices through this inquiry. A ‘Freefall writing’ approach\(^7\) encouraged the emergence of presentational knowing through spontaneous, stream-of-consciousness writing over short periods (five to fifteen minutes, typically); and then more narrative or poetic accounts looked back at remembered ‘moments’ of practice in an effort to slow them down and inquire into particular feelings, sensations, speech-acts, or other elements of knowing emerging as figure from ground at that particular time. Later, I would revisit both freefall and remembered pieces to over-write a second column that contained the narrative of a more critical consciousness looking for patterns, unconscious habits (shadows), and points of particular energy that could represent the starting point for a new inquiry. In addition, I was cultivating ways to become more present to the quality of my physical voice whilst facilitating group work. I had begun to use audio and video recording to capture these qualities and aid me in reviewing them afterwards.

In my MPhil transfer paper (2007), I summarised some of the key learning that these years of first person inquiry had brought into focus – and how this work had in turn given me a new sense of focus and intent to work at greater scale and refocus toward second and third person inquiry methodologies into the (then) future:

As I have integrated learning from the long-term first-person inquiry into my experience of agency and confidence which I point to here, a clear, core question has emerged how to embody a more effective and agentic stance in my PhD work generally. Practical outcomes of this inquiry include:

- A developing practice of embodied voice-work, a breathing/noticing/energetic technique I continue to evolve to help sustain a ‘bigger me’ (‘having my head above the water’), especially in contexts those traumatised parts of me may be triggered;
- A connected inquiry into my practice leading a course on ‘finding voice’ which I have developed for MSc students and is now in its fourth iteration;
- A curiosity for how theories of transformative learning and integrative/integral psychology and spirituality - which I value in my professional practice with groups – can also help me to sustain a ‘bigger picture’ perspective of my PhD/MPhil process as I experience another MPhil transfer process;
- An appreciation of qualities of authenticity as well as skillful question-posing in supervision support I’ve been offered at CARRP, and how these qualities have begun to help me move on from previous educational trauma;

\(^7\) Invented by Canadian W.O Mitchell and developed by Barbara Turner-Vesselago, the Freefall invitation is to write for a number of minutes non-stop, writing ‘fearwards’, noticing the censoring voice of the inner critic, and writing into detail wherever possible:

“The strongest energy will almost always be found in whatever we most fear to write about. It seems to gather where the ego’s shell is the weakest, just as water seeks out the cracks in any dyke.” Turner-Vesselago (1995: 11)
• More self-belief and, allied with this, more confidence, which has helped to hone...
• ...a more conscious approach to writing with the reader in mind.

From an almost exclusive emphasis in earlier papers on my inner journeys, I am beginning to turn outward to consider how this inner work might inform and connect with the outward-facing, structurally contextualised ‘in the world’ work that has dominated my professional life for many years but for different reasons, has tended to be marginalised from my CARRP writing.

Excerpt, MPhil Transfer Paper (2008)

2.6 Aspiring to a first, second and third person research methodology

If we live primarily in worlds of constructed meaning, and these meanings are of pivotal significance to our actions, then ... we are challenged to engage in the kind of research that creates futures about which we care. In this sense action research is a vanguard orientation. It represents the most forward looking orientation to practice existing with the social sciences.


This thesis follows the story – in a first person voice - of that research over four years as first I grappled with how to bring an ontology and related epistemological stance (as introduced above) alive within the context of Carnegie UK Trust’s Rural Programme; and then sought to involve colleagues, organizational partners, and later a growing membership of the CoP in the design and facilitation of a network for people interested in pursuing practical questions about how to ‘future-proof’ rural communities.

 Shortly after joining Carnegie UK Trust I wrote

How to track the impacts of the choices we are making as we design and then became actively involved facilitating the learning system we are creating? What’s working, and what isn’t – and how will we know? How will we surface unintended consequences arising from our actions? What will we learn about our skills as facilitators and researchers as the pace of work ramps up? Can we research all this in a way that learning can be shared with action researchers with similar ambitions?

Diary – March 23rd 2008

In the period immediately prior to joining Carnegie UK Trust, my diary is full on entries framing up research questions, approaches and possibilities. I was making a transition as a researcher from being an educator working primarily with groups of 15-18 people; to scaling up my ambition to develop a research framework capable of spanning territories of first, second and third person inquiry simultaneously. I wrote:

This is so exciting! I have three intentions for this work:

• Exercising effective facilitative leadership towards building rural community resilience from the standpoint of being a Carnegie employee;
• Supporting the Trust’s evolution towards its stated aim of becoming an ‘operating foundation’;
• Deepening my practice as an action researcher in service of these goals through experiments with opening, and then deepening, spaces for first, second and third-person inquiry.

**From a first person perspective**, I can inquire into the quality of my own facilitative leadership in pursuing an ‘asset based’ action research approach to the ongoing design and development of the CoP, as an employee of Carnegie UK Trust. I can do this through this diary, ‘freefall’ writing, and also I can record audio or video (with permission) conversations or workshops I facilitate, and I can also invite colleagues to offer me direct feedback about my work when appropriate;

**From a second person perspective**, we can establish and support collaborative inquiries (meeting face-face and online) focused around key ‘hot topic’ practice themes. The core partners of the CoP can have a collaborative inquiry too – into hosting a CoP! This hosts inquiry might then sow seeds of inquiry practices that they might find helpful in developing their own work; and

**From a third person perspective**, we can experiment with how to use social networking technology, integrated with face-face events, to try to catalyse the emergence of a wide scale learning network. Instead of lobbying politicians, as practitioners grow confidence by sharing and learning from their stories, we can help to shape those stories into inspiration that policy makers might like to integrate into their political platforms. We can use all kinds of techniques – like world café and open space facilitation – to help with this, as well as growing collective consciousness about cross-cutting patterns in our field. In addition, as second person hot topics mature we can develop resources – guides, handbooks, toolkits, policy documents – and distribute them through the networks that are meeting in the fieryspirits space.

Diary – March 12th 2008

From the outset I assumed that this PhD could pursue elements of first, second and third person inquiring to both track the major design choices of the CoP as a whole, as well as following some of the emerging research foci within the CoP as widening circles of co-researchers participated in defining research questions and developing appropriate methodologies together for tracking them.

In the first phase of the research I proposed that the work would be focused on bringing together a small group of ‘co-hosts’ of the CoP as a whole and that part of this work would be researching our own practice as co-inquirers. As I came to this work after several years supporting the emergence of co-inquiry groups (as participants on learning programmes I had directed), I reasoned that the suite of first and second person inquiry practices that I’d been developing in this earlier work (see below for more on this) offered a good basis for a methodological approach to characterize the first phase of the research.

Once it had been established, the core research group would then, I reasoned, be in a position to periodically review and refine the foci and methodological approach of the research. I hoped that this core group could in effect be close companions on my PhD research journey.

Over the course of the following four years, each of these assumptions were
severely challenged or overturned:

- Although early stages of the research did succeed in bringing together a proto-inquiry group; and the research methodology for this phase (which I introduce in more detail later) did succeed in revealing some learning about winning institutional space to support the co-inquiry group and the facilitation moves within the group that seemed to be helpful, outside events conspired to prevent us from progressing towards a substantial piece of co-inquiry which I had framed as a ‘participatory evaluation’ of our practice as CoP hosts;
- From the early stages, the scope of the Carnegie work was already ambitious, and from there it very rapidly grew multiple arms, legs and feet to the point as the scale, complexity, and pace of the action overwhelmed – often for months on end – my earlier intention evidenced by the diary entry (above) to systematically track through regular reflective cycles the choices I and we were making, and their impacts. As a result, I repeatedly found myself struggling to sustain a perspective of our work as research as well as the action we were immersed in, and following from these moments of awareness, attempts at inventing research strategies and tactics better adapted to this frenetic environment;
- The combination of both of these factors meant that, as I came to write up the PhD, I had a problem: amidst a sea of action ‘data’, inquiry lines were disjointed and sometimes broken. As my supervisor put it, there was enough material for several PhDs – and the major challenge was to discern how and where to focus (in a context of discerning what kind of focus might be useful to the wider action research scholarly community), and to then treat the writing-up process as an act of inquiry itself (‘writing as inquiry’).\(^8\)

As Gergen (ibid.) has said, action research as the “kind of research that creates futures about which we care”. At a time characterized by accelerating social, technological and ecological change – and resulting opportunities in new institutional and social spaces for cross-cutting movement-building – it seems to me that future-facing research of the sort that I have attempted with colleagues at Carnegie also faces a powerful set of challenges related to constructing an action research methodology resilient enough to remain viable within environments unused to action research, and operating contexts heavily biased toward action and away from reflection.

A significant implication of this learning is that first person research remains accessible even in the most pressed times. This thesis reflects this learning and is therefore offered primarily as a story of first person research – albeit into efforts to open and sustain spaces for second and third person inquiry where and when possible, recognizing that these spaces of social learning are the ‘sounding boards’ where more liberating, more hopeful and more sustainable futures are birthed.

In this way, the act of writing the thesis is an important element of the emerging methodology: this text is constructed as writing-as-inquiry to show a process of sense-making in action as inquiry accounts are followed by passages of reflection, and sections build on knowing emerging from previous sections. Presentational and Propositional knowing is thus layered into and across chapters as well as being

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\(^8\) We return to pick up and develop these points at the end of Chapter six.
embedded within practice accounts as I – as author of these accounts - reflect on what I’ve just written.

We now show how, from a base in first person inquiry practice, I found a metaphor of ‘spider methodology’ as a good approximation to the strategies and tactics that evolved to sustain this research through some challenging times.

2.6.1 A ‘Spider’ methodology – Where the Wild Things Are?

Through Skype, I am waiting for Geoff to boil his kettle; pour the water; arrive back in front of the screen. I take a breath; noticing in my stomach a fizzing vulnerability of anticipation; and simultaneously across my shoulders a loosening warmth – a sense of being held. These feelings remind me about how Geoff and I together have been dancing towards a supervision relationship where the balance of challenge and support is calibrated effectively towards the end of completing this PhD. Present too, as I hear Geoff’s footsteps approach his webcam, is an image of a boat on an ocean that still seems a long way from shore; and I sense how this journey we have been on together now stretches in and out of days, beyond months, and into years on years ...

In Where the Wild Things Are, Max travels ‘over years, across weeks, in and out of days’, into the liminal space between waking and dreaming. Here, he plays with the ‘creatures with terrible teeth and terrible claws’ who populate his mythic fantasies of a magical island where he is King of the Wild Things. After a while, a hunger in his belly calls him back to his bedroom, where a hot supper is steaming away on the table beside his bed.

Max’ travels are with me every night as Eisean and Oran ask for this adventure as their bed-time story. His liminal expeditioning, it turns out, plays into my waking consciousness too as, waiting for Geoff to appear via Skype, I am struck by how the world of CARRP has, at times, felt as if a dreaming amidst another world altogether where I have spent most of my apparently ‘waking’ hours. This CARRP way of being – ‘inquiry’; calling from a higher self within to allow the gut and spine to speak; and to attend to dreams and liminal spaces with curiosity.

As we rehearse together the viva feedback, I experience a shift: a call to place of presence where I feel stripped down, naked; disarmed. And
somehow hungry and excited to eat the hot food – the challenges - served up for me.

Diary December 2012

Earlier in this chapter, I have pointed to research conducted in the early phase of my time at CARRP exploring first person inquiries into ‘voice’ and ‘presence’, as well as a ‘Rural Leadership Programme’ constructed as combined first and second person research – by and for participants in the course - into individually and collectively defined ‘wicked questions’ pursued through free-fall writing, diarying, double column writing and audio/video taping moments of facilitation practice. I have also described a decision in the early stages of the research for this thesis to adapt and extend the methodological approach evolved during these earlier inquiries for the early phase of developing the CoP with Carnegie UK Trust.

For example, in an early meeting of CoP co-hosts, I shared two slides (below) designed to introduce this proposed approach. They suggested three parallel inquiries: a second person inquiry on ‘excellent hosting’ by co-hosts of the CoP (drawing data to inform action-reflection research cycles from a full programme face-face events); a third person inquiry that we envisaged would be enabled and facilitated through a fieryspirits.com social network based website; and an invitation to colleagues to experiment with becoming critical friends to each others’ first person inquiries connected with the roles we were performing in the development of this extended learning architecture.

9 Throughout this thesis I use diary entries to attempt to capture moments of heightened learning; liminal moments of insight into the living dynamics of situations, attempting to write down the voices of sensations within and outwith ‘me’. These entries represent one source of primary data for the inquiries comprising my research – an important resource as this data becomes part of the ‘presentational knowing’ of a research story narrated primarily in the first person. In choosing this data, I have tended to privilege those diary entries that most give voice to multiple intelligences and, as the research story heads into second and third person inquiry territory, the voices of co-inquirers.
From the outset, I envisaged that a fuller research methodology would evolve as it became clearer what the particular ‘wicked questions’ connected with my efforts to introduce action research into the Carnegie context; and arising from the priorities of the stake-owners of the emerging rural network. I have pointed out that this ambition was not realized, and how in its place came a humbling experience of being often on the edge of sustaining any research attempt at all, and how this precipitated the evolution of some different research strategies.

I have given these strategies the nick-name ‘spider research’ as they remind me of the common house spider’s strategy of building a flat web with a funnel into which she retreats to avoid predators. She waits, and waits. And then, when something tasty wanders into the web, she pounces. For an ‘insider’ action researcher, interested in amplifying stories of resilience, the spider’s tactics seem both eminently sensible and, given the proliferation of such webs (at least, in my house), potentially rewarding. Let me translate:

- First, the spider looks around for a good spot to weave her web. Likewise, in Carnegie UK Trust this researcher sensed an institution with resources, longevity, a respected name and a stated intention to support networking by rural community pioneers – all of which seemed to make a good site for a good research web.
- Next, she applies her skills in crafting the web. I see the ‘web’ as the conditions for inquiry - potential sites, modes and methods. As well as being in the right place, the research web needs to spun to be both barely visible but also strong;
- Now, she waits. It is in this waiting – perhaps we might translate as for conditions to be conducive to inquiry – that I find great wisdom. The spider doesn’t know when lunch is coming. But she is ready, and patient, and trusting that it will. And she continues conducting first person inquiries (‘is this really a good spot?’; ‘have I still the strength for this?’) while she’s there.
• Then – lunch! There comes a point when the planning, spinning, and waiting culminate in a good moment or moments of inquiry that are filling and nutritious; perhaps that whet the appetite for more as whole cycles of inquiry emerge.
• Then, mending/rewraving/relocating the web. Perhaps this is the time when a doctoral researcher sits down to write up and share some of the learning with colleagues further afield.

In the spider’s web metaphor I enjoy playing with a sense that opening spaces for inquiry could feel a little like a predatory move: eating and thereby transforming ‘normalising’ patterns of routine behaviours and conversations. I enjoy also the permission it seems to offer to be ‘holed up’ for long periods, awaiting opportunities for these potentially transformative moves. I appreciate in this image of a web an echo of an ecological world-view of inter-connectedness; or resilience science’s stress on designing flexible, modular structures capable of adapting to stresses and shocks; and indeed of the ‘world wide web’ and its promise to enhance resilience by enhancing connections between people through networks such as those this research has been experimenting with developing.

Clearly, there is a point at which the metaphor breaks down: it’s not apparent to me that a house spider is that interested in co-operative inquiry, or indeed has much use for developing new technologies to support her activities given the beauty of her web building. Nevertheless, the metaphor helps me here advocate a ‘spider’ approach to research methodology as a coherent and useful approach; that it allows a strong first person narrative (whilst ‘holed up’) as well as moments and cycles of second and third person inquiring; and that it is by and large a covert rather than overt research strategy pursued largely ‘under cover’ and often out-with the boundaries of paid ‘work’.

For example, I have already described the process of developing this PhD manuscript as ‘writing as inquiry’. This is a first person practice that has taken place almost entirely out-with the formal boundary of my working role with Carnegie UK Trust; complemented by responding to an invitation to write a book chapter for a Human Ecology textbook. The exception was when I wrote an internal ‘think paper’ to share with colleagues at Carnegie UK Trust in early 2010 – this being itself an experiment in inviting colleagues to slow down, reflect and plan next steps for the emerging research with me (this paper is included as part of the next chapter).

Alongside this continuing first person writing practice, and as the Carnegie work started to mature into its second year, the voices of two second person inquiries emerged to the extent that they became strong enough to find their own place within two chapters in the centre of the thesis:

• In Chapter four, we come alongside early moves in convening a co-inquiry into ‘excellent hosting’, seeding trusting working relationships between people from the four partner organisations who had not previously collaborated. However, this co-inquiry died before it had time to fulfill its potential, a consequence of an organizational restructure initiated by Carnegie UK Trustees following the 2007/8 credit crunch, and the voices of the co-inquirers have not as a consequence been able to tell this research story with me. It took a further eighteen months before elements of co-inquiry re-emerged, this time focused on reflecting on fiery spirits' experiments with social networking and social media technology, and
envisioning how a ‘fiery spirits 2.0’ might emerge building on this learning and the promise of yet another wave of new web technologies (the epilogue to this thesis contains this story).

- Chapter five contains the voices of a more sustained inquiry spanning first, second and third person territories, and resulted in the publication of a ‘community resilience’ handbook that has resonated beyond the boundaries of the CoP. This is a stronger example of living co-inquiry and the handbook itself is included in Appendix 1 to both bring the voices of co-researchers into this text, and to show how form as well as content has come to play an important role in our attempts to catalyse third person inquiry.

These chapters illustrate how we came to bring together different second and third person inquiry practices into a methodology geared to sensing pattern, resonance and building a ‘sounding board’ in the context of navigating the wider pressures, rhythms and complexities of researching across large geographies with a large number of people in different organisations. These methods included

**Second Person Co-inquiry methods**
- ‘Think’ papers to prompt feedback from participants in co-inquiries (e.g. experimental innovation in CoP design such as a paper on new web tools to try out; suggestions for ways to generate and share social media etc.);
- Exchange workshops – for example, where hosts could experience each others’ ways of hosting – and then reflect on this experience towards developing principles of effective hosting that would ensure all fieryspirits events shared a common ‘feel’;
- Using audio, video and notes to capture insights and learning emerging from the ‘inquiry into hosting’ (e.g. Skye meeting audio; CAT video – see chapter four)
- Collaborative authoring using online web tools such as ‘Google docs’ (e.g. Oxford workshop materials (see chapter five); Exploring Community Resilience report (see chapter four))
- Collaborative exercises (e.g. hosts Timeline; digital story workshop – see chapter four)

**Third Person research methods**
- Engaging in ad hoc, inquiring conversations with colleagues as well as wider stakeholders engaged in the CoP inviting feedback on the design and facilitation of online as well as offline spaces;
- Collating evaluations of face-face events hosted by both our team at Carnegie and our partners;
- Collating regular ‘NewsBurst’ emails that captured the evolving story of activity within fieryspirits.com;
- Using survey monkey questionnaires for surveys of the CoP membership;
- Taking screenshots and stats of web use at regular intervals from web analytics services including Google, issuu, bit.ly and ning; and
- **Through the process of writing up the combined insights of (1) and (2) to share with a wider community of action researchers**: for example, I benefitted from feedback from colleagues in CARRP supervision group sessions, and was later invited to write a book chapter for a Human Ecology textbook (Williams, Roberts and McIntosh 2012). Both of these writing processes involved a significant amount of writing and re-writing in response
to feedback from external reviewers…. Which in turn helped to hone and focus the ongoing work of hosting the CoP.

2.6.2 A ‘story that cannot be told’

Our ability to know is shaped in landscapes of practice. For instance, the body of knowledge of a profession is not merely a curriculum. It is a whole landscape of practices—involving not only in practicing the profession, but also in research, teaching, management, regulation, professional associations, and many other contexts, including contexts in which the clients of the practice develop their own views (e.g., patients communities in medicine). The composition of such a landscape is dynamic as communities emerge, merge, split, compete, complement each other, and disappear. And the boundaries between the practices involved are not necessarily peaceful or collaborative. What researchers find, what regulators dictate, what management mandates, what clients expect, and what practitioners end up deciding, all these attempts to colonize moments of practice can be in conflict.

Wenger (2010:183)

A first draft of this thesis was written during 2010/11 and presented for viva examination in February 2012. During the viva I experienced some intense feelings of frustration, anger and sadness at ways in which my original hopes to have conducted a piece of collaborative research into developing the ‘fiery spirits’ network fell apart as a direct result of changes imposed on the work as a result of a root and branch restructure of Carnegie UK Trust undertaken by a new Chief Executive during 2010. The fallout from these changes to the Fiery Spirits CoP, as well as to the Trust as a whole, adversely impacted the availability of colleagues to participate in cycles of reflection and sense-making that we had originally hoped and planned to integrate into this thesis.

As the viva conversation continued, I came to also see how the rawness and proximity (in both time and space) to these events had compounded issues of accessing a sufficiently reflective ‘research voice’, and had also skewed my choices about which material to foreground: my viva examiners invited me to exercise more distance from the immediate challenges of surviving a series of intense personal and professional challenges. Immediately after the viva, I wrote in my diary:

This voice that screams to be heard has a story that is vital and important. It is a story of attempting over fifteen years in different contexts to bring together the resources and epistemological space to initiate and sustain communities of learners who share a collective desire to transform society by embodying and acting through an ecological and participatory paradigm. This is a long story with different chapters about opening spaces within institutions that don’t fully understand the implications of a ‘transformational’ pedagogy and its challenge back to the structures and cultures of those institutions – of a lived participatory praxis. Each of these chapters has a similar beginning, middle and end: the beginning is the initiation and excitement of a blossoming in a new context of the learning community; the middle involves attempting to keep the programme viable in the face of changing management, funding and host organisation politics; and the end is about finding creative ways forward as the immune system of the host kicks in.
The viva conversation helped me to see that the PhD I had submitted was attempting to tell this long story as an ‘under-belly’ narrative, but not in a sufficiently conscious or inquiring way. I was also able to name a number of pressures keeping me from being able to voice this story in public.

At the close of the viva, we came to name this as a ‘story that cannot be told’ (at least, not yet); and to re-orient the focus of this thesis toward some substantive practice accounts that, whilst pointing to the inevitable pressures involved in holding open institutional space for innovative approaches, do not dwell here. My intention is that this revised focus will allow for a more satisfying and ‘readerly’ flow that tells a story of research into methodological questions about how to design and support a learning architecture for a trans-national learning network supported by social networking technology.

2.6.3 On Methodology and Research Focus – recapitulation

I have summarized above how I began this research with an intention to catalyse circuits of mutually supportive first, second and third person inquiry that could open enough space for an extended epistemology to be practiced more ‘up front’ than under cover (or ‘voiced over’).

In addition, at the outset of this work I have described how I consciously adopted elements of epistemological scaffolding from other action researchers in the hope they could help keep my – and our – research processes alive to the possibilities of ways of knowing beyond the rational - amidst a working context of largely unreconstructed positivism.

I have also intimated that from the outset of this research, the pace and nature of the work I had been employed to do tended to close, rather than open, opportunities for the kinds of collaborative and co-creative conversations with colleagues regarding this research that I had hoped to initiate. I have shared something of a struggle to share the fullness of my originally intended research frame with colleagues and in the early months of my work for Carnegie UK Trust.

I have said that I found myself re-calibrating my expectations of the scale and depth of the research that might be possible with colleagues and made a decision that the only viable way to undertake the research was to refocus on first person experiments into how to open up inquiring and enlivening communicative spaces even under ‘normalising’ institutional forces, and extend this to second and third person work as and when conditions allowed. I have introduced the metaphor of ‘spider web’ action research to describe the set of adaptive strategies that resulted and have proposed that together these constitute a research methodology that is appropriately adaptive to its context (i.e. tending towards being opportunistic rather than pre-planned; and more chaotic than orderly cycles of action and reflection). I have also noted that, given that the topic of the research – supporting resilience pioneers – also emphasizes traits of adaptability and readiness for change – that this methodological approach might be understood as being curiously fitting, suggesting a congruence of form and content.

Finally, I have described some of the choices I have been faced with as I have come to write up this research – connected with coping with a large amount of primary data and suspended/fragmented inquiry lines. I have introduced my choice,
supported by feedback from supervisors, to focus on our experiences with social networking technologies in augmenting emerging second and third person inquiries.

3 Towards a stance on second/third person action research – informed by contemporary debates

Through this research story is a series of experiments trying out theories, tools and models that promised to help guide the practical development of our Community of Practice across different developmental stages.

In my second year at CARRP I had become aware of social learning theory in the context of debates tutors and their colleagues in other institutions (such as SOLAR in Bristol, and the Complexity Research Group at the University of Hertfordshire) were having about the relationship between first, second and third person action research approaches. In particular, Peter Reason had shared his response to Bjørn Gustavsen in Concepts and Transformations (Reason 2004), addressing Gustavsen’s advocacy for a form of ‘distributive’ third person action research where it becomes more important to create many events of low intensity and diffuse boundaries than fewer events that correspond to the classical notion of a ‘case’


Gustavsen’s article in Action Research had elaborated on how, in service of catalysing the emergence of social change movements, it might be most effective to focus on generating a series of inter-related happenings amongst an ever-growing and democratic community of co-learners. For Gustavsen, a social movement was “a series of events that are linked to each other and where the meaning and construction of each event is part of a broader stream of events and not a self-sufficient element in an aggregate” (Gustavsen 2003: 96-97).

Reason had responded by arguing that “we need not only to build large scale networks of inquiry but also to engage in transformations of consciousness and behavior at personal and interpersonal levels” (2004:1), and cited the work of several members of the CARRP community who were attempting to do just this by integrating and linking first, second and third person action research strategies. The paper drew on Buddhist social theorist D.R. Loy:

... the obvious need is to work on ourselves as well as the social system. If we have not begun to transform our own greed, ill will and delusion, our efforts at addressing institutionalised forms are likely to be useless, or worse. We may have some success in challenging the socio-political order, but that will not lead to a transformed society.

Loy, D.R The Great Awakening: A Buddhist social theory quoted in Reason (2003:5)

As I had been attracted to CARRP in the first place because of the strong resonance with my experiences of deep ecology (a form of engaged Buddhism), and the Centre for Human Ecology’s head, heart and hand approach to transformative learning, I felt very much at home with the arguments in Reason’s paper and signed up to the integrative project he suggested. My curiosity was therefore not so much directed at
whether first, second and third person inquiring could be nested together, but how to do so – and in particular, how to win the space and resources, and develop the appropriate skills as an action researcher, to develop a practice at both depth and scale.

I was intrigued by Gustavsen’s apparent success at winning resources over a number of years for his ‘many events of low intensity and diffuse boundaries’, but saw that it would be rare to be in a position to sustain such activity within significant investment by a large organization or government. His challenge to the CARRP model, Reason’s response, and my own instinct that a ‘third way’ might be found also stayed with me after the workshop.

When the opportunity to shape an extended Community of Practice for Carnegie UK Trust emerged in 2008, I began to search out sources of inspiration for how this ‘third way’ might be possible. I looked for inspiration primarily to three places:

• to the ‘integral theory’ of Ken Wilber (with an attendant inquiry into how to work with this theory ‘lightly’);
• to a literature by practitioner-translators on how to design for social learning at scale, drawing on concepts from complexity theory, third person action research, and organizational development; and
• to the opportunities presented by adopting new social media technologies becoming cheaply available through the internet.

I now briefly sketch out the material that I found helpful at the time, by way of setting the scene for (and pointing towards) a narrative that develops throughout this thesis about how these points of inspiration informed our practice developing the CoP, which in turn generated some new thinking about constructing third person forms social media-enabled action research.

3.1.1 Engaging (lightly) with integral theories of learning and knowing

“The word integral means comprehensive, inclusive, non-marginalizing, embracing. Integral approaches to any field attempt to be exactly that: to include as many perspectives, styles, and methodologies as possible within a coherent view of the topic. In a certain sense, integral approaches are “meta-paradigms,” or ways to draw together an already existing number of separate paradigms into an interrelated network of approaches that are mutually enriching."

Wilber in Visser (2003)¹⁰

In seeking out inspiration for our research into developing a kind of ‘sounding board’ third person inquiry architecture, I found myself searching for thinking tools that could point outwards beyond the exclusively rational realm; that could illuminate learning paths towards greater holism and synthesis of perspectives and disciplines; and that can open opportunities for learning in relationship with others, human and more-than-human. I have come to call such thinking tools ‘integral theories’.

By drawing attention to possibilities of synergy as well as gaps between conventional disciplines and ways of knowing, integral theories promise to name scars left by dogmatic reductionism as a first step on the way to healing them by exercising those scarred muscles in ways designed to restore a sense of balance to our bodies of knowing. Good integral theories, in my view, should be accessible by people within dominant social institutions and used within these contexts towards healing those scars; and the same theory should simultaneously offer rich stimulation for pioneers at the leading edge of evolving integral practices who may be dreaming up entirely new paradigms more fit for purpose in a world that has extended beyond its ecological limits, and the paradigm that allowed this extension. In this way, an integral theory should also contain within it the possibility of its own transcendence: it will recognize dynamics of stuck-ness and flow within particular perspectives and open up transformative opportunities. In this sense, a transformative practice – informed by integral theory-making – will be about learning to become more present and alive to how to play a full part in the evolutionary self-righting of the evolving dynamic complex living systems in which I and we are embedded – ‘Gaia’.

John Heron’s model of an ‘expanded epistemology’ (Heron and Reason 2001) could be classed as one such theory: neatly framing one way of moving beyond narrow positivism toward practicing accessing broader intelligences. Heron has categorised ‘many ways of knowing’ into a fourfold ‘extended and holistic epistemology’. He writes “a knower participates in the known, articulates a world, in at least four independent ways: experiential, presentational, propositional and practical”:

- **Experiential knowing** is through direct face-to-face encounter, and coming to know through empathy and resonance the presence of some energy, entity, person, place, process or thing. ‘It is also the creative shaping of a world through the transaction of imagining it ...’- often impossible to put into words.

- **Presentational knowing** emerges from and is grounded in experiential knowing. Intuitively it provides the first form of expression through the many art forms. ‘It clothes our experiential knowing of the world in the metaphors of aesthetic creation.’

- **Propositional knowing** draws on concepts, ideas and language. ‘Propositions themselves are carried by presentational forms – the sounds or visual shapes of the spoken or written word – and are ultimately grounded in our experiential articulation of a world.’; and

- **Practical knowing** of how to do something is demonstrated in a skill or competence. ‘It fulfills the three prior forms of knowing, brings them into fruition in purposive deeds, and consummates them with its autonomous celebration of excellent accomplishment.’

  *Heron (1998:238)*

In Chapter four, we will see how Heron’s model helped a group of co-hosts begin to grapple with opportunities for epistemological emergence in contexts that are not yet fully open to this possibility. In Chapter five, Heron’s ideas help to frame up a question about “are we making research choices here on the basis of a broad set of intelligences and senses – or is ego/theory/head-based knowing (cheered on by our dominant context) leading me - and us - instead?”. The ‘head-based’ knowing in
this example is, paradoxically, another ‘integral’ theory – developed by American philosopher Ken Wilber.

Wilber’s ‘integral philosophy’ (Wilber 2001) proposes that in all living systems, ‘holarchies’ of knowing co-evolve across four core knowledge territories: subjective, inter-subjective, objective and inter-objective. Holarchies are nested hierarchical systems, where each level is both a whole in itself, as well as being a part of a more encompassing whole which transcends as well as includes the modes of knowing developed within the subsidiary level. A key methodological implication of the underpinning ontology of ‘open-ness to inclusion of all perspectives’ in Wilber’s integral project is that amongst the four ‘territories’ are multiple potential ways of knowing and sensing ‘truth’ in those territories. Sean Esbjörn-Hargens has proposed, for example, that an integral methodology might draw on systems of knowing drawn from multiple disciplines:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intention/Consciousness</th>
<th>Behaviour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I” Subjective realities; e.g. self and consciousness, states of mind, psychological development, mental models/constructs, emotions, state of self, etc.</td>
<td>“It” Objective realities; e.g. brain and organism, visible biological features, degree of activation of the various bodily systems, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phenomenology: (introspection, meditation, etc.) methodologies for understanding intention from the inside. (zone1)</td>
<td>Cognitive Science: (biological phenomenology, autoepoiesis, etc.) methodologies for understanding Behaviour from the inside. (zone5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structuralism: (developmental structuralism, etc.) methodologies for understanding intention from the outside. (zone2)</td>
<td>Empiricism: (behaviourism, positivism, empiricism, etc) methodologies for understanding Behaviour from the outside. (zone6)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Culture</th>
<th>Society and Systems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“We” Intersubjective realities; e.g. shared values, world views, webs of culture, communication, relationships, cultural norms and customs, etc.</td>
<td>“Its” Interobjective realities; e.g. social systems, environmental systems, visible societal structures. Economic systems, political systems, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hermeneutics: (collaborative inquiry, participatory epistemology, etc.) methodologies for understanding culture from the inside. (zone3)</td>
<td>Social Autopoiesis: (etc.) methodologies for understanding Society and Systems from the inside. (zone7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnomethodology: (cultural anthropology, neostucturalism, archaeology, genealogy, etc.) methodologies for understanding culture from the outside. (zone4)</td>
<td>Systems Theory: (component systems theory, chaos theory, complexity theory, etc.) methodologies for understanding Society and Systems from the outside. (zone8)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A slide shared by hosts of the ‘Integral Without Borders’ gathering, Istanbul 2009

The author intended that engaging with this table – and many others like it produced by Wilber and colleagues at the Integral Institute – should be a liberating experience: an opportunity to position oneself with humility amidst a multitude of potential perspectives; of recognizing the limits of any one perspective and the opportunities to welcome in complementary views in service of discovering, collectively, a fuller picture. Informed by this material I both welcome a growing awareness that action research might be becoming a meta-discipline capable of spanning the zones of methodology suggested by Esbjörn-Hargens; and I also recognize the current limits
of my capacities as a researcher to access this potential multiplicity of perspectives. As the research story in this thesis develops, we will encounter places where I (and we, in contexts of collaborative inquiry) touch into elements of phenomenology (through first person inquiry), hermeneutics (through co-inquiry), systems theory and ‘social autopoiesis’ as we attempt to become more conscious of patterns of emergence within a living, dynamic learning architecture.

In the context of a busy working life, however, accessing and working effectively with a such a ‘helicopter view’ multi-methodological approach suggested by integral theory has often felt over-whelming and far out of reach. At these times I have tended to rely on the simplified epistemological/methodological shorthand of ‘hand, heart and head’ as a way of shaping an attention to somehow ensure each has some space to breath through ongoing inquiries. In pressured moments, I had come to notice that Wilber’s integral synthesis can paradoxically draw me away from embodied acts of knowing and ‘back into the head’: the seductive power of the meta-thinking-framework drawing attention away from the very balance of perspectives and ways of knowing advocated by the theory itself11. Indeed, I am experiencing this pull right now, as I write this paragraph. At times like these, however, I am learning it can be re-grounding to reach instead for a story:

It is August 2011. I’ve flown to Istanbul to meet some old (and new) friends who are part of a group called ‘Integral without Borders’. We all have an interest in development issues towards more sustainable communities – at different scales and in many countries all over the planet. There are about eight of us – enough to devote peer mentoring across a full half-day session for each of us. Gail Hochachka is here, too. I have been enjoying writing she has shared with us on an integral approach to community development and find in it both a stance on integral theory as well as a development practice of community facilitation that is provocative:

11 It was this growing awareness – of the need to hold integral theory ‘lightly’ – that gave me the confidence to later create a simplified version of the four quadrants – as four directions of a ‘compass of resilience’ (see Chapter Five).
The week before I left Scotland I have been struggling with how to bring together an enormous amount of ideas, stories, insights and multi-media into a publication I’m trying to pull together on community resilience. I’ve had an idea that Wilber’s ‘four quadrant’ framework (and/or Gail’s interpretation of this as ‘interpersonal/practical/personal’) could help make sense of all this. It’s part of the inspiration behind a ‘compass of resilience’ that I’ve started sketching out to inform both the structure of our publication, as well as a way of communicating the complexities of the topic of resilience to a lay readership. Although for the last few months I’ve been reading widely, I’ve not seen anyone doing anything similar in either resilience or integral theory circles – and so I’m nervous about whether I’m ‘off on one’ or whether there may really be a bit of original thinking here that could resonate with other practitioners and thinkers.

On our first evening together, Ken Wilber teleconference in from his home in Colorado. I voice my fear that climate change may be accelerating beyond tipping points that can be influenced by human action of the sort we had been discussing. Ken talks about how we live at a time of deep paradox: that ‘everything is getting better; everything is getting worse’; and that this might make it more possible to let go and be more in the present.

The next morning it’s my turn to share what I’ve been working on. I draw the compass and start to talk to it. A few minutes in, there a sudden rush of energy as my colleagues lean forward into the table. We start talking quickly. We forget coffee break. We’re all there, together, immersed in a collaborative exploration of what ‘community resilience’ means for us and delighted by how the compass framework seems to help us have a common conversation about this. After coffee, we look again at the framework. Now the questions are informed by Wilber’s thinking directly – and they quickly reveal new angles and ways that I could experiment with in drafting up the booklet.
Lunch comes. We’re buzzing. I feel empowered, excited, and this feeling lasts for a couple of weeks after getting home as new connections and possibilities appear in the writing … I sense our collective intelligence still at work, now across thousands of miles.

Diary

This story captures my experience of how a group of practitioners with a common interest in Wilber’s integral theory came together to embody a practice of collegiality and critical friendship. The experience reinforced both the intellectual satisfaction at encountering and grappling with such a wide-reaching theory, as well as a relational need for support, acceptance and empathic resonance. It shows how Wilber’s theory informed question-posing in service of deepening learning. It is less clear that the encounter had strong elements of critical challenge and indeed it is my experience that this is not a particular strength of gatherings of those excited by Wilber’s integral theorising.

It was through the lens of an extended epistemology such as proposed by Heron that I found it possible to take a stance in appreciation of, yet simultaneously at a critical distance to, the work of Wilber and a growing band of translators of his framework. Heron suggests that his ways of knowing exist in holarchic relationship with one another: that practical knowing emerges out of propositional knowing, which in turn seeks to make sense of presentational interpretations of raw experience. Heron’s framework opens the possibility of ‘holding theory lightly’ – even theory as seductively potentially all-encompassing as Wilber’s intellectual universe. Furthermore, this stance implies that integral theories are useful to the extent that they can inform practical know-how about how to create conditions for transformative change – that is, the spaces (learning events, environments and architectures) capable of sustaining multiple perspectives in service of achieving clear purposes.

It also implies an ongoing inquiry into how, and whether, these integral theories are indeed being ‘held lightly’. This is a question that has at times flummoxed me as I have struggled to pursue a systematic approach to theory-testing and theory-development to the established standards of scholarship expected by the academy. As I have attempted to develop a scholarly voice in this context, I have repeatedly been drawn to experiment with how to engage with theory in a ‘fractal’ way. That is, starting from an assumption of implicit (or implicate, as David Bohm more precisely proposed) wholeness, my dominant intuition (or pattern) has been to work with theory in a scattered way: somehow trusting that somewhere along the line all the ‘bits’ join up and speak to the whole; and that being immersed within these ‘bits’ the nature of this joining-up sometimes appears as ‘fractal’ (that is, holographic in the sense of the part containing the whole), and equally often appears disjointed, inchoate, and ‘fragmented’ (that is, overly chaotic, representing a kind of intellectual and overly egoic kleptomania of concepts, methods, tools and languaging).

Reflecting on previous drafts of this thesis through this lens, it seems that I have been engaged in a series of experiments in attempting to develop writing structures capable of embodying more of the ‘fractal’ and less of the ‘fragments’. At the first vivas for both my MPhil transfer paper, and the PhD, my reviewers concluded that the papers had failed to communicate this relationship between theory and practice clearly enough, and asked me to try again. In response to this challenge, later sections in this chapter bring a tight focus on particular theories from communities of practice and complexity literature which informed our initial research questions.
and practice approaches in CoP development. We are then in a position to show how our research revisited these influences as our work progressed through iterative cycles of action and reflection.

As I reflect today on my writing experiments with finding ‘fractal’ forms, I see resonance to a wider question that we face in society – and indeed has become a focus in later chapters of this thesis – being that of how to make sense of and engage effectively with the exponential explosion of digital media and information available across the web. This is an important question for third person action researchers today in particular as we attempt to find curation tools and stances capable of ‘mashing up’ and sorting quality content in a focused way, amidst a digital culture that may be re-wiring the brains of ‘digital native’ teenagers to become adept at rapidly switching focus between different media in different ‘windows’ on the web; but losing the capacity for sustained focus in any one area.

As we will see in the Epilogue to this thesis, a workshop I convened in November 2012 on the topic of ‘the future for rural networking’ proposed that in the future, it will become more and more valuable for users of networks to become ‘network literate’ in order to find the content that is useful for them across multiple platforms; and the developers of online content will be simultaneously challenged to become skillful curators, weaving information together into coherent narratives that help to make sense of it whilst simultaneously enabling readers/viewers to use their work as the starting points for their own sense-making journeys through the internet. In Chapter five we look into an extended experiment in curation as part of my practice of facilitating an online co-inquiry into community resilience.

I have already introduced a note on ‘thesis structure’ above. In it, I emphasized an intention to create a clear narrative, and provided a table of chapters to assist my reader in their own journey through the inquiry stories I share here. We can now see that this framing – and the journey of writing into this structure - is the latest in a series of writing experiments (including previous drafts of this thesis and ‘Exploring Community Resilience’ book of Chapter 5) – about how to find a writing form congruent with the holistic intent of the work about which I am writing. In framing this intent, I am following Judi Marshall’s proposal that

> However much we name and frame what we think we are doing… form is a meta communication, analogically ‘framing’ that digital attempt at clarification, which thus may be contradicted or rendered meaningless.

*Judi Marshall (2008: 682)*

Ultimately, I find Marshall’s insights compelling: the relationship between theory that has emerged from my encounters with Wilber’s integral theory in particular is one of underlining that theory is useful in as much as it is ‘held lightly’ in service of enhancing practice; understanding practice as an effort to bring form and content – of learning events, publications, media - together into a song that the singers find liberates their authentic voices and resonates far, wide and deep.

### 3.1.2 Drawing on theories about designing for social learning at scale

Knowledge and evidence need to be contextualised, enriched, interpreted, debated and disputed – ‘set free’, if you like – in order for learning to occur among a multitude of stakeholders with divergent interests and world views. One way of doing this is by networking. This, in turn, may or may not foster
complex processes of social change and development.  
*European Centre for Development Policy Management (2010)*

I met Etienne Wenger – an early pioneer of Community of Practice theory – in Edinburgh at a workshop in late 2007. He was reflecting on designing social learning systems for corporate clients as well a being recently challenged about the implications of the social media revolution for the future of CoPs: did much CoP thinking now need updating at least, or possibly consigning to history as twitter, blogs and other forms of social ‘sharing’ become the norm in popular culture?

Wenger had a glint in his eye as he told the story. I sensed in him a playfulness, a kind of wildness, and an approachability that I appreciated and enjoyed. I was inspired to go away and read more deeply into some of his work. I wanted to know how he’d got started – and with what kind of vision. His website gave a potted history:

Social scientists have used versions of the concept of community of practice for a variety of analytical purposes, but the origin and primary use of the concept has been in learning theory. Anthropologist Jean Lave and I coined the term while studying apprenticeship as a learning model. People usually think of apprenticeship as a relationship between a student and a master, but studies of apprenticeship reveal a more complex set of social relationships through which learning takes place mostly with journeymen and more advanced apprentices. The term community of practice was coined to refer to the community that acts as a living curriculum for the apprentice. Once the concept was articulated, we started to see these communities everywhere, even when no formal apprenticeship system existed. And of course, learning in a community of practice is not limited to novices. The practice of a community is dynamic and involves learning on the part of everyone.  


There was much in this statement that resonated. Here was an observation about naturally occurring dynamics within communities; there were clear values of inclusion whilst recognizing the role of elders (‘masters’); and the account of the relationships between ‘journeymen’ resonated strongly with my experience as a tutor to several cohorts of students on a masters’ programme who, year after year, enthused about the experience of being part of a learning community (rather than products of a ‘sausage machine’ education).

Whilst I found the reach and scope of Wenger’s framing refreshing and liberating, I also enjoyed his suggestion of a natural, or ‘wild’ process of emergence of social learning tends to flourish wherever hospitable conditions exist. This resonated strongly with ideas of emergence I’d been encountering in complexity thinkers; with advocates of ‘abundance’ and ‘reciprocity’ thinking in the field of asset based community development; and with my first person inquiring into ‘presence’ which had led me to think about how to be more effective in exercising a light touch as a facilitator once the enabling conditions for the learning architecture were well established.

However, as I read more recent accounts from interpreters of Wenger and Lave’s early ideas about CoPs – especially literature published as the concept took off and

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began to be applied in large corporate settings – I sensed that a sense of the ‘wild’ in that early writing had been domesticated into a more manipulative/control frame that ‘sold’ the concept of a CoP as a way to corral organisational knowledge resources for its needs (rather than the community of learners as in the original proposition). I came across a paper by Chris Kemble (Kemble 2006) that took a similar (albeit more strident) line. Kemble suggests that as CoPs ‘go mainstream’, they become integrated within managerialist ambitions that foster closer and closer ties between corporate power and governments, with the result that they tend to lose touch with the qualities of tacit knowledge (learning happening out-with formal institutional spaces) which characterized earlier framings of the concept:

‘Communities of Practice’ have undergone a transition from being a heuristic device to a theory and from a theory to an application...[there is] a dislocation between the theory developed in the early work and that which is applied later.... Communities of Practice have simply become a tool that can be used to produce a particular outcome; much of the early theory concerning emergence, enactment and the ambiguous nature of the relationship between community and host organization has been lost.

Kemble (2006: 229)

Kemble’s perspective drew into focus a familiar tension that we had often discussed at the Centre for Human Ecology as we debated how best to keep open a space within Universities for ‘transformational learning’ pedagogies that by their nature tended to subvert the dominant patterns of tutor-student identities and lead us to experiment with new forms of peer-based assessment and participant-led workshops. As I read further into the CoP literature, Kemble’s critical perspective stayed close to mind. For example, a paper by William Snyder and Xavier Briggs (2003) introduced a framework proposing five typical stages characterizing a CoP’s maturation:

![Diagramme from Snyder and Briggs (2003)](image-url)

In Chapter four, I quote from a paper that we wrote to act as an introduction to – and advocacy for continued funding support for - the FierySpirits CoP in early 2010. The paper was shared with new staff at the Trust as well as Trustees and some of our partners. I had written it alone but was reassured by feedback from close
colleagues in the Rural team and co-hosts of the CoP that the framework ‘made sense’ and was something we could all ‘live with’ (I return to unpack this stance a little further below). At the heart of this paper is Snyder and Briggs’ framework, and a proposal that each of their ‘stages’ might represent a year in the development journey for the CoP. The framework well suited the paper’s purpose - two years into an intended five year programme - of advocating that the development process should be supported through its course. As such, it may have contributed to our success in achieving this funding continuation at a time when all the other existing work of the Trust was being brought to a close.

To reinforce the message in the 2010 paper, I had attached Snyder and Briggs’ original paper, where they stress that their framework is only indicative: that the developmental stages may be more messy than they propose; that different stages may need to be revisited. The paper also referenced Wenger and Lave’s early writing that we have already met above. This had been important in discussing the tactics of introducing the paper with colleagues: in particular, in an echo of Kemble’s critique, Eden project staff flagged unease with the ‘managerial’ language of the article. In a particularly rewarding teleconference, and with Ken Wilber’s invitation (see above) to work towards integral practices that ‘transcend and include’ perspectives firmly in mind, I proposed that our work was attempting to take the challenging path of having ‘one foot in two paradigms simultaneously’, and of therefore needing to learn to speak two languages too, and to learn how to move between them gracefully to achieve our over-arching purposes.

The conversation ended with an agreement that framing the paper in this way was helpful in drawing attention to the work that colleagues and I within the Trust were doing to secure continued resourcing – and ‘organizational space’ – to act as an enabling umbrella for the work of partners which Eden described as experiments with a ‘gift culture’ of ‘abundance’, and by referring to author Ray Oldenburg’s (1999) concept of a ‘great, good place between home and work’ (or ‘third spaces’) where people from different ages and walks of life come together to ‘turn the habitual into the extraordinary’. Examples are cafes, theatres, public squares, festivals, markets, concert halls…. Places that

“are important to community learning in that they bring together folks who wouldn’t otherwise meet, to do things they wouldn’t ordinarily do ... These spaces afford an opportunity for community members to explore, recast and ultimately to invent new potentials together.” (Oldenburg 1999)

This teleconference discussion was one of several catalyzed by what we came to understand as a creative tension across practitioner-focused literatures on communities of practice, some rooted in the ‘corporate’ world (and particularly helpful in framing our work in the ‘mainstream’); and others rooted in social movements (and particularly good at underlining the subversive values that CoPs might embody as places of ‘wild’ learning). By naming a principle of working ‘across two paradigms’, we gave ourselves permission to see our work as breaking ground and potentially achieving more ‘traction’ in influencing and advocating for a broader policy and practice shift from bureaucratic, overly controlling ‘managerialist’ ways of working towards more ‘enabling’ ways of funding and state support for local community action.

This was not the only outcome of our engagement with the CoP literature that I had found and chosen to share with very busy colleagues (who were not in the habit of
engaging with this kind of material). Snyder and Briggs’ framework proved helpful in its own terms as we revisited the model during co-inquiry gatherings of hosts and colleagues as a lens on making sense of our work together. In Chapter four, I write more into this engagement and what we learned through it.

Another set of concepts derived from CoP literature that we found helpful from the outset was Wenger’s own distillation of three interconnected elements of ‘domain’, ‘community’ and ‘practice’. If each of these, Wenger argues, is clear for both CoP participants and sponsoring institutions, then the CoP has a greater chance of thriving. The diagramme below is taken from an early think-paper and represent my translation of these concepts, again for close colleagues:

At the outset of our work (in 2008), I found this schema useful in thinking through our communication strategy for inviting people to join the CoP (for example, I found it gave me permission to name ‘asset based rural development’ as the ‘domain’ of interest; and to list practices about which people might share their know-how such as developing rural housing, developing a community owned wind-farm, etc.). Chapter four illustrates how this was so in relation to developing a brand and online presence in the form of a social networking website. However, although I shared this schema (above) and used it consciously in some early CoP design conversations,
colleagues did not find it very easy to work with these categories. In retrospect I see it might have been helpful to inquire with them why this was the case, but at the time I made a decision ‘not to push’ anything that seemed too abstract as the priority in the early stages was instead to prioritise building trust and our own sense of what we wanted to achieve – and our own logic, through mutual conversation – of how to understand what might work, and what might not work.

These ideas of domain, community and practice had however grabbed me and I continued to engage with them periodically as part of my first person inquiring into how to do my facilitation work well. For example, in early 2010 I had a gut feeling that the ‘domain’ of the CoP needed re-stating or refreshing to help to refresh the community. Whilst the domain had originally been framed by the outcomes of a Carnegie Commission into the Future for Rural Communities (introduced in Chapter four), in the meantime the economic credit crunch had hit and flooding, energy and food prices and other issues connected with resource depletion and climate change had become part of conversations at CoP events. With Wenger’s schematic in mind, I realized that these issues might be shifting the ground of conversations that rural practitioners wanted to have; and there was therefore an opportunity to initiate a new ‘inquiry’ (a latter day ‘commission’) involving CoP members in refreshing the CoP’s domain. Chapter five tells the story of how this inquiry developed.

3.1.3 Getting a grip on the implications of social technologies for designing a social learning architecture

One of the restrictions of the co-operative inquiry process for practice development is its requirement for people to be within reasonable travelling distance of each other. We know that in many cases working with communities entails distance and isolation making the possibility of connecting with others doing similar work unlikely. How can we better support practice in our field in these circumstances?

Community workers have often been reluctant to engage with technology, preferring the face to face interaction to what is perceived as a more remote or removed form of communication via email or on line discussion forums. With the explosion of interest world wide in social networking sites in recent times and the ever increasing numbers of people taking up and adapting on line networking there is significant potential for those of us working with communities to explore this as a space for practice development.

Communities of interest are forming almost daily on line using virtual space and networks on Facebook and other social networking sites. On line communities not only offer an enormous new focus for our work but also an opportunity for us to connect our ideas and practice in a global context.

Rawsthorne and Howard (2011)

We opened the previous section with a short story of meeting Etienne Wenger in Edinburgh in early 2008 – and the challenge he had been presented with regarding whether blogs, twitter and other forms of new social media might disrupt the concepts and approaches he had been pioneering regarding CoPs.

Given that the brief for the FierySpirits CoP was to find appropriate uses for ‘virtual’ technologies to support networking and learning by people who were widely dispersed across remote locations – as well as across five distinct jurisdictions – I
found myself searching, early on, for a literature that might help guide our decisions about when and how to adapt these new technologies.

I was particularly searching for perspectives on the recent emergence of web 2.0 social networking technologies and their potential to accelerate learning dynamic, user-led online spaces where people might cross-fertilise know-how more effectively and at a greater rate than previously. I sensed that these technologies could help to speed the dissolution of traditional boundaries between practitioner fields and expert disciplines; and that amidst these newly fuzzy boundaries would be new niches for innovation as previously isolated cultures, languages and perspectives had new opportunities to cross-fertilise. I was looking for early experimenters with both intranet and internet web technologies and their implications for the design of ‘social learning’ communities of practice and inquiry. In particular, I was searching for the ‘third way’ that somehow achieved Peter Reason’s depth through intense face-face inquiry encounters alongside Gustavsen’s ambition of scale and multiple parallel conversations… and all within limited resources.

By and large, in 2008 either this literature did not exist or I was unable to find it. I came to realize that we might be at a ‘bleeding edge’ of social learning practice, particularly in the context of foundation sponsored interventions in third sector development in the UK and Ireland. A little over a year after I joined the Trust (in April 2010), I wrote an internal briefing paper about my work to date. I wrote:

This is all happening very fast, and our experiment with the CoP is one among many focused on purposeful social networking: although the web architecture that we are using is similar to that used by Facebook, we are pursuing social networking with a social purpose, and we are experimenting with ways that action research practices can be useful towards that end.

Recognizing how our work might be pioneering, I decided to pursue a twin-track strategy to build some foundations on which our work might rest: firstly, to reflect on some of my own previous experiments with online collaborative platforms, and secondly to dig a little into the work of translators of complexity theory as it applies to facilitating organizational and social development: my hunch being that in complexity thinking (and its associated language of self-organisation, system boundaries, learning containers etc.) should lie some good clues about how to appreciate the opportunities as well as risks associated with experimenting with new social technologies to augment second and third person inquiry design architecture.

We now briefly review each of these investigations as together they reveal something of the basis on which we then made day-day choices as we designed the FierySpirits learning architecture. We are therefore in a position to review and develop a theory of ‘what seems to work’ through subsequent chapters of this thesis.
3.1.4 Learning to be a digital gardener: an experiment with ‘googledocs’

During 2005 and 2006, the Rural Leadership Programme used a proto-social network to enable participants to blog about their experiences – as well as to collaborate in a ‘participatory evaluation’ of the programme drawing material generated through the face-face conversations.

All the way through our journey together, we have been documenting, evaluating, and reflecting on each step. Every convergence was planned based on emerging ‘hot topics’ that participants called to be addressed in their ‘cluster’ meetings between convergences. At the end of every convergence we collaboratively explored and experimented with a range of approaches to evaluation, which included participants identifying indicators, interviewing each other on audio and video cameras; painting; writing; as well as engaging with photographs. For each convergence we explored different ways of recording the process such as ‘RLP News’ letters for RLP 1 and RLP 2, a ‘talking wall’ and an attempt at a collaborative report using ‘GoogleDocs’ for RLP 3.

Excerpt from ‘googledoc’ collaborative evaluation, October 2007

As part of this ‘collaborative blog’, we used a new tool - ‘googledocs’ – that promised to enable multiple authors to work simultaneously on an online document (‘RLP Ongoing Evaluation Page’, top right in the screenshot above). Our idea was that this tool could enable everyone participating in the course to shape the structure and content of an ongoing ‘harvest’ of learning we were generating together through the programme – and that during the closing stages this material could then be edited into a report to be shared with wider stakeholders (funders and others who might be interested in insights we’d come to).
The googledoc had two columns. On the left we collected and curated raw data – pictures, poems, schedules, notes; and on the right was a ‘double column’ (in an echo of a ‘double column’ writing technique I’d learned at CARRP) for reflective contributions in response to that data. By layering and placing comments/pictures alongside this ‘mess’ of material, we were able to start to make some sense of the learning journey we had been on; to identify patterns across individual stories; and to draft collective key learning points (see excerpt below):

Rural Leadership Programme Evaluation

Document Draft: 7th December 2007

Authors: Nick Wilding, Sibongile Pradhan with contributions from the RLP participants

Purpose of this evaluation document

Building on the action research culture and focus of the RLP, to:

- Help participants and stakeholder make sense of, and communicate the story of, the Rural Leadership Programme
- Learn lessons for future programmes on the design, facilitation and other factors which may contribute to an effective and value-full future Rural Leadership Programme
- Reflect on how the RLP ethos, culture and structure might be adapted/integrated into the on-going action-learning life of partner organisations (Falkland Centre for Stewardship and Communities on the Edge)
- Share the essence of the Rural Leadership Programme with external stakeholders, with an emphasis on ‘appreciative inquiry’ – what worked and how it might be built upon in the future, as well as shining a light on unhelpful patterns, dynamics or stucknesses which could be more awarly approached in a future programme
- Celebrate the achievement of the participants and co-creators of this programme over eighteen months (March 2006- November 2007)

Who is writing the report?

The report has been primarily drafted by Nick Wilding (RLP Director) with Sibongile Pradhan (RLP Co-ordinator), with significant and transparent involvement from most RLP participants, our external evaluator, and other key stakeholders.

How did we do it?

We are experimenting with creating this report on ‘Googledocs.com’, and on-line, collaborative word processor/web-page creator.

We asked contributors to concurrently:

1) Read the column on the left - the narrative. Add to it, especially when your name is in brackets by a heading. This is about what we did, and what we learned. What is your own particular take?

2) Look at the right-hand column. Add your photos, sound recordings, video (youtube links?) and comments on the photos and other material ... alternative captions?

3) Record questions that come up for you as you read ...

How is it circulated?

It is intended that the document be primarily web-based, circulated electronically in Adobe PDF format (which allows web-links) as well as being a web-page.

Structure of this report

We think there is noticeable learning (and results) arising from the RLP programme in three areas:

Section 1: About the report

What exactly can I do with Google Docs?

Here’s what you can do with documents:

- Upload Word documents, OpenOffice, RTF, HTML or text (or create documents from scratch).
- Use our simple WYSIWYG editor to format your documents, spell check them, etc.
- Invite others (by email address) to edit or view your documents and spreadsheets.
- Edit documents online with whomever you choose.
- View your documents’ and spreadsheets’ revision history and roll back to any version.
- Publish documents online to the world, as web pages or post documents to your blog.
- Download documents to your desktop as Word, OpenOffice, RTF, PDF, HTML or zip file.
- Email your documents as attachments.

Creating our own indicators of success, RLP 1. These included: (need to get these in)
During the final RLP event, participants invented the idea of drawing a ‘dinner’ that would be a metaphor for their experience of the programme as a whole. With a great sense of fun and energy we all took a piece of A3 paper and felt tip pens and drew our own ‘dinner’ which a participant then captured using their digital camera. Later that week, these pictures were uploaded into the googledoc as well as a reflective commentary that folk logged on to upload. We were thus able to see and ‘taste’ peoples’ reflective accounts of their key points of learning, and the dinner proved a liberating and accessible device well suited to unlocking/sharing creative reflection:

Helen

1) Have I changed through the RLP year?

I would have to take RLP in conjuction with other things that I’ve done/attended over the year, specifically Be The Change and the Big Tent. Being on RLP got me to Be The Change (through you!) and that had a huge impact on my understanding about climate change, equity, etc. And the Big Tent was such a big undertaking that it has to be there too. So, taking all 3 into consideration, I would say that I am more reflective (or intend to be when time doesn’t permit!), I’m far more conscious of being part of a greater community and not so insular. Consumerism plays a much lesser role in my life at the end of 2007 than in did say in 2005. My actions are also more reflective and I’ll take time to think about their implication before I go ahead and do them – if you see what I mean.

2) Have my wicked questions been alive for me?...have they evolved?

Question - how to convey stewardship to others in a way that they get it. Yes, still alive, still thinking about it but again, I’d like to think that both personal (smaller/misignificant practicality) and organisational actions have helped people to understand this more and more. It is a long journey, but I do feel that the message of stewardship is very much alive and gaining prominence (eg Bernie’s earth stewards the other day).

3) Have there been some concrete outcomes or outputs?

Like what? Not sure.

Some outputs - collaboration with other members of RLP eg Ian Bastille and the COTE group. Also, intend to put action learning cycle in to effect at team meetings - working with Ninian on this.

Annette:

1) Have I changed through the RLP year?

Yes I have changed lots! I have made changes personally and professionally. I have gained huge confidence in my abilities and now have total confidence in my instincts.

2) Have my wicked questions been alive for me?....have they evolved?

Again yes my question has been very alive and as it turned out a very apt one as in my role as an animator it was continually an issue. Did it evolve?...I got the answer!

3) Have there been some concrete outcomes or outputs?

I’ve thought through questions of enthusiasm and engagement with her work, and re-framed her approach to community development work as a result, unleashing lots of positive energy. Yes some very positive concrete outcomes working with and supporting a group to make amazing changes to peoples lives....with two great potential other spin offs from ....sadly on no call.

I’m on a weight-watchers diet

Veg: no points here - vitamins for the meal! they help you learn - the theory is there, the reflections that help to understand

Potatoes here: starchy bit - a place to practice presentations wouldn’t have been able to do this in other working life situato like what we did this morning - the place to be able to put into others and to get practical feedback

My vegetarian meat: learning about action research and the opportunity to take time out doing; the recurring theme for me whole time is not having enough time

My spoon yum-yum (not that I’ll be able to have one - too n points!): the energisers (penguins and flamingos in particular),

- whether all together or alone, music utensils to help along the way: without them it would be a very messy affair.

Sibongile is my fork - a fork you rely on pretty much for every single meal. Not spoon feeding, but helping to create the programme.

And when you’re getting stuck, you call on the ‘Nick knife’, an insight to maybe deepen things a bit more.

My doggy bag - the theory - if you’ve had too much, there’s unfinished business, yes, but you don’t have to do it all here - can take it home to finish later. You can take it home; action research, emails of everyone, Pig-trough: the role-play and my not being fully engaged while focussing on other things. I’d save all my points for my wine: I don’t care what type it is: my glass would be half-full and my wine would be for continu...

Friendship...
Although the ‘googledoc’ exercise resulted in a document that most of the participants, as well as the programme funders and external evaluator were able to draw on, the shift to using this online environment had not been convenient or easy for all the participants. Although we had said the space would be private (until the point where we decided to ‘go live’), and had affirmed that nothing could ‘go wrong’ as the software backs itself up all the time allowing co-authors to retrace their steps, we facilitators found ourselves doing more of the physical pasting of resources into googledocs than we had originally anticipated – often cutting and pasting in text and pictures that had been sent to us via email. We also reflected that as people had gone back to busy lives they found it most helpful to be prompted one-one rather than being asked to navigate an unfamiliar online tool and risk ‘getting it wrong’ on a collectively owned document.

On reflection, it strikes me that our experiment with googledocs was a little like learning how to be a digital gardener. We began with an enclosed space – defined by the password protected Google document – and created a structure (like beds in a real garden) where people could plant their images and reflections. My colleague Sibongile and I were the digital gardeners, encouraging and supporting people to get online. We discovered that this gardener role involved a lot of hand-holding (a little like nurturing the seeds of a tomato plant, staking the plants as they develop). At the end of the day, our garden fruited in an unexpected way (the ‘dinners’) and these fruits helped make the digital space seem more accessible, enjoyable and fulfilling to engage with.

Our external review process identified some high level issues at play in the design of an effective learning architecture, offering concepts such as ‘the paradox of the liberating structure’ to help reveal how much energy and input the cluster sub-groups required, thereby turning on its head my starting assumption that energetic inputs should be evenly spread across convergences and ‘clusters’. The external review was also helpful in highlighting some of the successes of our work to the programme sponsor, Carnegie UK Trust – to the point that the Director of the then Rural Programme at Carnegie had said words to the effect that ‘this is what we need for the Rural Programme at Carnegie!’.

3.1.5 From Digital Gardening to Digital Forestry
In July 2006 Facebook moved from being a tool used by university students, to being a public service. Along with MySpace and LinkedIn these new social sharing technologies promised to make it free, quick and easy to upload and access digital updates from friends all over the planet. Where the googledoc we had been using with the Rural Leadership Programme had been a (free) way to gather people together into a password-protected ‘digital garden’, these free services were based on business models that projected future profits for their investors based on the intention that more and more people would share more and more of their information with each other – so that, eventually, we would become habituated/acculturated/addicted to accessing particular online environments. With a critical mass of inhabitants arriving regularly into these digital spaces would come opportunities for investors to make money through placing adverts and services in the view of these users.

Along with ‘wicked questions’, ‘liberating structures’ is another much used term by practitioners of organizational learning informed by complexity sciences. See for example http://www.liberatingstructures.com/ls-menu/
As we were reflecting on the lessons of the RLP digital garden, I signed up to several of these services, curious about whether the powerful social sharing engines – with their emphasis on ease of use – might overcome some of the issues of confidence and accessibility that we’d encountered during the Rural Leadership Programme.

My hunch was that if these hurdles could be overcome, the new social technologies could potentially open up all kinds of new opportunities to do action research in different ways, across greater distances, and at greater scales than was previously viable on limited budgets. For example, by integrating online forums and blog-commenting threads tightly with traditional AR approaches such as face-face meetings and events, I saw it could be possible to develop second person inquiries that did not require people to travel to meet each other. If these second person inquiries took place within a larger holding knowledge ecosystem, it should be possible for members of different inquiries to start to notice patterns across different practice topics, and across regional or national differences, and across sectoral silos and academic languages too. And what’s more, it was increasingly looking as if this scaled-up third person learning architecture could be set up and run very cheaply indeed.

At this time, many of the online services were in their early start-up phases. It was not yet clear which ones would emerge to dominate the market, and the assumptions behind and implications of free-to-use business models attracting angel investors to support development of these tools seemed opaque to me and perhaps many average users. However, during 2006/7 the pace of development of these tools had began to accelerate exponentially, and affordable access to broadband through cable networks and upgraded telephone exchanges was being rolled out beyond cities, promising that many more people would soon have access to the internet.

One of these start-ups was a company called ning.com – whose unique selling point was the promise that, for free, users could set up their own Facebook look-alike sites. In April 2008, and in a leap of faith that this company would be around well into the future, would continue to develop their product, would continue to be affordable and would enable migration of all the data should we later choose to move to a different platform … I chose ning as the platform on which we would build the Carnegie UK Trust Community of Practice (an account of how we did this is developed in the next chapter).

This opportunity to experiment with ning and other new social media tools came at exactly the time when the focus of my own research journey was evolving towards becoming more curious about how to enable large scale social learning (this shift being introduced above).

We might understand this as a shift from a small-scale experiment in ‘digital gardening’ to an intention to experiment with stewarding ‘digital landscape gardening’ or perhaps ‘digital forestry’. In a garden, you more or less know where the beds are and what’s in them. There is a fence around the outside or similar protective barrier that keeps the rabbits/deer/wind out, and demarcates the boundary between ‘tamed’ nature and the ‘wild’ outside. Developing our metaphor of digital gardening a little, we can understand digital platforms such as Facebook,
Ning, MySpace, Bebo as extended digital spaces more akin to managed forests than enclosed gardens.

These managed forests are somewhere between tamed gardens and the wild: users might be able to view content within these spaces, but need to ‘log in’ to engage with the content or the people occupying these spaces. Different platforms offer different user experiences, just as managed forests might be put over to monoculture plantations for the mass market; or might be managed with an intention to foster ecological sustainability, requiring an eye to long time horizons and a willingness to allow natural regeneration to take its course, resulting in time (perhaps) in a highly diverse ecosystem of broadleaved trees interspersed with tangles of tracks between forest glades. Just as in real-world forests, there are economic pressures on digital forest providers to make these spaces ‘pay’. We have already introduced some of these pressures - such as the emphasis of growth of users and ‘stickiness’ of content within the networks so more and more people spend more of their time in one digital forest rather than a different one.

In the early stages of deciding to pursue and experiment with ‘digital forestry’ through a ning platform, I had been exploring the distinctions between a ‘tamed’ and a ‘wild’ community of practice that we have already introduced above with reference to Wenger’s early writing on CoPs and Kemble’s (ibid.) later critique of the tendency towards overly controlled or ‘managerialist’ spaces. It seemed to me that it would be wise to go into this work conscious of the implications of the business models underpinning free-to-use digital platforms: an attempt, perhaps, to move in the direction of ‘sustainable digital forestry’, whatever that might mean.

What, I found myself asking, would ‘sustainable digital forestry’ involve?
3.1.6 Taking inspiration and guidance from interpreters of complexity theory

In the early stages of the CARRP programme, through the Art of Hosting workshop, and through my earlier studies and work at the Centre for Human Ecology, I had encountered and been intrigued by complexity theory as a way to comprehend the dynamics of complex, dynamic and living human systems. By 2007 I had a gut feeling that interpreters of chaos, dynamic evolving systems and complexity theories, especially those who had experimented with large scale organizational and social development challenges informed by this thinking, could offer guidance and inspiration particularly in the early design stages for the FierySpirits CoP.

As a Wikipedia overview of these connected scholarly territories reveals (the picture, above, gives a visual snapshot of the scope of this intellectual territory)\(^{14}\), the links are immensely complicated. I chose not to be overwhelmed by the potential quantity of material available, but instead to take to heart Kurt Lewin’s epithet ‘if you want to truly understand something, try to change it’; and to launch into the work by choosing three or four key authors whose work resonated in some way and, ideally, who I had an opportunity to meet in person to gauge their sense of aliveness and qualities of authentic curiosity connected with their work. As I met authors with these characteristics – resonant with qualities I aspire to in my own practice - I felt more willing to take a leap of faith and trust their experience as well as trust-worthiness as interpreters of this scholarly field.

I now introduce these ‘elder’ guides whose experience and emerging theories of ‘what works’ in the design of social learning architectures I decided to trust. I also point to places in the practice accounts that follow where we return to consider their ideas in the light of insights emerging from our own practice.

Imagine dropping two identical coins from your fingertips off a 25-story balcony at the same time. Unless they are glued together, they will each take a different path towards the ground. Even though the force of gravity determines their general direction and speed, a host of uncontrollable variables such as wind and dust particles affect each coin independently. The infinitesimal and perhaps unidentifiable difference in starting conditions exponentially amplifies the effects of all other variables encountered which then feed back and add even more variation to the system resulting in very different paths taken to the ground.

_Wikipedia entry on complexity theory, accessed November 2012_

Complexity adaptive systems theory – and the related field of chaos theory – stress that the evolutionary potential of a system is highly sensitive to initial conditions. This is sometimes called the ‘butterfly effect’, coined after Edward Lorenz’ 1961 experiment with a numerical computer model predicting weather patterns where, instead of typing a full starting variable into the model of 0.506127, he entered 0.506 as a shortcut – with the result that the model went on to generate a completely different weather scenario. Lorenz went on to popularise his findings about nonlinear dynamics by positing that a butterfly flapping its wings in a distant city might generate a hurricane weeks later.

In the early stages of envisaging the potential for FierySpirits CoP the idea of a ‘butterfly effect’ drew me to decide to inquire into the ‘initial conditions’ for the CoP, on the basis that paying particular attention to these conditions – with the intention of ensuring they were as favorable as possible - might make a significant difference to the future impact and success of the initiative years later. To inform this inquiry, I set out to find advice from interpreters of complexity theory which might be helpful for us to bear in mind.

Margaret Wheatley’s work is often quoted by members of the Art of Hosting network as a point of inspiration - a highly accessible author whose work points to a theory of change suggesting how social movements emerge through stages of communities of interest, into communities of practice and thence into systems of influence.

In _Using Emergence to Take Social Innovation to Scale_ (Wheatley and Frieze, 2008), the authors introduce their typology by networks as “based on self-interest--people usually network together for their own benefit and to develop their own work. Networks tend to have fluid membership; people move in and out of them based on how much they personally benefit from participating”.

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16 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Butterfly_effect
For Wheatley and Frieze, the move to Communities of Practice is something that emerges, rather than being planned or forced: “smaller, individuated communities can spring from a robust network. CoPs are also self-organized. People share a common work and realize there is great benefit to being in relationship. They use this community to share what they know, to support one another, and to intentionally create new knowledge for their field of practice. These CoPs differ from networks in significant ways. They are communities, which means that people make a commitment to be there for each other; they participate not only for their own needs, but to serve the needs of others. In a community of practice, the focus extends beyond the needs of the group. There is an intentional commitment to advance the field of practice, and to share those discoveries with a wider audience. They make their resources and knowledge available to anyone, especially those doing related work.”

Finally, Wheatley and Frieze suggest that as the quality of relationships, strength of mutual support, and speed of learning accelerates, a more powerful pattern might emerge – a System of Influence: “It is the sudden appearance of a system that has real power and influence. Pioneering efforts that hovered at the periphery suddenly become the norm. The practices developed by courageous communities become the accepted standard. People no longer hesitate about adopting these approaches and methods and they learn them easily. Policy and funding debates now include the perspectives and experiences of these pioneers. They become leaders in the field and are acknowledged as the wisdom keepers for their particular issue. And critics who said it could never be done suddenly become chief supporters (often saying they knew it all along.).”

Wheatley and Frieze’s thinking represented a strong influence in the early stages of our work on the CoP. The public ‘about the CoP’ webpage on fieryspirits.com pointed to the Using Emergence article; and it featured repeatedly in internal briefing papers including that included in Chapter 3.4.. Wheatley and Frieze’s work helped to crystallise an intention – stated in this paper - that an important part of our future work might be to catalyse the emergence of multiple practitioner communities focused on particular themes – within a learning environment capable of maximising opportunities for these themes and practitioners to cross-fertilise understanding, experience and support:

(as ‘Hosts’) we focus on discovering pioneering efforts and naming them as such. We then connect these efforts to other similar work globally. We nourish this network in many ways, but most essentially through creating opportunities for learning and sharing experiences and shifting into communities of practice. We also illuminate these pioneering efforts so that many more people will learn from them. We are attempting to work intentionally with emergence so that small, local efforts can become a global force for change.

Wheatley & Frieze (2008)
As I read into Wheatley and Frieze’s invitation to action, I found myself trusting the simplicity of their logic, particularly as it resonated strongly with the intuitions about developing ‘sounding boards’ for ‘authentic voices’ emerging from first person inquiries at CARRP (which we have introduced in the previous chapter). As I attempted to understand what the work of ‘digital forestry’ might involve, it seemed very helpful to have guidance from these experienced guides encouraging acts of ‘discovering’, ‘naming’, ‘connecting’ and thereby ‘illuminating’ pioneering practice.

I came across similar – perhaps more nuanced - messages in Foth (quoted in Burns, 2007: 17) advocacy for a ‘network action research’ that...

... moves away from a pure homogenous model of community and acknowledges the fluid, dynamic, swarming, chaotic qualities of social networks that are present in communities. The primary objective of network action research is to map the existing (formal and informal) networks that operate within the community and initiate small participatory action research projects within each of them. The task of the action researcher is then to link and harness each of their sub-networks of inquiry to form a larger networked community of practice.

Foth (2006:212)

Here, again, was a voice of an elder action researcher spelling out in a clear way what this ‘work’ we were embarking on should involve, rooted in a recognition of the self-organising properties of extended social learning spaces (including, I assumed, digital spaces such as those we hoped to develop). In my view, Foth’s work complemented and added to Wheatley and Frieze’s notions of emergence. In particular, I found it helpful to imagine that ‘sub-networks of inquiry’ might emerge within the social network space of the CoP we were to establish. In this way, Foth’s proposals gave me a clue that we might focus in our ‘digital forestry’ practice on enabling the emergence of topic-based inquiries, with the intention that these in turn would create resources to share more widely across the CoP... which in turn (and now borrowing from Wheatley and Frieze) might help to ‘tune up’ the resonant qualities of the emerging ‘system of influence’ represented by CoP members.

Amongst interpreters of complexity theory there is generally agreement that the boundaries of any system are worth paying particular attention to. Often, the system within these boundaries is called a ‘container’. For example, Eoyang and Quade (2005) discuss different ways of appreciating the influences on the boundary conditions of a ‘learning container’:

The container holds separate individuals together long enough for a pattern to emerge. Many different elements might function as containers for a single group. The container can be psychological (for example, a visionary leader or fear of the unknown), physical (for example, a meeting room or national boundary), or social (for example, identity groupings or shared experiences). If there is not a sufficient container, a group wanders around, and energy and information are dissipated before they can coalesce into a new and more productive pattern. Containers are critical in effective large group interventions—the place, convening questions, and the time frame are among the constraints that can hold the system together until something interesting happens.

Eoyang and Quade (2005)
In effect, this means a CoP facilitator addressing questions like ‘Who is welcome; who is not?’; ‘How easy should it be to join this community?’; and ‘How can the container encourage a good balance of safety and challenge; diversity and sameness; of generating ‘bonding’ as well as ‘bridging’ social capital?

When a group meets face-to-face, the fact of their physical presence together means that it becomes possible – sometimes at a glance of a participant list, a show of hands – to tell who is ‘in the room' and who is not. We can relatively easily see if we are an ethnically and age-diverse group or not; charismatic leadership is relatively straightforward to spot (the degree of attention or (perhaps) applause in a plenary; number of voluntary sign-ups to a workshop); there is usually a clear starting time and an end-point.

Considering the challenges of working with the dispersed, virtual community of an imagined ‘digital forest’ I was particularly struck by Eoyang and Quade's proposition that ‘containers are critical in effective large group interventions’ – and realized that it would be important to pay particularly inquiring attention to the process of developing a container that was fit for purpose. A result of this intention was a decision to spend six months prototyping the fieryspirits.com website, and to construct this development process as an inquiry in itself – which Chapter four tracks.

Where Meg Wheatley’s writing often relies on evocation and metaphor, I found Eoyang and Quade’s more self-consciously systematic stance reassuring; I felt inclined to trust their insights and was particularly interested in those that seemed to flesh out and complement Wenger’s ‘domain/community/practice’ distinctions: in their typology of psychological, physical and social ‘containers’, it was stimulating to reflect on ways in which our these containers were emerging in our work. It struck me in particular that Kate Braithwaite, my boss at Carnegie UK Trust, might be providing something of the ‘psychological’ container as a ‘visionary leader'; and I imagined that her existing work with the Trust developing a ‘Rural Programme’ had already begun to demarcate the social and physical containers for our work together. As a first move, it would therefore make sense to inquire into the qualities of the ‘containers’ already in place.

A back-of-envelop theory of transformative learning within the ‘container’

Over many years prior to joining Carnegie the focus of my professional work had been designing and facilitating courses for ‘activists and change agents’ interested in supporting transformational change in society.

I have already pointed (in section 2.3.1 and footnote 5) to the time I spent with Edinburgh’s Centre for Human Ecology as formative in developing this practice. Central to all our programmes was a Geddesian epistemology of ‘heart, hand and head’ and an intention that our pedagogies should not just talk about transformative change, but offer participants embodied experiences of what this might feel like through an emphasis on building strong containers for each cohort of learners.

Our programmes particularly stressed the notion of ‘learning in community’ of ‘student/teachers’ where experienced elders (‘tutors’) sought to embody a pedagogical stance of experiential learning along with novices (‘students’). In his chapter in Radical Human Ecology (a textbook with contributions from several CHE colleagues including myself – see footnote 5 above), one of the participants in our programme reflected on the nature of the programme he had experienced:
As various members of the CHE have shown in their contributions to this handbook, Human Ecology as practiced there holds multiple perspectives.

As their student – or “student-teacher,” to adopt the term from critical pedagogy (Freire 1972: 63) – and the student-teacher of other teacher-students (some of whom were also student-teachers) they have instilled in me some ingredients of their Human Ecology.

Those elements of their teaching that I have absorbed are infused now with the juices of my own thinking, adding flavour and colour to them. The multiple perspectives that I encountered at CHE, learning from natural and social sciences, indigenous and spiritual traditions, were themselves rooted in an approach to the learning committed to the creation of critical consciousness among the students. This commitment was manifest in the pedagogy through the practice of participatory forms of inquiry.

Iain McKinnon, *Education for Life: Human Ecology Pedagogy as a Bridge to Indigenous Knowing* in Williams, Roberts and McIntosh (eds) 2012

Here, Iain has captured with generosity a spirit of co-inquiry that we, as tutors, aspired to both live in our own practice and share with participants traversing the courses we offered. In the process of writing this thesis, one of the hardest choices has been that of choosing to point to this formative time in my professional development, rather than including an account of this journey in all its intensity – through moments of pain as well as magic. Even as I write today, many memories from this time continue to burn with a kind of white-heat intensity.

It is, however, important before concluding this chapter to note that over these years at CHE, I came to trust a ‘back of envelop’ piece of theory that I came to trust as a reasonable approximation to – and aide memoire for – some stages of a typical process of transformative learning that groups experienced as we/they ‘dove deep’ into our questions across each epistemological realm: from ‘head’ attempts to get to grips with the nature of ‘the global problematique’ of simultaneous ecological and social collapse and its origins in our species’ evolution; to ‘hand’ experiences encountering land reform activists and others plugging away to create more sustainable local communities; to ‘heart’ self-inquiry journeys informed by critical exposure to depth, developmental, eco and integral psychologies, towards discovering or re-membering an authentic sense of personal vocation and ‘voice’ (in the sense I have already introduced in relation to material from Carol Gilligan and others in section 2.3.3 above).

This back-of-envelop theory is the ‘Theory U’ (Scharmer, 2007) of Otto Scharmer and colleagues which suggests a path for how a transformative learning journey can enable a group to ‘presence’ new possibilities beyond the constraints of their existing collective and personal mindsets:
Otto Scharmer’s ‘Theory U’ suggests that a conscious movement beyond everyday patterns of communication and conversational habits between people in groups is crucial to unlocking a route toward transformative innovations in practice: the theory proposes that transformative innovation occurs when groups are able to develop sufficient trust and sense of ‘flow’ to enable members to move from ‘talking nice’ and ‘downloading’ through to engage each other in robust ‘debate’ (speaking to a standpoint); through to becoming collectively curious about those stand-points and what they say about the qualities of the system as a whole (‘dialogue’ - t); through to ‘letting go’ of even this perspective to trust in their potential – as a group now open to unlocking their creative, collective intelligence – to what comes.

As I moved from co-journeying with small groups of people who had chosen to pursue a programme of ‘transformative learning’, into working at scale with people who had been attracted by a different kind of invitation (‘asset based rural development’) I was unsure of when, where, or even whether I would have an opportunity to work at such depth with a group in this new context. Nevertheless, there was no escaping my by now firm sense of experiential knowing that I was carrying forward into this work about how groups can experience powerful moments of co-creation and states of heightened consciousness together; and that I had a reasonable sense of what kinds of qualities face-face ‘containers’, as well as facilitation moves within them, can support a journey to depth. ‘Theory U’ became a kind of shorthand reminder: a note to self that, if the opportunity arose, I could offer both some facilitation skill as well as a bit of guiding theory that might come in useful.

Imagine the excitement in the air as a small team, passionate about the power of communities to take charge of their own futures, succeed in winning a commitment from a major UK foundation to invest in their vision to establish a world-class ‘community of practice’ for those self-same community pioneers.

Follow the story of how they put into a pot all their prior experience and thinking about how social change comes about, towards creating spaces for social learning and movement building, with the potential of unleashing the power of some very recent innovations in web technology such as social networking and peer-peer media.

- from an imagined ‘pitch’ to a publisher for this story, Diary, Feb. 2012

4.1 Introducing the practice accounts

This and following chapter invite my reader to come close-up alongside a number of parallel inquiries into designing and facilitating the FierySpirits CoP between 2008 and 2012.

These accounts draw on event reports, diaries, feedback and conversations with co-researchers, papers as part of the work, photos and other media.

Each chapter also contains reflective passages that pause to notice, inquire into and sense patterns of insights emerging from these experiments in midwifing and hosting learning spaces bridging face-face and online learning infrastructures. I have introduced their content in section 2.2; but to recap:

- Chapter 4 comprises a story into the ‘starting conditions’ for the FierySpirits CoP that develops into an account of an second person inquiry into ‘hosting’ during 2009 and 2010; and

- Chapter 5 focuses into a co-inquiry hosted within fieryspirits called ‘Exploring Community Resilience’.

4.2 Inquiring into the ethics of writing up these accounts

At the point of joining the Trust, I had just completed my CARRP MPhil viva with a proposal that the PhD itself would focus on the Carnegie work. I shared this intention during an early conversation with my new manager, Kate, and on the basis of her agreement with this intention received some support for university fees during my first year in post.

Kate had recently completed a doctorate on the topic of developing networks herself, and I said that I hoped to involve her and other colleagues in the research process as it developed. At the time of this conversation, I was imagining a scenario of ongoing team meetings that I would facilitate as part of our hosting practice. This would offer me an opportunity to seek validity for insights amongst my peers and lead to, hopefully, better decisions for the work going forward. The thesis could contain evidence from these team conversations about ‘whether the community of practice works or not’.
I had developed this vision out of the experience of working with close colleagues on earlier programmes to evaluate our work with a view to improving our personal as well as joint professional practice with the team at Carnegie. And during our first year of working together, I had begun to write up and share papers with my colleagues, sometimes receiving insightful as well as challenging feedback on them – sometimes on what they perceived as a skewed perspective; more often on what they construed as an impenetrable lack of ‘plain English’. I had also brought recording audio and visual equipment into some meetings and received the permission of those present to use them as data ‘for the PhD’.

However, as time progressed and external stresses on our team developed it became difficult to convene inquiring and reflective spaces. As a result, I drew back from ‘pushing’ the inquiry agenda at meetings that I was not in a position to set the tone or agenda of, and sought other less organised ways to invite feedback (often through conversations in cars or trains). I would then write this into a diary, which became my primary source of material for the accounts that follow.

In constructing the accounts that follow, I have thought carefully about whether it is fair on Kate in particular to write a perspective on events given her key role in many of the early decisions about CoP development and the original intention to steward a participative research into our practice together. The major impediment to following through on this intention today is that Kate left the Trust as part of an organisational restructure during 2010 and is not now in a position to comment on our work together.

I have decided on balance that the potential learning offered by an account retaining ‘up close’ qualities (e.g. accounts of team meetings and our individual stances toward the work) outweighs the danger that in presenting these accounts from memory and diaries I am not allowing my past and current colleagues at Carnegie UK Trust sufficient opportunity to present counter views or, indeed, request that the material not be discussed at all. I have come to this decision on the basis of considering the following factors:

• my explicit early conversations with Kate that agreed in principle the topic and scope of the research;
• our explicit commitment in early team building conversations to the principle of ‘walking the talk’ a learning organisation by modeling transparency, sharing our learning widely, and seeking opportunities to introduce and deepen inquiry where possible;
• the near impossibility of disguising the names of people, given the public nature of our work, with whom I have been working closely on this project, creating a more fundamental choice between telling or not-telling the story; and
• my acknowledgement here that the account I present does not include – directly – the voices of some of my closest colleagues and therefore must be taken by my reader as only one of many possible perspectives on what is a rich, complex and ongoing story; however
• in the drafting process I was able to invite feedback on the text from a number of colleagues and I have sought creative ways to share key elements of this feedback in an anonymised way when I am not able to quote people directly.
This reflection process and decision does not leave me in an easy place, however. It reminds me of the pain of working within an organisational system that made it difficult to open space for the kinds of open, honest and collaborative reflection that we had intended to inhabit regularly at the outset of our work together.

4.3 Inquiring into the ‘starting conditions’ for the CoP

In Chapter two I have introduced the proposal – drawing on the idea of the ‘butterfly effect’ from chaos theory - that the ‘starting conditions’ of any complex system might have a disproportionately great impact on the later development of that system. Taking the idea to heart, this chapter pays particular attention to a story of our research into ‘creating the conditions for healthy emergence’ of a vibrant social learning system.

I imagined that these initial conditions would comprise (at least) the quality and extent of existing relationships within and across active rural development networks across the UK; the history and current standing of Carnegie UK Trust’s reputation amongst these networks; wider impacts on practitioners of current and forthcoming national and European policy changes; and also - bearing in mind Eoyang et al’s observations about the value of ‘psychological containers’ in creating boundary conditions for CoPs, the particular qualities of charismatic leadership exercised and embodied by Carnegie staff including my own role and that of the Rural Programme Director.

In order to drill down into these dimensions as they showed up in practice, the narrative of this section is divided into six sections:

- **Phase 1**: Inquiring into Carnegie Rural Programme system at Aviemore, 2007;

- **Phase 2**: Inquiring into ‘facilitation’ during a ‘trip to the fens’;

- **Phase 3**: Inquiring with Kate into the potential of Carnegie UK Trust to act as an effective institutional convenor of a radical experiment in social learning;

- **Phase 4**: Imagining a learning architecture for the CoP

- **Phase 5**: Prototyping the design of the social networking hub, fieryspirits.com; and

- **Phase 6**: Initiating a collaborative inquiry into ‘excellent hosting’ with colleagues in partner organisations.

4.3.1 Phase 1: Inquiring into the Carnegie Rural Programme system at Aviemore, 2007

When I joined Carnegie UK Trust in March 2008, a Chief Executive with a background in community development was guiding two major programmes, both geared towards enabling civil society organisations, from social enterprises to campaigning NGOs, to strengthen their voices. This involved setting up large scale Commissions of Inquiry into big topics of the day (the future for rural communities; rejuvenating civil society and democracy), and then finding ways to implement the findings. The strategic plan framed these commissions as part of a shift in the way Carnegie UK Trust operated – from grant-giver to an ‘operating foundation’ intervening to enhance ‘the wellbeing of the masses’ (the mandate given by Andrew Carnegie when he established the Trust in 1913). Between 2004 and 2007 the Trust supported an ‘Inquiry into the Future for Rural Communities’. In their final report, the
Inquiry summarized their key learning and made one direct recommendation for implementation by Carnegie UK Trust:

We talked at length with people in rural communities – young people, older people, migrant workers and many, many more. Our investigations revealed that people were apprehensive about the future, about change, about rural poverty and future economic opportunities, about public services in decline if not actually withdrawn, about the lack and cost of land for affordable housing and the related complexity of the planning system, about the impact of migrant workers on rural communities. Many felt very distant from local and national government and powerless to influence local decisions. Some of these trends are long-lived but we believe that their continuation should not be passively accepted.

At the same time we saw abundant signs of hope and transformation, often led by remarkable individuals and inspirational community organizations. We recorded this evidence too. Many rural communities, faced with a challenge, have initiated projects and schemes which are rejuvenating their lifeblood. Their variety was as wide as life itself, ranging from creating a local shop which became a hub to managing a community-owned forest. What all the schemes had in common were people: committed, community-minded, can-do people who wanted to carry on living where they were and understood what they had to do. The Commission members were particularly impressed by those whom we came to call ‘fiery spirits’ – those individuals with the drive and imagination to devise unique ways to preserve and grow their own community…..

We call upon Carnegie UK Trust to work with others to establish a UK and Ireland centre for rural community development to support policy and practice development.

We support the development of a centre for rural community development that can support learning and development across the UK and Ireland and increasingly internationally. It should support action research, promote innovative learning approaches and materials, network facilitating opportunities for communities and professionals to learn from each other and support the training of the trainers…. The centre should take to the road on learning journeys to visit communities, share and test knowledge and emerging practice, and encourage communities

Carnegie UK Trust Charter for Rural Communities (2007)

Alongside the Rural Commission of Inquiry, Carnegie had also been running a partnership programme with the Big Lottery - called a Rural Action Research Programme (RARP). This applied £2.3 million over four years to support six streams of what was termed ‘action research’ into topics such as rural services, remote and peripheral communities, community planning, skills, diversity and inclusion… and asset based approaches to community development. It was whilst running a project supported by the asset-based stream that I met Kate Braithwaite, the Rural Programme Director, who subsequently invited me to facilitate two annual conventions to bring together and cross-fertilise learning from all six RARP streams.

Just before the second convention in Aviemore, Scotland in late 2007, the Commission for Inquiry published their report findings – A Charter for Rural
Communities (Carnegie UK Trust, 2007). One recommendation was that a ‘Centre of Excellence’ for rural community development be established. I was tasked with inviting feedback on this idea from participants. Both the CEO and Chair of the Board of Trustees of the Trust were present for this session.

There were two hundred people in the room, and we had ninety minutes for the session. First, I asked everyone to ‘buzz’ in a pair with someone they hadn’t met – discussing their best memories of learning to be effective rural development workers. Next, the pairs joined with other pairs and listened for similarities or differences in the responses. Next, I asked everyone to join a table of eight participants each for two rounds of a ‘world café’ exercise. The first task was to explore and find patterns in peoples’ ideas about how the ways people in the group learn best, given what they’d heard in the previous buzz exercises. Next, I outlined the proposal for a ‘Centre for Excellence’ and asked each table to reflect on whether – and if so, how – this could be designed to make a real difference for people in rural communities.

Finally, we put all the tables aside and the entire group responded as individuals to a series of ‘I agree’ or ‘I don’t agree’ questions by moving along a line down the centre for the hall (yes to one end, no to the other). I invited people to call out questions emerging from their café conversations, and gave an example: “the most effective learning happens when experts present papers at conferences put on by universities”. The room seemed to tilt under the weight of the rush to the ‘no’ end of the hall. Fairly soon, the great majority of participants had shown physically their preference for an informal network enabling practitioners to learn from each other in surroundings congruent with the content of the meetings.

Finally, we convened into a huge circle. I invited participants to share a ‘nugget’ of insight that had emerged for them during the exercise. As the Trust CEO and Chair listened on, we had time to hear from around fifteen of the participants’ views who all urged continued investment in RARP-type learning fora (a proposal that Kate had mooted during the opening session that morning).

participants at the 2007 Carnegie Rural Convention, Aviemore

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17 ‘World Café’ is an exercise involving several rounds of conversation at round tables focused on carefully constructed guiding questions. One of the table participants ‘hosts’ the conversation and stays at the table as, between each round, the rest of the room mixes up in new table combinations.
3. Closing (plenary)
Our final 45 minutes navigated the close of our time together, and had real qualities of dialogue and a sense of an emerging community of practice. Alongside this, I heard three focii:

- a passionate voicing of to maintain support for pioneers of transformational approaches ‘at the edge’;
- a call for greater clarity about the RARP action research process, roles and purpose; and
- an appreciation of the diversity of perspective and potential for genuine innovation in rural community development praxis communities across the UK and Republic of Ireland.

The session was concluded with synthesizing contributions from Tony Pender, Kate Braithwaite and Charlie McConnell. The vibrancy and quality of postings to the RARP hub in the days following the convention are testament to the catalytic quality of the final morning.

On reflection, I sense our RARP system becoming more conscious of itself as a living organism full of diversity, potential and life. Will this crystallise new forms of action and research over the next year or so?

excerpt from Convention Report prepared for Carnegie UK Trust

At their next meeting, Carnegie Trustees were able to respond to this clear steer, and agreed to support the experimental development of a community of practice would enable people to learn from each other – building on the way of working that the RARP programme had already begun to establish.

Two months later, Kate invited me to debrief the event in Dunfermline – at the Carnegie HQ. Reflecting on Aviemore feedback afterwards via email, we had started to think through what the aim and outcomes of the new CoP might be. I proposed:

Description of the Community of Practice

Aim
The CoP is an action research programme of learning and exchange for activists, professionals and policy makers who are building resilient rural communities.

The aim of the CoP is to catalyse systemic social change by creating opportunities for social innovators to connect, challenge and learn from each other at face-face events and virtually via the fieryspirits.com social networking website.

Intended Outcomes
Core intended outcomes of the CoP include
- Accelerated learning about rural development practice;
- Opportunities for activists, practitioners, policy makers and academics to work together to influence policy development;
- Capacity building by Carnegie UK Trust and partners in the field of action research-based social networking, new media and CoP facilitation.

At the meeting, she let me know that she’d like me to apply for the job of CoP facilitator.

Reflection on the ‘starting conditions’ for the FierySpirits CoP at Aviemore
Taking a complexity perspective, we can imagine the Aviemore convention represents a fractal (that is, a whole-in-a-part) of a wider system of rural networks across the UK and Ireland, echoing the dynamics and tensions, opportunities and threats experienced by rural practitioners across a range of scales from local to
supra-national. It also reflects the wider patterns of relationships between activists, practitioners, funders, and policy makers focused on rural affairs.

From this perspective, I note that I wrote in the event report that “I sense our RARP system becoming more conscious of itself as a living organism”. I had in mind the whole-room facilitated exercises that invited everyone present to inquire into the views and stances of everyone ‘in the room’.

On reflection it is difficult to gauge the extent to which this statement in the report was a projection of intent for what might come; or an accurate reflection of what people experienced on the day. At the time, most participants left the convention having written a postcard evaluating the event and offering feedback regarding whether Carnegie UK Trust rural programme had a useful role to play in rural learning in the future:

‘It’s great to meet up with old and new colleagues and get restored and inspired again. I came away from the conference feeling more positive about the future.’

‘The value of the Rural Action Research Programme - it is like throwing a small stone in a big pond, it has a ripple effect.’

‘You just have to listen today to the great ideas that are coming forward, the whole buzz in the room as people are talking about new things, learning about new ways of operating. It is just fantastic- this is the key way that we are going to re-engineer how we deliver rural services in the future and how other communities can learn from the success stories we have heard over the last few days.’

‘Carnegie has been very supportive- they have given us the freedom to think of how we want to take the action research forward. They have given us a lot of background information and the lead consultant has helped steer us in the right direction because we’re activists, we do things in Oban - we are not professional community development workers. Carnegie offers support, help and assistance but also the freedom to work on our project.’

Evaluation comments from convention participants

This sample proved representative of the mood of event goers as reported verbally during our closing session: there was a sense of genuine excitement about being able to meet other rural practitioners; and an eagerness that Carnegie support more similar opportunities in the future. The convention, it appears, had done a reasonable job of (in Wheatley and Frieze’s terms) naming, illuminating and celebrating pioneering work as an intentional act in seeding the emergence of a CoP. It also re-affirmed the value of the Commission’s report into the future for rural communities and of its central message: that ‘asset based approaches’ were working ‘on the ground’ and that investing in sharing know-how about how to do ‘asset based’ work therefore represented good potential for Carnegie UK Trust to achieve its ends of enhancing the well-being of people in the UK and Ireland.

In a ‘freefall’ diary entry several weeks later, I discovered another perspective that is possible to sustain about the Aviemore convention:

As I remember back to the Aviemore meeting, I remember feeling an adrenaline rush as the exercises all seemed to ‘work’. But now I am asking myself: from whose perspective? Certainly I achieved for my client (Carnegie’s rural team) a mandate for their proposal that the Trust continue to
grow its rural work. Was there enough space for dissenting voices? Had I in some way 'set up' the CEO and some Trustees, present during that final plenary, to commit to a course of action? Would it have been better to have had a 'cooling off' process; a time for later feedback; a more systematic attempt to map existing rural networking activity ‘out there’; to understand who was and who wasn’t in the room; to really test the proposals rigorously? And to solidly test the capacity of the Trust to make the long term commitment to funding of the “rural work”?

With the benefit of hindsight, I think the facilitation job I did – or indeed the parameters of the job I was asked to do – were not sufficiently thought through, especially from my stated intent of paying attention to the ‘initial conditions’ for this work. Instead, I was perhaps operating from an egoic or naïve stance: I wanted to please my client; I had in effect helped the rural team to make a significant ‘win’ of promises from the Trust to support their work for several further years; and within the immediate system I was then rewarded for this with a job.

Yet there was a real buzz about the place – and that this was captured in a video we made of the event shared later at fieryspirits.com. ‘Does it feel genuine?’, I asked myself; and I asked people over dinner ‘what do you really think?’; and I listened to unprompted observations and feedback that talked to a sense of collective values for community and social enterprise, for social inclusion and for a collective voice for ‘progressive’ ideas in rural life - as well as the pragmatic calculation that a continued alliance with Carnegie UK Trust kept open the possibility of future access to resources.

Diary

The entry helped to underline that if our work was to serve the people it was intended to serve – including practitioners who had never been part of a Carnegie sponsored event – then we would need to actively listen at every opportunity to whether the ‘buzz’ was still there, and if not, what we could do to bring it back.

4.3.2 Phase 2: Inquiring into ‘facilitation’ during a trip to the Fens

Soon after I joined the Trust our team took a trip to the Fens in Cumbria where the RARP ‘remote and peripheral’ group were meeting together, hosted by a local Herdwick Shepherd-cum-rural development worker, Geoff Brown (who would become a colleague at Carnegie later that year). We were booked into a youth hostel by Daren’t Water. On the second morning, I woke up very early and saw the sun streaming into the kitchen. I got a cup of tea and started ‘freefall’ writing, feverishly beginning to process my role in an exchange the group had had the previous evening:

... I feel inner fizzing and awareness... I look up ...Birds are chirping into the silence outside their early Spring chorus... Blue-grey, the lake is calming into focus; the in-bys and National Trust forest thoroughly earthing me into this place, so quickly. Above there is streaked-snow. We’ll walk up into those fells

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18 Unfortunately the video was later lost when we switched accounts with our video provider. However a similar spirit is captured in a video of a similar convention the following year: http://fieryspirits.com/video/cashel-convention-in-2-minutes
later, with the hill-farmers we’ve come to hear. For now, the Wordsworth stunningness; a memory of holidays long by, a gentle weaving road around the lake we spluttered along late last night, back from the institute.

The farmers had brought their wives. This hardly ever happens, V says. Their wives, too – that’s where the power is, or lies, dormant. The wives are bringing in the salaries that keep the farms afloat, just. Sheep lose maybe £30 a head… these ‘cussed farmers’, as Kate calls them. They don’t, can’t give up. The ewes are heaved into this land; the twelve farms working together on the commons, weaving together the tapestry of this landscape, onward of two hundred years’ tradition… collapsing now, and facing the end of the single farm payment in 2012.

We sit with the men – AND the women – of nine of those twelve. The young folk aren’t, can’t take over. It’s a crisis. Geoff’s got ideas, about eco-museums, world heritage sites, being paid by the land agents to do the maintenance work on the land that they have got used to being done for free by the farmers, the wall maintenance, the ‘feel’ of a human-made landscape that every romantic film set in the Lakes dwells into.

But I come out of the meeting clear about a crisis, of confidence, of voice. Of a lack of a bigger picture of how things have come to this, of the cheap-oil-capital which buys up the hotels and houses and keeps the life out of the local economy, of how the National Trust can put young environmental graduates into jobs where they feel they have to tell the farmers how to do their job. No wonder they are bitter and depressed.

Last night F from Lewis tells his story of their crofting community which has just successfully staged a hostile buy-out of a landowner of 50,000 acres, how this has unleashed peoples’ creativity, purpose, political ambition, voice. T from Eden tells his story of the Cornish communities who have faced catastrophic collapse of four kinds of mining, and fishing, and are pulling through by ‘rewriting the rules of the game’. I wait to say anything, wait and wait. At a point where it feels that Geoff is beginning to toil, beginning to circle around familiar ground of positive suggestions that can’t seem to shift folks’ negativity. He says ‘But that’s why these folks are here, with their collective brainpower, to help….’ I jump in, pretty much interrupt. I say to Geoff

“Geoff, I’m not sure. I’m not sure that I can bring any ideas here – you [I look towards one of the farmers who has most clearly articulated his sense of pride in the traditional way] are the people who will have the best ideas, because you know this place. I can’t guarantee that we’ll come up with any magic answers, but…. a visit to Lewis could be good? It could help open up some new questions. But it’s only half the story; the Scottish Government has created policy that has enabled this to happen – it doesn’t look like this is going to happen in England within the next month. So the solutions here will have to be a bit different. But it’s only half the story…. [Geoff moves to interrupt but I carry on]…. Geoff… the other half the story is what happens when you come back and see things here again. An outside perspective. I’ve only been here a couple of hours, but as you’re all talking I’m thinking to myself ‘is it possible that you’ve all been here so long you’re no longer seeing
what you’ve got here?’ I’m not sure I’m going to have any ideas for you that can compete with your own ideas –but I do wonder if there are ways through you’re not seeing because you’re so close into it all?"

I chose to speak because for the first time in the evening my heart started racing. It’s my sign that I’ve something to offer, it’s my check that there’s something that isn’t just a head ‘idea’ but a bigger knowing that might come through. As I speak, I check if this is being heard. As I say – that’s only half the story – I get a distinct sense of collective focus; I’m telling a story about half a story and the folks want to hear what the other half of the story is. I interrupt a pattern where Geoff comes with his ideas and the folks listen; I model that there are other ideas in the room to listen to. And I make a direct challenge to the farmers, to think about what they’re not seeing. The challenge lands, and is heard. Geoff comes in again though now, and the conversation returns to pattern, this time about house prices. Others come in, now, the conversation is more animated. We are definitely all here, in this conversation. Or, the men in the room are. The women sit, listening, intently.

It’s fifteen minutes later and I feel it again, an urge to speak. I’m more confident of speaking into this room now. It’s not only a room of fell folk; some potentially crucial allies for the Community of Practice are here, too. The folk who are coming up with the agendas that Kate feels we need to build on. I know that they are checking me out here. All this is percolating away, but I feel a confidence that I have something to say, grounded in experience, in years of working with this territory of finding voice. Geoff has just said ‘what would you say to the Minister if he walked in next month? What positive ideas would you have?’. Geoff has already briefed us all that the Minister will probably do just that, but we’re not to divulge this so as not to raise expectations. So I’m a little surprised that Geoff is being so transparent in his questions. Why would he ask questions about a Ministers’ visit unless the Minister was coming? If this is not to be an abstract mental exercise? Is this pattern of leading a ‘conversation’ the way he tends to work? It feels a little preacherly to me; a gentle preacher, a positive preacher, not a hellfire and brimstone preacher, but a preacherly leading nevertheless. And possibly this is just what’s called for here, in this meeting. And something in my gut wonders if this tactic might also, at some level, be misfiring, possibly disempowering? My heart begins to race; I jump in, interrupting the conversation about the houses (hmmm – an inter-ruption for dramatic effect – was that fair?).

“It seems to me that this all boils down to the question of whose agenda? On whose terms is the future being decided? If I’m an outsider, cruising in for a day, unless you show me what is special about being a farmer here, what’s distinctive, alive, worth caring for, I’m likely to just cruise on by because I’ll have no idea, because it will all look vague and out of focus unless you meet me and insist that there is something here for me to engage with. My questions are, ‘Whose agenda?’ ‘On whose terms?’”

The evening is beginning to wind up. A couple of minutes later, a strong voice emerges for the first time in the room. A different voice. “It’s about confidence” she says. She tells us how their family have discovered they can
charge more for B&B, and that people will pay it. She sounds strong. Confident. And seeing this scene with different eyes.

Afterwards, we sit in the kitchen back at the hostel, debriefing. As an aside I tell V about the Womens’ Alliance in Ladakh; of 4000 families held together by women who are working together to hold a traditional hill-farming way of life together in the face of Monsanto, the Indian Army, and men who have lost their way. I’ll see if we can buy a copy of Learning from Ladakh for the folks, gently seed that idea. M from Wales has already planted these seeds to, saying it’s always been the women who have led change in the Valleys.

Afterwards, an hour ago, I wake up, buzzing, bright and early, on my birthday, feeling alive, me, engaged. I remember I’ve recently emerged from dreaming; that this is another kind of knowing emerging in its own way, powering me into my waking day. It feels great. I’ve found a place that seems to matter. I can begin to see that there is a difference to make in this role of a rural CoP facilitator.

Diary – 11th March 2008

Reflection on ‘a trip to the fens’
Along with showing the energy and excitement that I was feeling at the time, the entry shows an early experiment with what my role as a CoP ‘facilitator’ could mean – especially in the context of some very experienced rural development people, who I imagined, if the CoP was to take off, would potentially be able to play eldership roles. The diary also shows some tension with Geoff - who I had just learned was also about to be invited to join Carnegie as a member of the Rural Programme staff – around his approach to hosting a community meeting. It’s clear that in this account I don’t appreciate Geoff’s stance towards these ‘cussed farmers’; that I am constructing a narrative where I distance my practice from his as I, perhaps, seek to establish for myself a legitimate role as a facilitator in this new environment; and one informed by a more participatory praxis. The diary entry captures well the energy and excitement of a novice peering into uncharted waters; does it also reveal a shadow, however – of an over-inflated sense of the impact of my contribution that day; perhaps also some hubris of a wannabe facilitator unappreciative of the cultural subtleties of my elder’s greater experience with how to set people from traditional farming backgrounds at ease?

During my first weeks in the role, I shadowed Kate and Kirsty (the programme coordinator) as we raced from meeting to meeting, attempting to ensure the RARP partner projects were on target. As we dashed from Manchester to Tipperary, from Aviemore to Cornwall to Macynlleth in Wales, I quickly came to appreciate the scale of my new colleagues’ workload - before taking on the new ‘team’ challenge of establishing the CoP.

I was struck by how different the meetings felt. Some RARP theme partners approached their work in a playful, passionate way and with a barely suppressed radical/rebellious tone: this was work self-consciously intended to be challenging to conventional ways of doing rural development. Other partner meetings were more conventionally business-like as we addressed agenda items and the conversational tone was polite and verging on formal. Once or twice, I attended meetings that felt quite dead; as if the partners were going through the motions and not present to the larger ambitions that Kate expressed for the work. I noticed myself paying particular attention to these energy dynamics as I was curious about the quality of the 'starting
conditions’ that I was inheriting – and which might shape the possibilities for relationship building, trust and collaborative working as the CoP grew from the roots of the RARP partnerships. It was becoming clear that the early members of the CoP would probably be self-selecting from the RARP pool: those who ‘got’ the agenda and ways of working that Kate had been pursuing on behalf of the trust.

I also became more sensitized to the nature of many of the relationships that people in the professionalized rural development space that I was encountering had established over many years. Often it seemed that these relationships had been formed or strengthened through participation in European funded exchange and learning programmes (such as LEADER). Thus, there was a significant ‘in’ crowd well known to my new colleagues who would have a strong voice in shaping the CoP, embodying ‘bonding’ social capital.

This observation helped me to frame an inquiry question: how to make a go of our stated intention for the CoP of also building ‘bridging’ social capital – that is the loose connections across sectors, disciplines, regions of the UK and Ireland, and activist/professional identities? How could we welcome in new voices and encourage new relationships? Could we introduce and develop some action research practices within our team, with our partners, and with the wider CoP that could help with this?

4.3.3 Phase 3: (Failing to) inquire with my new Carnegie colleagues into the potential of Carnegie UK Trust to act as an effective institutional convener of a radical experiment in social learning

In early 2008, Carnegie UK Trust opened new offices on the edge of Pittencrief Park, Dunfermline. Where the old building at the East end of town had been labyrinthine, cold, dark and pokey, the new ‘eco office’ was largely open plan; heated by a state of the art ground-source heat system; and with large windows open to the park that Andrew Carnegie had not been allowed to play in when he was a child growing up in the late 19th century – and which he later bought and gifted to the people of Dunfermline. Three months later I was shown to a desk with high-speed internet access, state of the art videoconferencing facilities, and a chair with more ergonomic options than I knew what to do with.

I also joined a team buzzing with the possibility for helping shape the development of Carnegie UK Trust invent a ‘creative philanthropy’ that, as the recently published Five Year Strategic Framework had put it, was designed to be ‘fit for the new and changing challenges’ of the twenty-first century. Early on, I asked Kate how she had come to join the trust:

When Carnegie UK Trust was reviewing its rural priorities in 1999/2000 I was invited as a guest speaker to their AGM. I spoke about ‘fiery spirits’ and the trustees were persuaded that it was a good idea to base a programme around them. So we pioneered a small grant fund that enabled individual fiery spirits to live their ideas out - it was a great success and the name stuck!!!

Kate Braithwaite, personal communication

In between the lines of the Strategic Framework (as a statement of intent), and only partially disrupted by the light, open plan offices, remained for the Chief Executive the challenge of transforming the operating culture of one of the United Kingdom’s
oldest trusts. There were long-standing trustees and staff who in some cases had worked with the organization for several decades. Accountancy systems were geared to one-off grants. Outside perceptions of the organization as a grant-giver associated with building libraries and supporting the arts.

As I read the Chief Executive’s vision as set out in the strategic plan, I began to grasp our opportunity as a Rural Team to be the ‘innovation unit’ of the Trust – to pioneer, experiment, test out new ways of working that could help to shape the future work developed by the Trust as a whole. I sensed too, beyond this, the potential that, should we succeed, we might influence a transformation in the wider philanthropic sector in the UK:

Carnegie UK is a well established independent foundation, with a near century tradition of supporting programmes that have sought to address some of the changing needs of the less advantaged in the UK and Ireland… In early 2004 the Board approved a proposal that the trust move away from its emphasis upon reactive, generally local and short term grant giving, towards more strategic, proactive and operational programmes.

Underpinning this change in focus were several key ideas:

• Clear vision and purpose, underpinned by the values of equality of opportunity and social justice that led our founder to establish the Trust;
• Being a more intelligent funder, committed to adding value through investment for the long term rather than short term grant giving;
• Knowing our place in the market and maximising the best of that, particularly though harnessing the strong international and national Carnegie brand identity;
• Being a learning organisation, able to adapt to and to manage change
• Not just funding the third sector as the vehicle for social change, but seeking out a wider range of public, private and civil society partners;
• Introducing more of an outcomes oriented approach to our funding, informed by R&D and a strong evidence base;
• Funding to make things happen, to shape the outside world, as active players as well as enablers of social change.

A new architecture has now been put in place that should ensure that our systems and culture are appropriate as we head towards our centenary in 2013, as a progressive and creative foundation fit for the new and changing challenges of the C21.

*Excerpt from Carnegie UK Trust Five Year Strategic Framework 2008-2012 (2007).*

This Community of Practice work began to feel a tremendous responsibility as well as a privilege. I wanted to do this sense of responsibility justice – and decided that a way to do this was to advocate to my new colleagues that we have some inquiring conversations into the opportunities and potential barriers that lay ahead for the work. How could we live up to the potential of this work? How could we ‘be the change we wished to see’ by embodying an ‘asset based’ approach through our own working practices? How could we equalize power relationships between the rural practitioners who we would come to work with as allies and partners and ourselves?
This morning we had a team meeting. Coffee, flipcharts scattered. I ask that we take two minutes silence at the beginning of the meeting to ‘tune in’. Feels awkward; sense an awkwardness; a bit of shuffling from Geoff; does Kate find this amusing? They give it a go. When we come out of the silence, though, not much has changed. We launch straight back into ‘planning’ mode. I am attempting to listen, to find some wicked questions. There is so much momentum already in this team; so many simultaneous projects being developed; so much drive. So little space.

Diary, March 2008

In this diary entry I am writing down an experience of trying out a way of slowing down our conversation – a silent pause – as a way to deepen our collective level of reflection. I am noticing, however, a discrepancy between the outcome of this experiment and the dominant culture of the team, with its bias towards action, planning, getting things done. The entry continues:

What, exactly, is the basis on which the Trust had made a strategic decision to invest in this CoP work? How does it fit into its transition from a grant-making trust to being an ‘operating foundation’?

Diary, March 2008

I remember feeling simultaneously frustrated and excited at the response I received to these questions: “write a paper”. The explicit rationale was that this paper could be a public statement; something to use with potential partners and CoP members to explain the basis on which we were inviting them to trust the Trust’s strategic intentions for this work. I also hoped that the paper might help to deepen and clarify our own thinking on these questions. I wrote:

Mind-Map, April 2008... framing some territory for the Rural Programme ('walk the talk'; 'challenges'; 'assets'; 'future-focused resilient communities')
At the recently renovated Carnegie Birthplace Museum in Dunfermline, Andrew Carnegie’s dictum that ‘the man who dies rich dies disgraced’ is contextualised within a story of a working-class upbringing in a family active in the Chartist movement, before emigrating to the USA. In the 1870s, he founded the Carnegie Steel Company which by the 1890s was largest and most profitable industrial enterprise in the world. Carnegie sold it to J.P. Morgan in 1901, and then turned to disposing of his enormous wealth by establishing a global network of twenty-three philanthropic organisations, of which the Carnegie Corporation of New York (established 1911) is the largest.

In the UK, two trusts had already been established to serve Scottish universities and Dunfermline (established 1901 and 1903 respectively). After the Carnegie Corporation had been founded with the bulk of Carnegie’s remaining fortune, the Chairman of the Dunfermline Trust, Sir John Ross, was concerned that Carnegie had overlooked the people of the UK. In February 1913 Carnegie responded to Ross by proposing to transfer ten million dollars for the Dunfermline Trust to administer for the ‘welfare of the masses’.

The scale, flexibility and breadth of potential uses to which this enormous bequest could be put was unprecedented at the time (and remains exceptional today). It fell to John Ross to propose the details of how best to carry out Carnegie’s wishes. An account of the first fifty years of the Trust’s work suggests that Ross was concerned by the implications of Carnegie’s wish that Trustees should only be drawn from Dunfermline:

I think you will agree that the men in charge of the fund should be men of very wide sympathies and eminent in such varied walks of life as will give them experience of what upon the whole is best for the national welfare. Moreover, they should be men of such positions in life as would secure general respect to their decisions, for unquestionably they will be subject to criticism, especially from disappointed applicants.

(Robertson 1964: 19)

Eventually, Carnegie acceded that sixteen trustees would be appointed, half from Dunfermline and half from further afield who could ensure the Trust worked “for the improvement of the well-being of the masses of the people of Great Britain and Ireland”, with the proviso that no activity could in any way “lend countenance to war or to warlike preparations” (ibid.).

In its early days, Trustees closely followed Carnegie’s wishes, building libraries and providing Church organs. Later, as the momentum of these priorities declined (along with the capital base of the endowment), Trustees began to be more creative. The fifty-year history reflects that “great importance has always been given by the Carnegie Trustees to the Trust’s part in aiding pioneering or experimental schemes” (ibid: 249). One example was the Trust’s involvement in town planning after the Second World War, amidst the rapid development of Carnegie UK Trust is perhaps still best known for the 660 libraries it built in the UK and Ireland. According to “The Carnegie Formula”, for a town to receive the building, it had to demonstrate the need for a public library, provide the building site, annually provide ten percent of the cost of the library’s construction to support its operation; and provide free service to all. The first was built in Carnegie’s hometown, Dunfermline, in 1883.
new housing estates across Britain. The Trust took a gamble on backing an action research programme called the ‘Bristol Social Project’ between 1953 and 1961. The purpose was to encourage “local initiative and on getting local residents in a mixture of old and new housing areas to take a greater degree of responsibility for their community life”. Our history suggests that:

Some of the Trustees were not entirely clear as to what the Bristol Project implied, an understandable reaction in view of the fact that the sponsors themselves did not seem to have a single mind about what they were aiming at… As a later Trust Annual Report commented: ‘The results will be measured by various people associated with the Project according to their own expectations, for this complicated, difficult piece of action research meant different things to different people. To some it was seen as a survey on which social action could be based; to others it was to provide social amenities that were lacking in a new housing area; and to others, again, it was an effort to provide a solution to some of the complicated problems confronting those who are responsible for directing and administering the social services of a great city’ (Robertson 1964: 230).

‘Carnegie UK Trust’s history as innovative trust’ – paper shared with partners drafted by Nick Wilding, June 2008

I remember enjoying writing up ‘The Bristol Project’ in particular. It seemed to set a precedent for our experiment with an innovative, action research based ways of working. It also raised the issue of the leap of faith that, as in the nineteen fifties, we were asking Trustees to take by investing significantly in the CoP over five years.

I shared the draft paper in advance of our next team meeting. But our conversations were overtaken by pressing decisions about meetings and events that we had already begun planning. At the end of the meeting I asked, somewhat muted, if the paper seemed alright. ‘It’s fine’, I heard. ‘Now, on with pressing business’.

This was a truncated inquiry; I learned through it that I was to trust in the ‘givens’ that my manager would hold the space open for this work with Trustees; that our way of working should be about capitalizing on the opportunity now without thinking about it too hard; and that it was ‘up to me’ to run the ‘black box’ of the Community of Practice in a way that I thought would work. My assumption that the design phase for the CoP would be highly collaborative was thus turned on its head, and as a result I started to focus on ways to involve potential CoP members and partner organisations in the design of the CoP.

Reflection

As the account above suggests, I had an early hunch that our team needed to pay more attention to the level of buy-in for the Trust’s investment in our experimental rural work. I chose a course of action of attempting to ‘shore up’ the foundations by constructing a ‘line’ that could underpin the public commitments our team were beginning to broadcast about our work – from my own (selective) reading of precedent in the Trust’s history. And I chose not to ‘push’ these questions within the team – instead deciding to trust my manager’s seemingly irrepressible competence and confidence with holding open the institutional space for our work.

On reflection, events that followed suggested that had we collectively paid more attention to the foundations for our work in those early stages, we might have been stronger in arguing for it later when Trustees brought in a new CEO with an
instruction to review all the work of the Trust.

A lesson of this truncated inquiry is of not underestimating what it takes to listen to and act on ‘gut intuition’ it slow down amidst a whirlwind of confident energy and forward momentum.

Today, I might be stronger in naming the cultural change challenge of an institution espousing a move toward more transparent, democratic and participatory ways of working. I would be more insistent that the stewards of that institution also simultaneously pursue their own parallel inquiry into the practices of institutional governance most fit for supporting staff mandated to attempt the work we had been invited to take forward.

4.3.4 Phase 4: Imagining a learning architecture for the CoP

Kate’s vision was that partner organisations – called hosts – would offer the ‘real’ places ‘where rural people who don’t normally meet can invent new possibilities for their communities’. Our work as a Rural Programme team would primarily be acting as both a ‘host’ partner ourselves, as well as supporting the development of the wider CoP infrastructure.

Out of our early meetings, we imagined a picture of how this arrangement might work:

This was an animated slide that suggested a ‘Carnegie Approach’ comprising partner organisations (hosts), from which two staff members would have the CoP as part of their job descriptions (stars), host networks (green circles), an online website (yellow circle), a dedicated online office (purple circle/blue star) supporting shared functions and joint projects between partners... and ‘catalysts’ (the bees) being individuals from other well networked organisations with a brief to ‘buzz around’ and
assist with cross-pollination between hosts, as well as supporting my role as CoP facilitator with specific developmental tasks focused on bringing to life this complex architecture across five different jurisdictions.

In those early discussions, it emerged that Kate had in mind who those host partners might be. They would be organisations with an already proven track-record of rural development work who would share an ethos. This ethos would borrow from ideas developed by the Eden Foundation about how to ‘host’ effective networking meetings. And among the influences on Eden’s thinking, Kate shared a think-paper where she borrowed from Ray Oldenburg’s (1999) ideas about a ‘third space’:

Is it possible for Carnegie to tap into rural communities’ needs, aspirations, and collective intelligence, by imagining and designing special occasions and places, where community members can learn from one another? Is it possible for us to invent the piazzas and coffee houses of the future: places/events where not just young and old, but also insiders and outsiders, can feel at home, learn from each other. Providing places (virtual and real) where rural people who don’t normally meet can invent new possibilities for their communities?

(persoanl communication)

Kate’s paper summarized Oldenburg’s ideas about eight characteristics that define ‘third’ spaces:

- Neutral Ground: where inventive and entrepreneurial people can get together;
- Leveller: where participation is not dependant on an individual’s status at work or other formal criteria;
- Conversation is the Main Activity: Instead of being ‘talked at’, in third spaces conversation is spirited and engrossing, and with humour
- Accessibility & Accommodation: Third places are easy to access and are accommodating to those who come along. They keep long hours and conversation may continue into the early hours. Activity is not rigidly structured;
- The Regulars: A cadre of regulars who attract newcomers and who give the space ‘mood’ and set the tone of conviviality;
- A Low Profile: Third places are without pretence and are comfortable and homely. Much conversation happens around a large table, accompanied by good food;
- The Mood is Playful: Word-play, wit, frivolity are normally present. Food and music seem to be an important ingredient as is a sense of place;
- A Home Away from Home: Home like, easy, warm, a feeling of ‘rootedness’.

Braithwaite (personal communication), adapted from Oldenburg (1999)

(borrowed from ‘open space’ facilitation the metaphor of ‘bees’ to help picture the catalysts’ function. In Open Space events, the ‘bees’ role is to move from table to table, cross-fertilising conversations and in so doing, helping to accelerate learning and helping to identify and unlock untapped potential.
In April 2008 Kate took our team on a visit to Eden to get a taste for their approach ourselves. The buzz of the place and the enthusiasm of our guide, Juliet, was palpable. Eden’s guiding principle seemed to be an embodiment of rebellion against ‘stuffy old ways of doing things’; of an unapologetic insistence of rethinking, sometimes from first principles, the role of a local development organization and how it should go about its work.

We learned that Eden used a language of ‘hosting’ to mean ‘bringing together people who didn’t know they needed to meet’. In the balmy subtropics of the project’s enormous geodesic domes, the wine flowed free, musicians paraded around like troubadours, and everyone got well fed. Here, in a nutshell, was a recipe for events that we imagined could offer inspiration across all our ‘host’ partners: provide a welcoming and inspiring physical context; put a group of interesting and diverse people together in a room; and see what happens!

Later in the year, we went back again to Eden for a conference called ‘Sense of Place’. The venue was Carnglaze Caverns, Cornwall\textsuperscript{21}. Three of the presenters elaborated during their presentations on the refreshing format and approach:

\textsuperscript{21} See the report at http://sensorytrust.org.uk/news_and_events/conferences/sense_of_place_2009.htm
It’s about kindred spirits and the words that come up all the time about making connections. In all the different spheres and sectors that people are working in one of the underlying shared values is the search for meaning, the search for belonging and how do we make connections?

_Sue Gill, Dead Good Guides, FierySpirits Sense of Place Conference, Eden Project 2009._

A conference that has a theme rather than a topic enables people to connect through that theme to each other which is where creativity comes about and where progress comes about and where new ideas come about.

_John Zeisel, Hearthstone Alzheimer Care, Ltd, interviewed at Sense of Place Conference, Eden Project 2009_

I am just going to leave you with a quote – one of my favourites from Alfred Lord Whitehead– without adventure, civilisation is in full decay- so I look forward to a very civilised 100 years and a very civilised two days because I hope it is going to be a big adventure

_Tony Kendle, Eden Project in his closing address as host of the ‘Sense of Place’ Conference 2009_

Eden’s RARP work had focused on rewriting the rules of ‘community involvement’ in planning to work with local theatre companies, musicians, story-tellers to put on fetes (called ‘tea treats’ after a local tradition) which also had stalls of interesting exercises encouraging passers-by to re-imagine the future of their place. Instead of ‘dry presentations and boring exercises with post-its and red blobs’, stalls would contain Kellner jars full of juicy words to be picked out and pasted onto ‘letters to the future’ and then decorated on a tree. Other stalls invited people to play with maps and local objects. A theatre company developed a way to help people mourn what had been lost from places after the collapse of local industries – these ‘shrines’ were then exhibited in local venues.

Of all the RARP partners, it was Kate’s experiences of working with Eden that did the most to shape the rationale for the community of practice. The proposal to Carnegie Trustees was that Eden – along with three other ‘host’ partners - would each receive £70K per year for up to five years to work with us to develop the CoP with ‘enabling’ contracts – hosts would use the money to do ‘more of what they wanted to do anyway’ in the line of hosting events, including showcasing their own innovative rural work. In a radical departure from the tightly controlled regimes of most funders, this approach was framed as an experiment in ‘walking the talk’ of an asset-based stance on investment that placed a premium of trust at institutional as well as personal levels as the bedrock of ‘unleashing potential’. By stripping away the usual safeguards that funders insist on (rigorous linear planning and monitoring regimes; fully costed proposals etc.) the intention was that our partner organisations would be free to innovate, to follow their noses aligned with our central collective purpose of stewarding the emergence of the CoP. A practical example: money that is not ring-fenced (ascribed to a particular project) can be extremely helpful in ‘levering in’ investment from other places. The high risk gamble Kate took was to test the potential that a ‘win-win’ solution emerged whereby the CoP ecosystem could show value for money after its start-up evidenced by a multiplication of synergistic initiatives between host partners bringing added resources to the CoP as a whole (in terms of activity within the CoP and a range of other criteria).

The intention was that this architecture of hosts, catalysts (for more, see below) and
a Carnegie Rural Team providing facilitation would set the ground for the
development of long-term relationships based on shared values of asset-based
approaches to rural development. We reasoned that this values basis could help to
unlock synergies between partners, and that we would all be ready to invest
significant planning time together given the security of a stated aim that our work
continue for five years. Each host was expected to bring their own resources to the
table, and we anticipated that as trust developed between partners, and the CoP
was integrated more deeply into each partners’ core mission, Carnegie’s initial
investment would result in a multiplication of outcomes beyond what might have
been achieved through a more centralised or grant-based financing model.

During the Summer of 2008, as well as our
visit to Eden, we recruited as hosts
Tipperary Institute, Ireland (a dedicated rural
development college of further education);
the Centre for Alternative Technology (an
NGO based in Machynlleth, Wales, focusing
on developing a ‘zero carbon’ vision for
Britain and offering associated learning as
well as practical skills in alternative
technologies) and Falkland Centre for
Stewardship (a private estate in Fife,
Scotland hosting a medium sized
environmental festival, ‘Big Tent’). Each host
would run as part of the CoP ‘programme’
several face-face events and simultaneously
develop a programme of rural development
activity, with learning from this regularly
shared into the CoP.

Reflection
The image of the ‘Carnegie Approach’ that we had developed (included at the
beginning of this section) suggested a neatly equal relationship between nodes,
alongside a ‘star’ role for Carnegie as (at least, in the opening stages). Taking
Eoyang and Quade’s typology (ibid.) of psychological, physical and social
‘containers’, I remember at the time we developed this image thinking that our
approach could allow for elements of all three containers, with the fieryspirits hub
acting as the ‘container of containers’. Kate’s natural charisma and enthusiasm for
her work offered something of a ‘psychological container’. Carnegie UK Trust and
partner resources (to enable meetings etc.) offered ‘physical’ containers. And the
‘social’ container would be defined by the shared values of an ‘asset based
approach’ to rural development, communicated by Kate as ‘focusing on strengths,
not deficits’.

At the end of this chapter, we return to revisit this assumption as this – as with most
things – did not play out as neatly as I had imagined it might at the outset of the
work. 
4.3.5 Phase 5: Creating a ‘social network with a social purpose’

The technical challenge is how to design human and information systems that not only make information available but help community members think together.

McDermott: 10 Critical Success Factors in Building Communities of Practice

At the same time as we set out to identify and contract host partners, I set about creating a social networking based website to be the ‘glue’ binding our extended community of practice together. I imagined that collaborating on elements of the website could be a good way for potential collaborators develop a sense of ownership of the CoP. This work could begin with our choice of the web platform itself.

Choosing web 2.0 as our liberating structure – and ning.com as our ‘digital forest’

In Chapter 3, I introduced the idea of ‘digital forestry’ to allude to the kinds of facilitation work I imagined would be needed to operate in one of the new social media based web environments being developed by companies like Facebook, MySpace, Bebo, LinkedIn and Ning. I suggested the platforms these companies have developed are somewhere between tamed gardens and the wild: anyone can usually view content within these spaces, but in order to actively engage with the site, they need to ‘log in’. If the aim is to create an active site where members are actively and voluntarily contributing quality content, the ‘pull’ of the existing content and activity from and within the sites has to be strong enough to overcome the inconvenience of logging on and concerns/fears the user might have about sharing material into a relatively public space in this way.

My proposal was that we experiment with web 2.0 on the basis that our project – like this new social networking technology - was to enable social learning by encouraging people to take an informal and tacit approach to sharing know-how ‘peer to peer’. I imagined that we could differentiate the potential of this work from that of more generic social networking: our CoP would be “a social network with a social purpose”. “It’s like Facebook,” I advocated: “Except where Facebook is highly individually focused (with narcissistic tendencies? reflecting a dominant culture of individualism?), our site will welcome people who identify themselves through their work for rural community resilience (reflecting a values basis of community values and co-operative working and inquiry).”

Where Facebook members might tend to share personal updates in a stream-of-consciousness way, I imagined that CoP members would share only material they felt would be interesting or useful for other site users. Whilst the frequency of these posts may be fewer, perhaps the quality might be higher – helping the network as a whole develop a reputation as being a ‘mine of gold’? And as Carnegie staff and a group of hosting partners, to begin with it would be our responsibility to pro-actively upload quality material to help frame what ‘quality content’ would look, feel, perhaps even taste like in the context of the Community of Practice that we would nurture together.

As well as populating the site, a key early design and facilitation challenge would therefore be to create an enticing, enabling, liberating and encouraging digital

22 http://www.co-i-l.com/doi/knowledge-garden/cop/nowing.shtml
environment that might enable others to feel inspired to create and share material there.

Underpinning this proposal was a judgment – a leap of faith – that in the wider culture digital technology would continue to rapidly become more accessible and easier to use; and that access to broadband services even in rural areas would also accelerate at a similar pace\(^{23}\). Our intended participants – rural practitioners – would not all be ‘digital natives’ of the sort who had driven the early development of Facebook or indeed earlier web 2.0 experiments such as the file-sharing service Napster. Indeed, especially older practitioners might face a double hurdle of the skills challenge of engaging with digital media, as well as the cultural challenge of adapting to a ‘digital forest’ favouring dynamic information organized by ‘tags’ rather than more static, ordered lists of the web 1.0 world that reflected more accurately the non-digital ‘paper’ culture many of us have grown up within.

Whilst this kind of consideration – and therefore the likelihood that some people would be excluded from accessing content because of these double or triple hurdles – will often prevent public services from pressing on too fast with experiments in the digital world, as a private Trust we were in the position to decide that the benefits of attempting to pioneer (and experiment therefore with the usefulness of web 2.0 technologies for accelerating community resilience, for example) might be of significant wider social value – and therefore this potential value might offset the risk that our choices of technology and focus would result in potential beneficiaries being unable to access or fully participate in the digital aspects of the CoP. Freed of the requirement to ‘reach out’, we decided to operate more on the basis of ‘build it, and they will come’ – if the ‘it’ was good enough.

From the basis of an intention of developing an experiment with a web 2.0 system, the next major decision we faced was the choice of the digital platform to build the CoP within. This was a very significant decision as practically speaking we would be committed to a developmental path within the evolving features, layout, and accessibility of that platform – even if that system theoretically would enable us to migrate elsewhere in the future.

During our early visits with host partners, I raised this observation and asked for feedback and suggestions on criteria to inform our choice of platform. Some host partners had little prior experience with ‘web 2.0’ online networking and were skeptical about its potential to be useful for the people they were working with. Instead, they saw the proposal as a potentially unsustainable burden on already over-busy working lives, and imagined that maintaining the site would feel similar to maintain a more traditional web 1.0 site (which usually relies on a webmaster generating and updating content regularly).

I set about testing this proposition. At the Eden Foundation, for example, our conversation went something like:

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\(^{23}\) In 2008 we had reason for confidence in this: BT had initiated rolling out faster broadband speeds across many rural telephone exchanges, and there was growing policy momentum in many jurisdictions (particularly Scotland) behind expanding broadband coverage to almost the entire population within a few years.
Eden staff: Are we going to have to spend ages feeding the ning? Not sure we have the time...

Nick: The idea with ning is that it’s not like a conventional website. We are going to have to do work at the beginning creating content and helping to bring it to life – but the idea is that over time members themselves directly upload content and take on roles administering different topics… sometimes with our support, sometimes not.

Eden: Still, it sounds like we’re going to have to feed the ning quite a bit?

Nick: Yes. But I’m not asking you to invent material you’re not creating anyway for this – but just to upload the best resources and some videos from your events. And maybe to use it as a way to share your ideas and thinking about community planning more widely than you can do at the moment. It will need one or two people to keep this in focus – realizing that as well as putting up a video or account of an event on the Eden site, it could also be uploaded into fieryspirits.com

Eden: Well, OK. But we don’t want to feel press-ganged into feeding this thing.

Nick: OK.

In Tipperary, the conversation was more one of positive curiosity in what I was proposing:

Tipperary Institute: Ning? Sounds interesting!

Nick: Well, hopefully. We’ll have to experiment with it to figure out how to make it work for us

Tipperary Institute: Fine. We’ve got video students here who could get involved. Will you help us figure out how to use it?

Nick: Great idea about the video students. Maybe it could be a part of some of the courses? Getting involved with the network like that could be a great way for them to learn about rural development. Yes Yes Yes!

Tipperary Institute: Let’s go!

At our last visit – to the Centre for Alternative Technology in Machynlleth – the conversation turned to questions of the ownership and control of the platform I was now focusing in on – ning.com:

CAT staff: Ning is American?

Nick: Yes.

CAT staff: What happens if their servers go down? It would be more resilient to have servers nearer at hand...

Nick: Yes.

CAT staff: An open source solution hosted on the CoP’s own servers might be best. Open source because that’s more congruent with the co-operative and ‘gift’ culture that we’re talking in our work in asset based rural development...

Nick: Yes, agree open source would be ideal. This needs technical expertise however to install and maintain. Which might be paradoxically more expensive than going with a free service whose mission will be to keep the data online and secure – otherwise their business model will fail.

CAT staff: And will it always be free? Will we be able to migrate away if it doesn’t suit us down the line?

Nick: At the moment, they are saying it will be free and that we will be able
to migrate away. But all these points are risks. It’s about weighing up these risks against the potential benefits – I think ning is already well established – it’s a fast growing platform and looking like as an early moving it might emerge as the market leader for DIY social networking. I don’t know how their financial model stacks up or not. They might have to make it a paid service at some point. But this would be worth it if it guarantees that ning keeps developing and is future proofed. I think we need to be in a system like this that is flexible and open enough to keep up with technology as it develops. And I also like ning because the management interface is so easy to use. We don’t have to buy a web designer but can design and manage the system ourselves. We can keep changing it as our ideas develop. And it’s all about making it easy for users to put up photos and videos and blogs and make comments on everything and join discussions….

Shortly after returning from CAT, I circulated a draft list of criteria around our hosts, drawing from the conversations we had had. I suggested that a good platform should have the following characteristics:

- It needs to be very easy to use, friendly, dependable, and as close peoples’ existing on-line experiences as possible;
- It should reflect and enable the embodiment of the asset-based philosophy of the Rural Programme, enabling people to make their own connections and a high degree of self-organisation and ‘distributed leadership’
- It needs to permit a lot of key features, including multi-media hosting, blogs, discussion forums, document libraries, a highly customisable look and feel, web chats, event listings and ability to incorporate features of web 2.0 such as RSS feeds (to allow content to be delivered from external sites, and vice versa)
- It needs to allow spaces for people to create specific practice/action groups with features in these groups to allow for discussions, document libraries etc.
- It needs to be backed by a development community or company who would continue supporting and updating the platform for many years;
- I need to be happy with the administrative functions and tools available in the ‘back end’, and to be able to share these administrative functions over time with others;
- I need to be able trial it in private for several months before launch, with the option to ‘go public’ at launch or later;
- It needs to be open source, or cheap, to design, run and continue to develop;
- We need to be able to move to another platform in the future.

With a thumbs up from hosts to take a decision on a platform based on these criteria, I set about a final search for further platform options. These included ‘socialgo’, ‘Tikiwiki’, Facebook itself, and open source options such as ‘mambo’, ‘Drupal’, and ‘wordpress’. However, I circled back to ning.com as being the service most likely to meet the most criteria. I researched Ning more, too. I learned that it was a California start-up, created by Marc Andreessen (serial web entrepreneur, making billions of dollars by inventing then selling Netscape and then Opsware) and an ex-Goldman Sachs investment banker Gina Bianchini. After three years’ development, Ning had been launched in early 2008 and immediately grew fast. In an interview, Bianchini said the founders had learned from previous successes of Google, Facebook, and YouTube by, she said, focusing on the same ‘viral loop’ networking strategies that had attracted so many customers to these other
companies\textsuperscript{24}. In the article, she predicted that Ning predicts would, by New Year’s Eve 2010, host 4 million social networks, with tens of millions of members, serving up billions of page views daily \textsuperscript{25}.

**Reflection on choosing ning**

With a mandate from our co-hosts to make an executive decision on which platform to adopt, and after the search of other technology available at the time had not identified an alternative that scored more highly against our criteria, I made a choice to go with Ning. By hitching our CoP wagon to the Ning engine, I thought it unlikely that the company would fail within the five year time horizon that Kate had told us represented the Trust’s funding commitment to the CoP initiative\textsuperscript{26}. By then, new more appropriate technologies might have emerged in any case.

Ning didn’t yet do everything that I imagined co-hosts of the site might need to support our work. In particular, its ‘groups’ feature was limited, and it didn’t easily allow the creation of shared document libraries and make other media similarly available to inform topic-based co-inquiries (focused CoPs within the broader FierySpirits learning system) that I thought could be key drivers of activity. As with the broader assumptions about the development of social networking acclimatization amongst digital non-natives; I took a leap of faith that these features would become fairly quickly, or that I could create temporary ‘good enough’ alternatives using third party coding until they did. Ning’s implementation of ‘open social’\textsuperscript{27} – which encouraged third party developers to produce ‘add ons’ for the core service - helped us take this leap and decide to develop a ‘trial version’ of FierySpirits.com between April and October 2008.

Finally, doing the background reading about the success to date of the ning product opened a set of intriguing questions about how being hitched to a platform built on ‘viral networking’ principles might influence the growth dynamics of the FierySpirits system. Already in our early conversations with hosts we had anticipated that over the first couple of years we would need to work together to grow the membership of the online system to a critical mass before there would be enough content, diversity and activity within the site for it to start becoming self-sustaining: once, for example, each of our four hosts were convening a topic each, and once these began to

\textsuperscript{24} Viral networking thinking proposes that in general the more connections you have, the more nodes, the more people - the more valuable the network as a whole will be. Andreesen has proposed that “eventually, everyone tends to be on such a network, the way that everyone has a telephone and everyone has an email address, because the value to being on it is so huge as a result of everyone else being on it.” The bigger a viral network gets, the faster it grows.

\textsuperscript{25} *Ning’s Infinite Ambition*, by Adam L. Penenberg at http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/125/nings-infinite-ambition.html?page=0%2C0

\textsuperscript{26} Whilst the CoP has never yet suffered an ‘outage’, in 2010 ning changed to a fee based system costing £120 a year.

\textsuperscript{27} OpenSocial is a common programming standard meaning that it could rapidly extend its functionality as developers start to make applications available – in a similar way that the iPhone now has thousands of applications available for users to download. Likewise, Javascript ‘widgets’ work wherever they are ‘embedded’ across the web: a cyber equivalent of introducing the standard railroad gauge during the industrial revolution.
cross-fertilise, then we imagined members might begin to propose new topics, events or other activity themselves. This was all guess-work: we had little idea what an optimum number of members would be; what exactly the relationship between face-face events and the online system would evolve into; or indeed how best to encourage people to make that transition to experimenting with ‘sharing’ online. We did agree, however, that all these questions could be part of an emerging co-inquiry into ‘excellent hosting’ of the CoP that our initial conversations in those early visits had sown the seeds for.

Having paused to affirm that hosts would experiment with web 2.0 technology; and that we would use ning.com – with third party software to augment this as necessary - as the basis for that; we were now primed to work together on an appropriate design for the site.

4.3.6 Phase 6: Experiments designing FierySpirits as a ‘third place’

Having chosen ‘ning’, the hard work was ahead of us - the development process for the website required the co-hosting team (including host partners) to become clear about who FierySpirits was for, to communicate clearly Carnegie UK Trust’s purpose in hosting the CoP, and to invite website subscribers to commit to some ‘guidelines for engagement’.

Wenger (ibid.) stresses the importance of clear boundaries that define the domain (topic) of interest, and the community who will be engaging with that domain. The literature suggested that the more clearly these can be expressed, the more likely it is people will volunteer their time (already a previous resource for ‘fieryspirits’ who tend to be very busy people) to add value and content to the site, and to support other site users.

Having initiated an email listserv for our host partners, we now embarked on four months’ rapid prototyping a site, involving a series of parallel, rapid experiments with the intention of getting the right ‘feel’ for the site – as well as agreeing how easy (or not) it should be to ‘join’ the website.

Experiments with the entry conditions (boundaries) for the CoP

We have already noted above that in our early discussions with hosts, we proposed to run a ‘social network with a social purpose’. We imagined that the quality of our content would be an important ‘attractor’ into the site.

When someone wants to establish a ‘ning’ site, the developer is asked to specify questions that are asked of prospective members. At its most basic level, these questions ensure that malicious ‘spammers’ or automated robots don’t become members. Often, sites ask for simple information – name, age, gender perhaps.

In order to learn what questions we should be asking, we decided to pursue a strategy for developing the site of incrementally –slowly at first – and then opening membership to expanding circles of participants as we honed the questions.

The first questions we asked placed an emphasis on organizational affiliation, job title and a weblink. However, during a team meeting, we started thinking more deeply about the impact of these questions: and how we might ask questions that might better reflect the appreciative, ‘asset based’ values of the community we intended to evolve. In particular, Geoff and I had an exchange that went something like this:
Nick: Why haven’t you created your account yet Geoff?
Geoff: I don’t really get this web thing. I don’t know what to say. I don’t find it that interesting.
Nick: Well, the point is that there might be people out there who might be interested in you. You’ve got years of experience with LEADER funding, running organisations, Herdwicks, anything.
Geoff: I’m not sure about that.
Nick: How about if we changed the questions in a way that helped you say a bit about who you are, why you were joining, what you might have to offer?
Geoff: I’m really not sure about that!
Nick: Go on! I’ll help you do it after the meeting.

As a potential ‘elder’ in our Community of Practice – and representative of others with similar relationships to the internet - it was important to me that we found a way for Geoff to get actively involved online. I realized in this exchange that I’d need to both change the questions on the sign-up to gently probe in a way that could help Geoff to think a little deeper about what he might offer into the site as well as what he might get from it.

As we talked through my prompts, I realized that Geoff was unused to thinking about how his experience might be helpful for others; unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the idea of broadcasting this to anyone, not least on a publicly accessible website (which ours wasn’t, yet); and unsure about what he’d want to do with the site.

Yet when we shifted from talking about answering my draft questions, to writing into them, it suddenly got easier. We had, it seemed, stumbled on some pretty good questions: “Why do you want to join the site” seemed an innocuous question, but in answering there is an implicit invitation to reveal something of the values and motivation that had kept Geoff’s interests over years in the field: his passion for Cumbria and Herdwick rearing; his interests in social history and the labour movement.

The question “What help might you be able to offer other members?” implies within it the reciprocity and ‘sharing’ culture that a community of practice – whether online or face-face – relies on: a willingness to share experience and support others’ calls for help. It also brought to the fore Geoff’s many years as a LEADER manager (LEADER being the primary mechanism whereby the European Union funds rural development work), and the many rural businesses and initiatives he had helped to establish over these years.

Over the next three weeks, I arranged to phone up our host partners to prototype and test the questions in a similar way. After these calls we had about fifteen profiles online and reading the profiles seemed exciting and rich with possibility about what might happen if and when our networking activity helped to strengthen or build relationships between these people. We had also honed the wording of our questions to the point where I ‘got’ how these ‘entry questions’ might turn out to be one of the richest sources of content for the site as a whole.

I had also decided that at least in the first phase, we should require that people join ‘as people, not organisations’ – and that they would be required to upload an image to go with their profile. The phone conversations had revealed a ‘default setting’ that many potential site members had already developed when signing up to other websites – an expectation of rapidly answering stock questions such as those we had asked in the first iteration; of remaining anonymous. In later conversations I began to intentionally explore this dynamic: how could we offset the risk of putting off
prospective members with these questions – by disrupting these expectations? Could we do this by designing a site that implicitly as well as explicitly; in its colours, layout, format and messaging 'nudged' users, at every possible step, into a sense that this is a personal, friendly, authentic place: an online version Oldenburg’s ‘third places’?

The last ‘inaugural’ host partner Kate selected was the Centre for Stewardship in Falkland, Fife – based in the same village where I live. For our conversation about the website, we met up with Centre for Stewardship staff in an organic café on the edge of the village\textsuperscript{28}. As we talked, it struck us that ‘Pillars of Hercules’ is a local rural business that is one of the largest local employers and also provides an important social function as a hub of local activity. The café had just launched its website – a fine reflection of the feel of the place itself, capturing the same sense of warm, human-scale, waney-edged wood conviviality:

![Screenshot of www.pillars.co.uk, July 2008](image)

After our conversation, I wrote:

\begin{quote}
What is the web equivalent of a community café full of waney-edged slabs of local oak as tables attended by hard worked but still-smiley waitresses serving up endless lattes and slabs of marmalade cake? How do we ensure people feel at home – and also deeply stimulated by great content, and enlivened by healthy diversity generating new possibilities of innovation, inquiry and collaboration?
\end{quote}

\textit{Diary, July 2008}

These were inquiry questions that stimulated an intense period of experimentation by trial and error as I developed, and then bounced off colleagues, prototypes for logos, colours and designs for the ning site. An early logo design borrowed some fire clip-art from an evangelical organization based in the USA:

\textsuperscript{28} \url{www.pillars.co.uk}
With each iteration, I sent the pictures around to the hosts who I had already talked with about the introductory questions asking ‘what do you think?’. Responses cc’d in the whole list – so we all got a sense of each others’ feedback. This prototype (above) didn’t hit the right note – one response put it that it was too ‘slick’ and wanted something more ‘home-spun’.

Although ning.com had already set a pattern for site layout/fonts/menus – and by and large we agreed that these seemed intuitive and versatile – inventing the ‘branding’ was turning into a big project, about a months’ full time work of prototyping, tweaking and trying again.

After three weeks we had reached broad agreement on a logo (below) on the basis that it speaks of risk-taking, but within the safety of an attractive bowl (the venues our hosts were offering for events); it also seemed to capture and add meaning to the tagline we also honed during August/September 2008: “building vibrant, resilience rural communities across the UK, Ireland and beyond”. The logo seemed to emphasise well that the CoP was intended to be rooted in ‘activist’ experience whilst also being open to professional involvement: too slick and it would feel overly professionalised and potentially alienating. We wanted, we agreed, to build a container sizzling with interesting material and good craic (Irish for ‘fun’):
I was particularly excited about the image of the fire-pot. It seemed to point to all the facilitation questions of building our ‘container’, and the possibility of a bespoke fieryspirits stance on facilitation ‘fired up’ by questions like:

- How much oxygen to let in to keep the fire strong but without over-fanning the flames?
- Will the flames cooking a slow stew or rapid BBQ sausages?
- What kind of fuel do we need?
- Do we need a fire extinguisher in case it all gets out of hand?

**Diary, July 2008**

**Reflection**

In the introduction to this chapter I set out a choice to inquire – with colleagues where possible – into the ‘starting conditions’ (including the ‘boundary’) of the FierySpirits learning architecture from its earliest stages of development. In the account above, we have touched on a series of one-one telephone conversations over three weeks intended to support rapid cycles of reflection and learning about what these boundary conditions should be – and how to support people to navigate their way through them into the online CoP site.

This mini inquiry engaged the new co-hosts in a gentle – but surprisingly deep – process of learning about the new website and how it might work, translating complexity concepts into practical issues about prototyping the questions that would set the tone for - and create significant content for – a pattern that we could build on co-developing the social network.

At the time as well as in retrospect this felt a fulfilling, positive and generative process with multiple benefits: I was able to get to know my new colleagues better; we were planting the seeds of a co-inquiry into hosting that could expand to take in many elements of CoP facilitation and design together; and we were learning how to support each other – and future CoP members – through hand-holding, where it was needed, into the transition into the online world. We were also coming to appreciate that we were not only ‘signing in’ to the site, but also generating crucial content and setting a pattern for how to ‘show up’ online that others could follow.

We were learning how to phrase generative questions calibrated to welcome new members into the site, as well as to invite them to rehearse skills in reflection and writing that might be employed later (by posting blogs and other material into the site). In each conversation I suggested that we could find ways to learn through ‘heart, hand and head’ (see Chapter 2 for an introduction to why such an extended epistemology seemed important): with the implication that our personal statements might somehow reflect these diverse intelligences and make it OK for others to do likewise.

Furthermore, I was also beginning to get a grip on Wenger’s questions of who the ‘community’ and what the ‘practice’ was, within the domain of ‘asset based rural development’ established by the Commission of Inquiry into the Future for Rural Communities. I was realizing that in a ‘digital forest’, it would be the quality and depth of answers to the prompt questions by members themselves – as well as the nature of the questions that prompted them – that would come to define the system boundaries in time. In all these ways, we had begun ensuring that the environment within the boundary felt ‘safe’ (membership into the CoP would never become automatic: the site administrator(s) would always check that the answers to the questions seemed genuine, with the option of inquiring directly with the applicant if
there was any doubt). Furthermore, by inviting people signing up to take a risk to share something of their aspirations, motivations and interests at a human level, we were building the social capital – that is, the strengths of relationship – between them: and thereby contributing to a more resilient system of more dense connections; underpinned by an affirmed set of ‘attractor’ values articulated directly by the practitioners themselves (i.e. their perspectives and descriptions of the domain/community/practices of the CoP).

As we started to open up membership between the initiating group, we discovered that the pattern set by these earlier profiles was helpful in giving a steer for others wanting to calibrate how open/honest/questioning they might be as they completed their own profiles (or, as began to happen regularly, updated their profiles to include more information after trawling other users’ information having joined). In this way, the boundary conditions of the CoP began to self-organise as a result of open feedback mechanisms. From mid 2011, the entry questions changed little from:

1. Welcome! FierySpirits is for activists and professionals who are building vibrant, resilient rural communities. Tell us a little about why you'd like to join?
2. Location
3. About Me (areas of expertise/interest I can share)
4. Photo
5. Members receive a short occasional 'NewsBurst' email highlighting the best of FierySpirits. You can choose to unsubscribe by clicking a link when you receive the email. Please confirm this is OK
6. Gender
7. Ethnicity
8. Website

Whilst in the earliest stage of CoP development the our inquiries into the ‘boundary conditions’ for the CoP focused on the entry questions, we then quickly realized that we needed to extend this inquiry to encompass the design of the site itself – and that this should, as far as possible, reflect the ‘feel’ of the face-face events that each host partner would convene as part of their contracts with Carnegie UK Trust. To this end, we arranged to bring our host partners together for the first time at the Gaelic College in Skye, in September 2008.

Initiating a co-inquiry into ‘hosting’?
Through the summer of 2008 our Rural Programme team had visited each host partner in turn. None had worked together before. Yet the vision Kate and I had dreamed up of the CoP as a diverse, thriving ecosystem of learning to be able to live up to its potential of being ‘more than the sum of the parts’ relied on an assumption that the ‘parts’ (initial and future host partners) would be inspired to take the risk of working collaboratively in partnership. Testing this assumption was a primary purpose of the first of what we anticipated would be regular hosts gatherings: and I wanted to go further – to see whether all the partners might be ‘up’ for building on our early conversations about the CoP website, to enter into a form of collaborative inquiry into sharing and improving our collective capacities and skills as ‘hosts’ of both face-face as well as online social learning. Put another way, it seemed to me that this meeting would be another important element of the ‘starting conditions’ for our CoP: it would reveal the quality of the soil and nature of the seeds with which we might work. It would help me understand as a Steward of the CoP as a whole what kinds of support might be helpful in order to help these seeds take root and grow strong.
In the ‘Art of Hosting’ workshop, we had discussed how a healthy self-organising human learning system requires clear purposes and principles: purposes set a collective intention and principles define agreed ‘rules of the game’ about how participants in that system will relate together in fulfillment of achieving that purpose. This conversation was alive for me as I framed an invitation for host partners to Skye:

SKYE: PURPOSE OF FIRST HOST’S GATHERING
This is the first opportunity for all hosts to meet. Our purpose is to

- Invest quality time in developing and deepening the relationships between all hosts and the Carnegie Rural Programme team
- Share developing work programmes (both as CoP hosts and as location-specific work)
- Agree a statement of purpose and shared working culture (principles of working) we intend to pursue as co-hosts of the Community of Practice

Invocation notice to Skye gathering

Building on the phone conversations – and a confidence from them that everyone at the meeting was ready and willing to talk ‘personally’ as well as professionally about why this work we were embarking on together might ‘matter’, we began the workshop with an exercise called ‘Johari’s Window’ – to catalyse a conversation about how best we might work together as a team.

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29 As we have already seen in relation to the Rural Leadership Programme, Art of Hosting material draws on Dee Hock’s (Hock, 1999) notion of a ‘chaordic design’, where organizational and event designers seek to balance energies of chaos (or creativity) and order (or structure) such that an enabling structure is brought to life through a ‘middle way’. Getting the balance between these energies is crucial: too much chaos and a system disintegrates; too much structure and it does of being overly controlled. To achieve a balance, the theory goes, “the first step is to define a crystal clear statement of purpose for the organization (or event, or community). Once agreed, initiating stakeholders agree a set of working principles through which the purpose might be enacted.”
In our phone calls about filling in our online profiles, I suggested that we had begun to push the boundaries of ‘openness’ and ‘feedback’. Through ‘open-ness’ (that is, making visible some of our motivations for joining the site), we took a risk online to make our motivations and hopes more visible. This, in turn, had begun to help others feel safe in doing likewise. And as this sharing cycle had begun to turn, we started to build a learning community together founded on trust that it is safe to be honest and talk openly about our feelings, hopes, experiences and aspirations – instead of through a ‘professional’ persona. We were ‘walking our talk’ of taking risks in order to unlock hidden potential – in this case, the potential of collaborative working between hosts.

How about we extend that pattern now, face-face, I suggested? Johari’s Window model, I suggested, also gives us permission to get more skillful at offering each other feedback: of helping each other see the ‘shadow’ and blind spots in our perspectives. Done well, feedback is the key to learning – to step beyond the ‘comfort zone’ of what I know – or think I know – into the exciting and risky place of not-knowing; of being prepared to fail. Johari’s window proposes that ‘trust’ is a function of both voluntary open-ness and voluntarily opening up to honest feedback from peers: with both processes in action, the window of untapped potential starts to become visible and a team can ‘be more than the sum of the parts’.

For the next twenty minutes, we worked in pairs to experiment with ‘open-ness’ and ‘feedback’ – and to report back on some guidelines for each that we might use to inform our practice as ‘critical friends’ moving forward. As we then moved from pair work to feeding back – and then reflecting on the exercise as a whole group – I experienced a great release of energy: and in our feedback session (which I recorded explaining my intention to later reflect on the process for my PhD), comments included:
“I’m fired up. This feels real.”
“We’ve got so much in common – and some differences to. A solid place to build from. Good to know we can challenge each other in the open.”
“Very good to listen to each other and appreciate so much experience.”
“We’ll make this work together. Before I wasn’t sure”

Transcription from audio tape of Skye session

Our next session focused on the design of the website. There was a focused, purposeful energy to our work together now. We began with a rapid-fire exercise (echoing the introductory questions we had already developed) imagining why people would want to join. We wrote up a flip-chart:

| - Some will feel isolated and relish the opportunity to connect with people who are ‘buzzing at the same wavelength’; |
| - Some will be pioneers with leading-edge messages to communicate and test with CoP participants; |
| - All will share an intuitive sense of what the CoP offers, will engage pro-actively, and bring their particular variety of spice to the show; |
| - It is likely that true sustainability/resilience pioneers will already be thinking and practicing well beyond the notional ‘rural/urban’ categories; we will welcome catalysts who can help us to see how a regenerated rural voice can help create the conditions for a resilient civil society as a whole. |

As the conversation developed, we framed two new questions: what is participation in the CoP about? And what are the ‘rules of engagement’? We agreed these should be as simple and few as possible. We wrote:

| - participation is about having the courage to join peers on a ‘learning accelerator’ programme; |
| - participation is about personal commitment as well as professional roles; |
| - we collectively anticipate that exciting initiatives will emerge from the CoP, and that we can help each other find ways of supporting these initiatives. |

It was time for dinner – and a visit to the pub. Some crofters we had met earlier had invited us down for a music session. By the next morning, the workshop almost seemed to be running itself. The task was to develop a collective statement of purpose and principles. But things seemed slower now. We’d got off to a bad start - one of the cars coming from the B&B had run into a ditch on the extremely narrow back-road between Sleat and the Gaelic College earlier that morning. There were one or two sore heads after a late night. It was 11.30am – and I felt like what sounded straightforward – ‘clear statement of purpose’ – was turning into a drudge. We needed to leave at 1. There was another exercise to go too. I remembered then what happened once as a participant on a Training for Transformation course. Our group had got bogged down in an exercise. Then the facilitators just got up and left the room. They said “self-organise to get this done”. It felt shocking – but it really shifted the group into a different energy level. It also showed up who was ready to step in. So that’s what we did that morning: I proposed that the Carnegie staff team including myself leave for half an hour. And it worked. When we came back, things were flowing again and this slide had appeared:
**Why? Purpose?**

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**Group 1**

Why? (to be developed)
- Recognise the importance of the voice of the community [principle]
- We want to learn from this process

How?
- Common Values that underpin what we are trying to do
- Quite different approaches - no safe book or definite way of doing things
- Engage with different audiences differently
- Sometimes there will be unintentional consequences
- Evidence and analyse

**Group 2**

- Why are we doing this? Why did we bother coming here?
- We all want genuine change - to be part of catalysing genuine change. To be able to describe and demonstrate how it is done.
- We are pushed to go further - going the extra mile
- Resources are an (increasing) driver - isn’t it to lever up further resources - helps people get things done
- Dare to be part of something bigger - movement for change
- To enable a dream (previously unreachable)
- Understanding how we enable the on-points on the Patel model to happen and to translate and transcribe

How?
- Learners of coming together - opening on all that
- How do we make the in-between bit work
- We need clusters of interest that give us a reason to connect in between times - need to name them and agree to touch in in-between times
- Four women - the salary we could spend on the web - gender divide online - more comfortable on the phone chatting
- Telephone conferences around clusters of interest - we also recognise it’s the 21st century - find out power to get voice on flypoints - that feel real and embodied stuff - where it’s just to feel the text and hear being on the phone

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**Group 3**

Why are we all doing this?
- Very interested in using opportunity to exchange people - do some visiting
- Exchange is all level of community and agency etc.
- More places to follow best practice - more good practice
- Strong commitment to remote rural areas
- Protect Commission’s legacy - so long as we are aware that there are two/three large groups in the room (peak oil and climate change)
- Third gender - global equity

Chris summation:
- ‘Because this is a place that needs to be lived in... those places deserve to be lived in - umbilical connection to place - a right to live here, and live well’
- ‘...leave me gaspstruck!’

Why Rob: “This is so irresistible that this is rolled out across Scotland”

(Draft statement of collective purpose)

This is how to engage with this site:
- We are building vibrant, resilient communities. We’re up for breaking the mould and learning from the challenges along the way. We take time to connect with each other, helped by inspirational places and friends who feed us enthusiasm.

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**Principles**

- Responding to the challenges of peak oil, climate change and global inequity, Carnegie Hosts are working as enablers to help build vibrant, sustainable rural communities
- Our approach is participatory, forward-looking, and adaptive.
- Our work will connect local narratives to global issues.
- We learn from and challenge each other, sharing good practice that promotes positive mindsets.
- Over the next five years we will be working together with many collaborators towards these aims across the UK, Ireland and beyond.

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We were almost out of time. In the final session of the workshop I had planned to spend an hour or so talking through the possibility of establishing a co-inquiry into ‘hosting a CoP together’. This was to have been the culmination of the design of the workshop as a whole: building on the Johari conversations, our thinking about who the CoP was for, our statement of purpose and principles. A commitment to now continue what we’d started, deepening cycles of reflection (at more face-face events as well as online) and action as ‘hosts’. I had wanted to invite everyone to experiment with freefall writing or some other first person inquiry process as part of this as a way to draw on ‘heart, hand and head’ intelligences. I’d wanted some sort of collaborative agreement about the next steps for this.

Instead, there were only fifteen minutes left before we had to leave. Later that evening I wrote

Felt a twinge of panic. No ‘plan b’ for doing this CoP hosting without a co-inquiry. How else can we walk the talk, skill ourselves up, hold this together
over such big distances. I can’t and don’t want to run this all by myself from Dunfermline. Was a great event but much now to do. Should have put the co-inquiry on the agenda at the outset. That was a mistake. Didn’t want to scare people off before they came. Kate’s already been on at me about the ‘head heart and hand’ stuff sounding too ‘fluffy’ and not ‘plain English’ enough.

I was writing the diary with a realization that this co-inquiry was part of a ‘hidden agenda’ that this work was developing a CoP – but a CoP based on action research principles and ways of work. I’d been fudging this – and at the earlier team meeting we’d agreed that ‘all this stuff’ was part of the ‘black box’ that I was in charge of. That’s why it wasn’t on the invite: and after such a positive start to the workshop – and after achieving the statement of purpose and principles that had been the ‘up front’ agenda – I only then realized that I alone would have to advocate for and initiate this work as action research. And that I’d need to be braver about putting this up front in the future as this was the only way I could imagine doing my job of ‘CoP facilitator’. The diary entry was an attempt to describe a galvanizing crunch in my stomach that I had felt as I realized we had only fifteen minutes before lunch at the end of the ‘purpose’ session: my body saying ‘have the stomach for this’ perhaps. Someone said “let’s have lunch!” . I put up a new slide:

**Inquiry into hosting?**

- Purpose: learn by doing about co-hosting
- Who participates? Those leading hosting initiatives connected with CoP (hosts and others) with a commitment to learning through action research about our practice
- Is a collaborative inquiry over the next year(s) possible/doable/realistic. Eg:

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Self inquiry: (self-reflexive practice)
Build on strengths; become conscious of blind-spots in my hosting practice
=> journaling, recording, meditation, peer critical friendship

Co-inquiry: (3-30 people)
Build on strengths; become conscious of blind-spots in our hosting practice
=> spaces, places, participation skills, conflict, group psychology etc.

Whole-system transformation: (30-many people)
leading social change through movement building
=> on-line facilitation for CoPs
complexity
cultural values
dynamics etc.
```

It was rushed, we were hungry. I wrote in my diary:

Response positive and a bit bemused: sort of “Yes, it makes sense” and “Ok we’ll give it a go” at the same time as perhaps a sense of “We’d better say that because Carnegie’s paying” as well as “and because we’ve had such a good time we’ll forgive you the over-blown-ness of this for the now”.

Kate closed the workshop by setting out a tight timetable by which each host should propose the content of the contract they would like with Carnegie UK Trust for the first years’ activity. The contracts had to be approved by a November
meeting of Carnegie Trustees. We had a few days to agree their content before the Board papers were to go out.

The next day I wrote up a note with some prompts about the kinds of work that hosts could do to develop the online work. It suggested email invites to members of hosts’ existing networks (and then taking the time to write each person signing up a welcome); of posting blogs, event notices, pictures, films. It proposed that each host in turn work with me to co-edit a regular e-bulletin (‘NewsBurst’). It imagined that hosts might set up online ‘webinars’ involving guests at their face-face events for the wider online group.

The next Monday afternoon, we were due to send out final drafts for hosts’ approval. I got into work and felt my stomach crunch and head begin to race. I didn’t know why and went for a walk. Then it came to me: this was another crucial moment. These contracts would set a pattern for what was to follow – they were some of the cement of the starting conditions for the CoP. But something vital was missing. There was no mention of a commitment of inquiring into our work together as hosts in a way that could build on what we started in Skye. I felt quite alone – and worried that my colleagues at Carnegie hadn’t seen this and picked it up. It had seemed, one of them told me later, too much like a luxury on top of the already huge workload.

With gritted teeth I raced back to the office and pounded out an extra paragraph, sensing a moment of being able to structure in space for collective reflection had almost slipped out of reach. My head thumped and heart raced. I would not, I muttered under my breath, let this one go. If our hosts weren’t actively following some kind of inquiry process together, what were the chances that they would support anyone else through one? I was adamant that the network needed more structure than the very loose list of events that Kate seemed content with. I agreed we need ‘light touch’ facilitation: but I wanted to balance the ‘chaos’ with the ‘order’: and the co-inquiry process could help us find and develop that balance, itself a liberating structure.

I went back to the proposed contracts and added a new section:

**Commitment to a ‘co-operative inquiry’ into hosting**

As we establish the Community of Practice, the role of hosts is critical to our success. We have an opportunity to model a ‘co-operative inquiry’ approach to learning about what ‘excellent hosting’ involves.

**What is a Co-operative Inquiry?**

A Co-operative Inquiry involves a commitment to learning from experience, presenting this learning in creative ways, from which we can better understand what works (and what doesn’t), which we can then put immediately into action as we get better at hosting. This will be a process of intensive learning together, and will greatly increase our chances of successfully co-hosting the Community of Practice.

Along the way, we can write up the stories of this experience and learning to share with others (including our evaluator) to help sustain support for our work from Trustees and other stakeholders. A Co-operative Inquiry approach will allow us to:
- Design into our working lives the space and time for quality reflection on how well we are serving our agreed collective purposes, and our blind-spots;
- Build our collective knowledge and experience of Communities of Practice, establishing a shared understanding of what this involves and what we’re trying to achieve through it;
- Strengthen relationships, innovate new initiatives, and communicate our learning for others to benefit from.

We can build on our work together on Skye as a prototype co-operative inquiry meeting. A good introduction to co-operative inquiry is here: http://www.bath.ac.uk/carpp/publications/coop_inquiry.html

Given everyone’s time pressures, we need to agree a schedule that will maintain momentum and be realistically doable. I propose that two people in each Host organisation make the commitment to participating in the co-operative inquiry by:

- Attending 2 hour video or teleconference every 2 months. I propose this will be the second Tuesday of the month from 10am-12pm. Next dates: 9th December, 10th February etc.
- Attending 2 face-face ‘co-operative inquiry’ meetings (of 1 day each) during 2009. Could we meet next on April 15th 2009 at Eden? I have proposed this date because it precedes the ‘RARP Policy Jamboree’ event that Eden is hosting (on 16th and 17th)
- Trying ‘first person inquiry’ methods. These involve a personal reflective practice (for example, a journal, or painting, or other approach that works for us) to capture our personal learning along the way.
- Sharing learning, insights and resources at our ‘virtual office’ space on FierySpirits.com or other agreed, accessible place.
- Opportunistically finding opportunities for further inquiry spaces along the way. For example, we notice there is an opportunity for learning passing us by – and respond by talking it through on the phone, or finding the space to journal about it.

There is no doubt that we are asking for a significant time commitment and organisational buy-in for your participation in this process and that there will be a need to allocate time in your work-plans.

**Learning how to teleconference**

By the time the contracts were signed, all the hosts had agreed that they’d be happy to continue inquiring together how to ‘host’ the CoP via monthly teleconferences - in the vein begun in Skye. We agreed to meet next face-face at the Eden Project, Cornwall. In the meantime, for our first teleconference, I put together a summary of all the commitments. The idea was that several staff from all the hosts would structure into their diaries an hour a month to participate in a teleconference, which I hosted in a tightly structured way: as people rang in, I’d write their names down in a circle so I could remember who was there. I would then invite people, one by one, to talk. Over the next several months (and after technology problems early on), a tight teleconference agenda and culture evolved that involved:
• A first round of ‘downloading’ - reporting back significant news or learning from recent or upcoming activity, and flagging up (if necessary) any ‘business’ issues needing dealt with.
• A second round of ‘responding’ – to stories raised the first time, to calls for help, and to emerging opportunities for collaborative work; and
• A third, shorter round of ‘reflection/intention’ - voicing new actions or insights that had been emerged as a result of the call.

This structure proved itself, over time, as a vital part of the co-hosting architecture. It helped us stay in touch, to share the ups and downs of institutional life, and it also offered a monthly reminder of the possibility of carving out reflective space, even at great distance via telephone over only an hour. We learned that the constraints of the phone imposed a discipline that invited all callers to be very present and attentive. My colleague Geoff at Carnegie who had been very reticent about the idea in the early stages became convinced after witnessing the seeds of collaborative European funding bids being planted; invitations to speak offered; tips about engaging with upcoming legislation shared; and a genuine spirit of sharing personal and institutional struggle develop. After about a year, the number of people calling in had grown to about 25 at one stage as our key contacts within the host organisations invited more and more of their colleagues to join in. Later on, the quality of communication these calls and our hosts’ gatherings established were helped us to stay present together through some tough times.

**Learning how to ‘NewsBurst’**
At our Skye meeting, hosts had proposed three principles which we invited members to subscribe to:

- participation is about having the courage to join peers on a ‘learning accelerator’ programme;
- participation is about personal commitment as well as professional roles;
- we look forward to unlocking the potential of the CoP together.

Principles of hosting Fiery Spirits CoP developed at Skye meeting

One of the limitations of social network platforms is that, unless you’re a regular user, it’s easy to lose track of what’s happening online and therefore to lose confidence and/or interest in being an active contributor (or even browser).

Furthermore, with the proliferation of networking sites (especially since services like ning have made it so easy to set them up), the experience of information overload and tendency to skit between sites rather than digging into them is increasing. As new generations of multi-media sharing come on stream (for example, both twitter and Google plus emerged two years after I set up the fieryspirits site in 2008), they bring with them a constant challenge of evolving a webspace that remains attractive (or deciding to adopt new strategies – for more on this, see Chapter six).

To bring more coherence to the ning online site CoP hosts took it in turns to edit a monthly e-bulletin intended to flag up latest content on the site and as a result drive up site engagement. This was a useful focus for encouraging hosts to engage more actively with the website – I supported the ‘editor’ as they selected content to highlight and wrote a reflective ‘blog’ about some aspect of their rural development work.
Designing an effective layout for the newsletter took several months of trial and error. Statistics generated by the mailchimp.com service which we use to send the newsletters helped us learn which content generated most ‘click-throughs’ and sharpened our focus on pithy, journalistic entries as well as flagging up new members that people might be interested to ‘check out’.

In five short sections below we follow the story of the first five editions of ‘NewsBurst’, covering the first year and a half of the CoP’s life. This narrative opens the way for some reflections on learning emerging from the practice accounts of this chapter as a whole.

**NewsBurst 1 (November 2008): Learning what NewsBurst should be**

Dear Nick Wilding

This monthly newsletter puts you in touch with the latest action on the Fiery Spirits site. Get back online soon!

**Forum: Private Land… Public Benefit?**

Kate Braithwaite's [forum discussion](#) asks about ways to value land managers' contributions to "national targets for carbon reduction, renewable energy and water catchment management". This was inspired by the Communities at the Edge? conference at Floors Castle, Kelso - see John Gold's [blog entry](#) and [photo](#).

**Forum: EcoTowns and EcoVillages**

Offer Tony Kendle [feedback](#) about Eden's proposed new neighbour, an ecotown: "The actual eco-tow proposal begins at our front gate, and it extends over a territory where more than a third of our staff live. I couldn't ignore it." For an inspiring vision, check out the [EcohousingEcoVillage Tipperary video](#).

**Events: Cashel Convention**

Tippary can be a highly successful convention. Feedback so far (leave yours here) hails praise on the field trips. Taste the energy we created together by watching the [Convention 2 minute video](#).

**Groups: International Connections emerges**

Tara (IACD) has created an [International Connections](#) group. Why not welcome your new international colleagues from the USA to Pakistan... (see, for example, Cornelia and Sharon)?? Welcome also to Cobi and RAB, IACD project workers. NOTE: Any member can create their own group (a mini 'CoP') within Fiery Spirits.

The most significant learning from the first edition is how to use the ‘MailChimp’ technology to produce a layout reflecting the design of the main web site, upload the distribution list, and send it out. I write up a guide on how to do all this and make it available to future NewsBurst co-editors. In an effort to kick-start the online Forum, I highlight discussion starters from co-hosts Kate Braithwaite and Tony Kendle. However, traffic on the forum remains slow and responses limited. This first edition took over ten drafts as we cut words out until there were punchy, short and to-the-point sentences. It was at this point I realised that we were teaching ourselves skills in rudimentary journalism.
NewsBurst 2 (December 2008): ‘Mini-Contracts’ - Blogs and Films

Paul's post describes his trip to the climate talks in Poznan, saying "What really surprised me was that even in Poznan, many participants still hadn't really grasped our global climate predicament. Even senior experts, scientists NGO's and political leaders failed to appreciate that the most recent evidence on climate change reveals a situation more urgent than had been expected, even by those who have been following it closely for decades." There is a new video on FierySpirits which brilliantly illustrates why we all need to 'get' this 'tipping point' science.

- Paul from Devon Heartlands: Carnegie Key Influencers Seminar
  The Seminar was organised by Carnegie to highlight a range of approaches for effective Community led Planning and Engagement from both the local community and local authority perspectives. Paul pointed out that engagement through a local Forum could be "low cost, but not no cost" a point that was well received by panel members who recognised that far greater continuity of resources was essential if the benefits of Community led Planning were to be fully realised.

- Lisa at Eden: BBC survey results on Community Life in Britain... and what we're doing about it
  Every region in the UK, broadly defined by a BBC local radio area, has seen its communities become less rooted. This is not news, of course, to many Fiery Spirits - especially to those who are actively doing something about it!

A Gaggle of Groups
Any member can host a 'group' on FierySpirits. These groups can evolve to enable strong exchanges of practical know-how. Thanks to our pioneer 'practice group' hosts for braving the new technology and giving it a shot...

- Food: a salvo from Mike and Pete in Fife: recapitalising the UK food system
  "Local and national government could start by acknowledging that a laissez-faire food system is no safer in the long run than a laissez-faire financial system... the levers include land use and town planning policy (including a tax on every inch of soil covered with concrete), public procurement, the place of food in the school curriculum, universal food vouchers for fresh and unprocessed food, management of food waste, sales taxes, choice editing, agricultural emissions trading, linking farm subsidies to public good accounting, research and development for sustainable food." See also the recent Sunday Herald article - a good example of using national media...

- Welsh Wizards: Shan initiates a conversation about building a community of practice in Wales
  Shan has been a trail-blazer on the FierySpirits site. An early post was in Welsh only - and when I put it through the only on-line Welsh-English translation service I could find (http://www.transxprod.com/2000/Translate/result.shtml) the results were pure poetry ("forbear with content Welsh") ...

- International Connections: Tara and Debi encourage global exchanges
  One early contributor, Serge Marti, who does participatory film-making with indigenous people in Indonesia (and elsewhere), has said: "When we localise, we shouldn't cut ourselves off, there are so many learnings that are important in the connection to other cultures. Localisation may not mean that we stop moving about - humans have been transhuman and nomadic for millennia, walking,

Given the explicit leadership of the Carnegie Rural Programme of this project, it seemed to me that unless my close colleagues are generating interesting content and discussions online, others are unlikely to follow.

For this edition, I supported Kate to start a weekly blog of her rural news.
NewsBurst 3 (February 2009): ‘Practice Groups’: where the action happens?

Concerned that activity on the forum (centre stage on the site) isn’t taking off, I relegate it to a link from the menu and replace it with the ‘Blogs’ feature and a trial to see whether the ‘groups’ might be a more productive place to hold well-focused conversations. The blogs strategy works – people begin posting – it’s less intimidating and easier for me to prompt by working behind the scenes, encouraging potential new-be bloggers to give it a go and offering to look over drafts. However the ‘groups’ strategy falls a little flat. Time for a rethink…
NewsBurst 4 (May 2009): Focus on Rural Flyer and Upcoming Events

Dear <Name>,

This newsletter puts you in touch with the latest action on the FierySpirits site - find out what you’ve missed, and what’s coming up in the next months.

Stop Press

2009 Rural Programme Guide: new published - points to key upcoming events, and what the Fiery Spirits Community of Practice is all about.

Click on the picture to read...

Events: the heart of our Community of Practice... join others!

Fiery Spirits at:

- Stop press: last minute places available at Transition Conference May 22 at 12pm to May 24, 2009 at 6:30pm - London
- Geoff Brown (Carnegie UK) is co-organising Communities in Control: Developing Agoda - June 24, Liverpool
- FG hosts Eden invite you to the phenomenal WildWorks event: The Beautiful Journey - Stunning June 2-20 - Darwenport South Dockyard
- Colin Campbell invites you to Social Capital & Community Resilience - June 3 all day - New Lanark World Heritage Site
- Fiery Spirits hosts Centre for Alternative Technology: aim to publish a “Zero Carbon Britain 2 report” - informed by seminars on Renewable Energy (June 3) and Transport (June 30)
- Meet FierySpirits Cemex and guests and international colleagues in Cannes, Australs - Building Community Centred Economies: Dialogue for Action (June 30)
- Carnegie RARP partners Autumn Leisure are hosting a key event with key decision makers on June 28 - Progress to Sustainability for Social Enterprise Service Providers
- And why not join Kate and Nick at the National Community Land Trust Conference - June 30 - London... for news of future support for CLT activists...

Top Tip: Mind like a sieve? With one click, export event details to your computer or iGoogle calendar! Click below the event listing to export event details.

Media: directions to FierySpirits exclusives

With a successful hosts’ meeting in Eden behind us, we are able to publish a well-designed ‘flyer’ to frame much more clearly the agenda and work of the Rural Programme. Feeling more secure in our sense of collective purpose and direction, this month represents a shift in toward more explicit leadership on issues.

In particular, the site isn’t yet supporting significant discussions on Carnegie’s key issue of asset-based rural development. With the publication of lots of RARP reports due over the summer, we are generating content worthy of discussion. To help spark conversations, we start investing in making better quality films (and a 7 min. intro to the programme) to capture the essence of publication launch events.

I come up with an idea for a new CoP role: ‘content steward’. I imagine that content stewards – initially from host organisations – would curate knowledge resources within topics – facilitating conversations, organizing material, creating new material where possible. It would be three years before this ‘curation’ role came into explicit focus, however.
NewsBurst 5 (July 2009): Focus on Forum re-launch, new members and new films

We realise that the forum can be brought back to life, this time more tightly focused on asset-based development. The front page undergoes an overhaul to accommodate it. Blogs move sideways ... but as people have by now got the idea, they start generating some great conversations all by themselves!

We learn how to direct traffic direct to online content to complement NewsBurst. The ‘share’ facility allows me send prompts to particular people about stuff they might like to engage with (events, blogs, films etc.). ‘Share’, we realise, is the social network equivalent of a round-robin email, but better directed. When I inadvertently ‘share’ a blog about resilience with everyone on my ning contact book (including local friends and family who have signed up for my baby son’s ‘ning’), we get surprising results – sign-ups and great unexpected contributions.
4.3.7 Reflection: inquiring into my practice as a facilitator during the early stages of CoP development

We are facing the biggest sociological and ecological challenges that our species could ever imagine and we need learning and education that somehow begins to address these enormous challenges. It’s my belief that these solutions will not come from government but will come from real people in communities, grassroots, sorting out stuff for themselves. For me it is about the learning of the next generation of young people and empowering them to take collective responsibility for their patch.

*Will Coleman, organiser, FierySpirits Sense of Place conference 2009*

The great thing about working with Carnegie has been the willingness to innovate around how we deliver services in rural areas. Where a lot of local authorities and public sector funders are quite risk-adverse, Carnegie were prepared to put their money where their mouth was and work with us to start to deliver world-class services to parts of Cumbria that had no chance of getting services normally through the public sector.

*Daniel Heery, Cybermoor Ltd, RARP partner.*

Coming here and meeting like-minded people working in so many disparate fields, in the theatre, science based activities, in other sorts of arts and in rural development work. To have all these people together is like coming home – it’s wonderful.

*Shan Ashton, Bangor University, Sense of Place conference.*

Late in 2009 a hosts’ teleconference considered a timeline (see next page) that summarized some of the ‘building’ actions that we had engaged in during our first year – and moments of reflection (with moments of particular ‘depth’ represented by stars) that informed them. It differentiated five strands of work, reflecting an emerging sense of parallel inquiries into diverse but connected elements of the hosting system for the CoP. The picture catalyzed a short reflection on the co-inquiry process and helped us name an emerging pattern of both planned and happenstance ‘moments’. Towards the end of our conversation our Irish partners in Tipperary volunteered to build on this work by bringing a paper to our next teleconference with suggestions for how we might develop a more formal ‘evaluation’ framework for our work together. It would be helpful, they said, in communicating what the CoP was about internally. And to do this, they asked if I could write a paper using conventional language like ‘aims and objectives’, translating the more esoteric statements of ‘purpose’ and ‘principles’ that the Skye meeting had focused on and the Wheatley and Frieze paper that, although by now part of the ‘about the CoP’ pages on the website, was rather ‘esoteric’.

On the next Monday afternoon, shortly after lunch, a new CEO for the Trust, just appointed by Trustees, arrives into the office unannounced. Four hours later, in a state of shock, I arrive home. “What’s wrong?” says Tara. “He swaggered around as if he owned the place,” I say. “He came to my desk and said ‘What do you do?’”. I smiled and said, “I facilitate the rural community of practice!”. “What rural community of practice?” he said. “Part of the Rural Programme?” I said. “I’ve heard of the Rural Programme”, he says. “So who are you working with?”. I name the host partners. “Never heard of them,” he says. And walks away.
Over the next ten days, with a growing sense that may be fighting for survival, I draft and redraft a ‘briefing paper’, circulating each one for comment by my colleagues and our host partners. We wrote:

**Description of the Community of Practice**

**Aim**

The CoP is an action research programme of learning and exchange for activists, professionals and policy makers who are building resilient rural communities.

The aim of the CoP is to catalyse systemic social change by creating opportunities for social innovators to connect, challenge and learn from each other at face-face events and virtually via the fieryspirits.com social networking website.

**Intended Outcomes**

Core intended outcomes of the CoP include
- Accelerated learning about rural development practice;
- Opportunities for activists, practitioners, policy makers and academics to work together to influence policy development;
- Capacity building by Carnegie UK Trust and partners in the field of action research-based social networking, new media and CoP facilitation.

**Timeline and associated activities**

Following Snyder and Briggs\(^{30}\), the Carnegie UK Trust understands that Communities of Practice may take several years to mature through successive life-stages, which might be broadly characterised according to the schema below:

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\(^{30}\) Communities of Practice, Snyder and Briggs, 2003 (download from www.businessofgovernment.org/pdfs/Snyder_report.pdf)
In our 2010 work plan, I have elaborated on the suggestion of evolutionary life-stages of a CoP by proposing broadly that each year has been characterised by a different focus:

- **2008** (birth or ‘discovery’ – communities of interest network together): design and implement infrastructure of hosts, catalysts and social networking site; enable transition of Rural Action Research Programme partners onto new platform; develop a distinct Fiery Spirits ‘brand’ and culture of event ‘hosting’;
- **2009** (youth or ‘coalescing’– test assumptions & CoP design): prototype hosting mechanism (e.g. run and review events with hosts and experiment with translating into web; initiate pioneer action research ‘inquiry’ groups; grow membership; expand web content;
- **2010** (early adulthood or ‘maturing’ – communities of practice around key themes form): key themes and associated collaborative work emerges; active membership grows (overall size may not); interim action research evaluation.
- **2011-12** (maturity or ‘stewarding’ – system of influence emerges): characterised by significant levels of unprompted user activity around practice development and related policy influence; members enjoy growing recognition beyond CoP as stewards of quality practice and innovation and address ‘scaling up’ issues;
- **Beyond 2012**: end-term evaluation considers issues of legacy/renewal according to needs of members, sponsoring institutions, and broader policy context etc.

**Partners**

Our facilitation approach encourages over five hundred CoP members to be active ‘co-producers’ of knowledge, initiatives and innovative practice. To support work of this complexity and scale, key facilitative functions are undertaken by colleagues from partner organisations.

These partners bring in-depth regional knowledge and know-how; recognition as leaders in rural development practice; quality rural venues; profile and reputation with local activists; diverse skill-sets; cross-disciplinary expertise; influence with decision-makers; and connections into wider networks and social movements. Partners fall into two types: hosts and catalysts.

‘Hosting’ contracts specify how this value is translated into the Community of Practice through face-face events, active online contributions, undertaking action research inquiries into emerging issues, and utilising Carnegie UK Trust’s ‘convening power’ to influence policy development at every level. Each host functions as a ‘hub’ and at least two staff members participate in a collaborative inquiry into ‘hosting’ fieryspirits as a whole. Over time our intention is that the hosting partnership will evolve into a ‘distributed’ network organization in its own rite, capable of creating a sustainable future for fieryspirits when Carnegie UK Trust withdraws its support after five years.

‘Catalyst’ contracts support specific developmental functions within the CoP. Catalysts are natural networkers who accelerate
connections and learning between people. Functions include inviting new constituencies into the CoP, creating connections between existing members and bodies of knowledge, introducing fresh thinking where conversations are ‘stuck’, offering action research mentoring to enable better reflective practice, and ensuring the CoP is up-to-date with innovations from other sectors.

Although we call FierySpirits a ‘CoP’ for simplicity, we recognise that, as co-hosts of the fieryspirits learning system, we are actually in the business of seeding the emergence of multiple CoPs, supported by partners with particular strengths on key themes who share a commitment to three principles:

a) a long-term commitment to community building;
b) support for the emergence of well focused inquiries that welcome participation from a healthy diversity of contributors; and
c) hosting ‘safe spaces’ capable of allowing participants to expose vulnerabilities at our ‘learning edges’.

In keeping with broader innovations in social networking (supported by insights from complexity thinking), we know that an important element of our facilitation approach is to conceptualise our work as hosting a living, self-organising system which enables members to define what is valuable for themselves, and in so doing choosing to volunteer energy, effort and time into FierySpirits CoP (as opposed to the many and proliferating social networks which are now freely available over the internet, for example). We suspect that Carnegie’s unique history, reputation and ‘convening power’ will be key ingredients to achieving success. As the Trust’s website says:

*This is pioneering work for a philanthropic trust. We are learning-by-doing, and invite collaborators to journey with us, recognising there are many opportunities to learn from each other along the way.*

- Carnegie UK Trust website, accessed October 2009

Excerpt from Internal Briefing paper (unpublished)

It was only possible to write this extract as a result of the first and second person learning journey that CoP hosts and I had been on since our work began in 2008 – underpinned by the doctoral process I was undergoing at Bath as a constant reminder of the opportunity to understand, frame and deepen our work as ‘action research’ and not just ‘rolling out’ a ‘network’. In this statement we see a coming

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31 For these points, I find helpful Shaffer and Anundsen’s (1993) identification of variables that can influence the effectiveness of a CoP

- Length: How long your group has shared experience and how committed you are to continue that sharing
- Breadth: How many facets of your life you share, and how wide a range of people and experiences you include
- Depth: How deeply, thoroughly, or intimately you share

*Shaffer and Anundsen’s (1993)*
together, therefore, of practice and theory: a coherent statement of purpose and intent; an advocacy that real resources continue to be spent on the programme at a time when the Trust was fundamentally reviewing all its activities: a sense of having ‘stomach’ to advocate and sustain this space we were opening up.

In this note, theory is used in a simplified way for this purpose. Snyder and Briggs' work happened to propose five phases of CoP development: useful in making a case for continued investment into a programme intended to develop over five years.

The note also points to the emerging complexity of the CoP project as actually ‘network learning architecture’. In this chapter, we have introduced an attempt to create some ‘conditions for emergence’ for this living, self-organising architecture that might be ‘more than the sum of the parts’ by unlocking the potential in strengthening and deepening relationships between host partners and individual members of the CoP. The note suggests that this potential might involve ‘influencing policy’ across a complex five-jurisdiction policy landscape – resonating with Carnegie UK Trust’s own stated aspirations to influence social change through both ‘policy’ and ‘practice’. Implicit in the note is an advocacy that the CoP ‘experiment’ might be a prototype for how the Trust as a whole might wish to develop its approach to ‘creative philanthropy’.

Key elements of this learning architecture were inspired by Wheatley and Frieze's notion of a ‘system of influence’ emerging from ‘communities of practice’, which themselves emerge from ‘communities of interest’; and a generic co-inquiry approach (in the CARRP tradition of Peter Reason and colleagues) with host partners tasked with the collaborative design and facilitation of the social learning system such that self-organising participants within it would be able to ‘name’ and celebrate/share their own stories of inspiring practice through diverse media. The early focus of our inquiring attention was on the system boundaries, entry conditions and the learning ‘container’.

The note went on to advocate next steps for the CoP should it be able to continue to evolve: in particular opportunities to seed and deepen particular practice topics (supported by ‘content stewards’) with the intention that they bring smaller clusters of practitioners together to share and generate new practical know-how – and in the process build both bridging and bonding forms of social capital amongst CoP participants (therefore walking the talk of the strengths-based paradigm which fieryspirits is intended to embody):

As the CoP begins to mature through 2010 and into 2011, we are consciously bringing more focus to particular thematic groups (and associated practice questions) which CoP members might gravitate towards and contribute to. We can also begin to engage in strategies to cross-fertilise practice insights and experience between these groups. My proposal for our 2010 Rural Convention is that we seek to achieve this cross-fertilisation by bringing together different practice groups who have heretofore been focused in specific areas (for example rural services, planning for resilience, and land trusts)....

2010: Picturing the CoP; recruiting hosts
Approaching two years on from the development of the original ‘pitch’ to partners, our vision of the relationship between different ‘players’ in the CoP system is evolving too. The slide below shows how our understanding of the
relationship between hosts, catalysts and site members is changing as mini communities of practice emerge as foci within the broader CoP at this stage of CoP development:

We can see that the note evidences a shift in our understanding that the ‘FierySpirits’ system might not be able to be understood as a ‘Community of Practice’ in the strict sense first proposed by Wenger and Lave in their book _Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation_ (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This book was focused in the main around five case studies of apprenticeship, and its impact across fields of education, learning and organizational development at the time stemmed from its championing of hitherto invisible (to these fields) was that these apprentices seemed to be learning-by-participating in a community of skilled craft workers. The implication of this early study was that a CoP would be locally based, have clear boundaries and membership criteria, revolve around a single recognized skill or authority (usually embodied in a ‘master’), and that the ‘learning trajectories’ of apprentices would tend to move from periphery toward the center - from (‘legitimate’) marginal engagement to full participation.

Although this narrative seemed helpfully clear in the early stages of grappling with understanding the design principles of a typical Community of Practice in the earliest stages of our envisaging _Fiery Spirits’, by 2010 I was seeing that our work should more accurately be described as hosting the emergence and cross-fertilisation between ‘communities of practice’.

In the process of researching/writing this chapter, I have discovered that Etienne Wenger himself – in his (1998) book _Communities of Practice_ - introduced the notion of ‘constellations of practices’ as an evolution and development of his original analysis in his partnership with Jean Lave (1991). This view suggests that multiple,
related CoPs occupy different niches in a wider learning system – and those niches might be differentiated by time, space and other variables, with the implication that the boundaries of the ‘community’ are more porous than the original analysis had proposed; and therefore becoming more problematic to define with clarity. I suspect that Wenger’s shift away from classically academic analytical work, towards applying CoP thinking in practice as a consultant to organisations in the intervening period, must have influenced this development.

Whatever the origin of this innovation, the suggestion for framing of ‘constellations of practices’ offers a better fit to our experiences with FierySpirits from 2009 onwards – and is therefore helpful in pointing to some of the ambiguities, challenges and paradoxes that our research into how to ‘host’ this system of multiple ‘communities of practice’ was beginning to throw up. Another decade on, Wenger opens a retrospective article on ‘the career of a concept’ to an Open University textbook (Blackmore et al. 2010)\footnote{32 The article is available to download from http://wenger-trayner.com/resources/publications/cops-and-learning-systems/ (accessed January 2013)} with a discussion on the relationship between the origins of the original theory and systems thinking:

The concept of community of practice was not born in the systems theory tradition. It has its roots in attempts to develop accounts of the social nature of human learning inspired by anthropology and social theory…. But the concept of community of practice is well aligned with the perspective of the systems tradition. A community of practice itself can be viewed as a simple social system. Arising out of learning, it exhibits many characteristics of systems more generally: emergent structure, complex relationships, self-organization, dynamic boundaries, ongoing negotiation of identity and cultural meaning, to mention a few…. And a complex social system can be viewed as constituted by interrelated communities of practice.

Wenger (2010:179)

From the perspective of aspiring to some kind of integral practice (as introduced in Chapter three, particularly in relation to Ken Wilber’s ‘four quadrant’ map), I find Wenger’s positioning of the trajectory of CoP evolution reassuring. From roots in social sciences (‘ethnomethodology’) concerned with ‘intersubjective’, in this article Wenger has crossed the field ‘boundary’ to engage with ‘interobjective’ systems theory; and in the resonances he finds in this crossing (over many decades’ research) I find I come to trust more the authority of the author – and therefore the degree to which I am inclined to allow his insights to influence my own sense-making as an action researcher. Therefore, when Wenger points to a ‘profound paradox’ at work within ‘constellations of practices’ I am inclined to sit up and listen:

There is a profound paradox as the heart of learning in a system of practices: the learning and innovative potential of the whole system lies in the coexistence of depth within practices and active boundaries across practices.

Wenger (2010:183)

It is this paradox – held between the tendency (hyper-enabled by social media technology) toward expanding the scale and reach of our learning system; and the
embodied intuition of every member (including myself) of that community of communities that ‘depth’ encounters are so often the most satisfying (yet most resources intensive) – that seems to sum up the greatest design and hosting challenges in working with dynamic complex learning architectures.

**Struggling with stats**

As the scale of the FierySpirits constellation expanded into 2010, and as we grappled to make sense of these questions of depth and scale, we brought some statistics of site usage together to establish a ‘baseline’ set of data with the intention that these would help to evidence the intended outcomes (see note, above) set for the CoP.

Getting hold of stats was not a technical problem: as well as Google ‘analytics’ different kinds of numbers were available also from ning.com, issuu.com (a web publishing platform integrated into the site), and mailchimp.com (used to generate the NewsBurst). Our key challenge was understanding how to ask questions of these stats that might be meaningful in the context of our research into better delivering our ‘intended outcomes’.

In mid 2010 I had a first stab at bringing a simple set of indicators together to share in the first instance with my managers at Carnegie. They contained historical data as well as targets projected on the basis of a cautious ‘gut sense’ more than any rigorous scenario planning. I include these projections along with actual figures that we subsequently generated in the table below:

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.fieryspirits.com">www.fieryspirits.com</a> members</td>
<td>Cumulative total members. Excludes those who leave (total 5 to Sep 2010).</td>
<td>454</td>
<td>704</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>1250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(943 actual)</td>
<td>(1248 actual)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fieryspirits Visits</td>
<td>Reveals total number of visits to the site annually (A rough indicator of activity).</td>
<td>7,708</td>
<td>6,503</td>
<td>10000</td>
<td>15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(11,754 actual)</td>
<td>(22,042 actual)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pageviews + publications views/downloads</td>
<td>Composite indicator - reveals use of user engagement with site content. See paper ‘Measuring the impact of CoP publications’ for more detail.</td>
<td>42,442</td>
<td>21,241</td>
<td>40000</td>
<td>50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(46,771 actual)</td>
<td>(57,016 actual)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

On their own, these figures suggest a steady sense of growing engagement across the CoP. This is deceptive, however. We increasingly found that activity levels were highly dependent on members’ awareness of – and sense of attraction toward – conversations, topics and related new resources. The figures mask the uneven-ness of periods of dormancy and occasional surges in activity; and our decision to compound ‘pageviews’ with ‘publications views’, in retrospect, was a mistake as one or two topic publications subsequently ‘took off’ to a much greater extent than
we had imagined likely, skewing these figures to look more positive than actual member engagement with the ning site warranted.

Furthermore, these stats were chosen primarily on the basis that (a) with limited time available for this exercise, they were the ones that were most easily accessible and (b) they were also the ones most intuitively comprehensible to my managers. In short, whilst gently rising averages presented a reassuring picture to organizational decision makers, they did little to reveal deeper patterns about what was, and what was not, working within the CoP itself. For example, it might have been possible to invent a system for tracking activity levels within the topics – and activity at the boundaries between these topics: this may have yielded clues about the balance of ‘depth’ and ‘span’ we were tussling with.

Later on, we developed our tracking system to include publication downloads and views; and we introduced an annual members’ survey (using Survey Monkey) to elicit feedback on key developmental decisions. However, from the perspective of aspiring to an integral research methodology encompassing both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, I am left with a sense of having ‘missed a trick’ in the early stages of FierySpirits’ development.34

33 Appendix 3 includes example uses of statistics and member surveys - taken from CoP Steering Group papers in 2011 and 2012
34 In June 2011, I developed additional a suite of ‘asset based’ evaluation tools that later proved too ambitious to be put into action, based on inspiration from tools and templates developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia, USA: http://www.cdc.gov/phcommunities/resourcekit/index.html
4.3.8 Reflection: side-stepping the shadow of the ‘psychological container’

On Skye, although we left the meeting with a growing sense of personal friendship, we hadn’t begun to investigate in any systematic way where points of difference or complementarity existed in terms of the roles and functions the different host organisations might be able to contribute during the first year.

Instead, as I review notes and notice moments of memories that are still alive from that time, I am struck by how dominant the ‘psychological’ container offered by Kate’s charismatic leadership was at the time. Having single-handedly willed the CoP into being, and secured the resources and institutional space to enable it to take flight, I now reflect on whether I might have acted sooner to counter-balance this powerful personality with other ‘container’ elements available to us.

I wrote in my diary some time later:

*Our idea that the CoP could focus on a core practice curriculum – relating to the twelve petals of the petal model – was in retrospect too fuzzy to temper or align effectively the passionate ‘activist’ energy of our group. It did not provide us with compelling traction to explore in any systematic way how to host specialisms might relate to each other towards the ‘win-win’ ambitions we talked up for the partnership.*

*And I didn’t spot this lack of rigour or see it as an issue at the time. Rather, I took a stance that this clarity would emerge over time.*

*I now think that was a mistake. As founding partners of a community of practice we owed it to ourselves and people we were inviting to share this practice with us to be really clear about what our ‘practice was’ – including areas of disagreement of differences in emphasis. As a result, practice wasn’t the engine it might have been and we fell into the easier (collective) option of relying too much on the charismatic energy of one individual (with decision making powers over significant resources) to inspire and define our work together.*

*If we were going to do Skye again, I would have prioritized pinning down these practices and exactly how they might be shared over stepping out of the room to allow our partners to dwell on an abstract statement of collective purpose about our work.*

In this entry, we see the beginnings of a falling out of love with an uncritical interpretation of the purpose-principles-people formula presented by the *Art of Hosting*. We see also the start of a re-examination of my stance as CoP host, realizing that the agreement that Kate and I had made to do ‘light touch’ facilitation masked the power of Kate’s personality, and was getting in the way of putting in place balancing measures to this dynamic. Our original rationale for the ‘light touch’ was that we wanted to disrupt a structural pattern of power relationship between funder and funded; between learning ‘provider’ and ‘consumer’. Our decision to leave the room in Skye seemed, according to this original action logic, daring and worthy at the time.

In retrospect, although twice I was able to listen to my stomach ‘crunch’ – and able to act at crucial moments to structure-in host commitments to a co-inquiry
process, I am only now becoming aware – as I write three years later – of the subtler blindesses at play at the time and their speculative impacts.

Nevertheless, in the 2010 paper we do see the beginnings of an energetic shift in my own facilitation approach, perhaps reflecting a growing confidence inhabiting the role of CoP facilitator and increasing clarity about how action research could be embedded into more of our work. Early on, I tried to encourage colleagues to ‘slow down’ in order to arrive into reflective space: an attempt to transform default ‘business’ meetings into spaces holding the possibility of collaborative inquiry. The momentum of the working context and a growing realization that attempting to change this was beyond my capacities or role as an action researcher led me to try a new strategy.

Rather than ‘slowing down’ on the assumption that my colleagues would share something of my own drive to research our practice together, I learned how to listen to my ‘gut’ and be more forthright and opportunistic about carving out spaces for inquiry. We see the beginnings of this shift in the account, above, that I needed to ensure the hosts’ contracts included seeding the potential for co-inquiry. We see it again in the writing of a briefing paper that adopts more forthright, muscular language in service of its advocacy for action research approaches in general and the developmental logic of the CoP in particular.

And we see it again in the next chapter, which describes a decision to become an active convener of a new online inquiry within the CoP.

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35 This was a good call, I think: the group needed coherence of structure to allow trust and co-operative working to develop in the face of new relationships, large geographical distances, and diverse practices of host organisations.
5 Hosting a collaborative online inquiry into the CoP domain: ‘Exploring Community Resilience’

Hope lies in making creative innovations from within traditional cultures that help young people to stay in the communities where they grow up – and to use this cultural resurgence to guide responses to the complex and turbulent futures we are all likely to be facing.

Exploring Community Resilience (Wilding et. al. 2011:50)

Chapter four opened with an imagined ‘pitch’ to a publisher who might one day be interested in bringing this thesis to a wider readership. I had written this ‘pitch’ on the advice of my supervisor during a time of struggle to find an appropriately ‘researcherly’ narrative voice for this thesis: a voice that was neither stilted nor stuck; that could tell a decent story in a way that flowed and didn’t become overly complex; a voice that stayed as close as possible to a language that the participants in the communities of practice which this text reports on might find palatable to engage with. In this pitch, I imagined the centre-piece for the thesis could be presented thus:

Now, we enter the thick of the action through an account of how forty members of the Community of Practice collaborated over a period of 18 months, face-face and online, to create a handbook called Exploring Community Resilience in times of rapid change. We follow the publication as it is then launched through online networks and attracts over 20,000 downloads within six months from all over the world. At the centre of this account is a discussion about the handbook itself as a tool for focusing second person inquiry and catalysing third person action research. We examine its aesthetic, focus, tone, use of story, digital links, design, and layout as we ask – in what ways did this serve to open a space for expanding circles of inquiry? In what ways did it not? Is there evidence here of an effective hyrbridisation of online and offline facilitation of social learning? If so, are there lessons here for other action researchers?

The book itself is included as an appendix to the thesis: its stories of what it takes to build resilience in real places add depth and weight to the narrative by bringing my reader up close to the salty reality of being a community resilience pioneer in the UK and Ireland today. The book’s proposal for a ‘compass of community resilience’ is itself an original contribution to knowledge – emerging direct from the co-inquiry - which might have been centre stage if this thesis was presented in a department of human ecology or resilience science. And the inclusion of ‘Exploring Community Resilience’ – in full – within this thesis allows readers – as I would argue - to gauge for themselves whether it has achieved an ‘analogically appropriate form’ (Marshall, Finding Form in Writing for Action Research, in Reason and Bradbury 2008) – proposed by Marshall as a quality criteria for good action research.

imagined ‘pitch’ to a publisher for this story, from Diary March 2012

As I have written into this chapter, I have tried to stay true to the pitch. This is a multi-layered research story: of an inquiry into a second/third person inquiry, intended to be an exemplar and catalyst for the emergence of similar inquiries within
the overall CoP architecture. The chapter concludes with reflections on learning emerging form this social-media enabled action research experiment. In particular, we show some of the ways in which action research strategies and epistemologies can helpfully support learning processes by community resilience pioneers; and we reflect on the challenges this work presents to public and third sector institutional cultures.


From the earliest design meetings for the CoP, Kate had proposed that our work be ‘future focused’. During one meeting of the Rural Commission a futures consultancy called the International Futures Forum has run a ‘scenarios’ workshop that had, according to Kate, helped to ‘unstick things’. Building on this existing working relationship, early in 2008 Kate had contracted IFF to ensure a ‘futures angle’ was designed in to our work. During a briefing meeting in April 2008 the IFF consultant (Tony) arrived full of enthusiasm:

“This,” he said “is very exciting!”.

He then pulled out some very large pieces of paper, one of which contained a simplified picture Stafford Beer’s (1964) ‘Viable Systems Model’ (VSM).

“If you’re interested in what a sustainable and resilient community is about, how about this?!” he said with a flourish…. “Why not try this out in some communities?”

The VSM is a representation of five key sub-systemic roles such that if one of them is removed or badly connected to the rest, death will surely follow. It is also a representation of “nested structure” such that both lower and higher order viability (different levels of complexity) can be represented - the principle of recursion. VSM also gives a way of looking at internal and external communication pathways and their proper function or malfunction

Tony Hodgson, personal communication (2008)
I remember vividly the sharp intake of breath from my colleagues. They said:

“I don’t really get it….”
“Scary”
“It’s very academic…”

The way that the word ‘academic’ was delivered struck me as having an edge to it; something beyond an observation about language. I glanced down at the iPhone – checking that the audio recorder was on\textsuperscript{36}. This, it seemed, was an edgy ‘moment’; something to unpack later.

“Well, if you don’t like it that’s fine – we can do something else – but I thought I should share some ‘back-room’ stuff with you – it doesn’t have to go in the shop window…”

The session continued for another half an hour, but lost momentum.

\textbf{5.1.1 Reflection}

Tony had come to meet with us after another meeting where Kate and I had been imagining who the CoP would be for – and how they might relate to it. After Tony left, Kate had said something like “the CoP has to be led by the agendas of the members!”]. In our earlier meeting, I had agreed: “How to not make it daunting to say something online? … Too many academics might scare people away – they are used to writing and publishing their thoughts – most others aren’t …”. Kate had been strongly agreeing that, at all costs, we must use ‘plain English’.

On the following Sunday I listened back to the recording\textsuperscript{s} of both Tony’s session and the previous one. It seemed his VSM presentation had acted as a lightning rod: his enthusiasm for a ‘backroom conversation’ about the potential of VSM to inform futures thinking had ignited an epistemological touch-paper: it seemed to embody what Kate in particular feared might happen on the basis of, I inferred, scars from past experiences with ‘academics’: bruises which she did not want to perpetuate in our work going forward.

At root, I began to see, we were negotiating indirectly the epistemological territory that would be allowable – the kinds of knowledge that we intended should be valued and validated – within the CoP architecture. Implicit in our conversation was a judgment that, in the face of a threat (whether real or imagined) of overly dominant ‘academic’ propositional contributions, as a hosting team we were being strongly invited to fight for (and the charge in our conversation did feel battle-like) knowing of the ‘hand’. This, I heard, was to be a community of ‘practice’ – not of ‘abstract theories’ articulated through multi-syllabic gobbledygook.

I had felt uncomfortable during the meeting with Tony, and now I felt even more uncomfortable. I wrote in my diary “the point is to include the head and the hand not to mention the heart – not to exclude good thinking”. This reflection helped to crystallise a new first person inquiry: how to achieve such a balance? We wouldn’t be able to individually vet every blog put up on the site – and nor should we. Instead, we could try to make enough space for everyone and many forms of media.

\textsuperscript{36} At the start of the meeting I’d got everyone’s agreement that I could record the conversation “for PhD purposes”
and ways of engaging with it online: photos, poems, status updates, comments, videos, votes.

And I also decided that I should take on the challenge of working with Tony to find a right relationship between his contribution and a wider membership of the CoP who might find it useful and interesting, if made available in an appropriately accessible way – using ‘plain English’ as far as possible. I therefore volunteered to go away and work with Tony on ‘backroom stuff’ that would not be intended to be shared widely – at least, not yet. The big challenge would be finding a route to this ‘appropriately accessible way’.

5.2 Researching community resilience Phase I: Seeding a domain-level co-inquiry within the CoP

With the birth of this intention to find an ‘appropriately accessible’ way to introduce ‘futures’ thinking into the wider conversational space we were creating in the CoP, I embarked on a series of inquiries with Tony and others in the CoP that together, and over a period of six months, created the conditions for the emergence of a co-inquiry into community resilience. We might see in this work an echo of the work that Carnegie team and co-hosts had initiated a year before as we set about developing the CoP architecture. I have included moments from some of these early moves establishing the ground for the inquiry in the section below for the same reasons that Chapter four focused on similar early moves: following chaos theory, my assumption is that these early moves may have had a disproportionately significant impact on the later evolution of the community resilience inquiry and it is therefore worth slowing down our narrative a little to review them.

5.2.1 Backroom work on ‘Resilience 2.0’ with Tony and Davie

From April to September 2008, Tony and I met every three weeks. In our first meeting, we agreed to focus on the concept of ‘resilience’ as perhaps the most helpful frame for ‘future-proofing’ the rural programme. ‘Resilience’ – rather than complexity theory, for example – offered a potentially powerful opportunity to span disciplines as well as practitioner-based and discipline-based perspectives on our topic. Understandable as a ‘common sense’ term, it is also in wide use across a wide range of disciplines that are working, in their own ways, with the implications of systems thinking and the complexity sciences.

In that first meeting, I had also told Tony about my curiosity about Ken Wilber’s integral theory (using similar material to that introducing his writing in Chapter three, above), and in particular the ways that his four-quadrant framework seemed to open up opportunities to ‘bring more perspectives into the room’ – or, to use Wilber’s own phrase, to ‘include and transcend’ multiple perspectives towards a holarchic synthesis: a more complete (or integral) practice of ‘building community resilience’.

Tony was happy to agree to imagine that our work might somehow inform or assist with accelerating connections between perspectives as part of a larger self-organising ‘paradigm shift’ happening simultaneously across very many fields, from health care through to ecology, from organizational development through to futures-oriented community development initiatives such as Transition Towns. Through an exploration into ‘resilience’, we agreed we might be able to include contributions from systems thinkers such as Stafford Beer, through to the model of a ‘sustainable rural community of the future’ that the Rural Commission had developed (this model is included within the Exploring Community Resilience book - see Appendix 1).
As our conversation developed, we drilled deeper into some of the assumptions underpinning the agenda of the Rural team at Carnegie. For example, we noted that a publication was currently writing to be called *A Manifesto for Rural Communities*[^37] (with a view to influencing the policy agenda of political parties during the run-up to a UK general election) built on a publication of international case studies commissioned of Tara O’Leary at the International Association for Community Development (IACD). Tara and her colleague Ingrid Burkett (with support from the rural team) then went on to develop a publication called *Appreciating Assets* (cover, right) that framed ‘asset based community development’ as part of a converging global tradition of person-centred and human-scale development traditions that took in Gandhian and other popular liberation movements alongside a well-known model from the USA initiated by Kretzmann and McNight in their 1993 book *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets*[^38].

We realized that the work we were about to do on ‘resilience’ would need to sit alongside or within (we were not yet sure of the relationship) this strong narrative framing of ‘assets approaches’ already present within the Carnegie and FierySpirits systems. This influence, we recognised, constituted another layer of complexity to the work of creating a ‘backstop’ paper: as well as reassuring ourselves of the case for placing perspectives on resilience from the natural and social sciences side by side, we would also be challenging inherited (modernist/reductionist) assumptions within those sciences. We were, in short, interested to unpack whether it was possible for a language of ‘community resilience’ to be framed in such a way as to be of practical use in building a sense of hope and possibility within communities: amongst the ‘stable’ of Rural Programme publications – and these as part of this larger appreciative/assets movement – of making another contribution toward shifting a dominant ‘deficits’ paradigm. As I elaborated on this position in my first meeting with Tony at his house in Dunkeld, I quoted veteran systems thinker Donella Meadows’ explanation of a ‘paradigm shift’ from her 1999 paper *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System*[^39]:

> “Folks who do systems analysis have a great belief in ‘leverage points’. These are places within a complex system (a corporation, an economy, a living body, a city, an ecosystem) where a small shift in one thing can


produce big changes in everything….

The shared idea in the minds of society, the great big unstated assumptions – unstated because unnecessary to state; everyone already knows them – constitutes that society’s paradigm, or deepest set of beliefs about how the world works….

Paradigms are the sources of systems. From them, from shared social agreements about the nature of reality, come system goals and information flows….

You might say paradigms are harder to change than anything else about a system…. But there’s nothing necessarily physical or expensive of even slow in the process of paradigm change. In a single individual it can happen in a millisecond. All it takes is a click in the mind, a falling of scales from eyes, a new way of seeing. Whole societies are another matter.”

http://www.sustainer.org/pubs/Leverage_Points.pdf

At the end of that meeting, we agreed that we should attempt to work within the ‘assets frame’ to see what ‘resilience’ might look like through this lens: but that we should be honest and transparent with ourselves and others we might share the work with about this. We wrote:

In the best possible world, we might be able to reframe ‘resilience’ language, moving away from stale old metaphors like ‘bounce back’ and finding something fresher, more generative… genuinely hopeful.

Note from meeting between Tony and Nick, July 2008

It was in a spirit of playful experimentation that Tony worked up a paper on what he called ‘Resilience 2.0’, which offered a review of different kinds of resilience thinking in play in the fields of systems theory and ecology, and showing how when applied to human communities, it is possible to imagine resilience thinking as a transformative science with ‘generative capacity’:40

The first kind of resilience is that which engineers design in mechanistic systems. The system is designed so that when it is disrupted from a steady state it will return to that state as quickly as possible. In this way the efficiency of the system is maintained in changing circumstances. This kind of resilience has limitations on the degree of disruption it can stand. For example a building designed to withstand earthquakes will have some degree of flexibility built in to absorb the shock. It will not be built in a brittle way. However, there could be an earthquake of a magnitude that breaks those limits and the building does not recover or even collapses.

The second kind we see more in basic ecological systems which are more complex and interactive than mechanistic systems. They have an inbuilt capacity to restore themselves after shocks. For example a biome might be temporarily flooded in extreme weather but rapidly recover its equilibrium.

when the flood subsides. Ecological systems also have the capacity to attract system enhancing species, as for example when desert restoration attracts flora and fauna that were not previously present in that environment.

The third kind shows itself in ecological systems that tend to go through longer cycles of change that enable the system to constantly renew itself. This kind of system is not only able to absorb disturbances but also goes through a recurring renewal cycle. The cycle has four main stages. The forms of life in the system exploit their environment and grow; they reach certain limits, for example space and nutrients and enter a conservation phase; this eventually collapses and releases the concentrated materials in the system and breaks much of the coupling; out of this stage a reconfiguration is possible that re-establishes the original vitality. This cycle has been called panarchy by C.S.Holling.

The fourth kind is a human-ecological system that has transformative capacity. This system not only absorbs and adapts to disturbance but can anticipate future impending disturbances and reconfigure itself to increase its capacity to bounce back after shock. This transformation also follows a panarchic cycle of growth, conservation, retraction and reconfiguration. The difference is that in the reconfiguration stage, innovations are introduced which change the nature of the system. This means that the next growth and expansion stage is taking place on different foundations. Transformative resilience, then, requires some capacity to anticipate future events, or at least the capacity to see the implication for the future of unexpected disruption. It does not fall into the pattern of “when things return to normal” but rather creates a new normal.

Transformative resilience therefore has a number of characteristics. It enables

- Adaptation to irreversible changes
- Core restructuring processes at different levels
- Gaining needed resources from multiple sources
- Increase of variety and diversity in the system
- Generation of wide range of options
- Having a sustained memory of the past and a consciously created “memory of the future”
- Sensitive linkage to its own subsystems to wider linkages in its environment
- Accumulating the surplus energy to make a leap to a different level of ‘normal’

This latter point can be illustrated from an idea from complexity science. A stable condition of normalcy can be represented by a sphere in a pocket. (See Figure below). When the ball is knocked out of centre it will naturally tend to gravitate to its usual position. However, a major disruption may dislodge it into a lower state. For example, a flooding disruption could immobilise normal functioning for a period. Effort must go in (for example through emergency services) to recovering the situation which will (a) prevent further disruption and (b) restore things to how they were.
If, however, the disruption is to be a stimulus to being able to ride over and be little affected by flooding, a whole new design and reconfiguration of society will be needed:

Excerpt from Resilience 2.0: An exploration of how new levels of community resilience might be structured, (unpublished paper developed by IFF and myself)

At the conclusion of our work together, Tony and I agreed that the paper should not ‘land’ into the CoP directly, but instead that we should report back to the Rural team that the most significant outcome of our work together was a growing confidence we shared that the next step was to figure out whether the idea of ‘Resilience 2.0’ could be helpful for the CoP. As a first step to this work, we proposed following up an email from a member of the Community of Practice. It explained that the author was part of a group that had begun to explore Viable Systems Modeling (VSM) as a way to help them to design their intentional rural community in Cloughjordan, Tipperary (www.thevillage.ie). And the author wondered if anyone else was trying anything similar anywhere?

After some scouting, it seemed that our correspondent was part of a group of lone pioneers, at least in the rural development world. And as we discovered more about the project it became clearer why this might be the case. It turned out that some of Ireland’s more experienced thinkers and doers in sustainable development had come together from across Ireland to buy 67 acres of farmland adjoining the existing village of Cloughjordan, with the intention of regenerating the village whilst establishing a showcase ecological settlement. A central ambition of The Village project was to innovate governance structures and processes adequate for the challenge of delivering on the scale of this ambition – and it was in this context that they had begun to experiment with VSM as a way to organize the large array of self-organising working groups that had emerged over the first decade of the project’s development – covering topics from establishing the community supported agriculture farm; to installing the community-owned superfast broadband network; to developing an enterprise centre, hostel and other associated businesses. The village website (www.thevillage.ie) states that
The Cloughjordan Ecovillage brings together a diverse group of people creating an innovative new community in Tipperary. We’re doing this a way that is democratic, healthy and socially enriching while minimising ecological impacts...Sustainable Projects Ireland has a commitment to sharing out responsibilities amongst its members, rather than following the more usual ‘chain of command’ approach. ...VSM is a tool that can be used by organisations in maximising the freedom of their participants to act and respond, whilst maintaining the cohesion required for those organisations to fulfill their purpose effectively. Modeled on natural systems including the central nervous system, VSM aims to create an adaptive and resilient organisation that preserves the autonomy of members and working groups within a coordinated structure of support and accountability.

From www.thevillage.ie (accessed August 2012)

This Cloughjordan experiment seemed to validate Tony’s hunch that VSM could be translated into a framework that would be practically useful for rural community development initiatives. I called Davie from Cloughjordan on the phone to check this out:

**Davie:** Well, there’s an enthusiastic core of us who are into it – but there are plenty of other people who have yet to be convinced... it’s early days

**Nick:** What have you learned so far?

**Davie:** That systems thinking can help make sense of what’s going on – to see whether different functions are working. We’ve got so much going on all the time it’s hard to see the wood for the trees

**Nick:** Is there something useful that FierySpirits could do – maybe put you in touch with other people trying out similar things?

**Davie:** Yes, sure, that would be good. It’s about community resilience at the end of the day. We want to be a real life learning laboratory into community resilience and FierySpirits could help with that.

**Nick:** How?

**Davie:** Opportunities to visit Scotland and other places. We’re so busy, heads down all the time, we don’t get much of a chance to tell other people what we’re doing.

Diary

It seemed to me that the conversation with Davie suggested that we had been broadly right not to ‘push’ a VSM model ‘down the throats’ of CoP members; but that equally there might be an opportunity for the CoP to contribute to opening up some innovative new territory by exploring, sensitively, ways of bringing traditional rural development practice in touch with organisational models and tools coming out of systems and resilience thinking.

5.2.2 Graham’s blog: experimenting with Bill Torbert’s ‘Four Ways of Speaking’

In parallel with the ‘backroom’ explorations with Tony and Davie, the wider Community of Practice was starting to grow as co-hosts began to develop face-face events and cultivate online activity associated with them through fieryspirits.com. In our hosting ‘contracts’, I had proposed that we actively experiment with ‘sharing’ content from these events as blogs – and now we began to learn more about the challenges of learning how to write a good blog – as well as supporting others to do so.
It was starting to become clearer that even experienced writers could find the idea of posting up a blog into FierySpirits intimidating without some sort of reassurance or technical or writing support: I sensed that the most common reasons people got in touch with me were because these posts would be public for all to see, and might come over as ‘missing the point’ or perhaps being read as inappropriately ‘amateur’ or perhaps overly ‘academic’ – or somewhere on the scale in between. Now that the CoP had grown to about 400 members (beyond the point at which any member might know already a majority of others on the site), I was increasingly asked to check that “what I have to say is going to be of any interest to everyone else?” and “won’t come across as blowing my own trumpet too much”.

In response to these requests, I had started experimenting with framing feedback through Bill Torbert’s ‘Four Ways of Speaking’ action science method – that proposes paying inquiring attention to the balance of elements of framing, advocating, illustrating and inquiring in communication acts:

**Conversations: Four Ways of Speaking**

**Framing and Re-Framing**
Explicitly stating the purpose of the conversation, the dilemma we are trying to resolve, and/or the assumptions that are (un?)shared---re-framing the priorities, feelings, and shifting assumptions at any point in the conversation

**Advocating**
Asserting what you think is true and what action should be taken--in relatively abstract terms

**Illustrating**
Offering a visualizable story that supports the advocacy (if the conversation is about how to re-orient ourselves, the story will be about one another’s actions and feelings in the present)

**Inquiring**
Inviting others to express their views, eliciting single, double, or triple-loop feedback that confirms or disconfirms your current sense of the situation, listening and taking others’ views into account


In March 2009 I had drafted up a template email which included this slide, which I then tailored to invite ‘pre-blog-publication’ correspondents to reflect on whether they felt they had achieved a balance of these ‘ways of speaking’, as well as offering (usually reassuring) feedback on tone, length or style. Very often, both framing and inquiring elements would be largely missing and including these two elements together often put peoples’ minds at rest: with good framing, we were coming to realize that even someone they didn’t know – but who was broadly signed up to the feel and approach of ‘asset based’ rural development – would be unlikely to leap to a negative judgment about the content of the rest of the blog; and by ending with an open-ended, inquiring question blog writers were able to sign off with a sense of possibility or request for help: both moves helpful in reinforcing a culture of openness, exploration and reciprocity that the CoP site stated, in its ‘about pages’, that it was actively seeking to embody.

Shortly after my phone call with Davie, a colleague of Tony’s at IFF – Graham – forwarded a draft email that he thought he might post into fieryspirits.com, asking
for my feedback. It was a well crafted piece about a recent experience working with Scottish Government emergency planners as the swine flu threatened to bring the National Health Service – and many other public services – to its knees. As I re-read the draft through the ‘Four Ways of Speaking’ lens, however, it struck me that the piece could be more ‘inquiring’ at the end – and that the language used in the ‘illustrating’ sections needed translated in places from government-speak into ‘plain English’. Graham’s published blog post ended with the question:

“Most of our central infrastructural systems are already running in failure mode. A small glitch in any one of them can rapidly trigger failure across the board. For example, our pandemic simulation showed how quickly core services can buckle if some of the worst-case scenarios unfold this coming winter…. emergency planning is not the same thing as creating genuine resilience – certainly as community activists would understand the term…. is this a theme worth developing in the fiery spirits community?”

Excerpt from blog at fieryspirits.com

I used ning’s ‘share’ feature to alert five people I thought might be interested in responding to the post, and within three days there were about fifteen responses. This was more than for many other posts at the time: Graham’s question had clearly touched a nerve. I watched for two weeks as more comments appeared. Although a number of good early posts had generated some momentum within the discussion thread under the blog, by week 3 activity began to dry up. Graham declined my invitation (offline) to step into a more active convening role – but suggested I should do this instead.

5.2.3 Changing facilitation tack: a moment of decision
Earlier in the development of the CoP I had deliberately chosen not to write directly into CoP topics, or instigate them, but instead to encourage others to do so. I judged that in its earlier stages, there was too greater risk that a Carnegie voice would become dominant, undermining our intention that the CoP be a space for a plurality of voices. However, six months in, an amalgam of factors coincided to inform a decision to change tack:

• A number of ‘topics’ were now underway led by different CoP ‘hosts’, some gaining significant momentum, thereby evolving a generative learning ecology potentially strong enough not to be unbalanced by the impact of a Carnegie staff member taking a lead;
• The conceptual work on community resilience that Tony and I had done gave me confidence that there was good content available and ready to be shared should it become relevant to the evolving direction of the topic’s conversations;
• The conversation with Davie from Cloughjordan gave a strong indication that there may be a pent-up thirst for a topic community resilience from rural development pioneers who weren’t otherwise connecting with each other;
• There was a clear mandate from my Carnegie colleagues to ‘take a lead’ within our team on the ‘future proofing’ agenda;
• I had a growing sense that at this moment in the overall development of the CoP architecture I needed to step into a more pro-active role (see Chapter four for more on this);
• Looking forward, toward deepening the quality of inquiring happening within the CoP – especially online – it seemed valuable to proto-type a hybrid ‘collaborative inquiry’ approach that hosts of other current and future topic
inquiries might learn from and adapt. I imagined for example that the hosts co-inquiry might develop to focus on our practice in convening these topic-based inquiries.

- Looking forward again, in the context of sustaining investment into the CoP by Carnegie UK Trust, I imagined a quality output of the co-inquiry (such as a publication) alongside ways of tracking its impact (numbers of readers etc.) could help Trustees feel that the investment represented ‘value for money’, and the content itself might help deepen Trustees’ appreciation for the content of the work of the Rural Programme; and
- From the perspective of PhD process, I was excited to imagine that researching the development of this topic might constitute a contribution to knowledge by generating new knowledge in the (new) field of community resilience – and from the perspective of experimenting with a ‘social network action research’ cop architecture influenced by (as we have introduced in earlier chapters) Wheatley and Frieze’s suggestion that a system of parallel inquiries might strengthen one another and enable the emergence of a ‘system of influence’, and Danny Burns’ advocacy in Systemic Action Research (Burns 2007) which advocates for change processes through ‘parallel developments’ that can then be tested for ‘resonance’ between them.

In summary, the decision to host a co-inquiry into community resilience gestated over several months, and Graham’s blog post had lit the touch paper. When I wrote a response to Graham’s blog proposing that I start a dedicated group on the topic, Davie, Graham and three others who had not been previously involved got back within a day voicing their support.

5.2.4 Face-face conversations asking “What, if anything, does ‘community resilience’ mean for you?”

An early, challenging response to Graham’s blog had come from a Director of the Eden Foundation, one of our close colleagues in establishing the CoP:

I fundamentally believe that the resilience debate is misguided and a waste of my time because it does not address issues of change and transformation, it is already over-academicalised and over-jargonised and does not engage well with real issues or many communities. It is an approach that is repeating all of the mistakes that the Sustainability debate did.

(T, personal communication)

The ‘heat’ in this view showed that this was an issue that practitioners were likely to feel strongly about – and would therefore be likely to engage with.

It also gave me pause for thought about the most appropriate opening stance for the inquiry topic. How could we ensure that views such as that expressed by T had their place – and were heard?

This reflection generated the question: “What, if anything, does community resilience mean for you?”; and this became the starting question for a series of about fifty open-ended, MP3-recorded interviews with participants at four CoP events that I attended between June and September 2009.
Two thirds of these ad hoc conversations (my preferred method was to ask the question of the person I was sat beside in a workshop or in a plenary – and to then ask their permission to ‘MP3’ record either the conversation itself, or a ‘summary highlights interview’ at the end. These conversations often lasted between twenty and thirty minutes. At the point of asking permission to use the recorder, I said more about the developing topic within the CoP and my intention to upload – as podcasts – edited versions of the recordings. No-one refused to participate, and the recorder (I was using my IPhone) began to fill up with recordings. As I listened back, editing moments of insight, clarity, contention or other ‘edgy’ material that seemed to stand out for inclusion in the podcast, I started to get very excited about the quality of the material and its potential to trigger a larger, more collective conversation online. With this end in mind, I uploaded all the rough podcast recordings to a free mac audio editing suite (audacity) and created an overview podcast capturing key insights, questions and stories. I then posted these up into the ‘inquiring into community resilience’ group online, and invited my interviewees to listen with a view to letting me know if they were still happy to be quoted, and ideally to get involved in the online discussions that started to be catalysed in response.

As the group filled out with content and discussions, about 45 people had made an active contribution into the online group by October 2009. These contributions were responses to prompt questions posted into the ‘group’ space at fieryspirits.com seeking

- more questions and comments in response to existing contributions on the thread
- contributions of ‘case stories’ illustrating what ‘community resilience building’ involved ‘on the ground’;
- links to good resources (ideas, toolkits, theories) that informed these ‘case stories’ in some way; and
- ideas for ways to ‘make sense’ of the material being generated in response to these contributions of stories and links – which I collated into a virtual scrapbook - a WORD document embedded into the group pages using a media player generated by the issuu.com online publishing service.

The next two pages contain a ‘screenshot’ of a general discussion thread within the exploring community resilience group in late September/early October 2009. It shows some of the qualities of typical comments and contributions into the group at this time. For example, many people found it helpful to write a ‘comment’ framed in response to either myself (as topic convener) or other contributions. With a group of people who had not previously ‘connected’ at a face-face event, this short exchange suggests that people find it helpful to make an entry into online ‘comment’ space in response to a direct invitation – or a sense of permission they experience through an already existing relationship with another contributor who is already ‘talking’ online. Whilst this observation makes intuitive sense, it was only as I imagined (following, for example, Wheatley and Frieze’s suggestion of a move from a community of interest to a community of practice) how the group might somehow cohere into a co-inquiry that I started paying more attention to these online micro-dynamics. I wrote in my diary at the time:

41 The issuu.com service generates particularly attractive animated documents, with turning pages and live ‘links’ that are clickable, making it easier to use online. We used issuu to publish all the CoP documents in this way.
The comments are frustrating and good at the same time. Good that people feel able to pitch in – and not just in response to my prompts. But frustrating because by and large the comments don’t build on each other. It’s as if each comment could spawn a whole discussion thread on its own – and yet it feels that to try to instigate this (I could write to these folk suggesting it) might kill the stirring to life of this group as it is. I think it’s best not to interfere for the time being; and for this comment space to be where people ‘download’ their stuff and occasionally spark off each other. Time for a face-face event to try to shift things to a new level.

*Diary, October 7th 2009*

A week later I had Kate’s agreement to host an 10-3.30pm day event in Dunfermline in late November. The Trust would pay for lunch and attendees’ expenses (if they needed them) for up to twenty five people.
Comment by Camille Dressler on October 8, 2009 at 22:00

thanks to Justin for giving me an opportunity to exercise my neurones… I had to read your post a few times, and now it seems to me that the question you are really leading to is: if resilience is built in any network/organisation system by virtue of the reasons why people buy into resilience which is that it is a protective mechanism, would it be right to then think of ethical resilience and non-ethical resilience? Non-ethical resilience would be when network/organisation/system uses its strength to exploit others for the benefits of some I, rather ethical resilience when it to benefit all, or at least benefit to some without harming others. …?

It also implies that resilience is a pretty fundamental thing when it comes to society.

Camille

Comment by Anthony Hodgson on October 7, 2009 at 15:49

Hi Nick, I seem to have fallen behind on the formation of this group! Looking forward to linking my thread of research on resilience to the group and especially on Monday next. Tony

Comment by Justin Kenrick on October 7, 2009 at 15:10

Interesting Podcast and responses. One of the most resilient "set of protective systems" is the one expressed through the legal requirement for corporations to make the maximum profit for their shareholders - therefore requiring them to externalise the social and ecological costs of production and maximise peoples wants in order to ensure maximum consumption. This set of protective systems is far broader than capitalism though, and comes into play whenever we seek to claim ownership, to claim that we have created an event/ course/ a product, without fully acknowledging the input of myriad others in making the networks of production and exchange happen. The resilience of these systems of appropriation in ourselves (because we fear being found wanting? being found relational?) and in this interlocking set of economic/ media/ political/ military structures is profound. My question is: how do we destabilise resilience? How do we sit with the discomfort of recognising our participation in systems that are poisoning and killing other humans and other beings? I expect all of us reading and contributing here are well-fed. The resilient system we are relying on to feed us is starving others. How do we sit in the uncertainty, in the reality of recognising the power of the systems we give power to? How do we enable ourselves to recognise the underlying abundance and resilience that can "rarely, if ever, be regarded as an intrinsic property of individuals"? Source: Roisman, Padron et al., 2002: 1216 (quoted by Angie)

Comment by Nick Wilding on October 2, 2009 at 17:24

A quick note to the folk coming to the October 12th event: I will be writing to you next Monday with some more information about our gathering, including a list of the resources in this group that you might like to look over before we meet. Here are the latest additions:

1) Thanks Angie for forwarding your slideshow: Resilience & the community2.pdf (download it here)
2) At an event in Cardiff this Wednesday, I met with Steve Williams of the Welsh Local Government Association who has developed some useful thinking on community centred risk management - I will invite him to share his paper in this space
3) If you haven’t already caught up with Ed Mitchell’s blog, make sure you catch up with it here

Comment by Ian Jones on September 29, 2009 at 10:42

Has everyone seen the Demos report Resilient Nation, great strap line:

"Next generation resilience relies on citizens and communities, not the institutions of state..."
Comment by Angie Hart on September 24, 2009 at 14:10

Happy to share my resilience work with your group, and as Nick says, my work starts in quite a different place to some of the things you’ve been thinking about. I’ve been working in the context of child and family deprivation/complex needs/mental health, so come from that perspective. Will email Nick some slides so he can distribute them to you - Nick could you send me a direct email to U668 and I’ll send them to you. There is probably a way for me to attach a powerpoint through fiery spirits but I can’t work it out. Shame on me.

Comment by Nick Wilding on September 24, 2009 at 13:22

Thanks Graham and all for jumping in. I’ve just responded to Catherine’s post in the discussion board (see above) outlining some next steps I’d like to take with this work. You are very tempting with the hint of a story about your experience with the swine flu planning - any chance I could tempt you to write more about that? It might be a good new thread starter in the discussion forum, especially around beginning to tease out your question about ‘success’. At Eden, I enjoyed hearing about Angie Hart’s work that comes from the family therapy tradition - in some ways, this feels a more grounded place to start for our purposes in fiery spirits than the more abstract eco-systems approaches of Holling etc. that are the more dominant ‘resilience’ narratives at play (it seems to me). Angie’s just joined fiery spirits and I’m hoping she’ll share some of her work with us.

Mike - I absolutely agree that some definitions of resilience will ‘close out’ our understanding of transformative potential. I think this was in some sense a core concern driving some of the earlier blog postings. I think it’s all to play for at the moment - and that there’s nothing in the resilience literature that precludes a transformative perspective. Indeed, Holling’s latest work on parasitics (which is probably one of the Tyndall Centre’s sources) stresses this potential. Angie (who I mention above) puts it quite simply - whilst being about ‘bouncing back’ she adds something like ‘and find ourselves doing more then we knew we could’. Bob Stigler has a nice definition too - this taken from the slides Ed Mitchell shared some the recent Bristol workshop. “The ability to dance with whatever life brings” - although that might come over as a bit flaky for some.

Comment by Graham Leicaster on September 24, 2009 at 0:02

Hi Nick. Your link to the original discussion is broken. Try this one.

There were some nice themes running earlier, as you know (e.g. bounce back vs transformation). And some good references - including to Walker and Salt, which Clare Cooper notes is becoming influential thinking in other arenas.

I am rather over-full with resilience thinking myself at the moment having just spent two days with the ‘Scottish Resilience’ team in the Scottish Government busy doing swine flu planning. Absolutely fascinating at many levels.

At bottom though the experience takes me back again to Tony Kendle’s earlier post (which has left me thoughtful all summer) about his ‘slow loss of faith’ in the resilience term. In particular I think Tony is spot on in insisting that, whatever word we use, the fundamental question is what we judge to be the purpose of resilience. What really constitutes ‘success’? It is easy to exert tremendous efforts going through the resilience motions without ever pausing to ask that question. But the answer (in practice the range of answers in any group) shapes everything.

Comment by Mike S on September 23, 2009 at 11:52

I found the podcast very useful Nick, thanks. I find the term very useful and increasingly ubiquitous. A meme? My only floating worry is the potential for resilience to conflict with a notion of transformation. In Kathy’s response she suggested that one of the indicators are “the system’s ability to absorb shocks and retain its basic function”. Under certain lights that ability is a part of the problem not a part of the solution. So one of the challenges we face I think is to discern what elements of our social system, our economics and our wider culture we want to ‘retain’.

Comment by Kathy Riley on September 22, 2009 at 10:54

A colleague passed me this definition of resilience the other day, it seems helpful?

In measuring a system’s resilience, the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research refers to indicators that demonstrate the system’s ability to (a) absorb shocks and retain its basic function, (b) self organize (social institutions and networks), and (c) innovate and learn in the face of disturbances.
5.2.5 Dunfermline workshop, November 2009

Twenty three CoP members, the majority from Scotland but also included five from England and Ireland - confirmed they would attend in response to a note posted into the online group, as well as direct invitation emails from myself.

We gathered at 10 and dove straight into a brainstorm exercise (onto flipchart paper spread out over six tables we stood around) inviting us to present in drawings or writing current questions about resilience building:

![Sample flipchart from morning session](image)

This worked well and after a few minutes we talked both to what we’d put down but also what we noticed about emerging commonalities and differences between us. In the process we had rapidly generated a lot of material (sample flipchart below) – stories, concept-maps, immediate reflections on live issues for the group, pictures, doubts, themes and questions (I asked permission to video the feedback session talking to the posters and then posted a long edit into the forum afterwards as a way for others not present to get a flavour of this step. If my reader has access to broadband, I’d like to show you a flavour of this video as well as other podcasts/videos and associated comments at [www.fieryspirits.com/group/resilienceinquiry](http://www.fieryspirits.com/group/resilienceinquiry)).

In a short session before lunch we switched tone and pace and I presented ten or so slides that attempted to capture key questions, issues, and themes emerging from the interviews and online discussion so far. I also proposed that we as a group might aim to get a sense of many perspectives on resilience available to us. To illustrate (and in an echo of the earlier conversation with Tony as we initiated our
work together on the ‘resilience 2.0’ scoping paper – see section 5.2.1), I introduced an example framed through Wilber’s (1995) ‘integral’ model:

![Diagram](image)

- Inner development & spirituality
- Authenticity, presence
- Identity and Belonging
- Indigeneity, Values, Faith
- ‘Bounce Back and More...’
- Physical fitness
- Exercise, Diet
- Genetics
- Redundancy - Google 20%
- Modularity - grids
- Panarchy etc.

We moved straight from the slides into lunch. A friend of mine (Catherine) cooked a stunning lunch - wild mushroom soup, oat bread, local salad, lots of cheese. Lunch helped to lubricate a conversational buzz around the table – which I interrupted after a few minutes to invite people to ‘say it like it is’ about what their ‘take’ on it is, and if they have any burning questions they’d like to put on the table. Later feedback from one of the participants reflected that this had been a strong invitation … that “you called people to account for themselves – to ‘arrive’ into the conversation - this is what I’ve seen you do before as well” (Justin Kenrick, personal communication).

On reflection, the strength of that invitation was based on a confidence that the form – and performance - of sharing good food and convivial conversation could anchor a call to deepen the quality of our engagement with each other around the theme of the day: we were echoing that sense of Oldenburg’s (ibid.) ‘third place’ that I have introduced above… but also I felt a great confidence in the potential of our conviviality around that table in resonance with similar experiences ten years earlier as a student-teacher at the Centre for Human Ecology, where we had hoste evening lectures followed by dinner with the speaker around a carved wooden table. In those days, too, the tradition was that part way through the meal the convener would tap on her glass, and call us toward purposeful reflection together.

It was in this way that I began by introducing and thanking Catherine as our chef. Catherine then spontaneously told a story of being with a friend who was dying of cancer. She described resilience as the ability to face death with dignity, and to still choose life. Her story shifted the atmosphere around the table; I felt that all of us had become more present, more engaged, more open in our hearts as well as heads. Catherine set the tone for the round that followed and, as we cleared away lunch we were already reflecting on the richness and diversity of experience around the table, and how useful it was to have a space to be able to share feelings – fears and hopes which, we affirmed, were important in framing different stances on resilience. It didn’t feel appropriate to turn the video camera on again after lunch; instead we worked together in one the most human and productive spaces I have
ever experienced at Andrew Carnegie House. People spoke purposefully and passionately about the trials as well as the successes of their work and we ended up with a number of ‘key themes’ that could shape future stages of a resilience inquiry (e.g. ‘leadership’, ‘planning’ etc.).

The afternoon had a transformative effect on my own relationship to the emerging inquiry, too. Whereas I’d been cautious before about whether there was a genuine mandate to develop the work from CoP members, there was now a clear mandate and commitment established by those who came that day, and a steer about the themes that could focus next steps. In our debrief, Kate said how impressed she was … and tasked me with writing a book about community resilience would become part of my work-plan.

One of the participants called me up a couple of days later and told me he was still thinking about the conversation. ‘That was a great workshop – how did you do it?’. During the phone call I found myself becoming more aware of Catherine’s role as host of food and conversational depth; but also that about half of those present had already worked with me at previous events where we followed similar kinds of process and thus were ready to ‘trust the process’.

This intent dissipated somewhat after the day, however. I felt confused by Kate’s request to write a book as it felt at odds with a more tentative write-up and opening-up summary of the conversation that I had in mind. Should I now take a strong leadership role or step back?

In the event, several of the Dunfermline participants got back in response to a request via email for feedback with suggestions – which were supportive of my suggestion on the day that I put a draft document/video together to act as an invitation for a wider group to participate. This feedback helped shape my sense that this was shaping up into a hybrid second/third person inquiry and that I would need to play a guiding role in maintaining coherent focus as we switched between different scales of face-face and online conversation as opportunities allowed. Could, I began to wonder, a wider scale online inquiry also follow the path toward deepening engagement that we’d achieved in Dunfermline?

5.3 Publishing an ‘Exploring Community Resilience’ handbook as an embodiment of and catalyst to third person inquiry

To recap: this chapter is telling the story of a multi-year inquiry nested within the framework of an enabling learning architecture supported by a ‘social networking’ website and face-face events run by a number of hosting partners. In the first two sections of this account, we have seen how some careful facilitation moves have enabled a group of co-inquirers to gather around and help to shape the agenda for a new topic, ‘Exploring Community Resilience’.

In earlier chapters in this thesis, I have introduced metaphors of ‘digital gardening’ – relating to topic-based online inquiries often with tight group boundaries to help build trust, safety and inquiring energy within the group; and ‘digital forestry’ – relating to the hosting activities necessary to support the emergence of a broader landscape of parallel, but potentially loosely connected, communities of practice and communities of inquiry within them.
We can now see that, from the outset, although the community resilience inquiry following this broad pattern (for example, through the emphasis on the ‘gardening’ activity of one-one conversations at the outset), from the beginning the intention to do some ‘forestry’ was also present: the one-one conversations became recorded interviews that became podcasts; and an online group was formed where blogs, videos, comments and other content uploaded by members could be viewed by anyone on the internet (however, only fieryspirits.com members could engage with this material).

The online content was thus a reflection of material generated in face-face settings that participants in those exchanges were happy to have shared widely. At every occasion where an audio or video recorder had been present – with a view to sharing onwards the content of those physical events – participants gave permission for the convener of the topic (myself) to edit contributions and share it into the public realm. This permission required a degree of trust that the material would be used as intended; and we have already discussed in Chapter two how early stages of CoP design were focused on creating such a trusting environment (through paying attention to the design of the website, transparency of the sponsor agenda, etc.). As the quantity of data generated at both face-face and online conversations grew (see, for example, a screenshot of a selection, right, posted into the online group space), and given the intention and mandate from both CoP members and my manager at Carnegie (cemented during the Dunfermline seminar) to bring together this material into a publication, I now faced the challenge of continuing to build on the participatory ethos of the inquiry to date by bringing together a diversity of perspectives, stories and approaches to community resilience building that nevertheless, when read/seen/viewed together, could add up to ‘more than the sum of the parts’.

In addition, from the perspective of researching how social media and other web 2.0 technologies might augment or otherwise enhance second/third person AR design, as well an ambition to stay true to the ontological, epistemological and methodological intentions.
shaping this research, presented another several layers of challenge and opportunity:

- taking up Judi Marshall’s invitation to find a congruence between form and content, how could we create a report that embodied – in its aesthetic, design, tone, layout and editorial choices the mood, feel, sense-making processes and conversational dynamics at work in the dynamic living inquiries across multiple real-world and virtual sites?
- taking up Danny Burns’ invitation to tune into and test the ‘resonance’ between parallel inquiries (interpreted here as parallel conversations in different physical locations but connected through the fieryspirits.com portal), how could this publication carry the diverse voices of these parallel inquiries whilst simultaneously enabling the resonances between their stories to amplify one another?
- taking up Margaret Wheatley and Deborah Frieze’s invitation to host spaces that could allow for the emergence of a ‘system of influence’, how could this publication help to name and celebrate a community resilience movement that remained under the conventional policy radar – in a way that might help it to recognize itself and in other ways grow in confidence and collective voice so as to tilt toward influencing national policy making across different jurisdictions?
- taking up Ken Wilber’s invitation to take an ‘integral’ approach that makes space for multiple perspectives – which itself echoes an ethic of generalist holism and an ontology of radical inter-connectedness inspired by engaged Buddhist teachers such as Joanna Macy - how could this publication reflect this ontological ground whilst translating it into a presentational form that stuck as close to ‘plain English’ as possible: how to suggest the richness of a shift to a relational paradigm whilst remaining coherent and understandable within a dominant paradigm mindset? And
- taking up my own challenge to attempt to open space for peoples ‘authentic’ voices, how could we navigate a transition from the relative safety of the ‘digital forest’ we had developed within fieryspirits.com to the ‘digital wilds’ – where anyone online can view, comment, forward, share, embed or otherwise manipulate online content – whilst retaining something of that spirit of authenticity? If we could achieve this, would it help us to perhaps catalyse a much larger inquiry into community resilience, perhaps involving many thousands of people beyond the boundaries of the CoP membership?

Holding these intentions – and questions – in mind, we embarked on a new phase of researching the extent to which online co-authoring and publication of a ‘handbook’ (augmented by a complementary project creating a ten minute animated film and a poster summarizing the inquiry process) might enhance the reach and deepen the quality of inquiring across the fieryspirits CoP as a whole.

In the sections that follow, we follow the development of this research story.

42 These following bullet points pick up theory introduced in Chapters two and three
5.3.1 Extending the conversation begun in Dunfermline: a face-face workshop at the Rural Programme convention, Cumbria

Geoff (my colleague at Carnegie) advocated early in 2009 that our team host an event for 150 people, building on previous years’ ‘rural conventions’. Geoff was working on a publication that he hoped would influence conversations developing in Brussels about the future shape of European Union support for rural community development, through its ‘LEADER’ programmes.33

In addition to the primary focus on the LEADER theme, as we came to design the event we agreed to open space – within opt-in workshops – for sessions generated by other topics within the CoP. I offered to lead a session on ‘community resilience’. Around half the participants (about 70 people) took part. For the final 45 minutes of the session, we sat in plenary session that I asked participants to help to video, by passing around the camera.44

Inquiring into being an ‘editor’: a place for a six minute film in third person inquiry?

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Early in the development of the CoP hosts had experimented with uploading videos of face-face events. Some relied on footage from a static camera at the back of a conference room; others had attempted to mix this with some ‘talking heads’ interviews with presenters; yet few of these videos had attracted many ‘hits’ within the website or provoked conversations.

Reflecting on our failure to date to create sufficiently compelling media, during a hosts’ teleconference in early 2009 we focused on how we might learn together how

33 LEADER is perhaps the most significant funding intervention available to both farming, enterprise and community organisations in rural areas. Geoff’s publication is available, along with other presenter’s material and the discussion thread that developed online alongside the event, at http://fieryspirits.com/group/leaderapproach

44 This video is online - with permission –at www.fieryspirits.com/group/resilienceinquiry
to produce more effective media from events for sharing into the CoP. The round went something like this:

“It’s no surprise that people aren’t looking at these films. They’re boring”
“We’ve got to get better at it. There’s so much competition from other places like YouTube and TV. People are very used to consuming professional video.”
“How about we give ourselves a rule that we never upload something longer than ten minutes – five minutes ideally?”
“That take a lot of editing”
“We need to take less footage in the first place and shoot it with an eye to the final edit – what are we trying to achieve or communicate?”
“And we need to learn how to put together video. I did a beginner’s course once. At the beginning we need to show the venue or give other information about the purpose of the event, who’s there. And we shouldn’t do shots of presenters but interview them instead after their session to get a short summary. And we should frame these ‘head shots’ by putting them slightly off centre – that’s what professionals do. And we should use lapel mikes to make sure the sound is clear. And we should think about the lighting. And maybe ask some questions from one angle, and then a second lot putting the camera at another angle. Then when it’s edited it looks like there were two cameras. Makes it more interesting”
“Sounds good – I’m up for trying it”

The conversation usefully kick-started a series of experiments that, over the next months, resulted in a new generation of videos that began to serve their intended function of both communicating member insights and stories – and also complemented inquiries developing within CoP topics.

Shortly after the Resilience workshop, and as I set about editing together (using iMovie software on a mac) the footage participants in the plenary session had helped to film, it struck me that the ‘six minute short’ would be important presentational data for our emerging third person inquiry. From this perspective, the framing power of the ‘editing role’ became clearer. I wrote:

We need to be transparent about the criteria we are using as editors. On what basis do I choose who is in and who is out? How do we allow people featuring in the videos to feedback on the editing choices before they become a public record? My emerging criteria are:

I am creating a six minute narrative story: the flow of this story should reflect, as far as possible, the flow of the plenary conversation;
Providing the sound and picture quality is good enough, I seek to include as many different voices as possible;
In choosing what of particular contributions to include, I favour - contributions that include more of elements of framing, advocating, illustrating and inquiring;
- contributions spoken with passion, clarity or otherwise reflecting an ‘embodied’ knowing by the speaker;
- contributions that challenge, contradict or otherwise somehow stretch the conversational space beyond ‘group think’;
- contributions that elicited from others in the room a sense of agreement or resonances (indicated by qualities of attention as they are spoken; nodding assent; or other verbal and non-verbal clues).

Diary 8.12.2009
Listening carefully back to the unedited video, against these criteria, and with an intention that the quotes that ‘made it’ into the video might also ‘make it’ into the forthcoming ‘report’, represented a key sense-making moment as I sought to imagine how to curate this extended community’s know-how on community resilience building. These editing choices – and the criteria informing them – would shape how ‘resonant’ the film might be amongst and beyond this community.

This learning held within it a re-affirmation of the importance of pursuing first person inquiry practice as a ‘curator’ of online inquiry – perhaps especially when employing powerful communication technologies such as multi-media. By maintaining the diarising practice, I had been able to notice some of the research implications of wishing to create better ‘crafted’ films, able to attract and hold the interest of a wide cross-section of potential participants in a wide circle of co-inquiry; whilst also coming to realize the ways in which this ‘craft’ would tend to hide or ‘edit out’ tentative, unclear voices: the possibilities of disconfirmation from ‘group think’.

This moment of inquiry did not resolve this issue, but it did raise it and suggest a strategy for developing and sharing some criteria when producing multi-media for action research purposes.\textsuperscript{45}

Similar issues – and choices – would come into play several months later as I became the lead author for the ‘online report’ of the inquiry group. I wrote:

It strikes me that if our publication could in some way mirror the pitch, tone, content, themes, timbre of the voices from the Kendal film, we could be a long way to creating a document that might act as a ‘sounding board’ for the even wider CoP community to chime in alongside.

Diary, January 2010

However, other pressures at Carnegie meant that I didn’t have the time to do anything about this. In the meantime, discussions in the online space had stalled. By now, new readers to the forum reported feeling overwhelmed by the fragmentary nature of several of the discussion threads and the confusing layout of the resource pages. In short, we had too much ‘data’ which was difficult to navigate... in the absence of facilitation, the group activity was drying up and needed a strategy for making sense of the swamp of data we had generated. We couldn’t see the ‘wood for the trees’.

\textit{Becoming an author: making sense of our Digital Forest}

Over the following three months – and between other jobs – I set about a systematic process of transcribing and indexing all the recordings uploaded into the online space, as well as reviewing all the CoP generated stories and references I had come across from the literature as well as the web.

I then started writing into the ‘priority themes’ that attendees at the Dunfermline and Cumbria workshops had identified – attempting to generate a composite narrative that illuminated each theme. By February 2010 I had a document that I judged was ‘good enough’ to post back into the CoP to ask for feedback about whether what I had made any sense. First, I ran it by Kate to check she was happy for me to do this:

\textsuperscript{45} I shared this diary entry with hosts during a session on multi-media within the CoP at a gathering in 2010.
I think this needs to be more polished. It needs to be written in plain English – there’s too much jargon. It needs to be from the same stable as the Charter and Manifesto for Rural Communities.

Feedback from Kate, email, June 2010

I had imagined an organic sense-making process whereby the ‘mess’ and unclarities of our provisional document reflected conversations and interviews across different events. I imagined that the inquiry group would then help make sense of this mess.

Kate had other priorities on her mind though – not least a growing sense of needing to produce some ‘outputs’ from our work to satisfy Trustees of the value of our work. Kate’s challenge was that I take more personal responsibility for leading this stage of sense-making: that I trust myself more and wait to share a more developed text with a clear narrative voice that could enable a wide spectrum of potential readers to engage with. In the same way that I had taken on being ‘producer’ and ‘editor’ of the Kendal film, Kate’s feedback was that I needed to present a coherent ‘edit’ of what we’d begun to call a ‘handbook’ to the CoP for feedback.

Shortly afterwards, one of the Dunfermline participants invited me to run a follow-up workshop for arts leaders.

As I imagined the group I was to present to, four slides crystallised around four topics (people, culture, economy, links) that, all of a sudden, seemed to make sense of the heap of stuff that had seemed so intimidating.

As I presented the compass (above), the group became animated and engaged. A museum curator from Suffolk asked for the slides and said it would make an ideal workshop for his staff as they thought about how to contribute more to local community life; a director of a major gallery in Dundee emailed afterwards with a list of potential projects he’d dreamed up based on our conversations that afternoon. Buoyed up by this feedback, the ‘compass’ model has stuck as both a good workshop prompt – but also as a
I found the challenge of writing for a ‘policy’ audience tricky and early drafts of this section were rather pompous. Looking back on those weeks, I am struck by how pushed off-centre I had been by CEO’s request to me as a member of staff – perhaps part of a wider ‘normalising’ process into the new organisational culture that felt alienating, scary, disembodied and isolating.

After two weeks, however, I re-read the sections I had previously drafted on popular education and experiential learning – and re-membered some of the values that had initiated the project – and what stance I should take to my CEO’s request. I quietly binned the ‘six page policy briefing’ proposal and pressed on with the original vision – but enhanced with the intention to ensure that co-producers of the publication should have a chance to shape some ‘policy messages’ within it. Not only did this exercise help me recover a sense of grounding in the project – it also gave a clue about how to get ‘unstuck’ with the writing process as a whole. “Start from experience”, I told myself; and it then became obvious that the story of the Cumbria floods should open the book. We had, after all, been holding our convention in Cumbria on the day the heavens opened – and I had already decided that the timbre of our conversations that day should inform the timbre of the publication as a whole.
5.4 Reflection: Exploring Community Resilience as a simultaneous act of collaborative presentational design, original theory generation in community resilience and catalyst to third person inquiry

In August 2011, a sixty-eight page, full colour publication, ‘Exploring Community Resilience’, was launched online and at a series of face-face events. The full publication is included in Appendix 1 to this thesis (and is also available for download from www.bit.ly/comresilience-download).

In this section, we reflect on the publication as an act of second/third person action research from three perspectives. These broadly follow John Heron’s holarchic model of extended epistemology (introduced in our exploration of the epistemological basis for this research in Chapter 2) for how practical knowing might emerge from propositional knowing, which itself can emerge from presentational knowing arising from direct experience:

- First, we advocate for and illustrate with excerpts from the Exploring Community Resilience publication ways in which this work is an embodiment of presentational knowing by and for co-researchers within the CoP;
- Next, we examine some ways in which the ‘compass’ framework and associated ‘dynamics of change’ represents a propositional sense-making move, representing an contribution of original knowledge in the field of community resilience; and
- Finally, we reflect on the evidence available to date about the extent to which the publication could be said to have ‘made a difference’ across two dimensions of (1) acting as a prototype for social-media enabled second/third person action research within the CoP; (2) catalysing subsequent cycles of third person inquiry outwith the CoP, amongst ‘real life’ communities of place as well as into other networks.

Our discussion draws on excerpts from the publication, feedback offered during and after publication by contributors and reviewers, statistics generated by online publishing services, and my own reflections from contemporary diary entries. The discussion assumes that the reader has read Appendix 1 or (better) read the document onscreen using a reader connected to the internet, and experimented clicking on some of the live hyper-links embedded within the document as these are integral to one of the document’s intended functions – from an action research perspective – in encouraging readers to begin or further develop their own learning journeys into this field. Clicking through these links will also reveal the diversity of
social and other media constituting the ‘field of knowing’ that this document helps to constellate.

Through our discussion, we develop a case that more action researchers might experiment with using hyper-linked media as part of our experiments developing social-media enriched forms of second and third person research.

5.4.1 Reflection (1): Exploring Community Resilience as co-created presentational knowing

‘How can the presentational qualities as well as content of the handbook open up spaces for further inquiry? How can the design echo the asset-based (appreciative orientation) to inquiry advocated in the text?’ Just remembered Judi’s article!

Diary, August 2011

I suggest that an engaged, emergent, iterative process is required to facilitate the generation of analogically appropriate form…. This is a highly process based notion of quality, drawing on disciplines of writing as inquiry (Richardson, 2000). We can, for example, ask: How did this writing come to be like this? What quality processes did the author engage in? How did they expose them to critique?

Marshall, Finding Form in Writing for Action Research (Reason and Bradbury 2008)

In earlier sections of this chapter we have come close to moments of collaborative inquiry and learning in face-face sessions and online as a community resilience inquiry was seeded and developed through its early stages. We have noted also how I came to take a strong convening/curating role in these early stages, and was then asked to step into a clear lead author role in order to create a document that a wide range of stakeholders could offer feedback on.

It was September 2010 by the time my managers at Carnegie agreed there was enough emerging clarity of concept, structure and narrative to go back to the CoP group for a new round of input. Was it, by now, out of kilter with the voices of the practitioners for whom it was originally intended and who had contributed so much in the first place?

Appendix to Exploring Community Resilience
Our team were planning what we feared might be the final event of the Rural Programme – a gathering for eighty people at Hill Holt Wood in Lincolnshire. I proposed that we use it to bring together participants from three co-inquiries that had by this time been running long enough to generate pieces of collaborative writing – focused on ‘appreciating assets’, whether rural public sector services could be effectively transferred to third sector (social enterprise) control, and the resilience inquiry. Each group would spend a day together, with half a day (at different points) given to cross-fertilising lessons. This working event would be invite-only – only contributors would attend – with the idea that we’d discuss drafts of three texts ready to go to a final draft shortly afterwards.

For the resilience stream, I invited practitioners who had either already actively contributed to the online or face-face discussions, or who the additional ‘policy’ research process had turned up as having powerful stories that we would benefit from hearing from. This group was later acknowledged in the front page of the report:

Reviewers offered in-depth and constructive criticism through four drafting cycles. For example, several Dunfermline seminar participants went over a first draft text with great care and pointed out inaccuracies or places where ‘compass’ framing passages fell short; seven ‘pre publication reviewers’ made suggestions that an executive summary should be included; others focused feedback on design ideas; some highlighted elements they particularly enjoyed and others which seemed ‘dull’ or ‘lifeless’; others made suggestions for stories and theory, pictures and design ideas. We now review some of the key areas of feedback and illustrate how our presentational design improved as a result.
Finding a ‘fit for purpose’ writing voice and rhythm

Eventually, through this feedback, a writing voice appeared that was able to present stories in ways that both contributors and readers appreciated. This feedback fed a first person inquiry into finding a ‘writing voice’: this inquiry involved learning how to listen to the actual (as well as, by extension, imagined) ‘live’ feedback from CoP colleagues. Tuning into these voices, I worked paragraphs over and over until I could imagine they would all be appropriately engaged with the text. I kept a diary at the time:

It is a shocking process to read and re-read this text and to notice when the voice becomes less inquiring and more proselytizing. Sometimes I feel split in two between being ‘on side’ with the powerful characters I’m working with - the driven ‘movers and shakers’ – and the small inquiring part of me that says ‘haaaaang on!’. Maybe the point of this writing process is to give that smaller voice an occasional chance to have some air – to try to bring both the verve and energy of action people forward whilst also sowing seeds of curiosity about whether everything is as it seems?

Diary, June 2009

Through this writing, I realized that I had framed an inquiry question: how can I develop a text that can be both inquiring as well as holding the attention of very action-oriented, pragmatic people simultaneously? And as drafts developed, I found myself recognizing an emerging pattern: of a sliding scale between two authorial voices – one more journalistic (tightly written, lots of facts and figures - to grab attention, encourage us ‘in’ to a story) and another more reflective (encouraging a ‘pause for thought’; carefully hosting ‘theory spots’ amidst the ‘stories’).

For example, the book opens with the story in rural communities in Cumbria that unfolded as the FierySpirits community gathered in Kendal:

On Thursday 19th November 2009 over sixty Cumbrian communities experienced a torrential downpour. Each has a story to tell of those days when British records were broken: two towns in particular – Cockermouth and Workington – were thrust into the spotlight as the national news media streamed dramatic pictures of the Cocker and Derwent rivers as they broke their banks, plunging businesses, shops and homes under water. In Cockermouth levels rose to 2.5 metres (8ft 2in). As the waters rushed downstream, PC Bill Barker lost his life as the Northside Bridge collapsed and not long afterwards two further bridges collapsed, splitting Workington in two.

and a little later on, through the eyes of a journalist ‘digging’ into her story, we accompany a local GP as he reflects on learning emerging from this experience:

Revisiting her initial story several months later, Driscoll wrote another story that sought out an angle on the ‘Big Society’. She interviewed Cockermouth GP John Howarth

As I circulated individual sections, I started to understand that each short section could echo this rhythm of fast-slower; and that throughout the book, this speed of
modulation between these paces could itself slow such that it became possible, later on, to develop longer stories, and introduce more complex theory.

**Presentational devices for ‘hosting’ theory**

As the handbook text began to be whittled into shape, questions of presentational design came to the fore. We had a small budget to employ a professional designer and, again, this was an opportunity to involve CoP colleagues in generating a design brief that might help transform the WORD document into an attractive artifact. Our brief stated:

In order to convey and celebrate the diversity of voices that have contributed to the publication, we need a design that can capture the sense of aliveness, creativity and passion characteristic of so many of the events and conversations that the book builds on.

Imagine a metaphor of not just scattering flower seeds in the hope that some might grow (into new collaborations/possibilities)– but of purposefully planting them into this text (the soil) with enough nutrients to help them grow and cross-pollinate, just like any self-organising system.

- except from the design brief, June 2011

I worked closely with the designer (Richard, from Falconbury London) over a week to refine first the design scheme (fonts, colours, theme elements). I suggested that where possible we invent a ‘fusion’ between online media and traditional printed media – borrowing design and navigation devices from both.

Richard came back full on enthusiasm with some powerful designs including the oak tree motif; the dotted line suggesting a journey across the pages; the heading font that suggests writing on flipchart; and the ‘live links’ in boxes instead of more conventional end-notes or footnotes. Another idea that Richard and I hit on was to use a ‘word cloud’:

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46 Later, Richard said that this had been a ‘dream job’ that enabled him to exercise some creativity, when compared to most of the design work he is asked to do for clients. He ended up investing much more time in the project than he got paid for and in return wanted twenty copies to show other clients.
The ‘word cloud’ would not only suggest that our research originated in both digital and analogue media; it also suggested the complex inter-connectedness of the content of our conversations that mirrored the ‘everyday mess’ of rural practitioners and, to some extent, the wide-ranging and eclectic conversations at so many of the face-face events. Yet the word-cloud also suggested an order to this chaos: the biggest words occur most frequently. As a snapshot overview, this presentational device offered viewers/readers an aesthetically attractive yet simultaneous sense of the depth of knowing and know-how enfolded in the publication.47

In addition to suggesting the ‘mess’ of experience, we also intended that the book find a way to reflect the stance on theory adopted within CoP topic discussions. One contributor suggested that we ‘host’ theory alongside stories in an attempt to ensure it wasn’t ‘scary’; and that we liven it up with ‘friendly’ design elements. In addition, and building on the learning about the fast/slower rhythm we had already established as a guide to writing (see above), we decided to ‘go easy’ on theory at the beginning of the book, but to allow it to occupy more space later on. Again, here we were consciously translating our epistemology of ‘hand, heart and head’ into design choices:

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47 The ‘wordle’ device has since been adopted by Carnegie UK Trust for its publications – and many other organisations have also copied the idea.
Recent Adobe PDF formats enable embedding of hyper-links in documents. This gave us the opportunity to place live links to interesting material immediately next to the narrative – echoing the links of a web page. This technology holds the promise of transforming a linear reading process into a self-directed journey around the web, with the document as the anchor point – the navigation compass through what can be an overwhelming sea of information that is today’s dominant experience of the Internet. In this way, is it possible that the book might trigger new first person inquiry journeys by its readers? By making some sense of the plethora of resources available at the touch of a button, our intention was that the document should act like a good librarian, helping online readers feel less intimidated and offering some good first port of call for the web surfing.
In this section (above), we see some of the design elements that we thought might help in this regard. Each resource is made ‘human’ by naming the CoP member who suggested it – and linking to their own work as applications of the original material. Each hyper-link is ‘live’ in the document, meaning that it will open the relevant resource at the click of a button (whilst keeping the publication open in the background). We also see, above, a juxtaposition of text and pictures: in this case, a photo taken at one of the events (at the Eden project) with a message about ‘playing’ that helps to balance the density of the text; and next to it is a picture of a flip-chart that shows something of the co-inquiry groups’ emerging method of giving permission for people to share ‘human’ as well as ‘official’ stories. Taken together, this page has a depth of messaging, design and content that reinforces each other and says (we hope) a message congruent across both presentational and propositional forms: that community resilience is a playful and ‘human’ activity – as well as being well ‘backed up’ by good tools and theories.

When put together with other devices such as the ‘word cloud’ and approach to ‘hosting theory’, we imagined that the live web ‘links’ (framed by the people whose work is inspired by the content they point to) could help generate an impressionistic sense of a systemic awareness of the field of community resilience. This was also an aim of the structure of the book as a whole – and the ‘compass’ device on which this structure is based.

In Chapter 4, we have introduced the notion – borrowed from Ray Oldenburg’s ideas on the ‘great, good place’ – of places where people ‘meet people we didn’t know we were supposed to meet’. We have noted that the Dunfermline workshop embodied this intention and became one of the transformative moments of the inquiry. And, as the publication came together, I saw an opportunity to echo this sense of surprising – yet potentially generative and inquiring meetings – by placing content together in such a way that it ‘rubbed shoulders’ with stories or elements of theory that may not usually sit together in peoples’ experience or in disciplinary theorizing on the topic of community resilience.

Does this presentational device help invite the (intuitive) eye to taste boundary crossing content in ways that the rational mind might dismiss? After publication, one independent reviewer of the book (in the regeneration-focused magazine ‘New Start’) said:

“it isn’t trying to impose a hegemony of ideas from a single professional or field perspective. It’s not short of polemical views, but they tend to support and celebrate the concepts of ‘messiness’ and plurality, which I find vital to my work” (Taylor in New Start, September 2011).

Taylor’s feedback suggested our structure – reflecting and illuminating the distinctions suggested by the ‘compass of resilience’ (see below) – gave enough structure as well as enough space to contain a wide diversity of content.

Other feedback was less positive, however. I asked Carnegie colleagues for their honest feedback a couple of weeks after the launch. Whilst several appreciated the emphasis on ‘visual stimulation’ in the design, several said it was difficult to read; that the design somehow ‘got in the way’. This triggered a conversation about the choices to be made in an effort to create a document that would be attractive to engage with online (in a context of an increasingly visual/multi-media online environment) versus something that conformed to legibility standards in the printed
version. For example, the typeface is too small for people with visual impairment to easily negotiate – contradicting the book’s own proposition that a resilient community pays attention to inclusion.

5.4.2 Reflection (2): Exploring Community Resilience as an original contribution of theory (as a synthesis of CoP knowing) about building rural resilience – en route to ‘making a difference’?

We cannot regard truth as a goal of inquiry. The purpose of inquiry is to achieve agreement among human beings about what to do, to bring consensus on the end to be achieved and the means to be used to achieve those ends. Inquiry that does not achieve coordination of behavior is not inquiry but simply wordplay. (Rorty, 1999, p. xxv quoted Reason (2006:190))

The handbook presents a constellation of presentational, propositional and practical knowledge that is the product of an ongoing process of exchange and meaning-making between many actors with different disciplinary and experiential perspectives on resilience building. It advocates process-based and learning-centred orientations to resilience building, informed by asset based development, popular education and participatory action research practices as well as theories of transformative resilience building informed by complexity and ecological sciences. In this way, the handbook offers an original synthesis – and therefore contribution - of knowledge into the field of rural and community development.

The ‘compass’ tool that structures the book emerged through repeated testing at workshops, and later as co-authors of the handbook offered suggestions for clarifications via tracked changes in the draft document. In Chapter 2 (above), I have introduced Ken Wilber’s integral theory; and earlier in this Chapter I have shown how a proposal for ‘four perspectives’ on community resilience helped to frame a conversation at the Dunfermline, which then ‘arrived’ reconfigured as four ‘directions’ of a compass of community resilience for a follow-up workshop for arts leaders. Taken together, these workshops and drafting process represented a process of consensual validity-testing for the usefulness of the ‘compass’ framework for practitioners: by the time the handbook was published, the ‘compass’ had been tested and refined as an idea by over thirty practitioners.

In this way, we can see that this thinking tool was playing an important role in the latter stages of our co-inquiry in helping to shape a collective intent about (to quote from Rorty, ibid.) ‘what to do … and the means to be used to achieve those ends’. In our case, our model – as a theory of change – emerged as a presentational way to make sense of hundreds of CoP members’ direct experience; and evolved through iterative refinement into the suggestion of a move toward propositional knowing borrowing from and synthesizing elements of Wilber’s holarchic/emergent integral theory; a ‘backroom’ literature survey Tony from the International Futures Forum and I had done two years previously based primarily on resilience, systems and complexity theory that pointed to the idea of ‘transformative resilience 2.0’ (here echoed in the distinctions of ‘break down, break even and break through resilience); the idea of a ‘virtuous cycle’ model of development from asset-based community development (suggesting that as confidence, skills and capacity are developed in one area of activity, these can then go on to support positive developments in other community enterprises); and languages in common use by ‘plain English' popularises of disciplines of economic regeneration (on the ‘economy’ line),
developmental psychology (‘people’), social anthropology (‘culture’) and interpreters of systems/complexity theory and engaged Buddhism (‘links’).

Although moving towards proposing a theory of change, the framing and situatedness of the ‘compass’ model within the text was careful to emphasize its contingent nature and primary use as a presentational form of knowing which might support/evoke/ catalyse/stimulate a readers’ own sense-making process of their own experience. We were aware that significant work remains to be done – in a positivist paradigm – to subject the model to more rigorous testing before any claim might be made for its applicability beyond its usefulness as a presentational device. This was a primary reason why we chose that the ‘compass’ model should not close the book – or be introduced as ‘the answer’ up-front, but should instead be introduced half-way, and then used to frame an extended exploration of practice:

We wanted readers who had made their way to the end of the book to feel both inspired and empowered to experiment with whether the compass framework might be useful in their own place, and to this end invented a model ‘community workshop’ that could be ‘tried out’, emphasizing again that the model was not to be pursued if it didn’t resonate with local peoples’ own sense-making processes, mindful that in action research, producing a theory is not the aim, but a means to an end, the ‘end’ being improved practice:
5.4.3 Reflection (3): Practical Knowing: has it made a difference?

Following Rorty (as quoted in Reason, above), and in the context of our primary research question into social media-enabled forms of action research, we should now move toward concluding this chapter by asking whether – and if so how - the publication process for this social-media enabled e-book has made a difference.

We can now look for evidence for ‘making a difference’ in
- Did this co-inquiry help refresh to life of FierySpirits CoP? Were there any impacts arising from the publication process on the depth and scale of activity within the CoP?;
- Evidence that the publication has made a difference in real life communities – of place as well catalysing or informing new cycles of second/third inquiry beyond the boundaries of FierySpirits.com?

**Did this co-inquiry help refresh the life of FierySpirits CoP?**

This chapter opened with an account of my decision to step into a convening role for the community resilience inquiry. Part of the rationale for this decision was an intention that this move might help to enhance the quality of member engagement in the CoP as a whole.

I sensed that the resilience inquiry might help galvanise a wide conversation amongst members connected with updating/refreshing our understanding of the ‘domain’ of the CoP. I also hoped that the experience of developing the inquiry could become data to inform parallel co-inquiry by CoP co-hosts into how we might improve our hosting practice as stewards of topics simultaneously developing face-face and online.
In Chapter three, we have introduced a definition of a CoP domain:

**Domain**
- defines members' common ground and identity - their shared field of interest
- knowing the 'leading edge' of the domain allows members to decide what knowledge is worth sharing
- guides the questions members ask and the way they organize their knowledge

A domain defines the boundaries of a complex, dynamic learning system. The Rural Commission, reporting in 2007 – shortly before the credit crunch, defined the original domain for the CoP. Now, in 2011, rural communities (along with the rest of society – and Carnegie UK Trust as well) were facing a ‘time of rapid change’. Reduced public sector spending, and the demise of many rural support organisations (such as the Commission for Rural Communities and Regional Development Agencies in England), threatens to amplify and introduce new shocks into the life of communities. In this context, it is evident that it should be helpful to invest resources into renewing and refreshing the 'shared field of interest' to reflect members’ changing priorities.

So, how well did the community resilience topic achieve this?

Statistics of numbers of CoP members, and activity levels across the site as a whole, suggest that the publication of the report and associated media stimulated a membership boost (160 additional members joined the CoP shortly following publication of the report – at a time when there were no other obvious stimuli for this shift). Blog contributions and comments in response to publication suggested that our work had resonated with a wide-cross section of existing members, too. In the first week following publication, thirteen comments were posted onto the website or received via email:

"I have just read the report - it is excellent, readable, enjoyable and I hope will inspire communities. I spent 20 years (until 2007) as the Director of Voluntary Action Rutland - this report encapsulates many of the experiences I had. Many congratulations"

"I ordered the hardcopy because I love the idea and the design. Lots of work….a melting pot of impressions and grassroots wisdom."

"Enjoyed read through. Great to see another approach. Fantastic layout and graphic design."

"Congrats for such a useful resource with live case studies from the field. Keep it up."

"Just wanted to say thanks for 'exploring community resilience' report. Excellent content with great ideas to chew on and in a fantastic format that makes the reading experience enjoyable."

"I have to say I am very impressed indeed..........beautifully produced, vibrant and easily-absorbed book."
“...full of admiration for what's been produced. I love the work the Carnegie Trust is doing in the UK.”

“This is an absolute pleasure to read. Thank you so much! Its inspiring!”

“Beautiful, thoughtful and - from a quick skim - one of the most readable books on this vital subject and community of interest, place and practice. Well done.”

“This is excellent. I love the graphics and the lay out is so accessible. I can also see a lot of potential as a toll for learning.”


“I was much taken by the resilience report. Lots of overlap with what’s been happening in the Highlands.”

“It’s a wonderful publication, offering a good overview of much of the historical threads and current wisdom in community development, as well as pointing in some welcome new directions. With lots of case study examples to bring it all home. I like your compass, and think it’s a timely contribution to a field that will definitely benefit from some integrally informed direction-finding tools. Well done! I will happily forward it on to some colleagues who I know will appreciate it.”

Taken together, increasing membership numbers and these comments offer some anecdotal evidence that our work had 'resonance' beyond the immediate co-research community involved in producing it.

Has this co-inquiry made a difference in real-life communities?

(screenshot from issuu.com – online hosting service)
Knowledge and evidence need to be contextualised, enriched, interpreted, debated and disputed – ‘set free’, if you like – in order for learning to occur among a multitude of stakeholders with divergent interests and world views. One way of doing this is by networking. This, in turn, may or may not foster complex processes of social change and development.

(European Centre for Development Policy Management’s Networking for learning: The human face of knowledge management? 2010)

In Chapter 3, we introduced this quotation from the ECDPM paper on the ‘human face of knowledge management’ in the context of a discussion on the influence of social learning theory on early designs for FierySpirits CoP. We now return to show how a widening circle of co-researchers began to collaborate in ‘setting free’ the Exploring Resilience publication in August 2011.

Our strategy primarily relied on inviting bloggers and commentators to mention, promote or review our publication through their online social networks. We featured the publication in the CoP e-newsletter and colleagues who put out similar e-bulletins for other networks also helped flag it up. In this way, we hoped to encourage peer-peer recommendations to ‘go viral’.

Along with the e-book (downloadable for free), we printed 750 copies with the intention of recouping the print cost (£4500) through a cover price of £9.95. We imagined that adding a price – and an ISBN number – could be helpful in positioning our output as having equivalent value to other published ‘books’ for that section of the potential readership familiar with the culture of print.

We chose to publish the book also for free via issuu.com. Issuu provides attractive animated coding that can be embedded into any website; together with the highly visual design of the publication itself, we thought this device (as opposed, for example, to providing a static link in emails and websites) might help to ‘up’ our ‘hit rate’.

Over the first month, issuu.com recorded 10,340 downloads/online views. By 17th November 2011, we had reached 20,405. The graph below shows the day-by-day pattern over the first month (troughs are Saturday/Sundays):
The issuu.com website also enables us to see which pages people read. It seems that the content ‘holds’ readers (note that due to a distortion in Issuu stats, the page view totals should be divided by 2):

Two weeks after the launch on Issuu, it became clear that issuu.com did not make it straightforward for users to download the publication. I therefore used another online service (www.bit.ly) to create a bespoke web address for the download. The advantage of using bit.ly was that this service generates detailed statistics tracking numbers of downloads and their origins. At January 2013, bit.ly registered:
Using a combination of statistics from issuu.com and bit.ly, we are able to be confident that the publication has been downloaded at least 6622 times and viewed online up to 26000 times\(^{48}\). The final – and possibly most significant test – for our ‘setting free’ (into the ‘digital wilds’) strategy has come as we have tracked where the publication is placed by the search engine google.com. Whilst we are not in a position to understand exactly how Google ranks sites, it seems a fair assumption that the ‘ranking’ is some function of the usefulness of the document to a wide array of internet users, as well as ‘fit’ to the search term typed used. When I checked on random days from December 2011 until January 2013, the search term ‘community resilience’ always returned our publication within the ‘top three’ rankings (note that unlike the Joseph Rowntree publication in the screenshot below, we did not pay Google to achieve this ranking):

\(^{48}\) We imagined that if someone ‘downloads’ the document they may be printing it out or in another way engaging with it at greater depth than on-screen – but we have not been able to test this hypothesis and recognize that a culture of reading on-screen may now be at a point where such an assumption is invalid.
Taken together, the statistics generated by Issuu, bit.ly and Google suggest our work has now reached well beyond the 1250 members of fieryspirits.com and – given bit.ly’s indication that the vast majority of downloads come direct from email clients (rather than fieryspirits.com), we can assume that these emails are peer-peer referrals. There is other evidence to support this conclusion: bit.ly also lists web addresses in sixty countries which have requested the download; there are regular sign-ups to the ‘twitter’ account (flagged within the publication) @comresilience (despite the fact that this account has often lain dormant for long periods since publication); and a colleague at Carnegie UK Trust reported that he had been in meetings in Northern Ireland where the work is known and associated with the Trust in a positive way.

When put together, it seems we can be confident in proposing that our work has touched a lot of people. Are we also able to claim that as a result of this our work has ‘had an impact’ on community resilience in real places?

In earlier chapters of this thesis I have shown how we took inspiration from theories of social learning and change including those of Wheatley and Frieze (‘Using Emergence to take Social Innovation to scale’), Oldenburg (‘great good places’), and Wenger (on designing CoPs to enable tacit and informal learning to support innovation and sharing of know-how). In the process of the resilience inquiry itself, we encountered both evidence from direct experience of practitioners, as well as new literatures from the field of socio-ecological resilience and disaster.
preparedness, that also suggested a direct connection between knowledge exchange (which I advocate the Exploring Resilience publication both embodies and has helped to catalyse) and the development of more resilient human communities of interest and practice as well as place. We summarised this factor as ‘links’ in the publication, and began the section articulating this emerging knowing by using two quotes alongside each other – one from a participant in the inquiry, the other Wheatley:

![Image]

_Exploring Community Resilience: 56_

Both implicit and explicit through the *Exploring Community Resilience* is advocacy for the view that an action research based networked learning architecture (such as a fieryspirits.com) ‘makes a difference’ by enhancing the systemic resilience of a community of interest/practice/system of influence. This proposition is echoed across most literatures on resilience. For example, Biggs et. al (2011) propose that

> Building networks of organizations committed to a process of continual inquiry, informed action, and adaptive learning is a more flexible and more robust strategy to cope with disasters than the standard practice of establishing greater control over possible threats through inward focused administrative structures.

> Biggs, D., R. Biggs, V. Dakos, R. J. Scholes, and M. Schoon (2011) - *Are we entering an era of concatenated global crises?*

And, in their comprehensive survey of community resilience research for the US Department of Homeland Security, Norris et. al (2008) observe that

> Uncertainty often leads to efforts to broaden the ‘scope of actors, agents, and knowledge that can be marshalled’… [through] inter-organizational networks that are characterized by reciprocal links, frequent supportive interactions, overlap with other networks, the ability to form new associations, and cooperative decision-making processes... this trend
necessitates networked as opposed to hierarchical systems for disaster response.


As well as relying on evidence that a significant number of people may have been touched by our work, we can also draw on examples for how our work is helping to shape a new series of projects and inquiries instigated by organisations beyond the CoP.

For example, the publication begins by suggesting how the disaster/emergency response community (spanning 'first responders' such as fire and policy services to United Nations emergency relief agencies) can productively connect and share learning with the community development profession. In March 2012, the CoP hosted a workshop initiated by the Director of the New South Wales Disaster Response team as part of her Winston Churchill Fellowship, examining ways in which (in her words) ‘traditional disaster response agencies don’t re-invent the community development wheel’:

This workshop, in turn, seeded some new connections (which we might imagine could become ‘critical connections’ to borrow from Margaret Wheatley’s theory of fostering emergence, quoted above). One of these connections is the with British Red Cross, who in April 2013 will host an event on Community Resilience and who, informed by the Exploring publication, have decided to ‘host’ the event in ways to encourage cross-fertilisation of experience between community development and traditional emergency response professions, including inviting Wendy to share what
she learned on her Churchill trip. In this way, I might imagine that the FierySpirits work has helped to plant seeds of new iterations of second and third person inquiry.

At the level of helping sow ‘critical connections’ between other networks, we know that our work has influenced Locality members in England (the umbrella organisation for development trusts as well as the UK Government’s ‘Big Society’ community organisers):

“Exploring Community Resilience will be really helpful to Locality members generally and to my team as we look at how members can demonstrate the resilience of their neighbourhoods. Very thoughtful and well integrated ideas. Nice one.”
- personal communication, Steve Wyler (Head of Communications, Locality)

In June 2011 Locality invited me summarise learning from the inquiry at a plenary session for their first convention – billed as ‘England’s fastest growing community network’. An audience of 550 filled the conference centre at the Palace Hotel, Manchester.

I arrived very late the night before so it wasn’t until I walked into the room that I grasped the scale of the event. I had put together some slides on the train and after checking in to the hotel finished editing a two minute version of the animation to use as well. Fortunately, I had very little time to come to terms with my first experience of talking to 550 people and went into autopilot, as if I was in a room of 20 or so. I introduced the questions that started the resilience work and then diverted from my script and suggested that everyone in the room ask someone they didn’t know the same question: ‘does ‘community resilience’ mean anything for you?’ and ‘is it a helpful term for community organising?’. The noise in the room was quite intense ...

Four people stopped to say hello at the end and three of them made a point of saying how stimulating they found the pairs conversation. I realise that this session was a continuation of the community resilience inquiry- just shifted up another scale on the back of the book which was finding resonance amongst bigger networks. Exhilarating! In the anonymity of that massive hall, it seemed like people were really hungry to connect and talk together on this subject. Resonance!

(Diary entry June 2011)

This sense of resonance was amplified by a review we received in ‘New Start’ Magazine – with a circulation of 20000 plus, this is a publication read by regeneration professionals across the UK. The review concluded by suggesting that “the book could actually present a much needed focus for localism. Its ideas go deep” (http://www.cles.org.uk/yourblogs/book-review-exploring-community-resilience-in-times-of-rapid-change/):

Beyond our developing sense that we had struck a chord with parallel communities of practice, it was a conscious intention of the inquiry (as part of the wider family of CoP topics) that, through sharing a constellation of practices, stories and tools, the efficacy of activists and professionals working in local communities might in some way be enhanced. In early 2012, practitioners began to get in touch with stories of how they were adapting the handbook to help catalyse action and inquiry in their own places:

- In High Bickington, Community Land Trust Directors had devoted a day-long session of ‘strategic planning’, triggered by using the compass worksheet. This had helped their new development worker open up new questions for the group about how to integrate a creative arts angle into the work of providing affordable housing (personal communication, November 2011);
• In Govan, Glasgow a number of local community organisations pursued a year-long programme called ‘Govan Together’ in 2011. By the time of their first anniversary, they had framed a story of their journey together through the lens of the ‘compass’ in an edition of their local newspaper:

   “A resilient community is one that takes intentional action to enhance the personal and collective capacity of its citizens and institutions to respond to and influence the course of social and ecological change.”

   Susan Pettie (March 2012) - personal communication

• In Ireland, a group from Cultivate Centre built on the book by creating a ten minute animated film, which once uploaded to YouTube has itself now been viewed over 15000 times:

   (right: still from ‘Surfing the Waves of Change’ from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mdv_iAa5mk)
• Correspondents from Haiti, Canada, Australia and New Zealand wrote to say they’d found our work valuable in shaping new programmes on community resilience:

“I am writing to see who I should talk with about translating your publication Exploring Community Resilience, or if you already have a translation, in Haitian Creole. BuildaBridge, an arts intervention and education NGO based in Philadelphia, has a new project of training community workers in Haiti. “Exploring” is excellent and simple. We are developing a train the trainer curriculum and would like to use this as one of the resource texts. We are under somewhat of a deadline to complete our curriculum before beginning the training the first of next year.”
(personal communication, BuildaBridge International); and

• At an event organised by the Scottish Agricultural College in late 2011 I presented an A0 poster summarizing our research approach (included in this thesis as Appendix 2 and as an indicative snapshot right50). At the close of the session, two participants working with policy and funding organisations stayed behind. One said they’d found the research methodology ‘refreshing’; another was more cautious:

Q: It’s very challenging. I’m used to trying to guard as bias, and doing randomised sampling.
A: Yes, it’s action research: co-researchers becoming involved in deciding what knowledge matters to them, and writing up their own experience.
Q: How do you get ethical clearance for that?
A: I would argue it’s more ethical to do research like this than through conventional means: here, co-researchers are involved in setting the research agenda, not just being asked to supply data for someone else’s study.
Q: Hmmm.

50 Full poster (A0 size) downloadable from: http://bit.ly/comresilienceposterlarge
Reflection: ‘So What’?

The true professional is one who does not obscure grace with illusions of technical prowess, the true professional is one who strips away all illusions to reveal a reliable truth, a reliable truth in which the human heart can rest.

*Margaret Wheatley (excerpt), The Illusion*

Chapters four and five have immersed us in a research story spanning three years and two multi-phase inquiries. Within these accounts, we had interspersed narratives of practice with reflections on these moments engaging iteratively with the guiding theories that we introduced in Chapter three.

In this chapter, we pull together learning emerging from these and prior chapters relevant to our research question. At the end of the chapter we also review the research methodology, and draw out some learning points in relation to that as well.

6.1 Three Inquiry Spaces

The first level of learning emerging from our experience with FierySpirits is that working with digital technologies seems to make the task of the action researcher more complex, rather than simpler.

We have not found that action research processes can transfer lock, stock and barrel onto digital platforms and expect to run smoothly. Instead, we have found that at best they can augment exist processes of face-face group learning.

In addition to learning how to design and host online spaces, as hosts of digitally augmented social learning systems we also need to learn how to support the transitions of ourselves and participants in learning communities in and out of these spaces.

I have come to equate this to attempting to learn a foreign language when you’re not actually living in the country day-day. Although as designers of online spaces we can learn to get better at creating environments that feel safe, welcoming and like a good neighbourhood café, for digital migrants these places can still feel odd; somehow alien; hard to trust. We have been learning that, in working with such migrants (as the majority of members of the Fiery Spirits community of rural development people are) requires a significant investment of time, skill, patience and perseverance.

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51 Downloaded from [http://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/TheTrueProfessional.pdf](http://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/TheTrueProfessional.pdf)
Through trial and error over three years, elements of the FierySpirits CoP experiment have achieved some level of success, and we have begun to understand what has helped – and hindered – in the process.

This understanding has emerged slowly, fitfully over time – and assisted by some new metaphors and thinking tools that we have developed.

We have already met the metaphors of ‘digital garden’, ‘digital forest’ and (by extension – and the Epilogue expands more on this) the ‘digital wilds’ in the narrative above:

- The ‘Digital Garden’ is a well-bounded space which people can feel welcome and safe as they arrive; a space that is actively hosted to enable participants to find their voices, experience their stories being heard, and get to grips with using technology in service of this;
- The ‘Digital Forest’ is a more wide-reaching space where clusters of inquirers meet up from time to time face-face and online; the forest metaphor echoes Wenger’s idea of ‘constellations of practices’ whose languages and practices bump into one another – good conditions for innovation and learning. In our work, we used a social networking platform, ning.com, to host our ‘digital forest’, but the metaphor could be used for any platform that requires a ‘log in’ from users; and
- The ‘Digital Wilds’ is the terrain outside of log-ins: it is the space of open-source innovation; twitter-feeds and cyber-attacks; it is the world-wide-web accessible every moment through a smart-phone and filtered through trusted sources (‘digital curators’). It is a place that either confounds inquiry through its sheer velocity and addictive power; or perhaps it will offer a new generation of action researchers as yet undreamed-of opportunities to host the emergence of radical, open-source ‘systems of influence’ for more democracy in organisations, regions, states and communities. This thesis – through the epilogues – can do no more than point out that this could be a fertile place for future researchers to train their inquiring gaze.

Making distinctions between these three spaces seems helpful from the perspective of this action researcher: we can start to grapple with the differences in dynamics, and different attitudes and approaches to facilitation and hosting research within them.

As with the ‘ah-ha’ moment in the story of the community resilience inquiry, alighting on these distinctions has helped me – albeit in the writing of this thesis – to find a foothold on this complex territory in ways that begin to help make sense of the complex layers of experience that the research has shone lights on. Even as I write, I notice with playful relief that even forest-related metaphors seem to help in us as we sit at the edge of the forest, peering into its depths, wondering how to navigate through – to ‘see the wood for the trees’ without ‘getting lost in the woods’.

I have therefore decided to organize my reflections in this chapter that relate to the distinct but related practices of ‘digital gardening’, ‘digital forestry’ and (tentatively, as we only begin to grapple with this space in the Epilogue), the ‘digital wilds’. In order to offer another perspective on these metaphors, we can look at them through the device of a compass (different but a little similar to that presented in the *Exploring Community Resilience*).
6.2 Visualising the work of digitally augmented action research as four dimensions of a ‘compass’

This ‘compass of resilience’ proposes offers another way of seeing into the three research spaces I have identified above:

**Dimension 1: My learning journey (First person hosting practice)**
In this inquiry dimension, we inquire into our effectiveness as leaders, hosts and curators in across both face-face and digital domains, paying particular attention to qualities of our own voice, and supporting others to similarly ‘find their voice’ as I/they transition in and out of online spaces;

**Dimension 2: Our learning environment (Structural Foundations and Container Construction)**
In this Inquiry dimension, sponsoring organisations and partners attempt to inquire together into how to design the conditions for ‘emergence’. As CoPs tend to deconstruct existing practice/professional/disciplinary boundaries, they also have a tendency of challenging existing power relationships (for example between funder and grantee). Although we barely achieved it, I continue to imagine that opening and sustaining ‘hosting co-inquiries’ may help to create the conditions for the emergence of more enduring learning architectures in the future;

**Dimension 3: Our learning journeys (Tuning up the ‘Sounding Board’)**
In this inquiry dimension, as hosts we pay attention to sowing the seeds of inquiry cultures; and then learning how to ‘tune up’ hybrid online-offline spaces to achieve qualities of resonance both within co-inquiry groups, and

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**Digital Garden (self inquiry):**
“How can I improve my hosting, curating and ‘sharing’ – online and face-face?”

**Digital Forest (culture):**
“How can we get better at hosting learning communities across online and offline spaces?”

**Our relationship with the ‘digital wilds’:**
“How can we improve our use of social media to link and learn alongside wider networks?”

**Digital Forest (structure):**
“How can we design containers better able to encourage the emergence of cross-fertilising communities of practice, inquiry and influence?”
between them. The metaphor of tuning up a ‘sounding board’ seems helpful here – and the work involves designing congruent and welcoming online environments; and nurturing roles such as ‘catalysts’ within that environment who cross-pollinate conversations, spark new topics into life, and steward the production of a communities codified knowledge – often in the form of social media (e-books, animations, posters). Therefore, an aspect of ‘tuning up’ a sounding board is looking out for people ready to play – or learn to play – catalytic roles and creating an CoP within a CoP where they are able to develop their skills as networkers, digital curators, facilitators (online and face-face) and co-producers of digital media;

**Dimension 4: Our relationship with the ‘Digital Wilds’**

In this inquiry dimension, we are interested in how, today, everyone is able to be simultaneously a producer and consumer and curator of knowing in the ‘digital wilds’. This is a future-focused dimension in the context of social learning/action research practice: it will involve constant experimentation with new technologies as well – as I will argue below – as a disciplined inquiry focus on how to remain centred amidst the seductions and sways of these new technologies which may distract from or subvert, rather than deepen, efforts to host inquiry at whatever scale.

This compass framework adds a layer of depth to the classification of the three research spaces by (a) distinguishing between the elements of structural design and cultural hosting of digital forests – but suggesting a strong relationship between them (two poles of the same dimension); and (b) it invites us to notice the resonance between the work of first person inquiry into engaging effectively with digital technology – and the focus on the individual (as producer, curator etc.) that is appears to be the dominant experience of the digital wilds.

The discussion below elaborates on this emerging sense-making – pointing to (but not rehearsing narrative or observation already present in) preceding chapters.

### 6.3 Reflection: So What are we Learning about Designing and Hosting ‘Digital Forests’ (the dynamic balance between culture and structure)?

Early in this thesis I told the story of a *Rural Leadership Programme* and some key learning emerging from it. In particular, I noted

... how much energy and input the cluster sub-groups required, thereby turning on its head my starting assumption that energetic inputs should be evenly spread across convergences and ‘clusters’.

The Rural Leadership Programme was small scale in comparison to the FierySpirits CoP. Our three learning clusters comprised 6-8 people; our convergences never numbered more than twenty five. Each cluster group had a dedicated facilitator - and yet our key learning there was that we had not adequately supported the cluster groups. As I considered this feedback, I found it hard to imagine how any funder would support an even more resource intensive process organized according to the same model. Was there another way?

The FierySpirits design tried a different approach. It did not start by attempting to
design in ‘depth’ by specifying cluster groups and imagining that they would conduct collaborative inquiries. Instead, the focus was on bringing together a team of hosts, and a light support structure as an encouragement and enabler as these hosts would design their own approaches to ‘cluster’ style learning. Whilst this strategy appeared effective in the early stages, the short life of the hosts structure provides no conclusive evidence one way or the other that this ‘light’ support was taking the collective hosting structure in the direction of inquiries to depth or scale of the sort imagined – for example – in Wheatley’s ‘social innovations’ paper that fronted the CoP website.

However, the experience of trying to seed such emergence was rich in unexpected learning along the way. For example, I have noticed how willing my first person narrative voice has been in chapter four to assign to Kate the majority of responsibility for the initial design of the CoP – and for playing such a strong role holding the ‘psychological container’ that, by implication, we might read her leadership as something of an ego trip. I think in retrospect that this account is probably flawed at best; very unfair at worst. Another way of narrating the story of this early stage might have been to question why I – and other colleagues – did not seize the opportunity to share more of the responsibility for holding the ‘psychological’ container of the CoP; and through this diversity perhaps creating more early momentum and charismatic authority that may have led to a different outcome over time.

Even from this perspective, it appears that it is true to generally observe that where the RLP may have been over-structured; the early stages of FierySpirits were too unstructured and seat-of-the-pants: too reliant on charisma (wherever it came from) to hold the container together; overly chaotic and unbounded. And this space left the structure vulnerable to shocks: in resilience terms, the balance between flexibility and strength, chaos and order, was not calibrated right.

We might reach a similar conclusion regarding the ‘fencing’ activity of sustaining the resources and organizational space for the CoP as a whole. The generic challenges of opening space for action research within ‘mainstream’ institutions has been well rehearsed by action researchers over many years. For example, Brown and Gaventa noted of their experience supporting a large scale action research learning architecture (the ‘Citizenship Development Research Centre’) that:

"Embeddedness in other networks and institutions creates both obstacles to and opportunities for network evolution and impacts. If the institutional expectations of donor, host or partner institution run counter to network values and processes, creativity and trust can be diminished and constrained."

Brown and Gaventa (2008)

Brown and Gaventa’s paper usefully points to (but does not directly reveal in their experience, just as I have chosen not to reveal in this thesis) the underpinning work required to convince sponsors rooted in one paradigm to sustain investment in an experiment with seeding another. I summarized this learning in Chapter four as:

A lesson of this truncated inquiry is of not underestimating what it takes to listen to and act on ‘gut intuition’... Today, I might be stronger in naming the cultural change challenge of an institution espousing a move toward more transparent, democratic and participatory ways of working. I would be more
insistent that the stewards of that institution also simultaneously pursue their own parallel inquiry into the practices of institutional governance most fit for supporting staff mandated to attempt the work we had been invited to take forward.

Chapter 4:80

The structure for our CoP assumed both continuing investment on the part of the sponsor and host organisations (and we did not foresee the impacts of the credit crunch), as well as the reliability of the software platform. Although ning.com has remained a viable service, a change of ownership in 2011 increased the charges, and failed to deliver some core tools we had hoped to see developed – in particular an easy way to upload and organise content into a library for the use of topic groups. It was only because – as part of that risk calculation – I happened to have experience with HTML programming (a web design language) that I was able to create technical fixes to ‘workaround’ this limits. For action researchers attending to the basics of venturing into working with similar platforms this kind of issue could create a headache without someone with web skills on the facilitation team.

Another area of significant learning about the ‘container’ was that, in spite of trying an online ‘virtual office’ facility and video conferencing facilities, our host teleconferences flourished only when conducted by telephone structured by the discipline of a monthly 45 minute call. The lesson here is that the teleconference proved itself as a ‘human scale’, relationship-building technology that was fit for purpose and a match to the ‘light touch’ facilitation approach: if I had not been seduced by the bells and whistles offered by the alternatives, we would have settled into this more productive pattern of communication much earlier in our work together.

As we have seen, it was only as the resilience inquiry got going with the clear intent to trial and showcase some of the possibilities of the online group technology within ning - as an aid to a co-inquiry process – began to become useful. And it is from this experience that we now harvest some more practice lessons about how to do ‘digital forestry’.

It was a finding of the resilience inquiry that the most resilient communities are likely to be good at learning – before, during and after shocks. We found that it seems especially important that this learning process builds ‘bridging’ capital: that is, bridges between communities, sectors, professions, disciplines and more.

The Exploring Resilience Handbook noted that resilience science now understands the natural cycles of renewal in natural forests: enlightened managers no longer seek to control a landscape by clear-cutting; no longer seek to prevent fires from breaking out - but instead allow regeneration to happen as young trees grow up between mature ones, and as fires create and compost clearings that then give rise to a proliferation of ecological niches, especially at ecosystem ‘edges’. Where visitors might once have got lost in the thickets, forest animals carve out new paths between these clearings and pioneer species sprout everywhere.

In Chapter five, I described a moment of getting lost, of not seeing the wood for the trees as a digital forest of content was felled into my hard drive. It was a moment of haphazard purchase atop the boundaries of multiple overlapping constellations of practice: community development, regeneration, resilience science, the politics of the ‘big society’ and more.
However, with co-producing a book as a focus (an act of codifying part of the community’s ‘shared repertoire’, in Wenger’s terms\textsuperscript{52}) – together with some external pressure requiring an ‘output’ from this work – and the synchronicity of an invitation to engage with a new community of practice (the Dundee arts leaders), the conditions seemed to fall into place of their own accord to crystallise a sense-making break-through… that in turn helped to catalyse a new round of productive co-inquiry amongst the co-authors of the resilience handbook.

A major learning from the resilience co-inquiry was that much of the highly improvised research process ‘worked’ through all the ups and downs: a function of the potent resonance of the topic? The quality of face-face conversations in workshops? The ways media generated at these events were curated into the online space? The time and energy I was able to give to leading the topic? A function of all these or others?

Margaret Wheatley’s suggestion that the work of the host is not ‘critical mass’ but fostering ‘critical connections’ rings true to this experience: we became interested in the edges between existing knowing on the topic: the conversation that isn’t yet happening enough between the emergency response community and traditional community development workers and members of the transition towns movement; the gulf between Stafford Beer’s Viable Systems Model and the more everyday language of community planning; the juxtaposition of indigenous cultural understandings of ‘resilience’ with complexity sciences’ perspective on the same.

Practices are like mini-cultures, and even common words and objects are not guaranteed to have continuity of meaning across a boundary. At the same time, boundaries can be as much a source of learning as the core of a practice. The meetings of perspectives can be rich in new insights and radical innovations. Still such new insights are not guaranteed, and the likelihood of irrelevance makes engagement at the boundaries a potential waste of time and effort. Indeed, competence in not well defined at boundaries. This means that the innovation potential is greater, but so is the risk of wasting time or getting lost. 

\textit{Wenger 2010:183}

\textit{‘Getting Lost’ (discovered at random on ‘Pinterest.com’)}

\textsuperscript{52} In his 1998 book ‘Communities of Practice’ (Wenger 1998, pp. 72–73) posits that first, ‘engagement’ builds trust and collaborative relationships; next a ‘joint enterprise’ is defined that coheres the CoP (e.g. the ‘domain’); and then a ‘Shared Repertoire’ emerges, being a set of communal resources move tacit knowledge toward codification in some way.
Our experience appears to resonate with Wenger’s emphasis on boundaries as sites of innovation. But it time spent waiting for such synchronicity to emerge ever wasted, as he suggests? How long can we ask groups to stay in uncomfortable places of ‘un knowing’? Is there a way to help create the conditions that make it more likely that such a ‘break through’ can happen?

It is in relation to these questions that Wenger’s ideas no longer seem adequate for helping understand the full territory of a CoP designed with transformative intent (the transformation in question being the paradigm shift toward ‘asset based’ approaches). In other words, we are here bumping up against the limits – the boundaries - of existing CoP theory (or at least that which I was aware of at that time). In particular, as I began to imagine that the resilience inquiry might help shift the paradigms of some readers and participants in our co-inquiry process towards a more appreciative and ‘integral’ worldview, I found little in this theory to explain what transformation might look like within a learning architecture formally understood as a ‘CoP’.

A retrospective critique of Wenger and Lave’s work on CoPs (Fuller in Hughes, Jewson and Unwin 2007) makes a similar point: in her article, Alison Fuller agrees that CoP theory appears under-developed and open to challenge in the area of transformative systemic innovation (although without recognizing the contribution that action research might make here). Without such an emphasis, she notes, CoPs can get ‘stuck’ in dwelling on ‘first order’ learning (imitation and socialization), rather than opening potentials for ‘second order’ learning (proposed as ‘solving of emerging contradictions’) and ‘third order’ learning (collaborative systemic innovation).

This is in contrast to a full literature on action research exploring the notion of AR as a ‘transformative social science’53, with roots going back to Gregory Bateson’s (Bateson 1972) notions of first, second and third order learning, developed through the introduction of a terminology of single and double loop learning by Argyris & Schön54 and later in Bill Torbert’s ‘action science’55.

Certainly, as I attempt to make sense of the development of the FierySpirits CoP as a form of social network action research, CoP theory appears to have less to offer than other streams in the action research family.

As I slow down and dig deeper into the connections between learning from our practice in the ‘digital forest’, and some of the change theory underpinning it, a question starts to nag about the role of the ‘host’ of inquiries within ‘constellations

53 This being the title of a paper by Bill Torbert and Peter Reason, available at http://www.peterreason.eu/Papers/Transformational_Social_Science.pdf
54 “Argyris & Schön (1974) distinguished between single-loop and double-loop learning, related to Gregory Bateson’s concepts of first and second order learning. In single-loop learning, individuals, groups, or organizations modify their actions according to the difference between expected and obtained outcomes. In double-loop learning, the entities (individuals, groups or organization) question the values, assumptions and policies that led to the actions in the first place; if they are able to view and modify those, then second-order or double-loop learning has taken place. Double loop learning is the learning about single-loop learning.” (source: Wikipedia)
55 I am drawing the narrative here from an interview with Bill Torbert published at http://integralpostmetaphysics.ning.com/forum/topics/bill-torbert
of practices’ – and in particular how the host role challenges any reductionist notion that the categories of first and third person research might be discrete and separable. Let me explain.

I begin by remembering Cooperrider & Srivastva’s (1987) introduction of ‘appreciative inquiry’ as a paradigmatic challenge to modernist assumptions in the field of action research during the 1980s, and the great similarities of this view with Kretzmann and McNight’s ‘asset based community development’ published a few years later (Kretzmann and McNight 1993). Where Cooperrider and Srivastva critiqued the ‘problem solving’ paradigm in the work of early AR pioneers such as Kurt Lewin as not being sufficiently transformative (‘if you go looking for problems you’ll find problems’), Kretzmann and McNight took on the monolith of social development programmes demanding that they stop labeling people ‘needy’ (‘build on strengths instead’). Both ‘appreciative’ turns wanted action research to support organisations and individuals to break out of unhelpful or outdated socially-constructed habits of thought and action, building on Kenneth Gergen’s (1978) call in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology that social science should instead focus on its ‘generative capacity’, that is the

“...capacity to challenge the guiding assumptions of the culture, to raise fundamental questions regarding contemporary social life, to foster reconsideration of that which is ‘taken for granted’ and thereby furnish new alternatives for social actions”


It is this ‘generative capacity’ that Scharmer, Cooperrider & Srivastva, and Kretzmann and McNight have all sought to identify, develop and harness in their theorizing about social and organizational change: If organisations and communities, and networks and communities of practice are seen as socially constructed realities, then it follows (taking a social constructivist view) that the questions one asks of that system - and the embodied stance of the researcher asking those questions – become potent focal points of potentially transformative change within that system.

At this point, it becomes hard to see how the work of structuring and hosting constellations of learning practices cannot involve both ‘first person’ inquiry and ‘third person’ action research simultaneously: with the implication that a high level of personal consciousness and integrity (an ‘authentic voice’ that is sensitive or ‘tuned into’ a wide range of the harmonics across the ‘sounding board’ of the learning architecture) will be a significant factor in determining whether there are generative and potentially transformative (paradigm-shifting) outcomes emerging from this work/research.

Certainly, the constellation of asset based/resilience/transformative change theory informing the resilience inquiry, and the generative outcomes of the resilience inquiry itself, suggest that the ways in which the role of researcher/convener/curator

56 Appreciative Inquiry has, I am well aware, now grown into a large field with many diverse practices and plenty of critiques, not least concerned with the tendency of practitioner-interpreters toward polarizing ‘negative(problem)/positive(generative solution)’, without an appreciation that such a polarization may itself be an unhelpful pattern... See eg. Bushe, G.R. (2011), at http://www.gervasebushe.ca/AITC.pdf
are embodied might be of crucial importance in determining the later trajectory of inquiries that happen at scale and increasingly through digital media.

And it is through this reflection that I now glimpse a fresh way to frame a continuing inquiry into the ‘wicked question’ of how to ‘host’ learning structures capable of balancing depth inquiries with healthy bridging activities throughout wider constellations of practices: the question becomes “how can my lived practice as a ‘host’ better embody the highest potential of the learning constellation?

6.4 Reflection: So What are we Learning about First Person Hosting Practice/Navigating the Digital Wilds?

In Chapter two, I drew on Carol Gilligan’s work to illustrate a first person inquiry into ‘finding voice’. I showed how this first person work has been crucial in helping me to develop a sense of grounded coherence – a sense of personal resilience – and have implied that this grounded has helped me to stay with the CoP work under difficult institutional conditions. I also included a story from the Art of Hosting workshop that offered a moment of insight into how a path of facilitation and music might intertwine, towards ‘following my bliss’ (to paraphrase Joseph Campbell’s epithet); and I highlighted a moment of insight as I read about Carol Gilligan’s voice work:

... something clicked deep inside. These stories rang true to my experience working with breath, releasing the throat and unlocking greater fullness of my physical voice ....

A pattern of examples that we might cluster under the emerging ‘finding voice’ continues into the practice accounts. For example, the account of the first hosts’ meeting on Skye gave partners the space to discover and voice their hopes and expectations for our work together; the account of the Dunfermline ‘resilience’ workshop (Chapter 5) showed how Catherine told a story of her friend’s cancer that rang so true it had a transformative impact on the inquiry as a whole; twice I show diary entries where I hear a gut ‘voice’ screaming advice that I only hear just in time (for example, defining hosts’ contracts in Chapter 4). There are the voices of contributors to the stories in the Exploring Resilience Handbook; and there is also the voice of the author of this thesis as he wrote and re-wrote this manuscript are all examples of first person inquiry journeys into finding a voice. All involve taking a stance and finding the courage to in some way show up and engage in shaping this research.

In the resilience inquiry, workshop participants talked about personal resilience as a capacity to be ‘self-righting’ even when living through amidst turbulent times; to be able to ‘stand up for oneself’ and yet remain flexible. My suggestion here is that a first person inquiry journey into ‘finding voice’ is an excellent way to build this capacity and I would advocate that this should be a non-negotiable element of any action research attempting to engage with the seductions of new media and their

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57 “Follow your bliss and the universe will open doors where there were only walls.” Joseph Campbell
ability to swamp, disorientate, or become a source of addictive fixation for their users.58

Building on this finding, we can seed a new set of inquiry question about how social technology mediates, supports or stymies a journey into ‘finding voice’. What kinds of supports can assist with transitioning from being overwhelmed by digital media in all forms – towards putting it in service of our inquiries, where appropriate? Chapter two shows me reflecting on my own tendency to write ‘fragmented’ texts:

a digital culture that may be re-wiring the brains of ‘digital native’ teenagers to become adept at rapidly switching focus between different media in different ‘windows’ on the web; but losing the capacity for sustained focus in any one area.

Here we touch into questions about how society is being re-shaped by these technologies and what an action research practice looks like that can help us become more conscious and compassionate/healing of our individual and collective neurotic of pathological responses to the pressures of an increasingly high-speed, high-tech life.

In our early discussions about the Community of Practice, we thought it important to actively embrace and experiment with new social networking technology. As we thought about how to make this accessible for people who might not be digital natives, we embarked on mini-inquiries into how to use ‘plain English’ in an attempt to create a common language across the practitioner diversity within the CoP; how to create a welcoming online environment; and how to hold the hands of newcomers who might be crossing the digital divide for the first time.

In the margins of this work, however, and at a time when the wider culture was rapidly gaining access to broadband and mobile technologies dissenting voices emerged: ‘I can’t cope with more emails’; ‘I don’t won’t the feed the ning’; ‘I just want to meet up in person’. In these glimpsing moments of feedback I started to hear a cry for help. As our culture is rapidly adopting new online technologies, it seems that many of us are strongly to cope with the information torrent pouring towards us at ever greater pace.

Practically speaking we have seen in Chapter Four how Bill Torbert’s ‘Four Ways of Speaking’ can be one place to start with such a practice – a simple but effective practice that our experience with FierySpirits has shown can help bloggers to become more confident engaging with the wider community:

It was starting to become clearer that even experienced writers could find the idea of posting up a blog into FierySpirits intimidating without some sort of reassurance or technical or writing support… I was increasingly asked to check that “what I have to say is going to be of any interest to everyone else?” and “won’t come across as blowing my own trumpet too much.

58 There is a nascent ‘slow tech’ movement emerging asking similar questions, “Instead of being obsessed with an overarching drive towards efficiency in our technology, slow tech thinkers advocate a more livable, mindful relationship between consumers and devices.” – from http://www.mobiledia.com/news/156804.html
This micro-level work of building confidence has shown up an area of Etienne Wenger’s early theorizing about CoPs that I am now concluding lacks enough depth. Although in the early stages of CoP design we found the distinctions of ‘domain, community and practice’ helpful, I think the framework could benefit from adding a new circle - ‘technology’.

Our discussion thus far has reflected on the multiple ways in which digital technologies are mediating, shaping and challenging us in our work designing social learning architectures – alongside traditional ‘soft’ technologies for facilitating face-face events. And I can confidently suggest that the depth, community and social psychology implications of these changes offers future researchers rich territory for further exploration.

Having proposed Wenger’s early theory is lacking in this area, I note that a later article for an Open University Textbook has proposed that as well as looking into the design of architectures, it can be useful for hosts of social learning to experiment with a perspective that “learning can be viewed as a journey through landscapes of practices” where our identities “come to reflect the landscape in which we live and our experience of it”:

> Our identity reflects our journeying within some communities as well as transitions across communities... Over time it accumulates memories, competencies, key formative events, stories, and relationships to people and places. It also provides directions, aspirations, and projected images of oneself that guide the shaping of the trajectory going forward.... The experience of multimembership is thus inherent in the very notion of identity in a landscape. And so is the work of experiencing all these forms of identification at once and in one body—whether they merely coexist or whether they complement, enhance, or conflict with each other... Should I follow that blog, read that scientific journal, follow that twitter stream, subscribe to that website, go to that conference, or join that community? Negotiating an identity of knowledgeability is becoming more complex.

> Wenger 2010:187

From this perspective, is it possible the feedback we have heard form CoP members - that sense of ‘drowning in information’ – might go very deep – to the core of who we feel we are? Is an impact of the growing sea of opportunities to be ‘friends’ on Facebook, to be ‘connected’ on LinkedIn, and invitations to join online inquiries in FierySpirits ultimately a disempowering sense of confusion?

Which ever way we look at it, seems that the work of ‘finding voice’ may be just as relevant for the social media generation as when feminist theorists such as Carol Gilligan first asked us to challenge patriarchy in our day-day lives, saying ‘the personal is political’. And at root, my proposal is that just as post-modernists and social constructivists built on these early critiques to emphasise ways that a dominant paradigm could be disrupted, so now we can continue to draw on this rich seam of theory and practice as we ask ourselves how to effectively empower ourselves to make technologies work for us, and not the other way around.
The question therefore becomes: in what ways can our work using social technologies serve deepening patterns of inquiry, opening the authentic voices of our embodied, inquiring selves? This is a rather challenging question as it faces head on into a culture that can be characterized as one of high-speed instant gratification, one that makes it easy to generate endless streams of tweets and Facebook ‘likes’; one in which we are spending more and more of our waking hours relating with screens rather than living beings.

But we have also begun to find purchase through our work with FierySpirits on some ways to help each other become more conscious of our relationships with these addictive technologies.

*The Art of Hosting* network draw on Christina Baldwin’s book *Calling the Circle, the First and Future Culture* (Baldwin, 1998) for a set of practices she has found helpful in supporting face-face groups to deepen the quality of their learning together:

“What transforms a meeting into a circle is the willingness of people to shift from informal socializing or opinionated discussion into a receptive attitude of thoughtful speaking and deep listening and to embody and practice the structures outlined here….

THREE PRACTICES:

. To speak with intention: noting what has relevance to the conversation in the moment.
. To listen with attention: respectful of the learning process for all members of the group.
. To tend the well-being of the circle: remaining aware of the impact of our contributions.

*Baldwin (1998)*

These were the ground rules that I introduced in the opening session of the Aviemore ‘Rural Convention’ (Chapter 2), again during the hosts gathering on Skye (Chapter four) and in a slightly variant form, online as guiding ‘ground rules’ for the CoP as a whole. The emphasis here is on conscious communication – learning to slow down our listening habits (becoming aware of others’ perspectives); learning how to gift words in service of a groups’ emerging knowing (rather than lobbing them in in the hope they ‘stick’); on practicing an ethic of reciprocity and care for the whole.

This thread of effective communication has been echoed in the experiments with Bill Torbert’s Four Ways of Speaking: a tool that has proven itself of enduring worth in our work. Of course, ‘right speech’ and variants on this concept across all faith practices have long proposed the power of conscious communication. Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield has long emphasized the power of speech-acts to shape cultures:

What does communication do in our world? It makes society. Our society is built on communication. We’re isolated individuals, in some measure anyway, even if perhaps cosmically we’re one, but mostly we experience

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ourselves as separate. Our society, our friendships, our love, the laws, the whole world around us, is created by agreement through communication. It’s very, very powerful. And when it’s truthful, or it’s honest, or its genuine, it builds trust.

A similar sentiment emerges from commentators and tutors about how to engage with the ‘Digital Wilds’. For example, Harold Jarche (who we meet in the Epilogue) advocates a system of ‘Personal Knowledge Management (PKM)’ to help individuals cope with the digital universe. A central practice in this system what he calls ‘Seek, Sense, Share’:

PKM [is] an enabling process for wirearchy: “a dynamic two-way flow of power and authority based on knowledge, trust, credibility and a focus on results enabled by interconnected people and technology”...

One way to look at network learning is as a continuous process of seeking, sensing and sharing:

- Seeking is finding things out and keeping up to date. Building a network of colleagues is helpful in this regard—it not only allows us to “pull” information, but also have it “pushed” to us by trusted sources.
- Sensing is how we personalize information and use it. Sensing includes reflection and putting into practice what we have learned. Often it requires experimentation, as we learn best by doing.
- Sharing includes exchanging resources, ideas and experiences with our networks and collaborating with our colleagues.

From article Network Learning: Working Smarter

If there is one ‘take home’ lesson from our research so far, it is that far from being a thing of the past, the mobile, ‘appified’ nature of digital technologies is pushing everyone in society to become more digitally literate. And action research, especially through the first person inquiry, is well placed to help people find a sense of balance, along with their voice and capacity for ‘right speech’, in service of evolving communities of interest, practice and influence towards restoring the ecological balance of our planet as she teeters on the edge of a climate tipping point.

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60 http://www.dharmaweb.org/index.php/Jack_Kornfield:_Right_Speech
61 Harold Jarche runs a ‘Centre for Social Learning’ and explains his PKM model in this clip: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VomuPGCePkk
6.5 Reflection on research methodology

How do we know our choices are quality based? There are in the end no clear foundational grounds. The best we can do is to offer our choices to our own scrutiny, to the mutual scrutiny of our co-researchers, to the wider community of inquirers and to the interested public at large. Quality rests not so much on getting it right but on stimulating open discussion.


We can establish communities of inquiry rooted in wider communities of place and practice; together, we can learn how to learn better from our experiences. This may, in turn, sensitize us to attune more fully with the evolutionary change dynamics of our lives, organisations and projects ... and to nature’s tendency toward self-healing...

Taking an attitude of inquiry as we jump more consciously into this evolutionary flow, informed by awareness of the dynamics of complex evolving systems, promises to transform leadership practice for governance, organisations, networks and communities. Learning how to exercise facilitative leadership to open such spaces seems to me an urgent task.

*Wilding, N. in Williams, Robert and McIntosh eds. (2012)*

In this section, I reflect on the research methodology of this thesis: both in relation to the inquiries into FierySpirits since 2008, as well as some lessons learned from approaching this thesis as writing-as-inquiry. First, I offer some reflections on the validity and qualities of the research story as presented.

6.5.1 Reflection: Validity and Quality in this writing-as-inquiry research story

In the early chapters of the thesis I framed my choice that this research be primarily conducted through first person inquiry. This choice was

- Inspired by previous first person inquiries as a CARPP student which had helped make conscious an ontological and epistemological ground for a developing practice as a researcher;
- A pragmatic response to the falling away of a second person inquiry that I had originally hoped would constitute a stronger voice in this research; and
- Catalysed by my active desire to draw together and reflect on learning emerging from diaries, transcripts, recordings and online media data that could help me improve my professional practice as a designer and host of digitally-augmented social learning architectures in the future.

The primary task of this first person methodology was to track learning about attempts to implement digitally augmented second and third person action research approaches to designing and facilitating the FierySpirits CoP.

In the development of this thesis as a piece of writing-as-inquiry I have, in addition, sought to build a relationship of trust my reader; a mirror of the second person methodology of creating safe spaces that I have espoused in the context of developing the FierySpirits CoP.

I have sought to build this trust by making writing into the ontological, epistemological, methodological and theoretical foundations for the research, by
both ‘telling’ and ‘showing’ inquiry in action, and by making explicit my relationship
with and stance on theory and the people whose ideas have shaped this research.

By grounding the text in this way, I have sought to offer my reader a breadth of
information sufficient to enable you to decide how much to trust the first person
narrative voice and its awareness of the inevitable partialness of its perspective –
and measures to reveal this awareness where appropriate (without disrupting too
much the readerly flow of the narrative).

Success in this instance would involve my reader deciding to give the text the
‘benefit of the doubt’; and using that doubt to also inquire deeper their own
professional challenges as conveners of social learning architectures grappling with
similar challenges to those presented here. Quality, from this perspective, would
look like the ability of this research story to catalyse future cycles of inquiry
somewhere ‘out there’.

I am aware that establishing such a relationship with my reader has been made
more difficult through my choice not to directly include the voices (as commentators
on the stories presented) of my closest colleagues. For example, this cuts off to a
significant degree the ability for this text to demonstrate what Patti Lather has
stermed ‘rhizomatic validity’ (i.e., the move of including commentary from voices
other than the primary narrator directly into the text so as to offer a disconfirming
perspective). I advocate, however, that in other ways (developed immediately below)
this text has brought in a range of other voices; and that the particular
circumstances by which the Carnegie UK Trust brought the Rural Programme to a
close at the end of 2010 has left this author with little choice but to raise this issue
as problematic, and move on.

Other ways that this text has sought to foreground multiple voices include:

- Data from ‘screen grabs’ where the voices of colleagues can be read directly
  (for example, the googledocs from the Rural Leadership Programme (page
  53) and the ‘Future for Rural Networking’ workshop (in the Epilogue), in
  ‘NewsBurst’ editions in section 4.3.5);
- Remembered conversations, excerpts from emails, diary entries, transcripts
  from audio recordings and feedback offered after events to bring into the
text the voices of colleagues and co-inquirers (for example, in section 5.1
  where the rural team meet Tony for the first time; T’s views on ‘resilience’ in
  an email he sent in section 5.2.4);
- Hyper-links to fieryspirits.com, where the reader of this thesis can read
directly the fullness of the work that happened there; and
- Reflective passages interspersed with or immediately after sections of
  narrative that bring to attention areas where I see my practice as a
  researcher has been weak, or open to question in some way (this interwoven
  into Chapters 4, 5 and 6).

In these ways, I have sought to win the confidence of the reader of this thesis that
the voice is trustworthy; and on this basis that other action researchers might find
value in the conclusions and framings of those conclusions in informing their own
research and facilitation efforts in similar contexts.
6.5.2 Reflection: Celebrating and pinpointing some methodological qualities of the ‘Exploring Community Resilience’ inquiry

I have advocated earlier in this thesis that the resonance of a text can indicate something of its quality; that is, its ability to ‘ring true’ into wider networks than those that generated it.

The story of the *Exploring Community Resilience* handbook advocated some ways in which this can be achieved. The story of this inquiry yields clues about what constitutes ‘resonance’, and how a second/third person digitally augmented inquiry process can generate a piece of social media with such qualities. For example, we saw that

- the design process sought to achieve congruence between content and presentational form;
- the editorial process ensured voices of practitioners were directly quoted in the text – in what that allowed them to speak their own stories for themselves; and
- the holding (liberating) framework for the publication created inquiring space *within* the publication to allow readers to engage with and make sense for themselves its questions, live internet links, ‘theory spots’ and practice stories.

Once published through social networks, we tracked the impact of the publication to test whether we had achieved the ‘resonance’ intended for our message that ‘asset based’ approaches to resilience building can offer genuine hope for struggling communities. Direct feedback and download statistics offered evidence that this had been the case: our publication had been successful in ‘tuning up’ our ‘sounding board’ to a higher amplitude of resonance.

It is on the basis of this experience that I now propose that the methodological approach developed in the course of the Exploring Resilience inquiry represents a contribution to action research knowledge – a process that other researchers might find useful to build on.

6.5.3 Reflection: On ‘Spider’ Action Research

In Chapter three I introduced the notion of ‘spider action research’, and elaborated on why this metaphor seemed an appropriate to show my stance as an insider action researcher across much of the research story. The metaphor allowed me to ‘rest’ in first person research whilst waiting for the ‘food’ of second and third person inquiry.

However, having sat and worked with this metaphor, I am not convinced of its enduring usefulness for wider practice, particularly as it implies that the point of research is to leave the ‘hole’ and feast ‘out there’.

Especially having written through to some conclusions about the power of first person approaches in the section reflecting on the substantive research question (above), I am not sure this metaphor represents an orientation to research that is useful beyond being a survival mechanism for staying robust during stressful times. Indeed, do I see in the metaphor a shadow side to my own orientation to research; one of wanting to be a ‘good’ research a la mode of the CARPP action research
school which (I quite possibly project onto my memory of CARPP, now closed) had tendency to valorise forms of co-inquiry?

If I were able to give some advice to myself as the action researcher who framed the ‘spider’ approach from the perspective of today, I would say “Don’t worry – it’s OK! Sometimes conditions are right for emergence; other times they are not. Rather than focus so much energy on trying to open spaces up, pay more attention to the qualities of the research you are already engaged in: time to pay more attention to your research question! What are you really tracking – and how? What really matters just now? What kinds of data gathering are best suited to tracking this question? Don’t worry that this research may not live up to your hopes to somehow do co-inquiry in the ways set out by Reason and Heron: be where you are now. And focus less on generating digital media as data for this imagined second person inquiry story you hope to construct in the future - and more on starting to make sense already through first person practices like writing as inquiry. And start with that inquiry question!”

6.5.4 Reflection: Celebrating a catalytic, readerly and boundary-crossing text

In communities of practice, innovation tends to happen at the edges of disciplines, fields, domains, containers. Likewise, this thesis is positioned across the edges of different disciplines: between third person action research and the field of social learning (in the tradition of Etienne Wenger); between mainstream rural (and other) development practice and asset based (or ‘appreciative’) approaches; between conventional philanthropy and ‘creative philanthropic’ approaches; between ‘Resilience 1.0’ and ‘Resilience 2.0’; etc..

In reaching for a ‘readerly’ voice to narrate this thesis, I have adopted a tone and writing style that aims to be clear and accessible: to be as simple, but no simpler, than necessary. I have also sought to raise inquiry questions along the way; to critique my own practice: to hold a balance between offering a clear enough narrative voice so my reader doesn’t feel lost, whilst retaining enough space (by for example including extensive footnotes and references a la mode of Exploring Community Resilience; by including lots of graphics for visual thinkers to offset some of the text-heaviness; by switching pace between ‘showing’ and ‘telling’; by gradually deepening the depth of theoretical reflection as chapters progress) to encourage a playful and reflective relationship with the text at the same time.

In this way, the intention is that the work can act as a catalyst of future conversation and debate as we move out of the digital forest – and into the digital wilds.
7 Epilogue: So what are we beginning to learn about action research in the ‘Digital Wilds’?

This Epilogue shows something of how inquiries continued within FierySpirits CoP after 2010, and indicates their direction of travel. Its data is largely presentational; the narrative less worked than in previous chapters. It is a work in progress; included here in the spirit of throwing some seeds into the wind hoping that they might find a fertile place to grow. It ends by imagining some future characteristics of action research in the ‘digital wilds’.

7.1 What is ‘the Digital Wilds’?

The development of the Fiery Spirits Community of Practice – and the topic-based co-inquiries hosted within it – has occurred at a time of rapid technological innovation.

In Chapters four and five, we have following a research story concerned with experimenting with approaches to action research in a ‘digital forest’ – using social networking and social media technologies (ning, YouTube, Issuu) to augment traditional action research strategies to serve the development of inquiries within and across the CoP.

There is much in the story of the detail of these design changes. However, for the purposes of our broad question about how action research might engage with social media technologies now and into the future, dwelling on our tinkering with the ‘ning’ platform would put us in danger of missing the ‘elephant in the room’.

That elephant is the explosion of new online technologies that have emerged since 2008. During 2009 and 2010, three major technological trends began to change the online landscape and the way growing numbers of us are engaging with the web.

Smartphones have arrived, and with them new kinds of ‘apps’ from new kinds of social media including Twitter, Instagram, Storify, Google ‘Hangouts’ and Pinterest. As smartphone and tablet (‘mobile computing’) technologies have become ubiquitous, online giant corporations have become tenacious competitors for the attention of millions – if not billions – of people. For example, Facebook and Google are emerging as dominant forces – with many of us accepting these mega corporations’ invitations to spend more and more of our time in their online worlds (and therefore future if not present profitability via advertising and information revenues).

It is likely that the future of the net will be charted through the evolution of both the trend towards the growth of huge ‘digital forests’ by the likes of Facebook; as well as the growing opportunities for individuals to generate and share media across all platforms, and to improvise our own ways to access this media (for example, through apps that allow us to ‘grab’ and ‘share’ content from multiple sources such as Tumblr, Storify, FlipBoard and many more).

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63 storify.com enables users to ‘grab’ content from the internet and interpret/represent it as part of a narrative they offer to help people make sense of it. A Google ‘hangout’ is an extension of a traditional online forum where users can simultaneously ‘chat’, participate in polls, watch slides, and engage in video or voice conferencing.
During 2010, monthly teleconferences between co-hosts of the CoP continued. However, the pace of development of the CoP had begun to slow: our host partners were allocated half the investment during 2010 that they had expected; and the energy and commitment to our work roughly halved as a result. In early 2010, from a hit rate on fieryspirits.com of 7-8000 per month, by the middle of the year this had declined to 3-4000.

This corresponded with mounting uncertainty amongst us Carnegie staff about whether Carnegie Trustees (through their new CEO) were about to ‘pull the plug’ on our efforts. Even if this was the case, I had started to imagine, might it be possible that our hosts ‘team’ could be strong enough to pull together to continue the partnership – even without the involvement of Carnegie UK Trust?

In August 2010, the Centre for Alternative Technology was to be the venue for our next hosts’ gathering. I started to plan for a session where we might broach this question, and prepared two slides to prompt it. The first suggested a narrative of the CoP journey to date (bouncing off Snyder and Briggs' model of stages of CoP development (introduced in Chapter 3)); and the second – borrowed from internal briefing note and which we have already met in Chapter 4 - suggested a new way to visualize the activity and scope of our learning network. In this slide, the place of Carnegie UK Trust (previously imagined as the ‘hub’ of a wheel – see Chapter 4) was replaced by a set of hosting practices (‘story telling’, ‘skills exchange’ etc.):

*The Ups and Downs of FierySpirits CoP*

*slide prepared to share with CoP hosts, August 2010*
During the run up to the gathering I had also asked a colleague from CARRP – Margaret Gearty – to offer a workshop on ‘digital story-telling’, with the intention that this experience might help to deepen our appreciation for the possibilities of digital co-inquiry, as well as continue to deepen the working relationships we had initiated in earlier hosts’ gatherings – part of a strategy of sounding out hosts about the proposal implicit in the second slide (above) that the partnership might survive the withdrawal of Carnegie funding at the end of that year.

The programme for Machynlleth began with a session enabling hosts to share their current work and associated questions for (a video of this session – filmed by passing around the video camera - was edited together by David Wake, a participant from North Harris Trust – and is available at [http://vimeo.com/14029611](http://vimeo.com/14029611).

The session continued with a workshop on digital storytelling. A colleague from CARRP helped to develop the workshop, which began with an example story worked up with a member of staff at our host partner, the Centre for Stewardship in Fife:
“One thing that surprises me when Big Tent takes place is that I don’t know who I am when Big Tent takes place”...


Helen’s story was very genuine: a reflection on learning emerging from several years developing an eco festival which had succeeded in becoming Scotland’s largest. As we unpacked the method behind supporting Helen to be able to offer this illustration, a colleague from CARRP who I had asked to help with this session (Margaret Gearty) wrote up two flip-charts, drawing out a distinction between ‘official stories’ and ‘human stories’, and suggesting that Helen’s digital story deftly covered both territories:

In the event the reflective quality was not at all diminished by the rough and ready nature of the script. Helen’s presentation was honest and moving. I felt myself well up as I witnessed it and several of the audience seemed to feel the same way. Kate immediately said – ‘I want to give you a hug’ – and the mood of the room was just that – a group, a collective hugging one of their community who had described work they recognised but had not, hitherto articulated in that way to each other.

Margaret Gearty freefall writing excerpt – July 2012 (with permission)
Although the session succeeded in sharing an idea for how hosts might begin to deepen their use of social media (our idea was that they might go on to facilitate people within their networks to develop – and then share on FierySpirits – their digital stories), the workshop had also brought to the surface more immediate questions about the survival of our work together. In the closing circle before lunch, for example, our partners based at Tipperary Institute said that public sector pay cuts in Ireland of 30% had already impacted their capacity to work alongside us, and that an organizational merger with Limerick University threatened to remove Tipp. Institute’s remit for outreach and development work, which was the basis on which they had originally been able to agree to work with us on the CoP.

Then, immediately after lunch, the group toured the Centre for Alternative Technology’s beautiful new eco building campus – but also heard the ‘human story’ impacts resulting from the building contractor’s failure to install the innovative roof system properly – and then went bust. As in Ireland, CAT staff were now being asked to share the burden of making cuts in budgets towards the enormous repair costs.

When added to our growing uncertainty regarding Carnegie UK Trust’s own future relationship with its Rural Programme, the likelihood that this would be the final hosts’ gathering generated a sense of appreciation of our time together in the moment: the mood of the gathering reflected an implicit agreement that in this atmosphere of uncertainty the priority was not investing energy in planning new rounds of host-led activity for the CoP, however interesting ideas like digital storytelling might be.

In November, Trustees confirmed that both Carnegie work programmes (Rural and Democracy, based in London) would close from the year end. Trustees decided that the CoP would be the only existing piece of work to continue to be supported – for a period of two years – and re-invented as a stand-alone initiative.
During late 2010 and into early 2011 I struggled to maintain a perspective that my work at Carnegie had anything to do with action research. The office was riven with barely concealed tension. Most communication was conducted through formal meetings with an outside human resources contractor.

Now without the peer support structure from ‘host’ colleagues, I found working on the first drafts for the community resilience inquiry proved a life-line: this writing process offered a sense of continuity and constructive personal and collective focus.

In parallel with finalizing the design and publication strategy for *Exploring Community Resilience* Carnegie Trustees specified that a new governance group for the CoP come into being (the ‘Steering Group’) during the early months of 2011. By July, I had confidence that we had a strong group of seven experienced networkers and practitioners in rural development from across the UK and Ireland with whom I could work. I was asked to provide a formal ‘secretariat’ role – producing papers, minutes – and at this point unhooked myself of any expectation that this structure could enable any qualities of co-inquiry. I was wrong about this however and Steering Group members started to take great care in engaging with papers I wrote for their quarterly meetings. In itself, the discipline of writing these papers helped me to gradually distinguish between choices and reactions charged with the emotional remnants of the bruises if the previous year, and some genuine seeds of possibility that the CoP might come to life again within the new structure. In essence, we shifted from an informal highly participatory working culture based on significant trust that our host partners would ‘deliver’ on our shared agenda; to a more formal conventional Steering Group that asked for clear recommendations in papers and responded constructively when arguments for these were set out rationally and with appropriate framing. At our first meeting, I proposed that all the papers and minutes should be published into fieryspirits.com as a way to become more transparent and
accountable to a membership that we hoped might start to take a more active ownership of the governance structure over time. These PDFs are at http://fieryspirits.com/page/about-the-cop (as at January 2013) and extracts from these papers are included in Appendices three and four of this thesis. Appendix three shows how we began to more systematically use statistics (towards addressing a deficit we identified in Chapter four) to track some indicators of the life of the CoP as it showed up within fieryspirits.com. And Appendix four is a poster – originally intended for printing at A3 size - that I developed to offer a narrative about the journey of the CoP to date and future possibilities, as we began to discuss how the CoP might become fully independent of Carnegie UK Trust by 2013 (as required by Trustees).

A key element of the new development strategy that I recommended to the Steering Group was to build on my experience stewarding the community resilience inquiry by investing in a new role of 'Carnegie Associates' whose work would be the development and curation of CoP topics. The person specification for the role emphasized a mix of online facilitation skill, ‘natural networking’ ability, experience curating online content, and established authority amongst peers in the topic area.

The broad intention was that each Associate’s work would ‘pump-prime’ topics through three phases of development: an initial scoping exercise to clarify inquiry questions, potential participants, as well as partner/funder organisations who may be in a position to support later stages of the work. A second stage would inaugurate an online co-inquiry (with face-face elements where possible) that would help the topic group ‘get their teeth into’ key issues and questions that the scoping phase had identified. And the third stage would involve this group taking ownership of the topic as the Associate stepped away. In July 2011, I proposed that we invest in six staggered experiments to ‘pump-prime’ topics in this way, with the intention that collectively these might re-ignite engagement by CoP members and inform a future business plan to sustain the CoP.

Suggestions for topics would come to the Steering Group from feedback from face-face events within the CoP, on the basis that these areas represented an area that was felt by members to be ‘missing’ from existing networking/conversations that people in the network were involved with; or an area that represented an ‘opportunity to unlock’ by bringing unusual combinations of people together. The rationale for each choice was set out and calls for expressions of interest to steward these topics were then advertised via NewsBurst, with a note re-iterating that the topics would aim to progress the CoP’s purpose and four associated ‘high level outcomes’, now defined by the Steering Group as:

Fiery Spirits is a ‘Community of Practice’ for rural activists and practitioners who share their experience building vibrant, resilient communities. Its purpose is to:

Accelerate learning by activists, professionals and policy makers who are building resilient and sustainable rural communities. It does this by enabling practitioners to connect, challenge and learn from each other at face-face events and virtually via a social networking website.

The high level outcomes for the CoP are:

- Accelerated learning by members about rural development practice;
- Opportunities for members to work together to influence policy development;
- Demonstrate the value of the CoP model for rural and other development; and
- Evidence of increased activity and engagement by CoP members.

The topics selected for development focused on community-led broadband; young peoples’ engagement in managing community assets; mapping community assets; transferring services away from local authority control; and ‘the future for rural networking’. We now touch briefly on learning emerging from two of these topics that relates to our question in this chapter, namely how might our CoP develop in ways congruent with the rapid evolution of social technologies and their implications for our task of imagining what a ‘sustainable CoP’ might look like in the future.

‘Community-led Broadband’

![screenshot, January 2013, showing the popularity of Daniel’s posts relative to other content across the site](image)

Associate Daniel Heery developed a community broadband topic through 2012, focused around webinars on ‘hot topics’ identified through an initial scoping exercise. Daniel’s profile was an ideal fit for the Associate work: he is foremost a practitioner who has managed to oversee the development of Ulston’s broadband network and is often asked by others to share this know-how as well as ideas about how the power balance between the ‘big players’ such as BT might be shifted in favour of enabling local people to own their broadband assets and also to unlock the potential therein to help regenerate local economies. Over the Summer of 2011 Daniel’s fieryspirits group gathered momentum. He put on ‘webinars’ using teleconferencing combined with an internet slide-sharing service; generated leads on future funding for the topic; and helped demonstrate to both Carnegie UK Trust and the Board of the Plunkett foundation – to whom hosting responsibility for the CoP was transferred in January 2013 - that the CoP model remained a viable way of supporting rural practitioner learning.
Young, Gifted, and Rural

With the support of associate Alan Caldwell, a group of 25 young people from five communities across rural Scotland met in three different locations over a period of a year. Early on, they decided they would prefer to invent their own ways to work and communicate online. The group began by setting up a Facebook page. Later, the group secured external funding— and developed partnerships with other young peoples’ support organisations - to work with a software developer to develop a new ‘app’ that would allow rural young people to curate the ‘best bits’ from other sites into a tool to help teenagers navigate life in rural areas. In the meantime, the Associate supporting this work, Alan Caldwell, captured elements of this story as a ‘blog’ on fieryspirits to share learning about ‘what works’ when supporting young people to get involved in developing their own networks and approaches to engaging in the life of the rural communities in which they live.

7.4 ‘Why not just use Facebook?’

From their perspective, the Young Peoples’ choice to use Facebook rather than a group hosted within the FierySpirits.com platform was an obvious one. Facebook is now ubiquitous: why go elsewhere?

The near rhetorical nature of this question underlines that now is the time — if not six or nine of eighteen months ago — to be recognizing the intensity of evolutionary challenges to the assumptions we made as we chose ning.com as the platform for the CoP in 2008. Alongside the shifts to every industry sector in coming to terms with new online entrants to markets, it is clear that forms of action research seeking to engage with these technologies will have to keep up with — if not attempt to be ahead of — the game.

During 2012, this realization spurred two new cycles of inquiry that I briefly summarise below to conclude this epilogue and point to the future:

- Initiating a daily aggregated e-newsletter: ‘Members News Direct’
- Convening a CoP topic on ‘the future for rural networking’

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64 https://www.facebook.com/NorthHarrisTrip2012/timeline?filter=2

65 http://fieryspirits.com/profiles/blog/list?user=0b6m4f8i477co

66 An extended account of this inquiry is included as Appendix 4
7.4.1 An experiment with ‘Members News Direct’ – October 2012

NewsBurst (see Chapter four) was conceived of as a summary of activity within fieryspirits.com social network: every two months or so, it would highlight to members of the site content and activity that they might like to engage with. The newsletter format majored on live links back into the ning site: the whole point was to attempt to increase the number of people actively engaging online.

Although in its first two years our statistics from the MailChimp service suggested a better-than-average ‘hit rate’ on the links in NewsBurst, by early 2012 it did not seem worthwhile putting the energy in collating and editing the magazine without some very tasty new content to announce: we were now competing for peoples’ attention with information sources that ‘early adopters’ of technology had begun taking charge of themselves – using online ‘format’ apps such as FlipBoard, Hootsuite, and Seesmic to curate into their smartphone all their twitter, Facebook, email, blog, LinkedIn, YouTube and whatever other ‘feeds’.

Online – where ‘content is king’ – my first response to this realization was to attempt to ‘up the game’ within our existing paradigm: I thought that fieryspirits should attempt to innovate some new content that members would value (and would therefore take the time to engage with). And building on our stated purpose of ‘helping people meet those they didn’t know they were supposed to meet’, I wondered if we might also help people make sense of emerging patterns of interest across members of the CoP.

The idea was to create a daily e-newspaper that collated ‘feeds’ from members’ blog, twitter, Facebook and other accounts wherever they were posted on the web. There did not, however, appear to be any easy technology available to accomplish this, so I had to manually collate the web addresses provided to us by members (about 180 in all) into a service called Yahoo Pipes (see screenshot, below):

![screenshot from yahoo pipes (the ‘black box’ behind ‘members news direct’)](image)

The boxes at the top of this screenshot each contain up to ten ‘feeds’ (web addresses that include an ‘RSS’ script that the yahoo service could pick up). Next, these feeds were filtered (only the most recent; only those with ‘meta-tags’ that might be relevant etc.) and then sorted (by second, minute, hour and day). I
discovered I needed to set up different algorithms for filtering and sorting different content (blogs and twitter, for example). At the bottom of the screen a ‘unison’ box pulls everything together, before the output is then picked up as one ‘RSS’ feed by another service, mailchimp.com, to send as a ‘daily campaign’ (the same service we were already using to send NewsBurst).

Theoretically, I imagined that this ‘daily’ email might help strengthen and deepen our sense of ‘community’ by making it more visible: we had by this time grown to over a thousand members. The automated technology, once set up, was able to trawl and sort and re-present in an attractive format content that members were creating in the ‘digital wilds’, without requiring them (us) to log in to our digital forest. In the NewsBurst of October 2012 (which we continued as an occasional manually edited newsletter), this innovation was framed as an invitation to ‘spot new trends, opportunities, connections to be made’ amongst our membership:

**Member News Direct service now LIVE**

In the June Newsburst, we invited Fiery Spirits members to tell us about where you post your news. We thought this might make is easier to:

- spot new ideas, trends, and connections to be made;
- stay up to date with hot topics and opportunities that members are passing on; and
- help members come together to influence or shape policy.

By combining responses to the survey with weblinks already provided by members when you signed up, we have now launched this service. You can access this in two ways:

1) Log on to fieryspirits.com and scroll through the 'News Highlights' box near the top of the home screen; or
2) Subscribe by clicking here

*For the geeks amongst us: after a trial of paper.li (problem: doesn't allow more than 25 feeds and we needed more than 150!), we grab, sort and order content into one RSS feed using pipes.yahoo.com and then use mailchimp.com to automate daily delivery...

‘NewsBurst’ article announcing launch of ‘Fiery Spirits Daily’, October 2012

At the end of the prototype stage for this service I was very excited at having cracked the technical barriers, especially as this aggregation setup did seem to generate emails with about the right amount of content, and presented attractively enough, to be useable – or so I thought.

However, the service itself failed to attract much interest. Just under forty people signed up. Were they weary of ‘yet another’ piece of information arriving into the inbox every morning? Had I not sold the idea clearly enough? Were people not curious enough about who else was in the fieryspirits community?

My gut said that, whilst all these might be true, that the stark quantitative feedback contained a greater challenge: that this attempt at innovating within our current
technology and assumptions was failing us. It struck me that, in the language of Argyris & Schön (1974), I had a choice to engage in single loop learning (perhaps attempting to sell it better etc.); or to inquire more deeply – to engage in ‘double loop learning’ to consciously question whether the goal we had set ourselves (increased engagement within the CoP platform) was still the right one: and if not, what would a better alternative be? What kinds of innovation would help us tune our work more effectively into the ‘digital wilds’?

7.5 ‘The future for rural networking?’ September-November 2012

The online environment is increasingly bewildering for most users, with more and more unorganised content, and diverse technology and network developments. Competition for attention is increasing. Online architecture is changing: as Community of Practice (CoP) specialist Steve Dale says “the future is personal, mobile and ‘appified’”… That means independent platform-based CoPs will have to be offer something really special to attract sophisticated online practitioners … without whom their community activity will die. They will have to be easy to use for less sophisticated participants, and fit the new architecture.

In future, value will come from helping people learn network and digital skills; providing aggregation, curation and community building; and developing methods for organising in a networked environment. While platform-based CoPs may have value when associated with an organisation, they will be difficult to maintain when they are no more than another social network. Existing platform-based CoPs may need to consider transitioning to a new model, not just a new tech platform.

Excerpt from invitation to CoP members to join new topic
by David Wilcox, Carnegie Associate, September 2012

Given our limited resources of time, attention, and memory, we have to make decisions about how we participate in landscapes of practice. This is going to affect learning capability—ours and that of the social systems in which we participate…. Our identity, and the unique perspective it carries, is our gift to the world… [we should] see ourselves as the learning contribution we have to offer.

Wenger 2010:197

Unlike our open ‘calls for expressions of interest’ used to recruit the first ‘Carnegie Associates’, in July 2012 I sought out David Wilcox – a veteran ‘social reporter’ and innovator in the field of civil-society based online communities67 - to ask if he would curate a topic on ‘the future for rural networks’ with a mandate to help ‘shake up’ existing patterns, assumptions and mindsets that had shaped the development of fieryspirits to date. In short, the brief was to assist in opening a space for ‘disconfirmation’, surprise and innovation in the face of mounting evidence that our existing strategies, whilst partially successful, seemed not to be sustainable beyond

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67 David has worked with a large number of philanthropic, public and civil society based organisations, and on his blog and through his tweets and recent work with the Royal Society for the Arts (RSA), Nominet Trust, Big Lottery Fund and others had been championing the potential for open source digital networking technologies to transform the ways that institutions and funders work – towards more open, accountable, democratic and devolved forms of decision-making. He can be found at www.socialreporter.com
the end of investment in the CoP by Carnegie UK Trust at the end of December 2012. Along with members of the CoP Steering Group, and key staff at Plunkett Foundation with whom the Steering Group had already initiated a conversation about becoming a host to the CoP, during our initial design conversation for the topic, David and I agreed that we should be as ‘open source’ as possible about our convening approach. We agreed that it might be time for us to move out of the garden and into the wilds. We sought to achieve this by using a mixture of a fieryspirits group, a ‘googledoc’, and lots of links to blogs, tweets and other content across the web.

**A note on the presentation of this account**

Through this thesis, I have experimented with different ways to enable the voices of inquiries to ‘show up’. In earlier chapters, I have experimented with included passages of narrative (verbatim and remembered) representing key ‘moments’ of inquiry, interspersed with reflections in my own voice as an author, with some benefit of hindsight.

With this final inquiry story, I am taking another approach. At the time of writing, the data we generated is fresh and raw a mix of experiential and presentational knowing; yet to be tested through the kind of peer review process towards propositional knowing that we developed in the resilience inquiry.

I have decided it most appropriate to lightly curate some of this material into a presentational account intended to start to foreground some promising areas of inquiry that future research might develop. This is the kind of curation that a new generation of ‘curation’ social technologies such as storify.com support. The screenshots are from [http://fieryspirits.com/group/thrivingruralnetworking](http://fieryspirits.com/group/thrivingruralnetworking).
In September 2012, David Wilcox and I invited members of FierySpirits.com to join a conversation about ‘the future for Rural Networking’:

We developed a background briefing paper and some other material we thought members of the group might find stimulating to help frame the ‘domain’ of the inquiry and begin to identify some of the practices (of facilitators of rural networking) that we might investigate together:
And seventeen people signed into the group. As they joined, David or I encouraged them to post a ‘comment’ under the introductory material, trying different prompts. People responded to these in different ways, some sharing their own ‘hot’ questions (for example, Ailsa and Davie below); others (such as Anne) examples of experiments elsewhere:

Comment by Anne Cottringer on October 2, 2012 at 16:43

Something which might interest you all about carrying on twitter discussions. For example, #agrichatuk is the hashtag for a twitter conversation which takes place every Thursday evening by farmers throughout the UK from 8-10 and sometimes from further afield. A topic is chosen beforehand, a moderator or host fields questions from people in the days before; the host for that week also researches background material to feed into the discussion and then for two hours people speak to the topic and to one another via twitter. It allows for some pretty lively discussion. Some of the topics have been: women, the invisible force in agriculture, and others more specialised and technical such as, precision farming. The chats are then storified and made available. It has become very succesful. Agrichatuk have a facebook page as well. Twitter online discussions might be something for fiery spirits to consider? All the best, Anne.

Comment by David Wilcox on October 2, 2012 at 21:10

Hi Anne - twitter chats are a great idea. John Popham, who is also in this group is running one at this very moment on social media for local government #igovsm

As you suggest, really useful if then curated and linked to other resources. We could also try Google hangouts which allow for a small group to interact, with on air broadcast publicly, and a YouTube archive.

Comment by Ailsa Clark on November 9, 2012 at 11:42

One of the issues I think we need to consider is how to engage using mediums that folks are already plugged in to on a daily basis. Networking that requires time to go to different sites to pick up on discussions and information can often get lost for busy practitioners.

So one of the key challenges is linking to existing systems for information or providing effective links to bring people in when there is a topic they are interested in. All the technology stuff is over my head, but I know we do need to be able to assist people working in rural areas to be engaged with initiatives and examples of practice that could assist their work. We are keen to explore how IT can be used to assist social enterises to demonstrate their added value and to assist commissioners of services to measure and monitor community benefit for public services.

Comment by Davie Philip on October 6, 2012 at 13:06

Thanks Nick, this inquiry on the future of rural networks is very relevant for me here in Ireland right now. I'm interested in exploring how we use digital tools and social networking to strengthen local communities and even facilitate livelihoods. I'll dive into the briefing document now.

Just to respond to David's question, "Would you invite someone to Fiery Spirits, and if so what would you say?" I would and have invited people to join Fiery Spirits, I usually tell them that there are people there who are working on similar issues - rural regeneration, resilience etc. I have found partners for projects, developed ideas for projects, even worked on projects with people I met through Fiery Spirits. I have also sourced and shared information through this platform and at face to face meetings organised by Carnegie have made life-long friends with members of this community of practice.
Once momentum began to build, we firmed up a date for a face-face workshop and David created a googledoc with information and more preparatory reading for this. We chose to use googledocs because it allowed anyone coming to add comments and ideas. It’s a very democratic way to plan, harvest, digest and represent an event:

**Supporting rural networking**

**About this document**

This document contains material about the future of rural networking developed in preparation for a workshop on November 14-15 2012, and also a draft of the key themes that emerged, and group discussion reports. In order to frame the discussion, we gathered some propositions - challenges, principles and ideas about networking - in this open document. We also invited comments about people’s personal experiences. The link for this doc is [http://bit.ly/VxTT5g](http://bit.ly/VxTT5g)

**Contents of this document:**

- Workshop background and programme - below
- Workshop materials and reports - below
- The original propositions: problems, opportunities, principles, ideas - below
- Personal responses and experience - below

**Quick links**

- The themes that emerged during discussion - below
- Videos of group reports - external link
- Flip chart reports on scenario discussion - external link

**Workshop background and programme**

From the original document intro: We are discussing the future for rural networking at a workshop hosted by the Carnegie UK Trust in Oxford on November 14th and 15th. The aim is to explore what personal skills and methods are essential for online networking, what network business models may succeed in future, and what facilitation, network building and social reporting may be needed to enable networks.

- Group on Fiery Spirits - external link
- Background paper - external link
- Workshop schedule - external link

**Workshop materials and reports**

- Summary propositions - below
- Summary propositions: cards used in workshop - external link (pdf)
- Flip chart reports on scenario discussion - external link
- Video reports on scenario discussions - external link

**Summary propositions used in the workshop**

The following problems, opportunities, principles and ideas were summarised from the longer propositions developed before the workshop. You can [download the cards used here](http://example.com) (pdf).

**Problems**

- Access difficult - both mobile and broadband
- Unsharing attitudes can block possible collaborations
- Competition works against cooperation - funding regimes don’t help
- Control culture limits innovation - managers won’t let go
- Key connectors offline - network builders need new skills
- Topics in silos - communities of interest may not connect
- Too much noise, too little signal - filtering is a challenge
- Knowledge hubs failing - high facilitation costs, uncertain value
- Too many new network choices - Facebook, Twitter, Linkedin, Google+ etc
- Everything is spread about - too many places to look
- Lack of support for change - and one-size training isn’t enough

The following were added by participants

- Finding audiences is very hard for volunteers to do
- Over-simplification in an age of information overload means audiences only hear one side of a story
- Finding skilled community-managers and facilitators and content producers
- Communication skills
- Time to relate to “all of this”
We can see that although this document started out life before the workshop, it stayed 'live' afterwards as well, with David transcribing contributions made at the workshop in real time (or near real time). Some of the participants at the workshop shared material that was already hosted in other places on the web. For example, Steve Dale (who had previously designed the Communities of Practice architecture for local government in England, and who shared our sense that the game was now changing beyond traditional CoP structures) showed a slide that he’d previously published online:

And as I went to ‘grab’ this slide to include in this chapter, I found another one in his collection that caught my attention, about the rapidly rising trend towards ‘gamification’ online. A ‘game’ in this context is “a system in which players engage in an abstract challenge, defined by rules, interactivity, and feedback, that results in a quantifiable outcome often eliciting an emotional reaction” (Kapp, 2012:23). My hunch is that social gaming represents a significant emerging technology paradigm for third person action researchers and hosts of social learning architectures. If I were to start this thesis again today, I might well choose a question about how action research can engage with the emerging online gaming paradigm:
The workshop concluded by drawing together threads from different exercises, including a simulation that asked people to take the roles of different kinds of stakeholders in a rural network (government, local people, NGOs etc.) to think through how they might want to relate to FierySpirits (or some other cross-cutting rural networking opportunity) in the future:

**Themes emerging from the workshop**

**Networking is about people.** It is about making connections, having conversations, developing trust - and then engaging in some transactions or collaborative activity. Because everyone has different skills and preferences, one type of communication, or set of tools, won’t suit everyone. That means there will be a strategic tension between the desire to create some common platforms and shared spaces, and the way that everyone works differently. The way to address this is to offer a range of methods, and focus on building relationships and social spaces where people feel welcomed and motivated to connect with others.

**Communication for networking has to be designed for purpose.** The connections, conversations and methods needed for development of an individual social enterprise will be different from those to create a campaign, or to debate a policy initiative. One approach may be about marketing a service, another creating a powerful voice, or teasing out different strands of an argument. Some of the communication tools will be common, but which ones to use - and how they are used - will depend on what they are for. Organisations and individuals will set their own purpose, and choose their own approach and methods. That makes it difficult to create a central system or platform that meets all needs.

**Networks require building, and facilitation.** While people may undertake personal networking to develop their contacts and opportunities, this does not necessarily lead to active networks with rich cross connections. For this to happen, someone has to spot the potential for new relationships, make introductions, welcome people to social spaces, join up ideas, and perhaps find some story lines among the multiplicity of conversations. These online enablers are the equivalent of local community enablers - or good party and conference hosts.

**The online world is going to become more complex, not less.** Social networks like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Google Plus will be joined by others, competing for people’s engagement. People online will be in more and more places, and it will be increasingly difficult to attract them to new places unless those offer an engaging experience. While an organisation or group will need a home base, it is unrealistic to expect many people to visit unless it offers something special. It is necessary to go where people are, and to engage on networks.

**Information may be freely available, but spread about.** Because it is easy for anyone to create content in many different places it will be increasingly difficult to find what you may need in the sort of “knowledge portals” that were more common a few years ago. People won’t be creating content there - and curating content in one place will be challenging and costly.

**Managing personal knowledge and networks will be an essential skill.** Because there are more and more networks, there will be many places to go, and many people to connect with. Benefits will follow from being smart at seeking information and people, making sense of content, and also creating and sharing content to develop more networking opportunities.

And, about two weeks after they got home, we prompted participants to offer some reflections on what they’d got out of the workshop:
Reflections by Participants

David (Ruralis):

What I took home from the workshop? The plethora of networks we all are plugged into and use, often for multiple purposes but the key importance of a “Fiery Spirits” type of network that is focused on rural practitioners (not a dirty word!) and allows us to share experience, seek answers/advice and maybe too allows us to lobby as one voice on occasion. A ‘network of networks’ is probably too much to ever hope for or even envisage but a single place to go to and which allows members to come together is vital. Curation certainly necessary, control by the membership vital.

Tom (Locally Made):

Putting a value on what comes out of a network is a messy (and probably fruitless) exercise. How can you ever capture the outcomes that arise from fragmented discussions and contact. For organisations that host (and pay for) networks, the value has to be seen in how they connect you to reality/practice. If you’re aim is to influence policy, and your disconnected from what’s happening on the ground, then you’re toast!

Ed Mitchell (Transition Network):

For me, it was the realisation that our information is a vital part of our web system and that we don’t have a clear plan or strategy about it. Since being at this group workshop, I’ve set up a meet in my organisation to discuss this and get a plan together. So thanks!

Chris Wells (Transition):

David Wilcox’s proposals to move from centralised membership platforms (i.e. Ning) to open web tools (like Google Docs) … [there is] something radically transparent about his approach which really appeals to me. As discussed throughout the two days, there’s a need for community catalysts, skilled in both off- and online facilitation and I would definitely like to be part of that group.

David Wilcox (socialreporter.com)

The need for a new model - beyond CoPs

It seems likely that in future the outcomes of accelerated learning, collaboration and influence sought by the Fiery Spirits steering group (and others in the field) will depend on development at three levels:

1. Personal: Higher levels of digital and network literacy among activists and practitioners to enable them to learn and operate across networks.
2. Intermediate: Curation and facilitation by intermediaries to make sense of large amounts of information, and to connect ideas and people.
3. Organisations and networks: More effort on the part of organisations and agencies to be sociable and connected - making content easily shareable, events accessible, cooperation easier.

Convening this workshop brought a close to my employment with Carnegie UK Trust employee. In January 2013 the Plunkett Foundation, Oxford became the new institutional host for Fiery Spirits CoP and I plunged into the work of writing this thesis, and begin to imagine ‘what next’?

Appendix 6 contains a page from a scrapbook: a creative response to this question of ‘what next’: raw, contingent, fresh, exciting.
7.6 Reflection

I love the sense of excitement and adventure that imagines a massively connected world, as well as the implication that the small ‘I’ ego can give up hope of being able to control activity within this swarming system. I love my smart-phone and its power to extend my sense of engagement with this global system.

However, are we collectively – and I individually – in danger of losing a sense of balance? Are we sufficiently aware of how our physical bodies, psychologies and patterns of consciousness are being shaped by what might be classed our growing social addictions to these technologies? Is there still room, in this multi-media saturated world, to grow in relationship with the more-than-human world; and in so doing – to follow Joanna Macy’s call of the ‘Shambala Warrior’ - to awaken to our ‘ecological self’, able to access through all our senses a taste of the radical interdependence with all living phenomena?

As a perpetual student of action research, I am learning how inquiry can be a transformative practice, an antidote to the addictive and colonizing qualities of new technologies, and a help in learning to see, hear, touch, taste and smell things in more and more of their fullness, immediacy and aliveness.

Make a place to sit down.
Sit down. Be quiet.
You must depend upon
affection, reading, knowledge,
skill — more of each
than you have — inspiration,
work, growing older, patience,
for patience joins time
to eternity. Any readers
who like your work, doubt their judgment.
Breathe with unconditional breath
the unconditioned air.
Shun electric wire.
Communicate slowly. Live
a three-dimensioned life;
stay away from screens.
Stay away from anything
that obscures the place it is in.
There are no unsacred places;
There are only sacred places
And desecrated places.

Berry (2006) – How To Be a Poet (to remind myself)

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69 The Wikipedia entry “Is Google Making us Stupid?” offers an overview of Nicholas G. Carr’s article in the July/August 2008 edition of The Atlantic and responses to it. The article is highly critical of the Internet’s effect on cognition, suggesting that it is altering our ability to stay focused, to the point of potentially altering brain chemistry, as well as associated ideas of the internet’s impact on neuro-physiology such as memory retention and other responses to ‘coping with abundance’ of information. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Is_Google_Making_Us_Stupid%3F
8 Endnote

Shortly after Tara and I said goodbye to our village hosts in Ladakh, we enrolled in a week-long silent retreat that involved many hours of either sitting or walking meditation. Apricot trees were in full fruit; as we sat together the early autumn light spilled across the valley every morning and retreated in front of quickly chilling air every evening. We followed our breath and then, sometimes for several minutes, my mind stilled.

All dhar•mas are marked by emp•ti•ness; they nei•ther a•rise nor cease, are nei•ther de•filed nor pure, nei•ther in•crease nor de•crease.

Therefore, given emp•ti•ness, there are no forms, sen•sa•tions, per•cep•tions, for•ma•tions, or conscious•ness; no eye, ear, nose, tongue, bo•dy, or mind; no sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, or ob•jects of mind; no realm of sight, and so forth, down to no realm of mind conscious•ness.70

My first retreat had been in 1992 whilst I was living in Toyama, Japan, teaching English conversation in schools. During one break I went with friends to stay at a Soto Zen monastery in Kanazawa. We would wake at four thirty, wrap ourselves in thick brown woollen blankets, and join Monks in the prayer room. The chanting would continue for an hour or so; I had little idea of what the words meant. But, as I sat in Ladakh years later, the smell and taste of that room was with me again.

Now, ten years later again, I have been in another kind of retr•eat; this time the meditation is the active process of writing and re-wr•it•ing; attempting to articulate and present patterns of meaning and story; slowly, painfully at times realizing that this writing process has been a training in the foothills of wild mind. As I type, a friend calls by and asks me how it is going.

I say that I have been carefully and compassionately attempting to ease away the bluff and bluster of earlier drafts and in the process I felt like I was clearing away years of mustiness, making space for what is to come.

And as I say that, Marianne Williamson’s poem leaps to mind:

70 http://www.dharma-rain.org/StillPoint/morningservice.shtml
Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us.
We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous?
Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God.
Your playing small doesn’t serve the world.
There’s nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you.
We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.
It’s not just in some of us, it’s in everyone.
And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give others permission to do the same.
As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

*Williamson (1992) – Our Deepest Fear*

My friend smiles, breathes … and says “good conclusion!”
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9 Appendices

9.1 Appendix 1: *Exploring Community Resilience* handbook
exploring community resilience in times of rapid change

what is it? how are people building it? why does it matter?

Carnegie UK Trust
CHANGING MINDS • CHANGING LIVES

FIERY SPIRITS
COMMUNITY of PRACTICE
building vibrant, resilient rural communities across the UK, Ireland & beyond

Toward the Digital Wilds page 219
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Appendix 1: Events informing this book

Appendix 2: Resilience Compass Community Workshop

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Executive Summary

How this handbook came about

In late June 2009 a member of Carnegie’s rural development community of practice posted a blog on<br>
fieryspirits.com. The blogger reported that he’d just come out of a meeting with Scottish Government<br>
emergency planners concerned with “the unfolding scenario of a pandemic flu outbreak”. Officials had been working<br>flat-out trying to prepare for the worst case scenario: no-one could be sure how deadly or contagious the flu would be. And although Prime Minister Gordon Brown had assured the country that robust plans were in place, our blogger wrote that “most of our central infrastructural systems are already running in failure mode. A small glitch in any one of them can rapidly trigger failure across the board. For example, our pandemic simulation showed how quickly core services can buckle if some of the worst-case scenarios unfold this coming winter.” He went on: “emergency planning is not the same thing as creating genuine resilience – certainly as community activists would understand the term... is this a theme worth developing in the fiery spirits community?”

By the time Glaxo Smith Klein and Baxter began delivering the government’s order of 132 million doses of vaccine, swine flu had left the headlines. November 2009 had brought massive flooding to Cumbria – and shortly thereafter disruption on roads, rail and air as the UK and Ireland experienced its first white Christmas since 2004. These events underlined the timeliness of our discussion, now focussed around three core questions:

- what is community resilience?
- how are people building it? and
- why does it matter?

Two years on, we have produced this handbook to share what we’ve learned more widely. It is full of stories offered by activists and professionals about what’s working in practice – and the sources of inspiration underpinning their work. And it suggests how some of these ideas might connect with wider policy conversations now in vogue.

Proposing a community resilience framework – and some key lessons

As the book came together, we invented a new framework (opposite) to make it simpler to navigate this complex area. This proposes four key characteristics (or dimensions) of communities that are becoming more resilient:

- Healthy and engaged people
- An inclusive culture creating a positive sense of place
- A localising economy – towards sustainable food, energy, housing etc.
- Strong links to other places and communities

This framework has helped reveal a growing body of practical know-how about how to engage positively with rapid change. As one participant observed, ‘community resilience is like a muscle which, when exercised, builds both strength and flexibility.’

We have learned that:

- Activists are experimenting with asset-based approaches – including tools like community-led mapping, risk analysis and oral history. These help to build trust and a sense of common purpose. Virtuous circles of activity begin to build, and with it hope for the future;
- Professionals can collaborate between sectors and disciplines to serve local agendas: this involves learning new, enabling roles and taking a ‘humbler approach’ to management; and
- Funders and policy makers can help by resourcing action research into ‘what works’ in building community resilience in real places. This investment is most effective when it also supports exchange and learning between communities with diverse experiences of coping with – and preparing for – rapid change.

Crucially, we suggest that a new form of ‘break through’ resilience can emerge as activists, professionals and policy makers collaborate together – combining graft with high levels of creativity and fun to invent better futures than we may previously have thought possible.
Next steps

This handbook is the product of a collaborative research and writing process. We would very much appreciate feedback – and even better, our readers’ active involvement in some next steps.

1) FierySpirits.com
Fieryspirits.com hosts an ongoing focus on the theme of ‘inquiring into community resilience’. To join in, sign up to the site, which has many more resources to browse. There is also space to offer your feedback on this book:

- Do you have a resilience story to share?
- Do you want to ask for support for a thorny issue you’re working through?
- How do we build on this book?

We welcome contributions from diverse perspectives – activists, practitioners, funders, policy makers, students, volunteers and more.

2) Email
Contact report author Nick Wilding direct (nick@carnegieuk.org) to discuss this report – or opportunities connected with the Community of Practice more widely.

3) Twitter (twitter.com)
Follow @comresilience for live updates and news.

4) Community Resilience animation
Content from this handbook has been developed into a lively animated film. Find it at http://fieryspirits.com/page/inquiring-into-community

Healthy Engaged People
“I’m happy and fit in mind and body”

Inclusive, creative culture
“We’re confident in our diversity – creating a great future together”

Localised economy within ecological limits
“We steward our land, food, water, energy, services, jobs, housing”

Cross-community links
“We collaborate with other communities near and far – we know no place can go it alone”
A note on defining community resilience

... if resilience is the ability to respond constructively to the unknown – to the shocks that come upon us in society – those shocks can come from anywhere. We can anticipate some of them but surely not all of them. How do you prepare yourself for that degree of not known?

There is no universally agreed definition of ‘community resilience’. This may be a good thing. It means that local people can be free to come up with the definition that works for them. In some places using the term ‘community resilience’ might help to galvanise a group into action; in others, it might be off-putting. Ultimately, it doesn’t really matter what this work is called: what matters most is that it helps people future-proof their communities on the basis of agreed values. From this starting point, this book sets out to explore questions that include:

- How are communities already resilient? … and is it possible to ‘break through’ to create communities which are more resilient in the context of future challenges?
- What is community resilience, anyway? Can we boil it down to a few dimensions to keep in focus?
- What outside help from other communities, funders, government and others might be useful?

‘Resilience’ is a relative term that can look wildly different in different contexts and according to different developmental stages of community life. Likewise, ‘community’ is a contested idea that makes different kinds of sense according to the values, location and perspective of the reader.

How to read this handbook

The book has two parts, with appendices:

- **Part 1** sets the scene, investigating the opportunities and challenges for community resilience during turbulent times; and
- **Part 2** proposes a simple way of thinking about community resilience – a ‘resilience compass’ – that suggests four crucial dimensions of resilience building. We investigate each dimension in turn using quotes from CoP participants, case studies, and insights from the resilience literature.

**Appendices:** There are three appendices: a summary of the Community of Practice events that this book builds on, a sample ‘resilience compass’ workshop outline, and an introduction to a related ‘parabola’ model of change in organisations.

Optimised for reading on screen.

The downloadable version of this handbook is optimised for on-screen reading, including many ‘live’ links to make it very easy to click through to toolkits, references, newspaper articles and much more. There are internal links too – such as the page numbers in the table of contents.
Word Cloud

On many websites a ‘word cloud’ helps visitors to get a quick feel of a site’s content... We copied the idea to generate a ‘cloud’ of key words used throughout this book (thanks to www.wordle.net for the software that makes this easy). The relative size of the word indicates how many times it appears in the text – the largest appearing most frequently:
This part of the book sets some broad context – looking at issues of both practice and policy – which later sections build on.

It begins by looking again at something of what’s been learned following the Cumbrian floods of November 2009.

1.1 Case Story: resilient responses to the Cumbria floods of 2009

On Thursday 19th November 2009 over sixty Cumbrian communities experienced a torrential downpour. Each has a story to tell of those days when British records were broken: two towns in particular – Cockermouth and Workington – were thrust into the spotlight as the national news media streamed dramatic pictures of the Cocker and Derwent rivers as they broke their banks, plunging businesses, shops and homes under water. In Cockermouth levels rose to 2.5 metres (8ft 2in). As the waters rushed downstream, PC Bill Barker lost his life as the Northside Bridge collapsed and not long afterwards two further bridges collapsed, splitting Workington in two.

1200 properties lost their electricity supply and people were stranded but local volunteers and emergency services quickly rose to the challenge. While RAF helicopters from three bases rescued 48 people, the RNLI deployed forty-one volunteers within five hours in nine inshore lifeboats, rescuing about 300 people, Mountain Rescue volunteers worked tirelessly. The full extent of the voluntary effort could be glimpsed at Christ Church, in the town’s South Street, which became a local hub of operations. Cumbria Voluntary Agencies Committee and Cumbria Constabulary worked side by side to ensure the immediate response was co-ordinated and effective.

Margarette Driscoll, writing in the Sunday Times (18th July 2010), described how “some volunteers were handing out tea and cake; others were organising teams to go into flooded homes and rescue precious pieces of furniture or photo albums. The Red Cross was on hand for medical emergencies, Age UK was helping with shocked and shaken elderly people and a new organisation, Street Angels, was just being set up to offer support when the waters subsided and people attempted to return to their homes.”

A few days later in Workington, Royal Engineers set to work building a new footbridge, to be named after PC Barker. On its completion, the BBC interviewed Inspector Mark Wear (Workington Police): “This footbridge is a tangible symbol of how we are starting to rebuild the area and getting back to normal”. …
As soon as news broke of the impending bad weather, the Cumbria Community Foundation had initiated plans to set up a Cumbria Flood Recovery Fund. The fund raised more than £1m. Deb Muscat, co-ordinator of the fund testifies that Cumbria’s “strong volunteering ethos and density of activists” has been a very significant factor in enabling the recovery of the region. She is working with third sector partners from across Cumbria to research the contribution the sector has made to both easing hardship in the immediate aftermath, as well as the longer term work of rebuilding social networks, enabling dispersed friends to connect regularly, supporting businesses and clubs with insurance claims, improving flood defences... and sustaining the psychological health people who, after three months of living away from home (perhaps with the relatives), are showing signs of stress.

Revisiting her initial story several months later, Driscoll wrote another story that sought out an angle on the ‘Big Society’. She interviewed Cockermouth GP John Howarth about how the “most extraordinary upsurge of community spirit” following the floods had enabled his surgery to initiate some changes in the way his practice delivered better health outcomes: offering Age UK a peppercorn rent to share premises, Howarth advocates that co-location enables Age UK’s volunteers to support more older people to stay in their homes, cutting down on expensive hospital visits. The idea is that money saved by the NHS will go to support further health-related initiatives such as the local University of the Third Age, “a big social network” which runs courses which are “a good alternative to antidepressants for someone who’s lonely and depressed”. We then discover that Howarth and colleagues have found inspiration for some of this innovation in John McKnight’s ideas about asset-based community development: “He’s given us a different view of the community that we serve, and that was crystallised during the flood, when so many people came forward and were willing to help”.

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Facing into a ‘perfect storm’: resilience practice and policy in times of rapid change
There are many more stories of Cumbrian resilience to be learned from. Terry McCormick of Action with Communities in Cumbria has noted that “Keswick had/has one of the best emergency plans in place in the UK and this enabled a ‘bounce-back’ to ‘Keswick is open for business’ in a matter of days”. In our conversations with Cumbrian activists and volunteers, we picked up a determined urgency to their continuing work, now focusing on building on and sharing lessons from what has been achieved so far: the question on their minds is when, not if, more shocks will arrive. The sector has been assisted in this task by the Big Lottery, which has demonstrated considerable foresight by pro-actively funding local organisations to capture lessons learned. The Northern Rock Foundation has also been notably active supporting learning and the recovery work of local organisations.

The research tests how resilience thinking can be better built into community-led planning processes; and trialing ‘Community Emergency Plans’ in four rural communities – to enable communities to survive without outside assistance for 36-48 hours following a future emergency event.

There are already insights worth noting:

1. Deb Muscat, of the Cumbria Flood Recovery Fund, has testified that the shocks of Foot and Mouth in 2001 and then flooding in Carlisle and surrounding area in 2005 left people better prepared for the events of 2009. In particular, there are today improved systems of preparation, co-ordination and collective learning. It seems that the idea that resilience is like a muscle is born out in practice – a sentiment reaffirmed by the Global Resilience Network:

   Resilience is like a muscle ... that must be developed in advance and consistently exercised [to] be both strong enough to withstand severe challenges and flexible enough to handle a wide range of unpredictable forces.

   http://www.globalresiliency.net

2. An RNLI volunteer, interviewed by Third Sector newspaper, said that “some of the fire and rescue service boats weren’t capable of doing the job…. We were more or less the experts in the field, so we were tasking people as we saw fit”. This anecdote suggests the ways in which such events can catalyse new working arrangements between voluntary organisations and emergency services – representing a step-change in the effective deployment of resources?

3. The Cumbria Flood Recovery Fund has amassed a lot of insight into how best to support families long after the initial event. This know-how will be valuable for others to learn from.
1.2 Learning from Katrina

In November 2009, Community of Practice members met in Kendal, Cumbria just as the flood waters were beginning to rise. One session focused on community resilience – and attracted sixty participants who didn’t need reminding about the significance of the howling wind and lashing rain outside. Over ninety minutes, we thought hard about what community resilience was about – and shared some of our questions about the topic.

One contributor came from a social enterprise called Hillholt Wood in Lincolnshire. Hillholt has attracted local and national attention of late because, at a time when councils are cutting budgets, Hillholt is growing, and fast. The initiative started from what many would view as an unpromising and depleted scrap of woodland. Over several years, the dedicated staff and volunteers have unlocked the potential in this asset, and in the process have generated employment and training opportunities and a hive of community activity.

Hillholt co-founder Nigel Lowthrop is a regular contributor into the Community of Practice. During our Cumbria workshop, Nigel recalled hearing social capital pioneer Tom Sander speak about the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (2005) in New Orleans. He recalled that Sander had compared the experience of New Orleans with that of the villagers in Indonesia following the Tsunami of 26th December 2004:

The story hit a nerve in the room. As contributions followed, it became clear that many people concurred that social capital is a helpful framework for thinking about resilience building – and that the case of New Orleans is instructive. Following up the lead, a google search revealed an article that Sander wrote for the Boston Globe in November 2005:

‘Social capital’ describes the benefits of social networks. Having friends and being involved in groups not only secures jobs – more Americans get jobs through who they know than what they know – but improves one’s health, education, and happiness...

Relatively recently our hearts were pained by a sea of black and poor victims, trapped on the Gulf Coast pre-Hurricane without an exit. We notice that they were carless and lacked money for bus fare, meals, and hotels. But far fewer notice that the poor were equally trapped by a dearth of these social connections, especially crossing economic lines. Specifically, they lacked affluent friends to give them a ride, lacked contacts to negotiate heavily discounted hotel rates, and lacked out-of-town relatives with extra bedrooms.

Boston Globe November 14th 2005

Sander contributes to ‘the Saguaro Seminar’ at John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University – see http://www.hks.harvard.edu/saguaro/

For the Boston Globe article, see http://www.boston.com/news/globe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2005/11/14/a_friend_in_need/

Nigel Lowthrop (transcribed from Cumbria event recording)
Building community resilience involves developing the ‘social capital’ of a community. A growing international movement has developed the practice and theory of social capital since the 1970s. Robert Putnam’s book Bowling Alone built on previous work by Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman by describing the ways we can enhance wellbeing by strengthening “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.” Putnam’s research showed that “in measurable and well-documented ways, social capital makes an enormous difference to our lives.”

Tom Sander has outlined three types of social capital:

**Bonding capital** is the close ties between people in similar situations – such as family and close friends. It builds trust, reciprocity, and a shared sense of belonging and identity.

**Bridging capital** is the looser ties to similar people, such as loose friendships, colleagues, or perhaps people we meet through social networking sites. It builds broader, more flexible identities and enables innovations to be shared across networks.

**Linking capital** helps ensure that people with different levels of power and status meet and learn from one another. It is the ability of groups to access networks of power and resources beyond their immediate community.

Sander’s article points out how the disaster revealed how Katrina revealed the rifts between New Orleans’ citizens. Whilst some used their savings and ‘linking’ capital to escape, others had little choice but to stay and risk death.

Eighteen months after the hurricane, the Washington Post reported how thousands of volunteers were supporting residents in New Orleans’ Lower Ninth Ward to gut houses so they could be eligible for federal rebuilding funds. By 2010, a Community Reinvestment Conference meeting in New Orleans brought together many hopeful stories in a podcast called Lots of Feet on the Street: Communities, Culture and the Rebuilding of New Orleans.

Meanwhile, a resurgent private sector was celebrating its success in driving forward major reforms in public service provision. On August 26th, 2010 Newsweek reported how the entire schooling system had been re-designed in favour of new private charter schools.

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/12/26/AR2006122600774.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/12/26/AR2006122600774.html)


The article quotes Paul Vallas, a superintendent of the Recovery School District: “We used Katrina as an opportunity to build—not rebuild, but build … an overwhelmingly publicly funded, predominantly privately run school system.” The article did not, however, point out the controversy surrounding this move: many African-American parents fought the move, fearful that the principle established by the civil rights movement that all children should receive the same standard of education might be reversed.

The speed and scale of these changes reveals how shocks can open opportunities for those promoting radical change—whatever the values informing this change. In her book The Shock Doctrine, Naomi Klein make a similar point when she quotes Milton Friedman’s 1962 manifesto for free market economics, Capitalism and Freedom:

Only a crisis – actual or perceived – produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable… a new administration has some six to nine months in which to achieve major changes; if it does not act decisively during that period, it will not have another such opportunity.

Klein goes on to note that three months after the New Orleans levees broke Friedman chose as the topic of his final Wall Street Journal column (he died shortly afterwards) the opportunity presented to the Bush administration to promote a voucher system enabling charter school development.

At the end of our Cumbria workshop, groups reported back on the topics they’d chosen to focus on. Some had looked at issues of leadership. One group in particular reported a conversation about how civil society leadership is crucial during times of shock: these are moments when civil society organisations need to be at their most active, organised and effective—and yet these are also the times when it can be hard to look beyond immediate questions of community and organisational survival. Others responded to the conversation by asking how community based organisations can stay on the ‘front foot’ during these times—holding vested interests to account through the democratic process—and ensuring that positive, community-led solutions win visibility and support. During times of rapid change, one contributor suggested, the direction of transformation will be determined by the values of those ready and willing to exploit these times.

Both Friedman quotes are Klein (ibid.) quoting Milton Friedman, Capitalism and Freedom (1962: 2).
1.3 Leading community resilience: sources of inspiration

This small community has just built its own community centre, new church and a curling rink and homes for seniors, which is what they call their older people. They have attracted some funding in from government but most of that was physically done with their own hands...they realised that if they wanted something they had to do it themselves and they had the skills within their community. It is that local intent and community leadership that has led to quite remarkable achievements in a very small very rural community which was focusing on the local leadership...

Participant, 2009 Carnegie UK Trust Rural Convention, reporting on a visit to Nova Scotia

Significant community development takes place only when local community people are committed to investing themselves and their resources in the effort.... community builders are refocusing attention on capacities and assets, and are inventing new methods for mobilising neighbourhood residents.

Kretzmann and McKnight, Building Communities from the Inside Out (1993)

Across the UK and Ireland there are many, many activists and practitioners whose work often flies under the media radar, but who can play a role in shaping the resilience-enabling policy of the future. They range from social entrepreneurs in Argyll and Bute who are coming together with council staff to sustain (through re-invention) local services even as austerity measures bite hard; to unlikely alliances of retired servicemen, ethical bankers and land campaigners who are creating community land trusts to deliver affordable local housing and many other benefits. They are logistics experts in Devon who have invented a new way to distribute healthy food direct to people on low incomes, and we have learned lessons from the dedication of a tiny team who put on an annual ‘festival of stewardship’ for 10,000 people on a shoestring budget.

And in Tipperary we have met a tenacious group that, over ten years, has changed planning legislation to bring world-class rural development to Cloughjordan bringing jobs, businesses and hope even as the wider Irish economy buckles.

These practitioners are redefining what we understand by community leadership. Rather than the more traditional idea of a community ‘gatekeeper’, we understand a leader to be someone (anyone) who steps forward to take initiative with the support of local people. To this end, community of practice events allow participants the space to recognise, celebrate and at times challenge each others’ practice as community leaders. Often some big insights can come when we use this space to explore the assumptions, motivations and sources of inspiration that underpin our work.

Whilst professionals might describe these sources in terms of their role or training in a particular tradition (such as ‘asset based’ or ‘endogenous’ development), activists may take a more eclectic stance, involving ‘hoovering up’ good ideas wherever they can be found – and applying them whenever they seem to ‘fit’.

This section weaves between these two stances to reveal some of the sources of inspiration that are informing the work of the resilience pioneers we have met.

See the Big Tent festival, Fife at www.bigtentfestival.co.uk
See www.absen.org.uk
See Carnegie UK Trust’s publication Appreciating Assets has already offered an overview of some of these traditions.
See the Stroud Co Food Hub (with open source software) at www.stroudco.co.uk; the Fife Diet at www.fifediet.co.uk; and Falkland Centre for Stewardship’s report Our Mutual Food at http://www.centreforstewardship.org.uk/oneplanetfood.htm
Moses Coady and the Antigonish movement

Moses Coady was born into a large Irish Catholic family on a farm in the Margaree Valley of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, in 1882. As a boy, he saw young men and women leaving the valley for industrial jobs far away – in coal mines and steel mills such as Edgar Thomson Steel Works in Braddock, Pennsylvania, where Andrew Carnegie started his steel empire. Coady would go on to spend a lifetime searching for solutions that would mean young people had a choice about whether to leave or not, addressing what he termed a “weird pessimism (that) so benumbed everybody that nothing has been attempted to break the spell.” In 1927, Coady testified before a Canadian government commission that adult education – which he summed up as learning skills in critical thinking, scientific methods of planning and production, and co-operative entrepreneurship – could transform and revitalise local rural economies.

These credit unions offered what many would call microcredit today, enabling farmers, fishers and miners to survive the toughest days of the Great Depression of the 1930s. By 1945 there were over 400 credit unions, with 70,000 members and $4.2 million in assets. Reflecting on this success, Coady summed up the Antigonish philosophy with the phrase ‘use what you have to secure what you have not’.

Today, the Coady International Institute at St. Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia continues to evolve the Antigonish tradition of ‘igniting leadership’ “with innovative people and organisations to create effective, practical and sustainable solutions to reduce global poverty and injustice”.

Popular education: ‘rehearsing’ resilience

The Antigonish movement can be seen as part of a broader popular education movement that emerged in many places through the early twentieth century. What Coady called ‘weird pessimism’, Brazilian Paulo Freire termed a ‘culture of silence’ that he proposed came about as rural people uncritically accepted the view of ‘oppressors’ that they were by nature backward and unable to rise about their station.

Breaking this culture of silence, Freire proposed, involved changing education from a ‘banking’ model (which assumes that people are empty vessels to be filled by other peoples’ knowledge) to an approach that enables people to decide what to learn, and how to learn it, for themselves. He called this new way of learning ‘conscientisation’ – becoming more conscious of the potential in places and people, and critical of the structures in society which maintain power imbalances.

Contributions such as Freire’s helped people to understand how to recover from the adverse impacts of colonisation. It helped to inspire a mass literacy movement amongst the landless poor in Latin America throughout the 1960s and 1970s, which was supported by a radicalised Catholic clergy. This movement sowed ideas that still reverberate across Latin America (as well as Africa, India and even the UK and Ireland) today.


Having won the endorsement of the Maclean Commission, Coady and his colleague Father Jimmy Tompkins won the support of both the Carnegie and Rockefeller Foundations to expand the reach of what they called the Antigonish movement. In the following years, and through the voluntary efforts of thousands of villagers engaging in study clubs, a raft of new credit unions and co-operatives were established, supporting agricultural marketing, fish canning, dairy farming, retail sales and housing.

This history helps to explain why some CoP participants find popular education methods good resources for thinking about resilience today (see, for example, Anne Hope and Sally Timmel’s Training for Transformation books, full of exercises for use by community groups).

For example, some popular educators have discovered the power of using simulation exercises to enable community groups to ‘rehearse’ real life scenarios before they encounter them. The same idea is behind Lord Sugar’s The Apprentice TV show, which pits young executive hopefuls against each other through a gruelling series of sales tasks; likewise, the armed forces and emergency services regularly conduct exercises as if they were in real-life combat or responding to nuclear power accidents, terrorist incidents and the like.

When set up by skilled trainer, simulations can generate learning that may otherwise take years to amass: the Cumbrian story has already demonstrated that rehearsal may be a crucial element in exercising the resilience ‘muscle’. Workshops can last anything from an hour to many days: groups are plunged into exaggerated scenarios that involve heightened stress, hazards, opportunities, and challenges. If done outdoors in unfamiliar environments, the learning can be even greater as participants aren’t able to fall back on their usual routines or knowledge. Crucially, an effective simulation exercise must build in enough time for ‘unpacking’ the learning afterwards – in this way, blind-spots are revealed, confidence increases, and community capacity can be strengthened.

**Resources**

Resources CoP members are finding useful include:

- The ‘Bare Foot Guide’ – see [http://www.barefootguide.org](http://www.barefootguide.org) – developed by the Cape Town based Centre for Developmental Practice.
- Conflict transformation and resolution approaches;
- Carnegie UK Trust’s handbook and guide to ‘power analysis’.

See [http://democracy.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/democracy/power_tools](http://democracy.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/democracy/power_tools)

Participatory Action Research

... there's a risk of making 'resilience' an output ... [for example, acting in new voice:] “I'm a community network manager: I'm going to manage your resilience, you'll be more resilient under me!... And I represent the organisation that has made you so poor in the first place – but it's OK!

Carnegie UK Trust Community of Practice participant

‘Sustainability’ smacks of academia, clever people coming in to tell you what to do, whereas ‘resilience’ smacks of something you do for yourself or you do for your community... A group I work with ...middle aged, Welsh speaking men finding a way of existing, continuing, building in a community and in a society that's rapidly changing around them. It's related in a sense to resistance... so you have resistance, and then you build resilience... they've been resisting for so long you can get stuck in the negatives ... but with resilience you can actually move the thing on.

Participant, Sense of Place event within Fiery Spirits Community of Practice, 2008

A recurrent theme at Community of Practice events is frustration voiced by activists about professionals who hold onto power inappropriately; and the frustration of professionals who feel themselves trapped within institutions and ways of working that don't match their values. But we have also heard how an approach called ‘participatory action research’ (PAR) can help to break the impasse ... by enabling the ‘co-production’ of resilience outcomes.

PAR has its roots in the 1980s and 90s when some development professionals started questioning their work within the international ‘aid industry’. In his book Challenging the Professions, Robert Chambers (of the Institute for Development Studies, Sussex) proposed replacing or re-skilling ‘normal professionals’ to become ‘new professionals’, skillful in enabling service of community-led agendas (rather than imposing change from above/ outside). The phrase ‘on tap, not on top’ was coined: these people would be first and foremost accomplished listeners, trust-builders, networkers and facilitators. Courses were developed to help professionals make the shift.

In this way, PAR facilitators would support communities as they took ownership of their own research agendas. Research would be ‘with people, not on them’, and the values of diversity and inclusion would be at the heart of the approach: the assumption is that social justice outcomes are more likely if the full diversity of community voices can be heard and respected.

These are values that resonate with many members of our Community of Practice. Ensuring inclusion remains at the core of effective community development work, and workshop participants affirmed their view that PAR tools (which have evolved considerably) continue to be some of the best ways to ensuring diverse local voices play a full part in resilience building.

As communities take more charge of their own research agendas (and see their developing story as a valuable community asset in itself), local researchers can learn about patterns of resilience or vulnerability within a community. Rather than relying on outsiders to design research purposes, methodologies and write up results, PAR puts local people in the driving seat. Local people decide if and when to draw on outside expertise. They then define the terms on which this expertise is hired (often in the role of a ‘critical friend’ to challenge local blind-spots and assumptions, as well as offering technical expertise).

This kind of work is particularly well developed beyond the UK and Ireland. International relief and development agencies such as Christian Aid, ActionAid, Practical Action, and Oxfam have long track-records championing participatory approaches to benefit the most vulnerable communities and regions. Many of the fruits of their work are available online. For example, ActionAid International’s Participatory Vulnerability Analysis toolkit begins by acknowledging how daunting it can be for local people to begin this work:

Action Aid’s ‘Participatory Vulnerability Toolkit’ is available for download, along with many other international agency toolkits, from http://www.preventionconsortium.org/?pageid=29. For example, ActionAid’s toolkit has as an early step a table about identifying ‘available information’ and ‘information gaps’ in existing knowledge towards better understanding the ‘vulnerable situation’ (its extent and ability of people to cope); the causes of this vulnerability; and the community assets and sources of external support available.

Anyone faced with the prospect of eating an elephant would be daunted. Too big! Where to start? But faced with manageable pieces the prospect appears more comprehensible. So with vulnerability – faced with such a complex concept there seems little prospect of addressing it. But if analysed as a participatory process, some specific solutions will become apparent for any particular context.

Roger Yates, Head of International Emergencies Team, Christian Aid

Christian Aid has developed and tested an integrated approach to disaster risk reduction incorporating innovative ideas such as encouraging local communities to track their own experiences of unusual weather events, and then compare them with climate science models. A formula has been designed to inform this process:

\[
\text{Climate Risk} = \text{Climate change trends and variability} \times \text{Likely exposure to these trends} \times \text{vulnerability capacity to adapt}
\]

A particularly useful innovation in the Christian Aid approach is an appreciation that local knowledge and climate science can help each other to develop more accurate models: Where science and local knowledge agree, confidence increases. Where they disagree reveals interesting points for discussion. For example, a low-density network of meteorology stations may miss flash floods cited by the community as a major emerging threat. On the other hand, community knowledge may be vulnerable to biases which need to be addressed by the scientific record.

Christian Aid’s approach as summarised in Richard Ewbank presentation at December 2009 Practical Action Seminar, further useful international resources all available from: http://www.practicalaction.org/reducing-vulnerability/integrating-approaches-seminar#posters

Knowing about ‘climate risk’ really matters in places where impacts from disrupted weather patterns can make the difference between life or death.

Professor Paedar Kirby is one of the first residents in an ‘ecovillage’ development within Cloughjordan, County Tipperary, Ireland. His work has taken him all around the world, especially to Latin America, working alongside communities who are surviving against the odds and fighting for their basic human rights. Paedar has seen how trends in economic globalisation and climate change has contributed to bringing some communities to their knees, whilst others survive with community spirit intact. A key lesson of his travels is that “to really know how resilient we are, we must first understand our vulnerability”.

Whole systems thinking

‘Vulnerability is the flip side of Resilience’
Professor Paedar Kirby, University of Limerick, Ireland

There is no power for change like a community discovering what it cares about
Margaret Wheatley, author of Turning to One Another

In 2007, Carnegie UK Trust’s Commission for Rural Development published a Charter for Rural Communities that adopted a ‘flower’ metaphor to propose twelve characteristics of the ‘rural community of the future’:

The Commissioners’ job, as they saw it, was to open urban and rural eyes to the capital assets of the countryside, and to give the people who live and work in rural areas the keys to a sustainable future. It was a radical change in policy for the Commission’s parent, the Carnegie UK Trust, who had to move beyond their traditional focus on rural grass-roots funding to the bigger picture: an overview which identified the structural and systemic challenges in rural areas, examined the whole mechanism for sustaining rural life and proposed solutions.

Dame Diana Brittan, Chair, Commission for Rural Communities (2007)

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Dame Diana Brittan, Chair, Commission for Rural Communities (2007)
As the Commission’s Chair made clear, a key innovation coming from the work was to take a systems view of rural development – stressing how the most successful rural communities are those which take a ‘joined up’ view of developing all manner of community assets.

This insight has much in common with innovations that have emerged in other areas of policy making in recent years. For example, in 1999 the UK Department for International Development (DfID) set out a ‘livelihoods’ framework through a series of guidance sheets (see www.livelihoods.org/info) suggested that a “livelihood is sustainable when a person or household can face or recover from shock and stress and at the same time maintain or improve their resources and capacities without deteriorating their natural resource base”. The idea was that community well-being involves five core resources (or ‘capitals’) – human, social, natural, physical, and financial.

DfID’s ‘capitals’ approach was part of a wider shift in development thinking that Caroline Moser has summed up in her book Reducing Global Poverty: the Case for Asset Accumulation:

Moser’s definition is careful to reflect the complexity of communities: resilience is a function of personal, family, whole community and larger scale interactions. Livelihoods approaches recognise that communities are fluid: each place follows its unique evolutionary path, increasingly influenced by patterns of migration and virtual connectivity through high speed internet connections which mean that ‘local’ people may hardly relate even to the street in which where they live.

This complexity gives rise to lots of practical and policy challenges. Some researchers in Carnegie’s Rural Action Research Programme tackled this by setting out to unearth how one person’s ‘asset’ may be another’s ‘liability’ – and how this perspective might change as their circumstances alter.

Community activists might recognise this issue more concretely, asking how it is fair that one resident can enjoy Mediterranean cruises whilst a neighbour might fall ill from being unable to heat their house (whilst their home heating oil prices sky-rocket).

See for example work undertaken by the New Economics Foundation for Carnegie’s Rural Action Research Programme: Enterprise Ecology, Multi-strand Livelihoods and Rural Community Development available from http://rural.carnegeuktrust.org.uk/rarp/sustainable_assets/new_economics_foundation

Asset-based approaches in development focus on how [people] use their resource base to develop strategies for acquiring, mobilising, expanding, and preserving their assets... asset-based approaches address inequality in resource endowments and access to opportunity, providing a concrete way to measure empowerment and ultimately sustainable reduction in poverty... Ownership and effective mobilisation of assets help establish personal and family security and encourage risk taking and diversification of productive and social activities.

Caroline Moser: Reducing Global Poverty: The Case for Asset Accumulation
As capitals approaches have evolved, they have attempted to tackle this reality. For example, some CoP members are experimenting with a ‘seven capitals’ assets approach originally developed by Cornelia Flora and colleagues at the North Central Regional Centre for Rural Development, Iowa State University.

Based on their analyses of entrepreneurial communities, they determined that the communities that were successful in supporting healthy sustainable community and economic development (CED) paid attention to seven types of capital: natural, cultural, human, social, political, financial and built... this approach focuses on the interaction among these seven capitals and how they build upon one another... evaluators can trace how an investment in human capital, for example leadership training, might impact financial capital as leaders use their skills to acquire new funds and better manage existing funds. Social capital may then be impacted as members of the leadership program develop new bonds among themselves and new bridges among the groups with whom they interact. The same leadership course might consequently expand political capital by providing information about how the political system works and how to access resources within the community; it could also help participants develop key linkages to other sources of political power.

Some practitioners infer from Flora et al.’s seven capitals model that community resilience relates directly to building circles of virtuous activity between these seven capitals. This is an example of how this theory can help to simplify the everyday ‘mess’ of community action in ways that help to sharpen resolve and steel nerves in order to keep going through what can seem like daunting challenges. The framework can also be useful for professionals deciding how and when to respond to requests for support by local leaders. As more and more practitioners report on their experiments using ‘seven capitals’ approaches, we will be better able to gauge how effectively this approach supports resilience outcomes.

Another source of inspiration founded in systems thinking cited often by resilience pioneers is a well established approach to community and agricultural design called permaculture. Australians Bill Mollison and David Holmgren are widely regarded as founding this movement through a series of publications in the 1970s:

Today, permaculture is a flourishing and well established field. Evidence of its influence and reach is clear through the fast-growing Transition Towns movement, which emerged out of the work of a group of permaculture students tutored by Rob Hopkins in Kinsale, Ireland. David Holmgren’s ‘Permaculture Principles’ internet site is a good resource for beginners – and also uses a ‘petal’ metaphor to communicate this sophisticated approach:
Permaculture (Permanent Agriculture) is the conscious design and maintenance of agriculturally productive ecosystems which have the diversity, stability, and resilience of natural ecosystems. It is the harmonious integration of landscape and people providing their food, energy, shelter, and other material and non-material needs in a sustainable way. Without permanent agriculture, there is no possibility of a stable social order...

The philosophy behind permaculture is one of working with, rather than against nature; of protracted and thoughtful observation rather than protracted and thoughtless action; of looking at systems in all their functions rather than asking only one yield of them; and of allowing systems to demonstrate their own evolutions.

Bill Mollison’s Permaculture: A Designer’s Manual

Systems thinking is not confined to any one discipline or practical field. Instead, it has evolved in many different fields. Early pioneers include Kurt Lewin who famously said that ‘if you want to truly understand something, try to change it’, and applied systems thinking principles to developing a new approach to research ‘action research’. It was also systems thinking that gave academics the tools to begin to think rigorously about what makes systems ‘resilient’ in the face of change.

An early pioneer was Canadian ecologist Crawford Stanley Buzz’ Holling who, in 1973, applied the term ‘resilience’ to describe how forests persist through cycles of change. His paper challenged forest management orthodoxy with a deceptively simple message:

For most of the time, Holling observed, a forest matures at a slow pace. However, as the forest ages, young trees are crowded out and species diversity dwindles. This makes the forest increasingly vulnerable to shocks, to the point when it can ‘snap’ as (for example) a fire rips through at speed. However, such fires (when not lit by humans) are part of the natural cycle and perform vital regenerative functions: as the old wood burns up, dormant seeds germinate and receive light from new shafts of sunlight that reach the forest floor once more. The forest is resilient by virtue of this cycle of continuous renewal.

The lesson was that forest managers needed to learn how to recognise phases of stability, increasing brittleness, and then rapid change – and to work with them. We can sum up the lesson as: if you ‘work with nature, rather than against her’, then the system will be naturally resilient. In recent years, ecologists had undertaken enough research to begin to propose how lessons from natural systems might be transferable to human systems, too. To support this work, they propose definitions of resilience which tend to stress the capacity of a system or organisation to evolve without losing its core sense of identity or purpose:

1 the amount of change a system can undergo and still remain coherent;
2 the degree to which the system is capable of self-organisation; and

International agencies have gone on to build on this work, including the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR) which defines resilience as:

The capacity of a system, community or society potentially exposed to hazards to adapt, by resisting or changing in order to reach and maintain an acceptable level of functioning and structure. This is determined by the degree to which the social system is capable of organising itself to increase its capacity for learning from past disasters for better future protection and to improve risk reduction measures.
Resilience: self-organisation through diversity, modularity and feedbacks

An early example of applying resilience thinking to human systems is the work of Donella Meadows (1941-2001) and colleagues, who wrote a report called ‘Limits to Growth’ (1972) – one of the first examples of computers being used to model future scenarios of population growth and resource depletion on the planet. The Limits to Growth report originally caused a stir because its ‘World3’ model, based on 12 scenarios using data from 1900 to 2100, predicted catastrophic ‘overshoot’ (human activity growing too big too fast) of the earth’s capacity to sustain human civilisation. Today, there is much in the media about what happens when ecosystems are pushed beyond ‘tipping point’ – and many people are recognising the connections between the over-exploitation of fisheries, mines, forests, the collapse of rural economies, and the social shocks that follow. See for example the End of the Line – a powerful film that spells out the consequences of over-fishing: http://endoftheline.com/

In 1992, the team wrote a twentieth anniversary update called Beyond the Limits, which presented new evidence that by the early 1990s human civilisation had already ‘overshot’ the natural limits of many of earth’s life-support systems. Ten years later, Limits to Growth: The 30Year Update suggested the process of break-down, or ‘collapse’, had begun as spirals of over-extended resource use, accelerating loss of species, poverty and climate change connect and feed off each other. See http://www.mnforsustain.org/meadows_limits_to_growth_30_year_update_2004.htm

The process of understanding how things influence one another within a whole. In nature, systems thinking examples include ecosystems in which various elements such as air, water, movement, plants, and animals work together to survive or perish. In organisations, systems consist of people, structures, and processes that work together to make an organisation healthy or unhealthy. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Systems_thinking

http://www.sustainer.org/meadows/

In the 1970s this way of thinking was still in its infancy and the early ecologists struggled to broadcast their findings. Meadows’ response was to start a regular column in her local newspaper. In one article, she wrote:

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Scientists are becoming increasingly well-resourced and influential. Stockholm’s Resilience Institute works with governments, international agencies and others, and a number of authors have begun to translate complex systems ideas for lay audiences.

In their book Resilience Thinking, Walker and Salt (2006: 121) draw attention to three key aspects of any system’s resilience: diversity, modularity and tightness of feedbacks:

Diversity

The more diverse a system is, the more capacity it has to withstand shock – because there are more options available to fall back on. Many people intuitively understand this principle, captured by the phrase ‘don’t put all your eggs in one basket’, or the idea of a ‘buffer’.

Mathematicians have used network theory to define resilience as made up of two key variables – diversity and interconnectivity. In a paper applying this thinking to explain why the global financial system remains unstable following the 2007 credit crunch, economist Bernard Lietaer describes resilience as the opposite of ‘efficiency’:
“In general, a system’s resilience is enhanced by more diversity and more connections, because there are more channels to fall back on in times of trouble or change. Efficiency, on the other hand, increases through streamlining, which usually means reducing diversity and connectivity... Because both are indispensable for long-term sustainability and health, the healthiest flow systems are those that maintain an optimal balance between these two opposing pulls”.

In the same paper, Lietaer proposes that the ‘optimal balance’ is found when resilience is valued about twice as highly as efficiency.

This is not an abstract point. When business or government goes for ‘greater efficiency’ by cutting ‘waste’, there is the danger that longer term sustainability will be undermined. For example, The Scotsman newspaper reported on 16 February 2011 that campaigners fear that cuts to the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) were implemented before the risks of these cuts were adequately understood. One of the threatened services are tug-boats. The campaigner’s concern is that without enough spare tugs, do risks of a major environmental disaster from a tanker oil spill increase dramatically?

For the sake of short-term efficiency, could the resilience of marine ecosystems (and communities relying on the health of the seas for their sustainability) suffer? The April 2010 Deepwater Horizon Gulf of Mexico spill underlines these questions.

A New Economics Foundations’ 2008 booklet *Nine Meals from Anarchy* applies the same principle to take on ‘just in time’ practices that supermarkets employ to stock food:

“Imagine that the petrol stations ran dry. The trucks would stop rolling. The supermarket shelves would be bare within three days. We would be nine meals away from anarchy.”

Food campaigners make other, related points, such as the importance of retaining diversity and distinctiveness in town centres. Without small shops and a unique sense of identity that comes from having pride in a local place, it’s that much harder to build a resilience local economy.

**Modularity**

This principle is about ensuring that if one part of a system breaks, it doesn’t bring everything else down with it.

The Centre for Alternative Technology (CAT) at Machynlleth, Wales has long pioneered leading edge renewable technologies. During 2010, CAT ran a series of seminars on how to create a Zero Carbon Britain. One contributor, Gunna Olsen of the European International Network for Sustainable Energy (INFORSE) spelled out the importance of ‘modularity’ by explaining Denmark’s strategy for creating a distributed or ‘cellular’ energy grid:

As with diversity, we can apply the ‘modularity’ idea to look again at many things communities take for granted today. For example, continuing with our food example – depending on only a few supermarkets to supply the vast majority of a nation’s food (each reliant on very long supply lines) might suggest greater food vulnerability than many people realise – especially as climate change and speculation begin to have real impacts on commodity prices.

**Feedback**

As an aspect of resilience, feedback means being able to quickly see and understand the consequences of our actions.

If you’re learning to drive a car, and steer too hard right, you immediately realise the mistake and take corrective action. But you may not also see the consequences of the carbon dioxide that is coming out of the exhaust – in this case, the feedback will take a long time to register, if it registers at all. In a sixty-second public information film ‘Tomorrow’s Climate – Today’s Challenge’ released in 2005, the UK government Department for Environment...
1.4 The politics of localisation: addressing the resilience imperative?

Shocks can act as wake-up calls, shaking us out of our habitual ‘silos’ as we come together to search for solutions to newly revealed challenges as well as existing thorny issues. For example, the aftermath of the 2007 credit crunch opened new kinds of spaces where policy makers and practitioners are asking how to build a more sustainable economy. The new politics of ‘localisation’, shared across major political parties, is one result.

As asset-based pioneers already know, local knowledge can lead to better local decisions – especially when a full range of local voices can participate in decision-making. Likewise, for policy makers sceptical about the efficacy of top-down decision making by a ‘nanny state’, thinking about the importance of tight feedback in systems can reinforce a view that local decisions are more likely to result in better outcomes.

This section looks briefly at how today’s policy makers are starting to address a ‘community resilience’ agenda.

Local communities facing Global Risks

Anything that helps us reflect and look at what we’re doing is going to be helpful … in particular, looking into whatever the future might be

Community activist interviewed at Sense of Place, Carnegie UK Trust sponsored Community of Practice event, 2010

Can we cope with the demands in the future on water? Can we provide enough energy? Can we do it, all that, while mitigating and adapting to climate change?

John Beddington, the UK government’s chief scientific adviser, speaking on 24 August 2009

As we have listened to Community of Practice and heard in depth about Cumbria’s responses to flood events, it has become clear that people in communities the length and breadth of the UK and Ireland (and beyond) are already grappling with the opportunities and challenges of times of rapid change.

Although there are those who maintain that climate change is yet to be proven, or that a return to ‘business as usual’ growth is both possible and desirable following the global credit crunch, many others are taking very seriously evidence of a raft of extraordinary new risks to community and national wellbeing into the future. The three most cited risks are the impacts arising from global shortages of resources including oil, runaway climatic instability and volatile energy prices.

Resilience depends on ‘tight’ feedbacks: that is, systems that are able to learn quickly from good information. The assumption is that the further away (in time or space or both) from the impacts of a decision, the greater the risk that a system’s resilience will be diminished. As Michael Shuman, author of ‘Going Local’, argues, “a guaranteed way to ensure that a car does not pollute is to stick the exhaust pipe into the passenger section. Similarly, a community committed to self-reliance will be mindful not to foul its own nest” (1998: 49).
climate change, and perhaps most fundamentally for the ecological health of our planet, the continuing acceleration of species loss (biodiversity).

In August 2009, UK chief scientist John Beddington warned that all these issues are inter-connected. Climate change, he said, is amplifying a ‘perfect storm’ of rapidly escalating food, water and energy costs: ‘tipping points’ in the earth’s climate system mean that it is becoming increasingly likely that future changes will be large and abrupt, rather than slow and gradual as many people imagine. Beddington’s speech echoed key insights that have emerged about the nature of change in natural systems that have emerged in recent years from the field of resilience science:

Sometimes change is gradual and things move forward in roughly continuous and predictable ways. At other times, change is sudden, disorganising and turbulent .... Evidence points to a situation where periods of such abrupt change are likely to increase in frequency and magnitude. This challenges the adaptive capacity of societies.

Stockholm Resilience Centre, What is Resilience?

Periods of such turbulence are, it seems, already becoming normal. For example, during a very short period in the early winter of 2010, French protestors blocked fuel supplies in protest at Sarkozy’s pension reforms; voters in the US mid-term elections returned ‘Tea Party’ candidates angry at all existing politicians; the UK coalition government faced growing union and student militancy; and crowds gathered in front of Ireland’s parliament furious that the Government support for the Irish banks had resulted in losing control of the Irish economy to the IMF and European bankers. As the winter of 2010/11 progressed, we witnessed epic climate-related floods of Queensland, Sri Lanka and Pakistan’s Swat Valley. And then, following the catastrophic Tsunami off Japan’s North East coast in March 2011, events in Fukushima reminded the world of the potential consequences of the bargain that energy hungry economies have struck with nuclear power.

In Nagoya in October 2010, delegates from 193 countries met under the auspices of the United Nations to agree to put under protection 17 percent of land and 10 percent of oceans by 2020 to stop the loss of plant and animal diversity in their ecosystems.

2010 was the hottest year ever recorded, with catastrophic flooding across swathes of China and Pakistan and increasing resource conflicts in Africa: surviving rapid, abrupt change is already the day to day experience of the majority of people living in poverty in rich and poor countries alike. As pressures increase on states, survival becomes harder. Internationally, the coal-face of resilience work is undertaken by international emergency relief organisations, such as Action Aid, Oxfam, World Vision and United Nations agencies such as the UN Development Programme and the UN Environment Programme – see for example http://www.unep.org/climatechange/UNEPsWork/Adaptation/tabid/241/Default.aspx

There is an excellent introductory video about ecological resilience available from http://www.stockholmresilience.org

See http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8213884.stm. See also Thomas Homer-Dixon’s (Centre for International Governance Innovation Chair of Global Systems at the Balsillie School of International Affairs in Waterloo, Canada) work on simultaneously catastrophic collapse, eg. http://www.tragedyoftheclim.com/, and the video output of FEASTA’s 2009 conference New Emergency Conference: Managing Risk and Building Resilience, at http://vimeo.com/feasta/videos. It is likely that international reports – such as that of the IPCC – significantly under-report the scale and speed of the global crisis. For example, Reuters reported in 2009 that a member of the IPCC told an American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting in Chicago that, due to the unpredictable nature of climate feedback loops (making them difficult to prove and therefore report), “the actual trajectory of climate change is more serious” than any of the climate predictions in the IPCC’s fourth assessment report in 2007.

This tipping point (or ‘threshold’) science means that the earth’s climate system may rapidly ‘flip’ into a state that will make it impossible to bounce back to ‘normal’. Instead, as Jim Lovelock has observed in Revenge of Gaia, the earth’s ‘new normal’ may be uninhabitable for much of humanity. Ice core samples from the North Pole prove that the earth has ‘flipped’ in this way before (See IPCC, 2007; UNDP, 2007; and Stern, 2007).

See http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/05/pakistan-floods-failure-state
During the autumn of 2010, however, another kind of story had caught the attention of the world’s media. For 69 days, thirty-three miners awaited rescue deep in the bowels of a Chilean mine. Video technology gave us a unique glimpse into their experience and coping strategies. Then, on 14th October, tens of millions watched as a subterranean pod shuttled each man to the surface in turn. When the final miner, Luis Urzua, stepped free, President Sebastian Pinera captured something of meaning of the moment: “We had strength, we had spirit, we wanted to fight, we wanted to fight for our families, and that was the greatest thing... You are not the same, and the country is not the same after this.” Had the Chilean mine rescue resonated because it touched something of the spirit of resilience of human beings everywhere? Did the international media pick up on the story with such passion because surviving in the face of tough odds speaks to something of the spirit of our age?

A new politics of leadership and localisation

We believe there is a great deal of latent talent, knowledge, ability and willingness in people to improve their communities that is currently not being used. The Government has a key role in unlocking this talent.

Just a week before the rescue in the Atacama Desert, David Cameron had attempted his own Pinera moment at the Conservative Party Conference in Birmingham. Cameron’s rallying cry was for a ‘Big Society’ where people everywhere pull together. He talked of austerity as a time of opportunity as well as challenge, the opportunity for entrepreneurs of all kinds to escape from the barriers of red tape and suffocating bureaucratic restrictions on innovation. “We need to change the way we think about ourselves, and our role in society”, Cameron announced to the hall of Tory stalwarts. Fellow proponents of this thinking, such as Philip Blond of think-tank Respublica, have called for a major shift in the relationship between citizens and their state:

The welfare state nationalised society because it replaced mutual communities with passive fragmented individuals whose most sustaining relationship was not with his or her neighbour or his or her community but with a distant and determining centre... this ‘benefits culture’ can be tied directly to the thwarting of working class ambition by a middle class elite that formed the machinery of the welfare state, yes to alleviate poverty, but also to deprive the poor of their irritating habit of autonomous organisation... This new civil state will turn itself over to its citizens; it will foster the power of association and allow its citizens to take it over rather as it had originally taken over them.

Philip Blond, The Future of Conservatism (speech)
In practice, emergency services, local and national government planners, and voluntary groups are increasingly working to develop emergency response strategies fit for scenarios from terrorist attacks to flu pandemics to coastal flooding to extreme snow events. As our inquiries have developed, however, we have heard many local voices suggesting that we have a long way to go. They identified a ‘resilience deficit’: how many emergency planning groups have adequately factored in the impacts of escalating oil prices? Where are local ‘transition town’ groups working in close partnership with the emergency services? And in our age of austerity, how do we resource ourselves to take steps to mitigate the future impacts of economic, social and environmental change?

In Resilient Nation, DEMOS suggested that ‘nudge’ economics might help – reflecting a wider swing toward ‘nudge’ thinking across public policy circles. The idea is to give people choices in a way that ‘helps’ us to make better decisions than we’d have otherwise opted for:

Nudge thinking is fast becoming standard issue in UK government policy circles – there is even a Behavioural Insight Team established at Downing Street, applying the thinking across many areas of government – beginning notably with public health (obesity, diet and alcohol policy). DEMOS has reported that local authorities are beginning to apply nudge thinking in relation to emergency planning. For example, North Norfolk District Council wanted to prevent residents from over-ordering sand-bags in advance of flood risks – too many people were inappropriately stock-piling them to protect gardens and outbuildings. This led to an unsustainable demand for the bags, and the risk that the bags would disintegrate come the actual floods because they degenerate over time. According to DEMOS, the Council’s decision to charge £2.50 for each bag beyond the first six delivered constituted an example of a ‘nudge’ in the right direction.

Nudge thinking has helped to fuel a wider critique of conventional approaches to policy making that have tended to propose more top-down, target-driven interventions – sometimes with perverse and unforeseeable impacts. For example, economist John Kay expounds on this shift through advocating for what he calls ‘oblique’ approaches:

In complex systems the blind watchmaker may be more effective than the sighted one. The ant colony is a social and economic organisation of subtlety and complexity, and no one planned it. Small children judge the size and speed of an approaching object with an accuracy that complex optics and computers find hard to emulate. If there is a one-line explanation of the power of obliquity, it would be: ‘Evolution is smarter than you are.’

John Kay, Obliquity, 2010:139
Kay is drawing on the field of complexity thinking—which shows how many individuals can act together for the greater good—especially if that co-operation is guided by an agreed set of working principles and sense of common purpose. The message is that ‘complexity’ can turn out to be a much simpler way to achieve policy outcomes that older command-and-control approaches: instead of the need for gate-keepers in communities or in key positions in organisations of any size, the leadership role becomes one of enabling collective innovation through many personal actions focused in favour of collective goals.

A new policy language of ‘wicked issues’ has developed to describe areas where complexity approaches may offer fresh hope. Building community resilience might be understood to be one such wicked issue: community development workers have long recognised that on-the-ground work is always ‘messy’ and requires special leadership qualities if people are to be well supported in taking collective charge of a community’s future (and constructively addressing conflicts in the process). Seamus Boland of Irish Rural Link succinctly summarised this in one session:

“The question really is how do you manage a system where leaders are active, where they are in tune with the knowledge and are in tune with the solutions?”

Seamus Boland, Irish Rural Link (speaking at Kendal)

The leadership challenge is sometimes described as being able to switch easily between seeing the big picture and getting on with day to day tasks:

“Once you have got a picture in your mind ... you can then start working towards it ... but if you don't know what it is that you are trying to create you are just stumbling forward...”

Hugh McLean, Atlantis Leisure, speaking at Carnegie Rural Convention, Kendal November 2009

Similarly, many others have advocated that the most effective community leaders are those who can are humble in the face of uncertainty – and who are always open to learning:

“What’s appropriate when you’re learning is small steps, constant monitoring, and a willingness to change course as you find out more about where it's leading.”


Effective decision-makers are distinguished not so much by the superior extent of their knowledge as by their recognition of its limitations. Problem solving is iterative and adaptive, rather than direct.

When one moves away from thinking that one has to manage the whole system, one pays attention to one’s own participation in one’s own local situation in the living present. Perhaps this humbler kind of ‘management’ is what the ‘knowledge society’ requires.

Ralph Stacey Complex Responsive Processes in Organisations: 235

Today, professionals and activists are un-learning old gate-keeper rigidities – and experimenting with how to live the insight that ‘evolution is smarter than you are’ in practice. Some, borrowing a phrase coined by Mahatma Gandhi, emphasise that the key is to ‘be the change you want to see in the world’. This is not usually a straightforward task – often involving being open to personal development in order to address old and sometimes quite stuck personal and professional habits.

Julian Dobson, a founder of the ‘OurSociety’ social network, has translated this insight for a public policy audience: “Devolution starts with a state of mind: those who take decisions in the usual places, surrounded by the usual people, are highly unlikely to give us the unusual. You can’t use a hierarchy to create a network.”

Such thinking – and preparedness to be open to personal and professional development – can help practitioners see more clearly the opportunities and risks presented by an age of unprecedented change. Part Two of this book illuminates some early findings from such experiments.

There are increasing links being made between leadership development and disciplines of meditation and yoga, which offer training in becoming aware of how ego can cloud good leadership judgement and action, especially in complex contexts.

Julian Dobson, founder of OurSociety network: http://www.respublica.org.uk/blog/2011/02/delivering-big-society

Section 1 – Facing into a ‘perfect storm’: resilience practice and policy in times of rapid change

Summary Points

1. Community resilience is like a muscle which, when exercised, builds both strength and flexibility.

2. Future social, economic and environmental disruptions may well be bigger and faster than we imagine – a ‘perfect storm’.

3. Especially in turbulent times, civil society plays a vital role examining the values underpinning local visions of ‘community resilience’.

4. Assets (strengths-based) approaches are core to resilience building. There is much to learn from international experience, community development.

5. The disciplines of systems thinking and social capital underpin resilience thinking, stressing the importance of feedback (trust & learning), diversity (don’t put all your eggs in one basket) and modularity (localised infrastructure).

6. Policy makers are recognising resilience as a complex ‘wicked’ issue: dynamic, unpredictable and likely to confound ‘command and control’ mindsets.

7. Funders can help by enabling local action researchers to innovate together – and share their learning through communities of practice. This is most effective when people work together who wouldn’t normally collaborate.
2.1 Introducing a ‘compass’ of community resilience

The terms ‘resilience’ and ‘vulnerability’ are opposite sides of the same coin, but both are relative terms. One has to ask what individuals, communities and systems are vulnerable or resilient to, and to what extent.

Characteristics of a Disaster-Resilient Community: A Guidance Note, John Twigg for the DFID Disaster Risk Reduction Interagency Coordination Group

Community resilience is a youthful and vibrant field. People are constantly innovating and finding ways to share these innovations. We have already flagged up how Carnegie’s Rural Development Community of Practice is one of many networks that enables people to do this. Through a series of workshops and conversations over two years, CoP participants have challenged and supported each other to look more deeply into what community resilience is all about through questions such as:

- What are communities doing to build their resilience – and does their action help others to do likewise?
- How can we tell if our hard work is having the desired effect?
- When you boil it down, what is a resilient community anyway?

In addition, community support organisations are taking the next step and translating their on-the-ground experience into manuals and toolkits. For example, the Community for Community Enterprise in Canada developed a comprehensive Community Resilience Manual in 1999 and in San Francisco, Bay Localise actively updates their own Community Resilience Toolkit. In Australia, the federal government’s Social Inclusion Board has published a booklet (2009) of principles which defines resilient communities as “equipped to help themselves and are also able to reach out and support one another in times of crisis – this has been seen in the recent Victorian bushfires”.

Similar work is underway in the field of public health – see for example Davis and Cook’s ‘THRIVE’ tool, introduced in their article ‘A Community Resilience Approach to Reducing Ethnic and Racial Disparities in Health’. And the Young Foundation have also recently developed a tool that will be useful for local authorities called ‘WARM’ (‘Wellbeing and Resilience Measurement’).
All these resources offer up clues about how communities might decide to measure their resilience. In addition, during the development of this book, we have noticed a growing number of media and other organisations experimenting with generating resilience indicators of their own (for example, see box). Measurement is important for several reasons – not least to track and communicate progress locally and to evidence bids for support from government and other external agencies. However, as our discussion in Part One has demonstrated, resilience is a ‘wicked issue’ and is not easy to pin down – it is probably best understood as a function of an ever changing system. Particular tools of sets of tick boxes may on occasion be useful as guides for communities – but maps are never the territory, especially when navigating uncharted waters!

This is a favourite example of Paul Allen, co-author of the significant report Zero Carbon Britain from the Centre for Appropriate Technology. Paul compares Mitchell’s work with the need to prepare today for the coming impacts of peak oil.

For more on Churchill, see Digby Jones and Prof. David Reynolds interviewed at http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00tpsvk.
As the Community of Practice resilience inquiry gathered pace, the in-box started to overflow with toolkits, stories, anecdotes and flashes of inspiration from workshops. The challenge was how to create a simple route through this material – which keeps in view the complex and systemic nature of the topic?

Gradually, four themes emerged that connected practitioner stories and key insights from a wide resilience literature. This handbook therefore proposes four key dimensions of community resilience building:

- Healthy people: supporting individuals’ physical and psychological well-being;
- Inclusive, creative culture: generating a positive, welcoming sense of place;
- Localised economy – within ecological limits: securing entrepreneurial community stewardship of local assets and institutions;
- Cross-community links: fostering supportive connections between inter-dependent communities.

These themes can act as a navigation aid for practitioners wanting to steer a course towards resilient outcomes for their community. Rather than heading in only one direction, however, the point is to connect initiatives in each dimension – work in one area is likely to benefit and amplify that in another:

- **Healthy Engaged People**
  “I’m happy and fit in mind and body”

- **Inclusive, creative culture**
  “We’re confident in our diversity – creating a great future together”

- **Localised economy within ecological limits**
  “We steward our land, food, water, energy, services, jobs, housing”

- **Cross-community links**
  “We collaborate with other communities near and far – we know no place can go it alone”

Authority literature reviews including those by Walker, Brian, & Salt, David. (2006) and Magis (2007).
This picture looks a little like a compass – and the idea of a compass makes it easy to reveal an underlining stance – or approach – that some of the most effective resilience pioneers seem to adopt:

**Making it up as we go along:**
For centuries, compasses have given explorers added confidence as they set off into the unknown. A compass can point out a general sense of direction, but the adventurer has to decide whether to climb over or walk around the mountain.

**Enabling everyone to work together toward a common goal:**
The very first compasses were invented in China during the Han Dynasty (206BC-220AD). They didn’t point North – but were used instead by Feng Shui practitioners to assist with bringing order and harmony to buildings and places (see picture, left, from Wikimedia commons). Resilience practitioners are increasingly recognising the importance of learning skills in transforming community conflicts to better enable everyone to contribute to the bigger goal – of working together to thrive through turbulent times.

**Having fun:**
Many of the best resilience stories are about the times when people were loving what they are doing together. Although there is a fine tradition of solo explorers bagging Munros, conquering the Poles or sailing single-handed around the planet – most of us prefer to party with friends along the way. Just as Douglas Adams put the words ‘DON’T PANIC’ on the cover of his Hitch Hiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, it seems that it would be a good idea to put a sticker that says ‘HAVE FUN!’ on the back of the compass.

**Experian’s ‘resilience rankings’**
In the run-up to the UK Government announcement of its comprehensive spending review of October 2010, the BBC commissioned research company Experian to develop ‘resilience rankings’ comparing the potential economic vulnerability of the 12 BBC regions (comprising 324 local authority districts). Experian took an approach that focused on indicators designed to reveal the strength and adaptability of each area:

- **Strength of local business base:** for example, is it dominated by sectors hit by the recession of those that are relatively unscathed such as agriculture, forestry and fishing, banking and insurance? Have local firms and start-ups already proven their adaptability?
- **Community vulnerability:** for example, the percentage of households vulnerable to declines in disposable income or to long term unemployment, alongside a survey question that asked of people “Do neighbours look out for each other?”
- **Personal vulnerability:** for example, the size of the working age population, skills, average earnings and number of professionals (managers) compared to low-skilled workers (such as labourers); and
- **Place:** for example, median house prices, local crime rates, and green space availability.

Experian must have deployed significant number-crunching power and professional expertise to undertake such a study so quickly. It seems unlikely that local community initiatives had any opportunity to help to design the research or define the indicators – but in an age when the science of measuring resilience is still in its infancy, the investment by the BBC in the Experian research indicates that in the future there may be good opportunities for local communities to develop local media partnerships that would support the development and reporting of resilience indicators that are genuinely owned by local people.

**Rob Hopkins**, author of the Transition Towns Handbook, has recently completed a doctorate where he looks in more detail at promising indicators emerging through the experience of Transition Totnes and other initiatives (personal communication).
Describing the four dimensions of the compass – and some principles that inform how resilience builders might go about using it – misses a crucial part of the exploration of what resilience actually is.

It is as if we have told an alien visitor to the planet about the idea of ‘north, south, east and west’, offered them a pair of hiking boots, but omitted to explain that the compass needle points North because it follows the earth’s magnetic field.

Where magnetism is the force that makes a navigational compass work, knowing how to understand and navigate change (or ‘change literacy’) is a core skill for any effective community resilience practitioner.

Everyone is ‘change literate’ to a degree: over the course of our lives, we get to know about our own patterns and cycles – from feeling stuck and depressed to times when there’s a skip in our step and we feel particularly energised and alive. After living through a few of these cycles, it gets easier to recognise that nothing is constant for very long – that, as Heraclitus said thousands of years ago: ‘the only constant is change’.

Evidence from our inquiries suggest that change literacy is a skill that is worth honing. As one possible starting point, this Handbook proposes getting to grips with three states of change that communities can experience – ‘break through’, ‘break even’ and ‘break down’. These can be easily mapped onto the compass. In this way, local people can begin to guage whether their community is becoming more or less resilient over time.

2.2 Break Through, Break Even and Break Down: three responses to change

Part One introduced ecologist Buzz Holling’s work about resilience in natural systems like forests. In his most recent work, Holling and colleagues at the Stockholm Resilience Institute have developed a sophisticated new resilience model that they call ‘panarchy’. This work now integrates human as well as natural systems82. Significantly, the model shows that systems can undergo ‘step change’ transformation to either much greater, or significantly less resilience. This thinking lies behind the proposal in this Handbook that communities experience (at least) three kinds of change: break through transformation, break even ‘bounce back’, or break down collapse (see box).
Break through communities

A break through community anticipates and responds to shocks by taking co-ordinated collective actions toward a commonly agreed vision of a better future.

This is a little like a sports team whose sustained efforts enables them to break through to the next league.

Another way to think about this is to imagine a master juggler who has mastered the basics – and moved on to try new, more complex tricks. From learning how to ride a bicycle without stabilisers, to learning a new language, many of us have experienced how, after hours of practice, we might wake up one day and succeed where we failed before. This book calls this experience a step change: rather than being daunted by the challenges, we seem to thrive. Some people call this place of rapid learning a ‘learning edge’; others call it an experience of ‘flow’.

Break even communities

Communities can often cope with disruptions and bounce back to something approximating ‘normal’ after having learned important lessons about their vulnerability – in this book, we call these ‘break even’ communities. There is often a groundswell of effective co-operative action in these places, but it may not have yet resulted in a step change towards significantly greater resilience: break even communities cope reasonably well day to day, but become vulnerable if unexpected shocks come too thick or fast. People in these communities could benefit from reassessing their vulnerabilities – in other words, the risks they face from local, national and global impacts, and the communities’ likely capacity to be able to endure them.

These communities are like sports teams whose performance has fluctuated through a season. Retaining the confidence of a loyal fan base, they avoid relegation.

‘Flow psychology’ is a fast developing field, part of the positive psychology movement. For a good summary, see Csikszentmihalyi M. The contribution of flow psychology of positive psychology. In The science of optimism and hope: research essays in honour of Martin P. Seligman. Gilham JE. Philadelphia PA: Templeton Foundation Press 2000, pp387-95.
Communities at risk of break-down

Especially when one shock comes on top of another, and often despite the best efforts of dedicated local people, communities may need emergency support from the outside to prevent break down.

Returning to the example of the sports team, if a club suffers multiple, unexpected setbacks from injuries, conflict in the boardroom or other misfortune, morale can be sapped and a negative cycle can set in creating more and more stress until things become ‘brittle’ and can suddenly snap – and the club is then vulnerable to bankruptcy or takeover.

The juggling analogy: If we’re over stressed by attempting to juggle too many demands, we may be on the road to burn-out or ‘dropping the ball’. It’s important to ask for help before this happens – but the experience of running faster and faster to keep up can make even asking for help seem very hard.

It’s now possible to visualise these change categories by overlaying them on the four compass dimensions introduced earlier:

A break through community will be developing strengths in and connections between each dimension, expanding the size of the green circle (the larger the circle, the more resilient a community will be). A strength in one dimension will likely open opportunities for creative action in the others, too.

The orange and blue circles represent decreasing flexibility, connectivity and capacity to mitigate shocks. We could think of these circles as different resilience zones.

Resilience theory suggests that shifting from one zone to another takes either lots of effort or a shock big enough to prevent ‘bounce back’ to the existing state. Imagine a heavy iron ball – it has lots of inertia, but once it starts rolling it’s really hard to stop:
In the normal course of events, a moderate push on one of the balls might disturb it a little, but won’t shift it out of its dip (see diagramme, above). However, a big push in either direction could roll it into the next-door dip. If you’re keen to skip straight to seeing whether the compass could be of some help in your place, there are two appendices at the end of this book that might be useful:

- **Appendix 2** imagines a workshop session translating these categories into the context of a local community; and
- **Appendix 3** shows how this thinking can be helpful in planning the future sustainability of community organisations.

In the sections that follow, bear these change dynamics in mind. Each section brings one dimension of the compass to life with real-life stories and literature references shared by participants in the resilience inquiry.

## 2.3 Personal resilience: healthy, engaged people

**How we weather those coming storms, to me that’s what resilience is ... it’s going to be our ability to cope ... so I put ‘personal resilience’ as well ...**

*Irish participant, Dunfermline Resilience seminar*

**The National Youth Agency’s Youth Work Week in November 2009 focused on two key qualities – Resilience and Resourcefulness. This approach urged youth workers to consider the factors that help children and young people manage, cope and even thrive in the face of adversity and disadvantage. It recognises that personal development, family support and community influence positively impact on young people’s resilience, their ability to bounce back from life’s disappointments and setbacks and enable them to achieve their full potential.**

*Bud Simpkin, CEO of Young Suffolk*

**Deciding to live**

Amid a continuing media frenzy, Edison Peña, one of the rescued Chilean miners, ran in the November 2010 New York Marathon. The Guardian reported that “for the first 18 days when he was trapped, he gave up hope, and curled up, waiting for death. Yet once contact had been made with the outside world and he believed life might continue, he resumed his running, covering up to six miles a day in the dark: ‘I ran to forget I was trapped ... I became two people: the weak person who wanted simply to give up and the person who chose to be strong – to run and survive. Eventually, I chose to live’.”

Peña’s experience is not unique. In a previous age, Victor Frankl wrote and talked about his experiences of surviving Nazi concentration camps:

**Everything can be taken from a man or a woman but one thing: the last of human freedoms to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way... Man does not simply exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next moment.**

*Victor Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning (2004)*
Today, there is a wealth of research and practice on helping people to develop and maintain personal resilience. Some of it challenges the popular view that resilience can be summed up with the phrase ‘bouncing back’:

Bouncing back suggests a rapid and effortless recovery from adversity.... This might be the ideal that some wish to aspire to, yet it seems to be more of a comic-book view that may well trigger self-deprecation (seeing oneself as weak or inadequate) if this ideal is not realised in times of crisis... imagine you have been injured in an accident and now suffer from chronic pain.... ‘bouncing back’ suggests little time for [a] slow process of adaptation and discovery.

Others contrast ‘survival’ with ‘resilience’:

Unlike the term survivor, resilient emphasises that people do more than merely get through difficult emotional experiences, hanging on to inner equilibrium by a thread. Because resilience best captures the active process of self-righting and growth that characterises some people so essentially [italics in original]

Most importantly for our exploration of community resilience in this book is that there is a growing consensus amongst personal resilience experts that it’s by no means only about individual actions – instead, we are learning how it is our relationships that are critical for effective ‘self righting’ (friends, family, community).

Social isolation, especially when combined with an inability to cope with emotions or to make sense of events, are important indicators of vulnerability. Reviewing fifty years of resilience psychology in children, Masten says that in the early days, some researchers thought ‘resiliency’ might be a trait that special people possess... but that today, it is accepted that resilience is ordinary, not extraordinary:

What began as a quest to understand the extraordinary has revealed the power of the ordinary. Resiliency does not come from rare and special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary... minds, brains, and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities.

Masten (2001:235)

Since 2007, Austerity measures in the Republic of Ireland have resulted in job losses and other forms of severe disruption for many people. Statistics on the Irish suicide rate released in September 2010 already show an increase of 24% over the previous year. Young men, as with previous years, were shown to be disproportionately at risk. Ireland’s National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP) suggested that: “the impact of the economic downturn in 2008, and particularly in 2009, has led to substantial increases in both self harm and suicide numbers.”

Mental health is about how you think and feel and your ability to deal with ups and downs. Your mental health does not always stay the same. It can change as you move through different life stages or in response to difficulties in your life such as losing your job or having money worries.

For example, Aaron Antonovsky is a Professor of Medical Sociology who has gained recognition in the field of personal resilience with his finding that people who manage stress best tend to share three characteristics: they can make sense of events, they feel they can take care of things, and who really care about what happens. (His ‘salutogenesis’ model is outlined in his 1979 book Health, Stress and Coping).
Whilst figures such as those in the NOSP report represent vital information for policy makers charged with making difficult decisions about prioritising public sector spending, and professional theories about resilience can be helpful in targeting those most at risk, a focus on the numbers or theory alone risks obscuring from view the scale, breadth and power of the work happening every day in communities on preventing personal tragedies from becoming abstract statistics.

**Relationships matter**

Alongside the Samaritans and other help-lines, people are supporting each other as an everyday part of community life. We are all likely to find ourselves offering a friend or family member help to survive dark days… and to then learn how to cope with the after-effects. Our own experiences of being similarly supported in the past can help us, in turn, feel confident when stepping forward to help others.

Healthy eating, keeping fit, drinking lots of water and following a faith or meditation practice can significantly enhance personal resilience. We know that regular exercise really helps, too – whether it’s yoga, dance, walking, cycling, running, swimming, surfing or climbing the stairs instead of taking the lift. But the evidence suggests that even the strongest, bendiest, most calorie-controlled individuals rely on good friends and strong relationships when times get tough.

A four-year study into ‘Capability and Resilience’, published in 2007 by Professor Mel Bartley and colleagues at the University College London Department of Epidemiology and Public Health, affirmed “the enormous capabilities and resilience that people already show in their everyday lives and under crisis conditions”, and underlined that “it is social relationships that are most effective in maintaining resilience in the face of adversity”. They concluded that resilience building needs to begin by making “best use of the many assets for well-being and social and economic development that already exist in communities”.

A good example of this approach is a ‘self-management’ programme run by Hackney-based Social Action for Health (SAfH). Over six half days, lay people with long-term conditions guide others in similar situations through a course (involving action planning and group problem solving activities) aimed at helping them come to terms with the impacts on their lives and emotions. SAfH claims that lay people are able to do this work “as effectively, if not more effectively, than health professionals”. The course also encourages participants to think about diet, medication usage, exercise and communication skills as well as techniques for relaxation and breathing exercises.

**Resilience in young people in Brighton and Suffolk**

Another area where personal resilience practice is very well developed is in working with young people. In Brighton, Professor Angie Hart and colleagues at the Community University Practice Partnership (CUPP) have been translating academic resilience concepts to help build practical programmes that give hope to disadvantaged children and families. Hart starts from a definition of resilience as ‘bouncing back… and a little bit more’, or

The kinds of things we need to make happen (e.g. events, parenting strategies, relationships, resources) to help children manage life when it’s tough. Plus ways of thinking and acting that we need ourselves if we want to make things better for children.

Source: Aumann and Hart 2009

In practical terms, a network of support workers use ‘five potions’ to guide conversations with children toward enabling them to make good choices in their lives. The potions focus on:

- basic security – such as ensuring access to ‘good enough’ housing;
- belonging – for example, involving securing more ‘healthy relationships’;
- learning – such as ‘help the child organise her/himself’;
- coping – for example, ‘understanding boundaries’; and
- core self – involving, for example, affirming a ‘sense of hope’.
There are, of course, many different ways of concocting such potions. Community of Practice participant Bud Simpkin of Young Suffolk emphasises how important shifts in school curriculums, already underway, hold the promise of sowing resilience skills in children from their earliest years. However, he adds that it’s not just the curriculum that needs to change – as society becomes more concerned about issues of resilience in the round, we might need to think deeply about the whole balance between informal and formal approaches to learning:

In addition to the informal education setting of Youth Work, the Whole Education movement teaches social and emotional competence as well as developing the capacity of individuals to collaborate and forge strong relationships with each other. This is considered to be a fundamental aspect of a new curriculum that focuses on a well rounded education combining practical skills with theory, vocational with academic and steers away from a “passing exams” mentality for education.

At the heart of the work of Young Suffolk is a focus on developing young peoples’ self-esteem and confidence. Why is it that so many young people growing up in such a sophisticated society find it difficult to make good life choices? Bud suggests that young people today have fewer opportunities to hone their decision-making skills than in the past.

This is where initiatives such as the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award, The Princes Trust and the new coalition Government plans for a National Citizen Service can help. These programmes can enable young people to experiment, take risks and make mistakes in supervised settings. They help young people to take responsibility for their actions, and to learn how to work co-operatively and collaboratively – the core skills of any community resilience worker.

A Big Noise in Stirling

In Raploch, Stirling, Scotland a new music initiative is a very practical example for how innovations in almost any field can help to create more resilient people. The idea behind ‘El Sistema’ began in Venezuela in 1975, when young musicians from Caracas and the interior of the country came together to form the first National Symphony Youth Orchestra of Venezuela. By 2008, El Sistema’s philosophy of “passion first/refinement second” had enabled more than 400,000 disadvantaged children to join over 130 orchestras. Inspired by this approach to mass participation in collective creative expression, El Sistema was established in Scotland with the support of grants from the Scottish Arts Council in 2008 (in Venezuela, El Sistema is resourced through the State Foundation for the National System of Youth and Children’s Orchestras of Venezuela). Going under the name ‘Big Noise’, it has begun working with children in Raploch, Stirling and quickly achieved publicity from papers and the notice of decision makers. Chair of El Sistema, Richard Holloway, summarised the approach in a speech at No.11 Downing Street:

By recruiting children and immersing them in orchestras, we can slowly, year upon year, build them into something stronger and greater and more enduring than the despair that surrounds them. They learn discipline, they experience joy, they co-operate passionately with each other to create excellence, and a wonderful beauty is born.

For more on El Sistema, see http://www.sistemascotland.org.uk/
Enjoying a ‘Big Lunch’

We can see that there is already a huge amount of work being undertaken in communities around building personal resilience – whether it is for young people, those recovering from illness or accidents or shocks such as terrorist incidents, or others. All this work is crucial in developing more resilient communities – but it may not be sufficient. We are learning how to help (to quote running miner Peña) individuals make choices to ‘run and survive’ rather than ‘giving up hope’. How do we come together to exercise such a choice collectively?

The Big Lunch initiative shows how possible and fun it can be. Big Lunch aims to ‘make isolation history’ by acting as a “catalyst facing up to tough issues” of crime, domestic violence, homelessness and children living in poverty. The website illustrates with statistics that shows that in too many places isolation has become the norm:

- Two million more single person households by 2019.
- More rich, poor and ethnic ghettos than ever before.
- 7% annual drop in trust between neighbours from 2003-05.
- Social trust in the UK halved and now is among the lowest in Europe.

Source: www.thebiglunch.com

The idea is that every year people roll out the bunting and hold a street party for their street with the idea that “when doors open up, people open up and neighbourhoods open up… we call this phenomenon ‘human warming’”.

Thanks to the Big Lunch, I went from being a normal(ish) 32 year-old-guy to being the Chairman of a Residents Group/social community group. How did that happen?

2010 Big Lunch organiser, quoted in http://www.mirror.co.uk June 29th 2010

Mental health experts agree that getting out and getting involved can be an excellent antidote to some forms of depression. The Big Lunch is an excellent example of how important it is that communities address loneliness. No matter how individually fit, healthy or rich we are… when we ‘open up’ and celebrate being part of a wider community, benefits flow all round.

In 2008, the UK Government’s Foresight project on Mental Capital and Wellbeing worked with the New Economics Foundation’s to propose ‘five ways of well being’: connect, be active, take notice, keep learning… and give. The is an excellent resource for those wanting to dig deeper into the evidence base behind the psychology of personal resilience:

The concept of well-being comprises two main elements: feeling good and functioning well. Feelings of happiness, contentment, enjoyment, curiosity and engagement are characteristic of someone who has a positive experience of their life. Equally important for well-being is our functioning in the world. Experiencing positive relationships, having some control over one’s life and having a sense of purpose are all important attributes of wellbeing.

Volunteer Cornwall is an organisation with a long track record of working with over 1600 local groups (including many people with physical and learning disabilities) in this kind of work. Ian Jones, Volunteer Cornwall CEO, is also a passionate resilience advocate. He reports how the organisation is creating ‘virtual hubs’ where local people – even those who are housebound – are able to connect with services with the help of people who are visiting their house anyway – such as a postman, handy person or shopping delivery driver. In order to get such a system up and running, Jones describes how “the work is focused on distributing leadership and not controlling what happens”: the ethic of Volunteer Cornwall’s approach is to enable people and organisations to work across ‘fuzzy boundaries’ – breaking down the walls between the public, private and voluntary sectors.

See http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/five-ways-well-being-evidence

We only knew our immediate neighbours before. But at the end of it, we felt we had a community spirit. It’s a little bit like when Christmas comes you can write a card to every single neighbour in that street because you actually know their names and their children’s names.

Participant in 2010 Big Lunch, quoted in http://www.mirror.co.uk June 29th 2010

The message from events like Big Lunch and the everyday experience of communities where people already know and trust each other is that by connecting with others we feel more confident that we belong in a place… and more ready to step forward to help others:
2.4 Economy: towards enterprising self-reliance...
within energy and ecological limits.

Economic assessments, strategy, policy and
delivery have tended to work in isolation
from their social and environmental context.
Resilience allows us to think about the
broader palette of aspects that make a place
sturdy. In turn that enables us to assess a local
economy’s brittleness, its vulnerability and
weak points. This leads us to better develop
policy and action which fully considers a
locality’s power of recovery and understands
what can drive it.

Neil McInroy, New Start, January 2010

The drive to devolve power and responsibility to
individuals and communities is sometimes called ‘localism’
– a significant driver of policy innovation in our age of
austerity. For community activists, localism can be most
meaningful when it is connected with the idea of local
self-reliance – that is, where communities establish and
maintain control over their own, diversified economy,
thereby minimising exposure to external shocks.

In this way, communities are effectively localising their
economies – helping to ensure that money and savings
keep circulating through local shops and businesses rather
than quickly ‘leaking’ out. As Part One has pointed out (eg.
the Moses Coady story), credit unions and co-operatives
are well tried and tested ways to achieve this end.

International experience affirms how critical such
initiatives are. For example, Bangladesh is regularly hit by
floods, earthquakes, and typhoons. It is also the birthplace
of the Grameen Bank – a micro-finance institution whose
operating model is based on an understanding that its
clients often experience extreme conditions as well as
more stable times. After major flooding in 1998, some
households lost their ability to generate income for up
to 90 days. Some people lost their homes and access to
their crops or animals, and at the same time, day to day
costs of food, transport, and other essentials rose steeply.
Grameen and other institutions responded by innovating
new savings products – some compulsory, some voluntary
– which were designed to release resources to clients only
in the event of a future emergency.

Although the impacts of flooding have yet to match
the severity of conditions in Bangladesh, far-sighted
organisations such as the New Economics Foundation
have long championed the importance of innovating local
financial instruments to
‘plug the leaks’ in the local
economy to help ensure
local well-being through
thick and thin.

This move towards economic localisation raises important
questions about how comparatively wealthy communities
who have effectively plugged some leaks can quickly
move on to share their talents and financial resources
with less resourced communities. This is an issue that the
Fair Trade Towns and Counties movement has begun to
address: Fair Trade is about ensuring that farmers and
producers everywhere can achieve a fair price for their
labours.

There are many, many stories from the Fiery Spirits
Community of Practice about economic and energy self-
reliance in action. Entrepreneurial people are inventing
exciting new forms of community based organisations
to hold, finance and steward local assets. This section
draws from a small portion of such stories, culminating
with a story from the 2001 currency crisis in Argentina.
The Argentina experience prompts a question of how
to ensure that this groundswell of economic
localism continues to gather
pace, supported by
new experiments
in complementary
currencies that
may help to buffer
the impacts
of continuing
global economic
commodity
and currency
turbulence.

For a full review of
Microenterprise Best Practices
see Development Alternatives
briefing no. 3 at http://gdrc.org/
icm/disasters/bangladeshi_
experience_in_adapting_
financial_services.pdf

See for example the
‘Plugging the leaks’ at http://
www.pluggingtheleaks.org/
resources/plm_ptl.htm
The Scottish Highlands and Islands: hotbed of localisation innovation

A visit to many of the remote communities in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland can be illuminating for anyone interested in getting to grips with what resilience is all about. Island communities in particular reveal the limits of modern life, where long distances and harsh weather challenge the robustness of globalised supply chains, and reveal the resourcefulness of remote dwellers.

Sit in a traditional music session in a Scottish pub, and likely as not, in between some fast jigs, the fiddlers might weave in the haunting tune ‘Calum’s Road’. It was penned by Donald Shaw (the accordionist in Capercaille) to commemorate the story of Calum MacLeod of Raasay who, when the local council refused to build a two-mile road to his croft, did the job himself. Some time in 1966, with a sledgehammer, pick-axe and his piece (sandwich) in a wheelbarrow, Calum set about a task that would take him the best part of twenty years.

Visit many crafting townships today and variations on this spirit of stubborn self-reliance is achieving equally remarkable results. These are places where residents have learned to turn their hand to almost anything, including organising community buy-outs of over 400,000 acres across the Highlands and islands since land reform legislation was passed by the Scottish Parliament on 25th February, 2003.

The Islanders of Eigg were pioneers who helped put land reform back on the agenda in the first place. On 12th June 1997, they bought their island for £1.75 million after a huge public appeal for support which yielded a private, anonymous donation of £1 million. They then set about the long road to transforming a ‘run-down and unstable’ community:

The old tearoom was dilapidated and tilting above the pier road; the pier was inadequate for anything but flit boats to laboriously transport cargo and passengers ashore from the ferry which served the island; and much of the housing scattered around the three-by-five-mile island was in a state of constant disrepair.

Worst of all, the future of its people – the underpinning of any community – was unstable. There was no way for residents to put down roots. Croft land is limited on Eigg. Leases were virtually non-existent, and the entire island had been in the hands of increasingly erratic private owners.

In 2010, the Islanders were back in the headlines, this time taking a winner’s share of a £1 million ‘Big Green Challenge’ prize awarded by the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA) for community-led climate change action.

As well as the technical achievement of installing Europe’s first community-owned renewable energy grid, it was the integration of carbon reduction activities into the everyday lives of islanders that particularly impressed the judges.

The Egg system is novel because households are fined £20 if they exceed their 5kwh domestic limit, with the money going to the community. The story raises questions about whether other communities may be willing to go down a similar road in the future?

The Highlands and Islands are full of similarly inspiring stories. Eday lies in the heart of Orkney’s Northern Isles, 16 miles north of Kirkwall, and the 150 strong population have owned the community shop for over two decades. If all goes according to plan, in 2011 the Eday Partnership will significantly scale up their ambitions by taking ownership of a £1.67 million, 900KW wind turbine. Partnership Chair Clive Brookes believes this investment will “put us in control of our own destiny” by generating up to £120,000 annually for further community investment. A Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) scheme called “Initiatives at the Edge” has helped to develop the Partnership that has made the plan possible, offering islanders development resources and a route beyond ‘volunteer fatigue’. The Partnership – which employs several specialist staff including a Ranger and a ‘Powerdown Officer’ – has also helped to secure grants for capital developments at the Hostel, the old Baptist Church (now a heritage/visitor centre), and for a new slipway.

Roger Hutchinson has published this powerful story with Birlinn, Edinburgh in a book by the same name (2006): “Calum’s road would become a powerful and beautiful symbol of one man’s defiance against the erosion of his native culture”.

Bill Currie quoting Islander Maggie in the West Highland Free Press, 13th June 2002.

See Lucy Conway’s ‘FierySpirits’ blog post for the full story: http://ruralresilience.ning.com/profiles/blogs/thoughts-on-winning-1300k-in

See http://islandsgoinggreen.org/
All our livelihoods and energy needs are ultimately met through our direct or indirect interaction with the natural systems on which we depend. There is a real danger here of continuing the analysis that blames the poor for their poverty and for the degradation of their environments. What is needed is an analysis and proposal which places defending or re-establishing community ownership and use of natural resources as the solution to poverty and environmental degradation (local people know they depend on the resources around them)

participant Carnegie UK Trust resilience seminar, 2008

However, challenges remain on Eday. Only “real and meaningful employment” can help sustain momentum once grant funding ends: “we all need to become a lot more business-minded” (to quote Clive Brookes again). This process has already started. In summer 2010 the Partnership carried out a pilot ‘fast boat’ project to test the market for a fast and more direct service between Eday and its neighbours – which also doubles up as a tourist trip for spotting porpoises, seals, and the nearby European Marine Energy Centre’s test site. HIE staff member Chessa Llewellyn-White from HIE points out that the coming of the turbine and fast boat businesses have been “a bit of an eye-opener”, presenting new challenges of complex cash flows and organisational growing pains – such as putting in place new systems to separate out income generation from charitable activities, and generating reliable financial reports to ensure a £1 million loan is paid back.

Today, a string of community land buy-out communities are supporting each other to generate housing, energy and employment initiatives sufficient to lure young families to contribute to the future life of remote communities. These places show how it might be possible for communities everywhere to steward more actively their local land, institutions and other assets – from food and water to buildings and the supply of finance. Community land ownership is proving itself a powerful catalyst for activity on all these fronts in these contexts. One Community of Practice participant put it this way:

However, land ownership is no instant panacea. When a community takes responsibility for land, what safeguards will ensure it is managed well? Without additional support, many communities may struggle to find enough people with sufficient skills to steward local resources effectively. Building these skills takes time, investment, and mentors who can build local confidence: without such supports, the resilience skills gap will be difficult to close. This is an area where LEADER funding from Europe has proven its worth in the past, and remains a unique source of external support.

For a closer look at the potential of LEADER, see the booklet A Common Rural Development Policy? which proposes that a comprehensive and well-financed policy of supporting rural enterprises and community initiatives alongside farming interests will help address the continuing challenge of low farm incomes and need for new business start-ups. http://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/publications/a_common_rural_development_policy1

Recognising vulnerability to energy price hikes

Energy price volatility is an increasing concern for everyone. Just a few years ago conversations about ‘Peak Oil’ were confined to oil industry insiders and Transition Towns activists. With rapidly escalating oil prices impacting everyone in 2011, such activists don’t need to offer screenings of films such as The End of Suburbia and How Cuba Survived Peak Oil to spell out the likely impacts of the end of cheap oil.

http://www.endofsuburbia.com/ and
http://www.powerofcommunity.org/cm/index.php

Nevertheless, these resources continue to help community groups think carefully about the risks of not preparing for peak oil. The argument goes that severely oscillating prices (or sustained high prices) threaten extreme disruptions to our way of life in the near to medium term future. The longer we wait to make the transition to a lean economy, the harder the landing is going to be.

http://www.chrismartenson.com/page/crash-course-one-year-anniversary

An excellent primer on this and connected issues is Chris Mastenson’s crash course, at http://www.chrismartenson.com/page/crash-course-one-year-anniversary
In February 2010, a report of an Industry Taskforce on energy and peak oil comprising Virgin, Arup, Scottish and Southern Energy agreed that latest oil futures research (supported most recently by a report of the International Energy Agency itself) suggests that global crude oil demand may have already outstripped supply.

Rather than resulting in sustained high prices, most peak oil models suggest that the global economy may experience increasing frequency and scale of economic ‘bubbles’ that burst as oil price volatility distorts markets and severely disrupts the capacities of businesses, small and large, to plan. The most forward-thinking local business people are already trying to factor in such risks. For example, a researcher from the University of Liverpool interviewed by Future Proof Kilkenny illustrated how he had helped a dairy farm to conduct an ‘oil vulnerability analysis’:

Some of the initial findings were shocking. When we did our first analysis we looked at 5 particular elements connected to oil price; fuels, energy, petrochemicals, man-made materials and components. When we did the initial analysis of the farm we found that around 17% of the costs related to the price of oil. But the beauty of the audit is the way in which it breaks down an analysis of the component activities and processes. So when we began to look at the cultivation of the plants to feed the 200 herd cattle we found that 80% of the costs of cultivation related to the price of oil. This was petrochemicals such as herbicides, pesticides, insecticides and fertiliser, not really a petrochemical but hugely dependant on hydrocarbons. Once we understood that we shot from 17% oil vulnerable up to 70% oil vulnerable. 17% is bad enough but 70% is shocking.

In some cases, recognising the growing urgency of questions about ‘peak oil’ has prompted traditional community development organisations to evolve their ways of working. For example, in Northern Ireland Rural Community Network (RCN) has traditionally only responded to issues raised directly by local people. However, during 2009 RCN conducted an experiment to invite local people to think about what might happen if oil prices rose to £5 per litre. Project worker Aidan Campbell reported that the exercise worked well – and that it seems that many people in traditional rural areas are already aware of the potential consequences on transport, jobs and the future viability of traditional rural communities. Few groups, however, had yet developed action plans to address this knowledge. Aidan termed this a ‘values action’ gap. It is this gap that projects like LightFoot Enterprise’s Household Energy Surveys are beginning to address.

Household Energy Surveys in the Marches

In 2005 in the Marches, a small group of residents set out to construct a community-owned Household Energy Service (HES) with a view to putting power to manage energy use in the hands of householders. Local volunteers carried out a home energy survey which made tailored recommendations for conserving energy, reducing energy consumption and switching to local and renewable energy sources. Word spread about the service as people started to transfer what Light Foot Enterprises, who run the scheme, call ‘energy wisdom’. The idea is that this energy wisdom enables a new local energy market to emerge.

Rachel Francis of Light Foot says:

In Bishops Castle, where engagement of households now amounts to over one in five of the population, demand is growing for a range of energy services at local level as well as affordable deals and renewable options. It’s no good if our service simply passes people by or just stays within the circle of the existing green community. We have drawn heavily upon marketing know-how and research into sustainable behaviour to help broaden engagement.
Light Foot’s work is characterised by a process of trial-and-error: as with many community-led solutions, lessons from one place can’t always be easily replicated in others. Instead, it’s a process of trial and error – such as replacing the requirement for an initial survey with a ‘leader’ offer of offering a free draught excluder as a first step into the process. Rachel Francis sums up the experience:

We have to stay dynamic, uncluttered and able to prioritise community needs, but even that is not easy at times. Our strategies work when they are authentic, warm and honest. That too is part of resilience.

Questions of size and scale of local energy initiatives

The house-to-house work that Rachel and colleagues in the Marches are engaged with is part of a bigger picture about how we create more resilient systems for producing and distributing energy. These are questions taxing national politicians who are charged with ensuring we don’t face black-outs as existing power stations come to the end of their lives. In December 2010, the UK Energy and Climate Change Secretary Chris Huhne laid out three connected challenges in this way:

- First, our demand for electricity could double by 2050 as we shift from fossil fuels to electricity for our vehicles and our residual home heating.
- Secondly, around a quarter of our generating capacity is ageing plant that will shut down within 10 years, and has to be replaced.
- Thirdly, that replacement cycle – entailing some £110bn of investment, or more than double the normal amount in the next decade – must be in low-carbon and secure sources like renewables, nuclear, clean coal and gas if we are to meet our climate change targets. Left alone, the current market will not deliver these objectives at the lowest cost.

http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/newsbysector/energy/8204586/The-biggest-energy-market-shake-up-in-25-years.html
At a community level, it’s possible to complement large-scale redesign of national energy systems by creating local energy generation solutions (turbines, biogas digesters etc.). Usually, these systems feed into the national grid, and so are vulnerable if the grid fails. Resilience thinking suggests that ‘modular’ – or distributed – grids will be better at withstanding and then recovering from shocks than relying on the centralised national grid alone.

Experiments such as Eigg’s community-owned electricity grid demonstrate that it is possible for a local community to establish its own system – but the cost of this energy sovereignty are strong limits on local consumption:

If everyone did this, it would mean that together we’d all use a LOT LESS electricity, which would mean power companies wouldn’t need to generate as much thus closing the ‘energy gap’ and (the really cool bit), saving you money! Spreading the load is good too – means the poor old national grid isn’t trying to deal with huge swings from high to low demand.

Eigg isn’t in a position to fall back on the national grid in the event of failure – instead, the old system of noisy oil-powered household generators would kick in again. However, even though Eigg’s situation is unlike most communities in the UK, the Eigg Electric story has sparked the interest of many. It demonstrates why the experience of remote communities can be particularly valuable to society as a whole: innovations ‘at the edge’ challenge the rest of us to consider questions of energy justice.

Could we achieve a more equitable distribution of energy use between energy-intensive and energy-lean local economies? Would other local communities voluntarily accept limits on energy use in the way that Eigg residents have done? Is it important that local communities own their own electricity generation and distribution systems?

One workshop commented:

…I think it is important to put some control over those huge resources in the hands of the communities and not leave it to the multinationals that currently come in and set up massive operations with a token gesture to the local community council, you know ten thousand pounds a year for community activities, but actually when communities take control of those assets like in Gigha and they put up their own turbines and that helps fund their own housing issues then that can make a real difference and that is how rural communities can be more resilient but they have to be given the support in terms of the initial capital investment to make that work...

Participant, Rural Convention 2009

On a tour around the Centre for Alternative Technology at a conference called Power and Place, we learned how CAT has for many years been asking such questions in relation to running their own onsite electricity generation grid. In the early days, CAT pioneers were determined to be as self-sufficient as possible, without relying on the wider world. In the end they gave up however – recognising that isolating themselves from the mains supply meant limits on the organisation’s ability to grow. Peter Harper (long term CAT staff member) reflects:

It’s interesting ... at the beginning of CAT back in the 70s we definitely shared the view that [the future] was going to be a collective, rather decentralised and rather self-sufficient economies. For one reason or another we’ve abandoned that... now we are serving for a globalisation – I don’t want to deny the need for resilience – we need to build that in... but we’re thinking of reaching out to Europe, to supergrids, exporting our gold mine North Sea... having a more integrated rather than a less integrated Europe.

Peter Harper, CAT
Towards resilient local money: how Irish activists are learning lessons from Argentina’s currency crisis

During 2001, Argentina experienced a currency crisis that accompanied its economic collapse. As part of an international attempt to stabilise its currency, Argentina agreed to peg the value of its peso to the United States dollar, but investors lost all confidence and a flight of capital followed. Five presidents came and went, people were only allowed to withdraw about 200 pesos a week, and the government began seizing public servant pensions. A run on the banks ensued, and all bank accounts were then frozen for 90 days. By December, violent rioting broke and the government defaulted on its debt obligations. There was soon no cash at all circulating within the Argentine economy. Into the vacuum, barter markets swiftly emerged. Those with some experience in barter systems trained others and the idea spread rapidly; market organisers required newcomers to attend training sessions before they could participate in these new markets. Schools, parks and gymnasiums were used as exchange sites.

Over time, communities with the greatest degrees of local production in value-added areas such as food, wood, and even specialty commodities like honey were much stronger than communities with less local production: regional trade was only possible through such value-added goods. Civil servants and white-collar workers had to rapidly drop their prices whilst farmers were most secure. Meanwhile, more complex systems of exchange – local currencies –emerged as people started manufacturing and trading durable goods. Some of these systems experienced inflation, for example in the market for spare parts not manufactured locally. Solar and outdoor ovens became more prevalent, though they had limited seasonal use. Services fared best in areas where they were run by local community cooperatives whose members had a strong interest in maintaining them.

The story of the Argentine money crisis was brought to the attention of a large Irish audience in Tipperary at a Community of Practice event hosted by Tipperary Institute in Thurles. ‘New economics’ author Richard Douthwaite gave a talk that began by suggesting that society has still to learn the real lessons of the credit crunch, predicting further difficulties for the Irish economy which have since played out as Europe and the IMF offered a bailout later that year. Douthwaite has long foreseen the global economic instability that caught many of his contemporary economists unawares in 2007. For example, in Short Circuit (1996), Douthwaite was already proposing how communities could implement community owned wind energy, local currencies, community supported agriculture and many other innovations which are today becoming widespread.

Members were expected to arrive early and help set up tables. Before each session, people first browsed the market in order to plan their trades. Market rules and guidelines were created to help the process run smoothly and fairly. They also developed strategies so that entertainment was provided for children to keep them occupied away from trading areas. Street theater, clowns, musicians not only improved the atmosphere for the young, but also gave an avenue for expression that served to diffuse conflict. Thus, a culture flourished alongside trade.

With thanks to Kate Bodin and her first-hand article published 31st October 2010 on Culture Change website http://www.culturechange.org/cms/content/view/681/1/

The whole book is available for free here: http://www.feasta.org/documents/shortcircuit/contents.html


Energy supply and money availability are closely connected in today’s globalised economy. With a growing realisation of the vulnerability of national currencies, an increasing number of resilience activists are experimenting with local currencies. Recent Irish and Argentinian experience can help to explain why – and how.

Toward the Digital Wilds page 266
Douthwaite’s talk in mid 2010 centred around a little known event that happened as the Lehman Brothers bank collapsed: oil tankers bound for Ireland were halted in the tracks at Gulf ports. They were not sailing for shortage of oil, but because banks had stopped trusting each other to honour their promises. This meant that the oil companies couldn’t get the credit slips they needed to guarantee they would be paid for the shipments at the other end. Above, we have pointed to a film that shows how Cuba rapidly adjusted to the consequences of a rapid hiatus in oil supplies following the collapse of the Soviet Union. There are also lessons to learn from closer to home.

In September 2000 across the UK lorry drivers and farmers blockaded oil facilities for several days in protest at proposed fuel duties. By Monday 11th September, panic buying of petrol began to close some petrol stations; the next day, 3,000 petrol stations were reported closed and the BBC reported that the government’s emergency committee had begun to mobilise the military to get supplies to critical services – including the NHS, which was put on red alert. Perhaps most worrying was that the major supermarkets warned they would run out of food within days. The government was forced to back down and had learned how vulnerable the nation was to future disruptions in oil supplies.

In the 2008 credit crunch, it was not refineries that were blockaded, but the banking system that was blocked from enabling business as usual. Faced with no food on supermarket shelves, governments felt they had no option but to bail out the banks by borrowing colossal amounts of money – and then printing money to pay it back.

There are, fortunately, opportunities for local communities to conduct experiments keeping money circulating which national governments can’t propose easily. Whilst the national media focuses on bigger and bigger bailouts as even countries threaten to go bankrupt, Totnes, Lewes, Stroud, Brixton and other places are trialling alternative systems. Like the Argentina experience, such initiatives have forerunners in the regional trade tokens that used to be used in the UK and Ireland throughout the 17th and 18th Century. In County Mayo, Douthwaite and colleagues now want to go one step further to establish a regional ‘liquidity network’:

A Liquidity Network is an innovative payment system to enable local authorities and businesses to maintain services, exchange goods and pay salaries without the need for euros. Combining the best features of local trading systems such as the Swiss Wirtschaftsring with electronic payment systems used in Japan and elsewhere, they are an emergency measure to help local economies keep business moving and prevent further job losses.

From http://theliquiditynetwork.org/

More and more local communities are starting to recognise the value in experimenting with local money systems in view of the risks associated with full scale dependence on national currencies, and the risks of further recessions in the global economy. Unlike in Argentina, we might see this time as one where we have the privilege to learn what works before the robustness of these systems is tested at scale and for real:

Like the old story of the frog in hot water, if the situation is gradually deteriorating, as it is in Ireland at the moment, we may not respond... if there’s a sudden crash, we do recognise that things can’t go on the way we have been going.

Richard Douthwaite, FEASTA, speaking at Tipperary Institute Summer 2009

See a picture report at http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/gallery/2010/sep/21/trade-tokens-local-currencies

This is the apocryphal story of the frog that fails to jump out water that is being brought slowly to the boil – see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boiling_frog
2.5 Cultural resilience

Whatever is given can always be re-imagined
Seamus Heaney, *The Nettle Bed*

The world may come to an end, but love and music will endure
Gaelic proverb

When I think of ‘resilience’ it immediately makes me think of the Welsh word ‘hafwyweddd’ which I suppose translates as vital or strong – so resilience is a much more positive, descriptive word of where we’re at within the work of Theatre Felinfach and where I think the work of communities is at – more positive descriptions...

*Dwywyn Lloyd Evans, Theatre Felinfach, Ceredigion*

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**Learning from an oral history of the 1966 Seaman’s strike, Lewis**

In September 2009, BBC Radio Scotland’s early morning ‘Thought for the Day’ programme was presented by Alastair McIntosh, a theologian and human ecologist whose book *Soil and Soul* tells the story of growing up on the Island of Lewis – and his subsequent work as an activist and advocate of community resilience in the Highlands and Islands. In the broadcast, McIntosh aired his perspective on what makes a place resilient – informed by new research about whether the Outer Hebrides are more, or less, resilient today than forty years ago (Eden 2009). The researcher, Lauren Eden, used the powerful research method of oral history – a great way for any community to begin to seek old resilience wisdom that is lying waiting to be discovered in every community:


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It’s a year ago today since our banking systems were very nearly engulfed following the collapse of the Lehman Brothers in America. And I bet I’m not alone in wondering what if our own government’s financial bail-out had not happened and succeeded.

Not only might the hole-in-the-wall have stopped talking to us. But our globalised food supply system could also have been thrown into chaos, because without the banks doing their bit you don’t get the deliveries coming through.

I’ve thought a lot about this recently while working with an Edinburgh University student seconded to my supervision. She went up to Stornoway and interviewed people about what happens when the Ullapool ferry fails to sail because of bad weather. ....
She learned that the supermarket shelves quickly go bare, and it’s not just panic buying. It’s also because restocking is on a just-in-time basis, and so there’s no slack to make up for any disruption in the system.

For the sake of comparison she then went on to interview people who could remember the six week long seamen’s strike in 1966, that forced Harold Wilson to declare a national state of emergency.

Most people said they’d avoided hardship because crofting was still vibrant. They had their own potatoes, hens, sheep, and maybe a cow for milk or a fishing boat moored in the loch. But above all, they had an ethos of sharing.

This gave the local economy the resilience by which it could stand up to knocks. But in contrast, today we have greater efficiency, but it’s also a more brittle system – like the banking crisis could very nearly have taught us.

The lesson is that economic efficiency is vital, but only if matched by the community resilience that makes for true security.

That’s why such principles as Fair Trade, farmers’ markets and local entrepreneurship are all so important.

They remind us that the economy should be not just about money, but also about the human handshakes that reflect right relationships ... for they’re what counts when the ferry fails to sail.


For McIntosh, it is the ‘human handshakes’ of indigenous crofting culture that underpin true community resilience. In this culture, resourcefulness and flexibility are second nature: it’s not really necessary to invent a concept like ‘resilience’. Living folk memory – though dance, music, poetry, story – already keeps alive understandings of what it means to sustain ‘right relationship’ between human and natural communities.

Global indigenous rights and climate justice movements have long struggled to secure the cultural survival of marginalised cultures and communities. These struggles continue today in many places.

see for example http://www.ienearth.org/

These movements have won a UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) which now enshrines rights to “strengthen [indigenous peoples] distinctive spiritual and material relationship with their lands, territories, waters and coastal seas”.

A number of film-makers have attempted to make bring an indigenous world-view to the cinema screen. See for example James Cameron’s block-buster film Avatar and the 1982 film Koyaanisqatsi – see: http://www.koyaanisqatsi.org/ (taken from the Hopi language meaning ‘life out of balance’ or ‘life in turmoil’) – which used time-lapse photography to reveal how out of kilter the speed, technology and energy profligacy of modern economies is with traditional ways of living close to the land.
Gaelic poet Iain Crichton Smith (1928-1998) was intensely aware of the decline of his native language and of the threat to his culture’s resilience. In his book *Towards the Human* (1996) he says why Gaelic must not be allowed to die:

*To be an islander is to inhabit real space on a real earth.... He has his proverbs, his philosophies, the cemeteries and cradles of his hopes: his tasks and his loves: his language. Behind the judgment made on him by the bureaucrat is the idea that his world is in some way irrelevant....

If there is no Gaelic left, will not the islander live in a disappearing landscape, as an Englishman would if his language were slowly to die? ... If he were to wake one morning and look around him and see “hill” and not “cnoc,” would he not be an expatriate of his own land? For we are born inside a language and see everything from within its parameters: it is not we who make language, it is language that makes us....

To live is to be conscious of a history... the possibility of a future means that the children must grow up in a world that they recognise as being as important as any other ... It requires a government that is concerned for all its people including those who speak a language that they do not understand.*

Crichton Smith (1996)

Whilst Crichton Smith is fearful of what might be, McIntosh’s tone is much more up-beat. In his poem *The Forge*, he suggests that a vibrant cultural renaissance is underway that connects people, place, and language:

*The Forge*

*What is the point of land reform so that remote communities can be preserved as threatened cultures at a massive social cost to the nation as a whole*

... [we] stoke the glowing hearth anew to smelt and skim and pour a precious shimmering stream refined by sense of place and ancient lore

... and hammer out the beauty, of the braided crofting way ...which is our greatest export, to this world that’s gone astray...and that’s the point of land reform

*in the politics of today.*


In the dialogue between the despair of Crichton-Smith and the hope in McIntosh’s poems is a call to move from an idea that community resilience, in an indigenous context, is simply about ‘resistance’ to something that is more complex, fruitful and creative. Hope lies in making creative innovations from within traditional cultures that help young people to stay in the communities where they grow up – and to use this cultural resurgence to guide responses to the complex and turbulent futures we are all likely to be facing.
Ferment: lessons from Celtic Neighbours

From 2004-2009, Carnegie UK Trust worked with the Big Lottery, UK to support a major rural action research programme (RARP). One stream of the RARP was an ambitious programme called ‘Celtic Neighbours’, which developed cultural exchanges across Wales, Scotland and Ireland:

Imagination, language, creativity, culture .... Can you think of anything else that can transport people and bring them along on a journey of the imagination? These are the things that give us the spirit and resolve to make our own path into the future and to make this future better

Dermot MacLaughlin,
Chief Executive Temple Bar Cultural Trust, from Ferment

Meic Llewellyn, Celtic Neighbours co-ordinator, is passionately committed to harnessing the creativity within cultural traditions in service of navigating challenging, changing times:

Alongside our economic and aesthetic resources, and long-standing traditions of sustainability, generosity and thrift, the everyday business of cultural production is a key driver of development here.

Meic Llewellyn, from the introduction to ‘Ferment’

Celtic Neighbours sought to catalyse and enhance new innovations in ‘cultural production’ by establishing a new network to broach new connections between diverse Celtic-speaking communities across the UK and Ireland. This very practical work continues today, with touring artists offering workshops and performances, and cross-community events supported by simultaneous translations into Irish Gaelic, Scots Gaelic and Welsh. Against a background where many traditional communities have become used to resisting change at all costs in order to preserve a cultural inheritance that has been at risk of extinction, the work of Celtic Neighbours introduces new and more creative ways of relating to change. Meic and colleagues maintain that celebrating and encouraging this shift is vital for renewing and enhancing Celtic language community resilience. As Gwyn Jones, contributor to Ferment, puts it:

I feel it’s important that our work is innovative and cutting-edge, even when the form is a traditional one. Looking to the future, we have to ensure our cultures are alive and inviting for the young, and they don’t feel that to be daring or cool they have to use English... Only last week, when we had a technical hiccup sorting out our Hebridean weblink, I made contact with a school on Anglesey who have linked with one in Lesotho, and they helped me find a way round it. Developing the links we know exist between us as Celts and because of our shared historical and economic experiences doesn’t mean we close our minds to the rest of the world – in fact, the opposite is true. But we do have a huge amount to learn from each other. Look how far ahead the traditional music scene is in Ireland compared to us, or story-telling in the Hebrides.

From Ferment: culture, confidence and regeneration in rural Celtic communities.

One stream of RARP partners followed a similar trajectory. Focusing on resilience skills, several organisations undertook action research to test out a ‘skills bank’ that had been developed for rural community development practitioners. In Wales, Shan Ashton and Bryan Collis, of the Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) called their project Learning for Rural Resilience. As with the Celtic Neighbours,

it’s useful to note that many advocates of the ‘peak oil’ movement stress that the skills gap is perhaps the most alarming deficiency of modern society potentially facing a need to many more farmers, renewable energy engineers, etc. There remains work to be done to integrate this analysis into the tradition community development skills bank...

One output of Carnegie’s Rural Action Research Project (RARP), available at www.carnegieuk.org/rural

...exploring community resilience in times of rapid change
the work was based on an appreciation of the power of valuing traditional cultural values, and enhancing the creative spark that is already alive in places. In an echo of Moses Coady’s earlier work in Nova Scotia (see Part One), Ashton and Collis wanted to challenge a view that although “change is happening and inevitable... these changes are most often perceived as threatening or limiting”. Again, exchange visits and learning sessions were established to open up opportunities to reflect on how change is perceived within traditional Welsh farming communities:

In another innovative move, Bangor University awarded a ‘community certificate’ to groups that successfully completed the programme.

**Welcoming migrant workers, Northern Ireland**

In Derry, Northern Ireland, Eddie Kerr and colleagues at Seeds Co-operative have demonstrated an inspiring and different route toward fostering greater cultural diversity – and therefore resilience. SEEDS began life in 2004 to offer support to new residents from many different countries – and today, the organisation has over 490 members from 38 nationalities. The Seeds website picks up the story:

Because inward migration is a relatively new phenomenon to Northern Ireland, the indigenous communities are coming to terms with the influx of new citizens. This has created many issues and concerns and these must be addressed urgently. Many migrant workers are ill prepared to live in a society that is currently coming to terms with centuries of sectarian politics. We are working closely with many statutory bodies and community representatives to reduce the impact of change in a society going through transition. We need to find methods and techniques of working with all parties creating a safe and supportive environment for all people living and working in this region...

---

The skills focus of this initiative helped maintain a focus on practical outcomes for groups. For example, one exercise invited local people to create a strategy to prioritise local actions based on a local skills audit:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thread</th>
<th>Existing knowledge/assets in the community</th>
<th>How to use them</th>
<th>Knowledge/ assets needed</th>
<th>Where to access the knowledge/ assets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community Energy Company</td>
<td>Wide range of knowledge and technical skills available</td>
<td>Ensure the project is understood as a grass roots led project for the benefit of the community</td>
<td>Knowledge about appropriate business form</td>
<td>Wales cooperative Centre</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key references shaping Ashton and Collis’ approach were Nachtegal P & Hass T, 2000, Annenberg Rural Challenge: School Reform From a Slightly Different Point of View. In J C Montgomery & A D Kitchenham (eds) Proceedings of the Rural Communities and Identities in the Global Millennium International Conference, Malapino University College, Rural Communities Research & Development Centre, British Columbia. See also Rahman A, 1993, People’s Self Development: perspectives on participatory action research, Zed Books.
As a first step in this direction SEEDS has opened a ‘One World Centre’ (incorporating a Multi-Cultural Centre) providing a range of services and activities promoting integration and meeting unmet needs. We want to respond to the needs of the growing number of new citizens and migrants to the North West of Ireland region and represent a link between the North West’s immigrant community and statutory and voluntary services. This is the first One World Centre of its kind in Ireland and now houses seven different ethnic minority groups as well as the Foyle Language School.

What motivates people like Eddie to throw themselves into this kind of work, often at great personal expense? In his contribution to the Celtic Neighbours book Ferment, Eddie reflected on how creative writing and community work aren’t so far apart:

I don’t see the processes of writing and community work as essentially different... They’re both about creating, and responding to need. They both contribute to releasing the creativity in people and making life more rewarding. Both demand innovative thought, and both can be heartbreaking when results won’t come, and better than any drug when they run away with you.

Eddie Kerr, quoted in Ferment, ibid.

Integration is not an automatic consequence of learning the language of the host community. Individuals must also participate in the life of the community. SEEDS language courses have always been underpinned by the importance of a social integration programme. In 2008 this programme expanded to include visits to places of practical and cultural interest – libraries, service providers, local museums, theatres, galleries, and sites of cultural and historical significance. We have designed a programme encompassing local cultural aspects as well as oral history lessons.


Place Based Learning in Cornwall

Cornwall is a hotbed of cultural activism – and has offered many stories of community innovation into Carnegie’s Rural Development Programme over the years. The outreach team at the Eden Project have been trailblazers, working with artists to dream up inspiring ways for local people to get involved in community planning. It was through our Eden colleagues that learned of an inspiring young peoples’ dance group from Camborne, Cornwall called the TR14ers (after the local post-code), who are breathing a sense of infectious life and energy into a community suffering multiple disadvantage. The group is run by and for young people, and research has shown how their activities helps people to move ‘from apathy to anger to positive energy’.

Youth village are also at the heart of another Cornish cultural initiative led by Will Coleman – a story-teller and bagpipe player whose passion is to put place-based learning at the centre of the school curriculum. Will and colleagues create materials and experiences for children which underline the value and uniqueness of their places, and the potential to make a good future life there. Beyond the virtual worlds of Facebook and YouTube, place-based learning engages all the senses by getting out and about exploring local history, wildlife,
business, farms. The approach surfaces old local stories – as well as encouraging the invention of new ones. Working with stories in this way can help to shift ‘stuck’ ways of seeing a place, to realising instead its potential. Launching a report on place-based learning at a Carnegie event in Cashel, Ireland, Will told a story about how his experiences as a teacher – where he saw children being encouraged to get ‘up and out’ of their community to ‘get on’ – led him to search for a way to enable local young people to stay:

Schooling often encourages young people to reject their home communities and to seek elsewhere for the ‘good life’ depicted by the media.... Media and advertising reinforce individualism which inevitably leads to uprooting, lack of participation, economic dependency and community breakdown.

By extending the boundaries of the classroom to include the whole local area, place-based learning immerses students in local heritage, culture, landscapes, enterprises, and all the many assets, seen and unseen, of a place. This kind of approach can help young people become more confident in taking responsibility for growing the vitality and resilience of the places. As we saw in the section on personal resilience, it is therefore a promising area for policy innovators to explore as we investigate how young people might be encouraged to get more involved in resilience-building. This was a message first mooted by Carnegie UK Trust in its Charter for Rural Community Development (2007):

Governments, the curriculum development agencies, local education authorities and the teaching profession to support place-based education as a cross cutting feature of the primary and secondary curriculum in rural schools.

Resilience through craft revival: the GalGael Trust, Govan

Place-based learning is about practical application of skills – and can include reviving skills that may be in danger of being lost. In Govan, Glasgow, there is an inspiring initiatives that shows the power of this philosophy in action – and how everyone (not just younger people) can benefit.

Trust founders Gehan and Colin Macleod realised that after the closure of the Govan shipyards that unemployed master wood craftsmen could be brought together with a younger generation of long-term unemployed people, many with drugs and alcohol habits, to share skills and establish a ground-breaking social enterprise which has revived an ancient tradition of Birlinn (a form of Viking longship) building on the Clyde.

Whereas long-term unemployment can be a recipe for loneliness and hopelessness, the GalGael have helped many people to stay active, learn transferable skills, and recover a sense of pride in belonging in Govan. In this way, a negative cycle of depression is broken and a ‘beneficial cycle’ of positive, practical action is taking its place.

Visit the GalGael today, and the sense of energy and hope can be highly infectious, even in the face of depressing news from the wider world media. GalGael is not a one off ‘project’ but a way of life for a growing community of locals in Govan. Like many other stories in this book, the Trust is a social enterprise, generating income based on the artistic calibre and craft skills of local people.

Artists Rehearsing Resilience: Tooting’s Trash-Catchers Carnival

the time is right for an urgent re-examination from the widest possible perspective, of the role creative expression already plays and could play even further, in driving the social innovations and in building the individual and collective resilience we will need to survive and thrive in an increasingly uncertain future.

Clare Cooper, Mission Models Money

Although the London borough of Tooting can seem a world away from rural Cornish villages where Will Coleman and colleagues champion place-based learning, in both places it is creative artists who are unlocking creative cultural expression within local communities. Fiery Spirits member Lucy Neil has described how she worked to create a ‘Trash Catchers’ carnival involving a partnership between Transition Tooting and two professional arts organisations.

The idea was to draw hundreds of local people into the streets – ‘reclaiming’ the A24 arterial High Road (which carries 10 million cars a year) as a ‘community space’ one Summer’s day. The celebration took a year to prepare. Instead of throwing stuff away, people were encouraged to keep it to be transformed into impressive, shiny decorations, puppets and floats. The message would be that it’s possible to transform every place into something beautiful:

Nothing like this had happened before... over one year we ran workshops in half terms and put up publicity until people started to say ‘heh this is happening – they are going to shut the High Road!’. This quickly gathered a sense of excitement and possibility ... lots of community groups and schools got involved.... The idea that it would be our own story... early workshops writing, poetry, walking around streets, food ...

Lucy Neal, co-ordinator of the carnival (personal communication)

In our interview, Lucy went on to describe how, as the day neared, excitement mounted. One puppet was called ‘Our Lady of Tooting’; another was a ‘Sankofa’ bird which, according to legend, could look forwards (to the future) and backwards (to the past) in the same glance. Head teachers allowed hundreds of local schoolchildren the day off to participate. Although the traffic authority refused permission to stop the traffic, so much momentum had gathered that the event was unstoppable:

On the day itself the sun shone... and we jettisoned idea of getting permission from Transport for London. Instead we registered as a direct action, and were given safe passage by the local police.... We stopped traffic.

Lucy Neal, co-ordinator of the carnival (personal communication)

800 ‘Carnivalisters’ processed down the High Road and into a 50 acre green space that is usually inaccessible. Local businesses and restaurants provided food for 1000 people for free, and people were handed out packets of seeds – to grow new things to share in follow-up food festivals.

When we invited Lucy Neal, the Carnival’s co-ordinator, to reflect on what putting on a carnival had to do with building community resilience, she was clear that in her view resilience is fundamentally about harnessing creativity: the carnival proved that local artists can be deployed to harness the power of imagination -a crucial resource for creating a low-carbon future. Neal stressed that artist have many skills in co-ordination, planning, and project management – and that local groups can benefit from these too. And finally, Lucy stressed that the carnival, in her mind, is a kind of rehearsal for a more resilient future – in the same way that a theatre company rehearses in the weeks and months before a performance, a community that is rehearsed before a crunch time has a far better chance of not fluffing its lines:

.... We don’t get these opportunities very often – but they are critical times to see ourselves differently: they are points of re-invention, renewal, and of giving our imagination the chance to fly ...we think “If I can do that, then what else can I do?” It’s an experience of joy – a radical force... it shows that the community is able to do far more than it may believe itself to be capable of... and it showed how artists can help to raise the game in terms of ambition, aesthetic, organisation – helping people to do something they never dreamed they would be capable of.

Lucy Neal, personal communication
2.6 Cross-Community Links: ‘no community can go it alone’

It is very important that communities recognise their interdependence with other resilient communities and not trying to do an isolated island because that’s not going to work and that is going to cause conflict.

- participant, Fiery Spirits Community of Practice

Despite current ads and slogans, the world does not change one person at a time. It changes as networks of relationships form among people who discover they share a common cause and vision of what is possible. Rather than worry about critical mass, our work is to foster critical connections.

Margaret Wheatley, author of Using Emergence to take Social Innovations to Scale

God forbid that India should ever take to industrialism after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.

Mahatma Gandhi (1928)

A key finding of the 2007 Carnegie Commission was that rural community activists – which the report called ‘Fiery Spirits’ – often feel isolated. It called on governments to support networking opportunities for rural activists, building on the powerful experience of LEADER (a European Union initiative) which has demonstrated how networks can kick-start rural regeneration across Europe. Today, there are many good examples of such networks. For example:

- Scotland’s National Rural Network (http://www.ruralgateway.org.uk/) is a Scottish Government initiative benefitting from significant funding from Europe;
- Transition Network (http://www.transitionnetwork.org) is another inspiration: a bottom-up initiative resourced primarily from the passion, skills and dedication of volunteers; meanwhile
- ‘Our Society: Social action. Honest exchange. Grounded learning’ (http://oursociety.org.uk/) has begun to cause a stir; and
- Project Dirt (http://www.projectdirt.com) – an initiative of the Low Carbon Communities Network – shows how even in cities networking can bring communities closer together.

The transition towns movement is a powerful example of an international grassroots network that is beginning to transform places on the basis of a hard-headed analysis of the local risks from the future impacts of the combined global trends of climate change and peak oil production. Self-organising groups tackle the initiatives they are most interested in, informed by a whole community ‘energy descent action plan’ which has set a guiding vision for how local people can take responsibility for building resilience over a period of twenty years or so. This ‘scenarios’ approach to community planning is a feature of many community resilience initiatives and resources.

This chapter explores how these and other resilience-building networks (including www.fieryspirits.com) can help to build cross-community links in support of greater community resilience everywhere.

In the past traders, monks, wandering minstrels and more all brought news from the outside world to people who rarely travelled far themselves. Today, the globalised economy and internet mean that many take for granted instant access to news, online shops, and the ability to stay in touch with friends who may live very far away. However, there are down-sides. Instead of too little information, the experience of the internet can feel like we’re drowning in it. And there are many, especially in remote and rural communities, who aren’t able to access technology and services.
‘Imaginal cells’: the power of a good network

Davie Philip is a natural networker – a passion for promoting sustainability has motivated him to spend twenty years convening hundreds of events throughout Ireland. Davie is a member of many cross-cutting networks – and has been an active member of fieryspirits.com since its inception. During a workshop at the Centre for Alternative Technology in Machynlleth, Wales, he shared some of the inspiration behind his work by using the metaphor of a butterfly: “After eating hundreds of times its own weight, the caterpillar forms its chrysalis and inside its body new cells start forming – called imaginal discs. At first the discs find it hard to survive the caterpillar’s immune system – but soon they multiply and connect – and the butterfly emerges”.

We learned from Davie about how even a small group of under-resourced but committed people can have a big impact. We made a connection to the novelist William Gibson’s phrase ‘the future is here, it’s just not widely distributed yet’ as Davie invited us to see ourselves as ‘imaginal discs’, beavering away in our own places, and yet sensing how important it is to connect together to build a strong community resilience movement: “as the old structures of society break down thousands upon thousands of us are already living the future – and it’s better than what we’ve got today!”. The session seemed to fire us up. The butterfly metaphor had helped us to glimpse why networking is such a crucial part of effective community resilience building.

Resilience’s ‘dark side’: why no community should try to ‘go it alone’

This book opened with the story of how Hurricane Katrina revealed fault-lines between New Orleans communities: wealthier residents escaped whilst many poorer people perished. We suggested that community resilience is not about establishing easy ‘escape routes’ for the rich, but rather building connections between communities, often within the same city or region.

Throughout our workshops, the imperative of social justice was raised repeatedly. On one occasion, a participant raised the question of a ‘dark side’ to community resilience: of places that ‘bunker down’, fighting change – especially that which is perceived as being imposed by outsiders:

Sometimes the idea of resilience reminds me of Dr. Strangelove – build a big bunker underground to perpetuate the race...

Participant, Dunfermline seminar

She was referring to Stanley Kubrick’s cult film Dr. Strangelove (1964), where a war room full of politicians and generals frantically try to prevent a paranoid general, USAF Brigadier General Jack D. Ripper (played by Peter Sellers), from starting a nuclear war. In one memorable scene, Ripper explains his warped logic:

General Jack D. Ripper: Mandrake, do you recall what Clemenceau once said about war?
Group Capt. Lionel Mandrake: No, I don’t think I do, sir, no.
General Jack D. Ripper: He said war was too important to be left to the generals. When he said that, 50 years ago, he might have been right. But today, war is too important to be left to politicians. They have neither the time, the training, nor the inclination for strategic thought. I can no longer sit back and allow Communist infiltration, Communist indoctrination, Communist subversion and the international Communist conspiracy to sap and impurify all of our precious bodily fluids.

Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964)
Sellers’ brilliant portrayal the twisted psychology of war touched a nerve – and helped the film become a cult classic. General Ripper would have seen his actions as defending his nation’s resilience – whilst all the while blind to the bigger impact of nuclear Armageddon.

We agreed that this reference helpfully raised questions about a ‘dark’ side to resilience: how, in a scenario of community conflict and break-down, the idea of ‘resilience’ could be misused to garner support for extremist politics. As the conversation turned to the British National Party’s messages of repelling outsiders and scape-goating minorities, we also asked ourselves whether we hadn’t secretly also asked ourselves ‘what would we do if it all goes pear-shaped?’. Would we gang together and head to the hills with some guns, like the cannibal gangs in the film The Road?

Shortly after we met, the IPPR released a report (April 2010) that examined why the British National Party seemed to be gaining ground in some constituencies. In most communities in England, the IPPR study found, it is not the direct experience of immigration, but “the slow-burning mixture of frustration, isolation and sense of powerlessness people are feeling in some communities”.

A flavour of our conversation continued at other events. By and large, the conclusion was that it is most healthy to be aware of this possible ‘dark’ side to a resilience agenda: it may help to remind residents of wealthier areas that it may well be fruitless to develop an all-singing and dancing resilient community initiative if, down the road, ‘frustration, isolation and powerlessness’ is building into pent-up rage. No community, we conclude, can or should try to ‘go it alone’: resilience, we realise, is a function of a community’s capacity to foster diverse connections to other places, near and far. We now look at some ways this can be done.

In the face of historic and continuing profligacy of resource use by the rich world, we have found that many people we have met who are working to build local community resilience in the UK and Ireland are also active supporters of organisations such as WDM and the Fair Trade movement.

In 2009, Tipperary Institute (based in Thurles) host a large scale community resilience event as part our Community of Practice. Many of the presentations advocated for local food activism as a powerful starting-place for community resilience initiatives. Some also stressed a global food justice imperative: they are motivated to find a new system, beyond inequitable trade and the domination of the international food system by a small number of multinational companies.

Local food: catalysing global networking and solidarity

You can’t just have one resilient town, you need to link into other communities, and their learning...

Mike Small, Fife Diet

Whilst rich countries are responsible for most of the emissions pumped into the atmosphere it is the poorest communities in the world that are being hit the hardest by climate change. But rather than providing compensation for causing climate change rich countries are using it to trap the world’s poor into new and dangerous debt.


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From Transition Town Totnes, Devon, Rob Hopkins showed maps of the region that showed the ‘food footprints’ of local settlements to try to answer the question ‘can Totnes feed itself?’. Mike Small, from the Fife Diet project in Scotland, told us how they had spent the previous year experimenting with whether they could survive on a diet sourced 85% locally: they had held dinners, swapped recipes, received offers of land for allotments, and learned a lot about how difficult it is to buy local – even from farmers in the same village. We also heard how another Fife initiative – One Planet Food – is attempting to take lessons from the Fife Diet as well as ideas being generated by an international peasant movement, Via Campesina, to influence regional and national food policy.

Evidence from our conference in Tipperary suggests how powerful cross-community linking can be – especially when we make the local-global connections. It also shows how simple, catchy ideas like a Fife Diet has the capacity to ‘go viral – inspiring others near and far. As our Community of Practice develops, these are lessons we are learning from.

The ‘Food Sovereignty’ report is available at [http://www.centreforstewardship.org.uk/oneplanetfood.htm](http://www.centreforstewardship.org.uk/oneplanetfood.htm). See also a video snapshot of a project co-ordinated by St. Andrews University aiming to catalyse similar outcomes: [http://fieryspirits.com/video/fife-councilcommunity-food](http://fieryspirits.com/video/fife-councilcommunity-food).

Section 2 – Building more resilient communities – guided by a compass of community resilience

Summary Points

1. Community Resilience is a youthful and vibrant field. This handbook offers a ‘compass’ of community resilience to make it easier to navigate the many toolkits, stories, theories and definitions that already exist.

2. Achieving ‘breakthrough’ resilience will likely involve high levels of creativity, co-ordination and even fun across four dimensions of personal, cultural, economic and inter-community collaboration.

3. Personal resilience is an active process of ‘self righting’ involving feeling in control of life, getting fit, and being positively engaged in community life.

4. Local economies can ‘plug the leaks’ by stewarding their own energy, water, money, housing, food and other resources.

5. Creativity, fun and a strong and inclusive sense of identity, belonging and place are at the heart of cultural resilience.

6. No community can or should try to ‘go it alone’ – more resilient communities are learning how best to support other places when needed.

Next steps

We hope you have found this handbook useful and stimulating. As a next step, why not:

1. Try out the ‘resilience compass’ in your own community. See Appendix 2 for a sample workshop.

2. Offer feedback via [www.fieryspirits.com](http://www.fieryspirits.com)

3. Follow updates via twitter – @comresilience
Appendix 1: Events informing this book

Sense of Place, Eden

September 2009
Attendees at a ‘Sense of Place’ talked about building a strong ‘sense of belonging’ – and how this can help build community resilience too. Presenters’ stories included creating a Cornish language school curriculum, re-inventing local festivals in Cumbria to bring life back to villages, baking bread from local ingredients in Fife, and many many more captured using ‘graphic facilitation’ (see right).

Power and Place conference, CAT

October 2009
CAT hosted the Power and Place conference in addition to a series of seminars on writing a new ‘Zero Carbon Britain’ report, with the idea of showing, very practically, how the UK economy could make a transition capable of preventing runaway climate change. CAT’s emphasis is on ‘transition technologies’ showcased pioneer communities who are pioneering locally appropriate solutions to transport, energy etc.. Two presenters went on to share a £1 million prize from NESTA’s Big Green Challenge later in the year.

‘Resilience’ Ceiluradh, Tipperary Institute

Oct. 2009
Ireland is suffering badly from the credit crunch. House prices in free fall and a government crisis coping with crippling debt, with public sector workers having to accept big pay cuts. This was the back-drop to TI’s annual Ceiluradh themed ‘resilience’. Food, money and community innovation were big topics. A major part of this event included workshops where all delegates did some hard thinking about to to build resilience in their context. Report available from TI, as well as a video summary on fieryspirits.com.
Resilience Seminar, Dunfermline

November 2009

A day long event brought together 25 participants from the online resilience discussion group for a rich, engaging conversation. The small group size, careful facilitation, and quality contributions made for a productive session which identified some question themes (picture, right) to follow up on.

Carnegie Rural Programme Annual Gathering, Kendal

November 2009

We met at the time of the Cockermouth and Workington floods. As part of the event, I hosted a workshop for 90 minutes for about fifty people. We began with small group work – exchanging views on resilience – then opened out a wider conversation which we captured on video.

Carnegie Annual Gathering, Hill Holt Wood, Lincolnshire

October 2010

A group of twelve experienced practitioners met to help to shape this document, bringing case stories and insights from different sectors, jurisdictions, disciplines and practice areas. Our conversations were wide ranging and turned up useful new thinking such as the importance of ‘rehearsing’ resilience… and the importance of connecting rural and urban community agendas.
Brain-storming a local index of resilience can be very helpful for communities starting down the track (or indeed reviewing progress to date) of building greater resilience. This Appendix suggests a sample format for how to run a starter session of 90 minutes with about 12 people, using the compass of resilience introduced in Part Two of this book:

1. Welcome participants and invite people to talk in pairs or threes about a real life experience where they have learned something about ‘resilience’. Next, ask participants to feedback any insights from the experiences they shared. Ask each speaker to be brief, and to note down the insights in a way that everyone can see them (a flipchart laid flat on a central table can work well). After everyone who wants a go has had a chance to report back, switch chairs and ask people whether they see any common themes in what’s been said (30 minutes).

2. Briefly introduce the ‘Resilience Compass’ in a way that makes sense to you (using your own examples, ideally). Ask whether people would like to experiment with seeing if it can add anything to the insights that have just been noted down. The idea will be to invent labels for the compass that are unique to your place! If people aren’t interested, don’t force the suggestion. Instead, see where the ensuing discussion leads! (5 minutes).

3. Hand out copies of the blank compass (see next page). Invite participants to self-organise into four groups of three, with the task of rapidly coming up with locally relevant labels that explain the break through, break even and break down stages under each heading ‘people’, ‘culture’, ‘economy’ and ‘links’. It might help to brainstorm these into a table to begin with (generic example below) (15 minutes).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Break Through</th>
<th>Break Even</th>
<th>Break Down</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People</td>
<td>Feel in control and able to plan ahead</td>
<td>Feel isolated and cautious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Re-create local story to fit changing times</td>
<td>Celebrate sense of place &amp; belonging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>Localised economy, many ‘virtuous circles’</td>
<td>Diverse infrastructure and organisations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links</td>
<td>Pro-active cross-community collaboration</td>
<td>Networking with like-minded folk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4 Next, keep everyone in groups and ask them to consider each axis in turn: how well are we doing in our community? By the end of the conversation, there should be one coloured in compass per group (sample, below). (5 minutes)

5 Now bring the groups back together and each briefly reports back. Take time to notice any similarities or differences between the labels the groups came up with, and the shapes of the diagrammes that have been drawn on the compasses. (10 minutes)

6 Spend time de-briefing the exercise. Was it helpful? Did it throw any new light on the local situation? How about involving the wider community as well – perhaps each person present could conduct two or three small focus groups with friends and neighbours, and bring all the compasses back to a future meeting. If the group decides to go in this direction, why not ask local people to map the untapped potential of the community at the same time? It might generate some great ideas for taking next steps towards ‘break through’ resilience!

7 If this exercise worked for you, how about writing a blog about how it went at fieryspirits.com, suggesting improvements to this workshop? Feel free to contact nick@carnegieuk.org for help on how to do this.
# Compass Worksheet

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<th></th>
<th>Break Through</th>
<th>Break Even</th>
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<td>People</td>
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<td>Economy</td>
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<td>Links</td>
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Appendix 3: Break-through in the life-cycle of organisations

In Part One of this book, we pointed to the Training for Transformation resources that were compiled by Anne Hope and Sally Timmel, building on Paulo Freire’s insights into popular education. In the third book in the series, the authors introduce a ‘parabola model’ that helps to describe the life cycles of projects and organisations in communities. The diagramme below adapts the parabola model to show typical points of break even, break through and break down in such a cycle:

The parabola model is designed to be read from left to right: it describes typical steps that pioneers follow as they establish new organisations, groups or even communities. There are several lessons that can be drawn. For example, even if a community feels things are going reasonably well – ‘breaking even’ – it would be wrong to grow complacent. Instead, this is the time to get ready for a new burst of innovation and creativity. Building regular cycles of action and reflection (action research) can help with this.

The parabola also reveals lessons for founders of initiatives. For example, it shows why succession planning is vital to ensure that an organisation isn’t overly constrained by existing ways of working. If the life goes out of a community of organisation (the red curve), doubts can creep in. The longer these doubts are not brought to the surface and addressed, the deeper they can become until people may wonder if the organisation should still exist. The Training for Transformation manuals identify three stages of doubt down the red slope: operational, strategic and ethical.

Lively, easy to understand and packed with useful metaphors and practical tools for applying resilience thinking

Community activist (Scotland)

The compass model is very useable ... really beneficial in my work supporting local community leaders

Community development worker (Ireland)

Brings home different aspects of resilience ... the section on resilience and creativity is inspiring!

Social entrepreneur (England)

Inspiring stories that make the theory come alive – and a theoretical framework that makes sense of the stories

Sustainability Academic (Wales)

I love the ‘commitment to bringing people together who didn’t know they needed to meet’ – it’s the guiding principle for the handbook

Foundation professional (England)
We have now begun to refine the CoP’s emerging model of resource co-production. There is potential that this service can become one element of a future business plan for the CoP.

This service enables ‘social learning for a social purpose’, rooted in the values and experience of asset based approaches to community development. Since 2008, the CoP has established a track record in:

1) Enabling people from different sectors, backgrounds and activist/professional perspectives to exchange know-how and present it in accessible forms for wider stakeholders;
2) Using social networking and social media technology to enable this cross-cutting work (evidence from recent Rural Networks Research suggests that the CoP is ahead on the learning curve of many other networks in this regard); and
3) Generating outputs that are valued by, and have influenced the practice of stakeholders. (e.g. as evidenced by download figures and feedback from the February 2012 member survey).

Whilst 2011 topics were led by Carnegie UK Trust staff, during 2012 we are focusing on developing topics in partnership with other networks and funders. Carnegie Associates are leading this work. Associates are experienced practitioners who apply facilitation skills to pump-prime topics, then step back to enable members to take ownership of outputs/further work.

Current topics in development are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Network Partner</th>
<th>Confirmed events</th>
<th>Funding partners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transferring Services</td>
<td>Lead: Argyll and Bute Social Enterprise Network (ABSEN) Additional: tbc</td>
<td>September 2012 CoP Oct 2012</td>
<td>Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Argyll and Bute Council (in-kind)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Young, Gifted and Rural: narrative

Through three residential meetings (Comrie, November 2011; Harris March 2012; and Twechar October 2012), five groups of four-five young people (aged 16-18 with one or two adult accompanyers) from five Scottish communities came together to explore common experiences of actively trying to make rural living for themselves and their friends more ‘liveable’. The workshops involved 50% outdoor and active sessions (kayaking/biking/surfing) and 50% facilitated sessions. I worked as a sounding board for the Carnegie Associate – Alan Caldwell, an established facilitator who has worked in rural development across Scotland over many years – who took the lead on the session planning and facilitation at the Comrie workshop.

During the first workshop in Comrie, these sessions involved each group showing a previously made video they had put together about their area; and after questions, the young people starting to make links and connections between the stories and issues that had come up in the videos as well as ‘stuff’ that came up through conversation at the tables they were sitting at (each table had representation from a different locality). This session was testing the water: did the participants ‘get into’ meeting and talking with people from other areas? How about meeting up again, this time hosted by another group?

As part of my remit supporting North Harris Trust to engage with the Community of Practice (funding by Highlands and Islands Enterprise), I had encouraged the Trust to invite the young people to visit them as a follow-up to the Comrie event. North Harris Trust is a community buyout group who had been developing housing, land management and other resources on North Harris since purchasing 63000 acres a few years prior. Among different issues they were exploring as part of their ‘learning’ agenda to feed into the CoP were around how they might support young people in the community to have more of a sense of ownership and awareness of the Trust’s activities. The opportunity to host a group from across Scotland meshed well with this agenda, and I arranged for a follow-up ‘Associate’ contract for Alan to support a second workshop patterned around a similar mix of ‘fun’ outdoor activities and ‘work’ sessions. This time the sessions were focused around enabling the young people to decide whether there could be a common project that the group could work on – that might have benefit for young people living in rural areas. This time the young people themselves used video cameras to record their conversations and activities and edited it together into a record of the trip that they posted into a new Facebook page they set up for themselves. Although four ideas for projects were voiced at the Harris workshop, the final edit of the video made a case for developing an ‘app’ by and for young people. The video then became an effective reminder of the Harris trip, its conclusions, as well as a fund-raising device that enabled a smaller steering group of young people (with continued background support from Alan) to approach Unlimited, a funder focused on supporting budding social enterpreneurs, to enable them to build this app.

The group decided to convene another get together – this time in Scotland’s central belt – to start designing and building the ‘app’ which was intended to help young people navigate day-day issues they faced. This time, the Unlimited grant enabled the group to ask a software developer from Glasgow to help focus their thinking, and they also invited along other networks focused on supporting young people (such as Young Scot) who would be in a position to help test and promote the app through future design iterations. In particular, in Spring 2013 the Scottish Rural Network (supported by the Scottish Government) want to bring 200 young people together and are keen that the ‘app’ development is a central part of the agenda for this gathering.

Altogether, Carnegie UK Trust invested £11K in the young peoples’ topic, and this investment has now enabled a further £9K as well as opening the possibility of informing a much bigger event in Spring 2013 where part of the agenda is genuinely owned by
young people engaged in a process of collaborative inquiry into ‘what helps make rural life liveable’, focused through producing films and apps.

Reflection: what worked, what didn’t?
I worked with Alan Caldwell in three stages, within a broad framework (Carnegie Associates to pump-prime topics) that I had designed to fit within the new governance and strategic priorities for CoP Development that were established in late 2010. This involved short three month contracts for phased development work of the topic set at £3.5K per contract including expenses and value added tax. Implicit in this contracting cycle were opportunities for reflection and planning the next phase - and as part of this I asked Alan to write up his reflections to share with others (including myself) interested to learn how to go about working alongside young people through second person action research cycles within the Fiery Spirits network. Alan and I either met in person or talked via Skype at each of these reflective moments. Some clear learning points emerged across these junctures:

- Relationship with online technologies:
  Although the young people we were working with were ‘digital native’ and (mostly) excited by the idea of developing a smartphone ‘app’ together, neither the fieryspirits.com platform nor the facebook page they set up for themselves really worked as a forum for holding this interest and energy.

- Learning how to balance ‘fun’ and ‘work’ at residentials
  Instead, much of Alan’s energy (and my support) went towards around planning and designing the face-face elements, and in particular getting the ‘right’ balance between ‘fun’ and ‘work’ elements.

- Wider impact?
  Whether this work will have an impact beyond extending the social capital of a few young people is as yet untested. In addition, this work has not touched other topics within the CoP closely. It is quite possible to conceive of this work happening as a conventional project outwith the context of the CoP as a holding learning frame and despite my efforts to encourage Alan to share his learning into the CoP, a virtual conversation that I had hoped our work might help to catalyse amongst a latent group of older CoP members who have voiced at different events their frustration at being able to connect with young people has thus far failed to take off. Instead, to date we have an example of some practice that might help illuminate a future conversation about rural organisations might engage more effectively with younger people.

- My role as contractor of Alan as ‘Associate’, spanning worlds:
  Alan and I developed a good working relationship – but I felt throughout that my role working for Carnegie UK Trust, and mediating the flow of resources to this work through the Steering Group, was also always present, mediating our conversations toward what I felt to be an emphasis on pragmatic negotiations of what the work was, strategies towards achieving our goals, and ensuring the administrative arrangements for hosting young people were in place. At times, I found myself re-emphasizing requests that Alan write up and share his approach to this work through fieryspirits.com; but also only half believing myself that we would be able to develop an engage online topic out of this material.
  In effect, we had already both agreed about the primacy of face-face working; and pushing back against a narrative pursued by the new Carnegie UK Trust CEO in particular that valued the virtual elements of the work in particular. Continuing to be employed by Carnegie UK Trust, but feeling increasingly isolated from this working context, the experience of working with Alan and this group of young people in particular brought home in an embodied way the challenge of straddling two worlds: one interest in the value to policy makers of this experiment in ‘virtual’ networking; another buoyed up by the human experience of making friends with some young people and hearing first hand about the joys and struggles of their lives.
CoP Survey February 2012 (excerpts)
The Community of Practice enables people with day-to-day experience of rural development to learn together (a ‘learning network’). This happens in two ways:

1) *Ad hoc*: by sharing news, videos, blogs, reports, pictures etc. through the social networking website; and
2) *Co-produced resources*: involving participation by members in the production and dissemination of high quality resources on topical practice issues.

The CoP model of co-production focuses on themes and topics that have potential to bridge between professional ‘silos’, and between local people/activists and professionals.

During 2011, the CoP focused on prototyping different approaches to co-producing resources (books, animations etc.):

- *The Power of the Plan* (launched February 2011)
- *Appreciating Assets* (launched June 2011)
- *Exploring Community Resilience* (launched August 2011)
- *Surfing the Waves of Change* (animation - launched October 2011)

In February 2012, a survey of CoP members suggested that some members have used resources to inform their day-to-day work, and most have shared resources onward beyond the network:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource/Package</th>
<th>Used it in practice</th>
<th>Shared it with others</th>
<th>Personal interest</th>
<th>Didn't use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Power of the Plan</td>
<td>0.0% (0)</td>
<td>16.7% (3)</td>
<td>16.7% (3)</td>
<td>66.7% (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciating Assets</td>
<td>21.1% (4)</td>
<td>26.3% (5)</td>
<td>5.3% (1)</td>
<td>47.4% (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Shareholder’s Guide to Rural Services</td>
<td>0.0% (0)</td>
<td>16.7% (3)</td>
<td>27.6% (5)</td>
<td>55.6% (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploring Community Resilience</td>
<td>30.0% (6)</td>
<td>30.0% (6)</td>
<td>26.0% (5)</td>
<td>15.0% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surfing the Waves of Change (animation)</td>
<td>11.6% (2)</td>
<td>17.6% (3)</td>
<td>11.6% (2)</td>
<td>58.8% (10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**When did you join fieryspirits.com?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>14.7 %</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>17.6 %</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>17.6 %</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>35.3 %</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>5.9 %</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>can’t remember</td>
<td>8.8 %</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*answered question* 34
*skipped question* 0
How often do you visit fieryspirits.com?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Response Percent</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regularly</td>
<td>8.8 %</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite often</td>
<td>11.8 %</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasionally</td>
<td>55.9 %</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>23.5 %</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>0.0 %</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

answered question 34
skipped question 0

During 2011, CoP members were involved in producing five resources. Did you find any of these useful?

Comments:
- I tend to engage directly with the deliverers of change themselves
- Perhaps direct the use… ‘signpost’ reader….what’s it for, who/how to use?
- Great work
- Haven’t (knowingly) seen them.
- ‘Appreciating Assets’ is particularly good, and, for me, relates both to my personal interest in this subject and also to my work in NHS Wakefield, developing asset based approaches to community development and health.
- Last year was incredibly busy and so I didn’t really have enough time to process any additional information. I maybe hope to use some of the material in the future
- these all look very useful! i just forget about your site most of the time

Which CoP features are useful for you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>I’ve done this in the past</th>
<th>I might do this in future</th>
<th>Response Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linking up with others face-face (e.g. at events)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linking up with others online (e.g. via member pages, discussions)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Show-casing work (e.g. promote events, blog with news)</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to reflect on and share experience (e.g. )</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Would another feature attract you to engage more fully with the CoP?

- In many cases I could have selected both options 1 and 2 (had technology allowed) in that there are many features I have found useful in the past and plan to use again. I think platforms such as this which require separate log-in can fall off the radar sometimes: more regular email updates (not necessarily lengthy) might remind me to log in more often. Perhaps members could also be encouraged to produce brief updates of their work (e.g. quarterly?) that might be useful to share with others?
- more face to face events to know new people/members, perhaps CoP officer or coordinator putting people in contact that may learn from each other and have not interacted before in the CoP. CoP getting involved in follow up events which are not necessarily to share practice but a natural follow up of previous practice-sharing events
- Information on investments made to local initiatives and their impact at the coalface
- Topical discussion - differing perspectives e.g. on N’hood Plans...from community member, planner, parish council, principal authority etc.
- A shared enquiry into something specific that would be of benefit to my work here
- Still catching up. Less jargon and acronyms would be tedious for you and others I guess but better for me - a simple soul.

probably a more regular email reminder would be best
### 9.5 Appendix 5: Facilitation Methods circa 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methods in Use (general category)</th>
<th>Training for Transformation</th>
<th>Get Your Voice Heard</th>
<th>Rural Leadership Programme</th>
<th>CHE Action Research CPD</th>
<th>CHE Finding Voice residential (4 days)</th>
<th>CHE leadership residential (5 days)</th>
<th>Emerging Patterns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-4</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-2010</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence</td>
<td>Popular Education (Freire)</td>
<td>Participatory Appraisal/ CARPP action research</td>
<td>Participatory Appraisal/ CARPP action research</td>
<td>Participatory Appraisal/ Popular Education/ CARPP action research</td>
<td>Experiential Deep Ecology/ Popular Education/ CARPP Action Research</td>
<td>CARRP Action Research (John Heron's autonomous learning)</td>
<td>An evolving hybrid strain of action research with heavy popular education, participatory learning and deep ecology influences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant profile</td>
<td>emerging grassroots activists</td>
<td>emerging grassroots activists + professionals (multi-sector)</td>
<td>emerging grassroots activists + professional community development workers + estate employees</td>
<td>MSc students plus CPD students e.g. health/ NGO professionals</td>
<td>MSc students ('emerging activists')</td>
<td>MSc students considering dissertations</td>
<td>Work centres on supporting emerging activists/community leaders, including participation of NGO/public sector professionals where possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diary/ Journal</td>
<td>Scrap-book</td>
<td>freefall writing</td>
<td>Freefall writing, double column writing</td>
<td>Freefall writing, double column writing</td>
<td>Freefall writing, double column writing</td>
<td>Personal element of group presentations involved quotes from learning diary</td>
<td>Use of creative journaling with frequent emphasis on freefall writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative collective expression</td>
<td>Image theatre, montages, often at start of exercises e.g. ‘draw your community’</td>
<td>image theatre, map-making of North Edinburgh</td>
<td>often at the beginning of exercises e.g. ‘draw stewardship’, image theatre, montages</td>
<td>Collective image theatre check-in;</td>
<td>Wide variety through most sessions, most days</td>
<td>Involved group presentations from collaborative inquiries</td>
<td>Emphasis on visual exercises (with some other presentational forms on occasion)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Diary/ Collective Harvesting</td>
<td>Reporting team wrote up each day; time-line ‘journey’ exercise on last day</td>
<td>timeline drawn at end of every day, revisited beginning of every session</td>
<td>Participatory video, photos, interviews, newsletter, audio</td>
<td>Using blog during sessions</td>
<td>end of workshop free-form evaluation</td>
<td>Involved group presentations from collaborative inquiries</td>
<td>Eclectic experiments with forms of group diary-making</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**An evolving hybrid strain of action research with heavy popular education, participatory learning and deep ecology influences**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Listening Survey</th>
<th>Within group in order to prepare ‘codes’</th>
<th>Within local community in order to reflect on diversity</th>
<th>Within group as part of collaborative evaluation</th>
<th>Final day presentations all peer assessed – listening survey of responses</th>
<th>Listening to local guests, with debrief</th>
<th>Peer-led evaluation surveys of whole MSc core programme</th>
<th>Community listening surveys of different kinds consistent thread through all projects</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simulations (role-play with debrief)</td>
<td>Set piece simulations – e.g. conflict in groups, majorians/minorians, ‘draw your community’</td>
<td>Improvised role-play (e.g. role-playing in cluster group e.g. handling conflict in community groups)</td>
<td>Improvised role-playing in cluster group e.g. rehearsing attending a community council meeting)</td>
<td>facilitation assessment: role-play an upcoming real-life facilitation challenge (peer assessed)</td>
<td>Real-life example of Falkland community as a simulation of community place-making 297</td>
<td>n/a in other places</td>
<td>Emerging emphasis on role-play learning exercises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>Private forum used as repository of notes from face-face sessions; googledocs for collaborative evaluation</td>
<td>Collaborative Blogging experiment – all materials posted up in real-time during group sessions; &amp; responses between sessions</td>
<td>Private WIKI – used mainly to for organisational cultural memory – previous years' sample 'creative assignments' posted.</td>
<td>Co-operative Inquiry assessment – required use of web forums (quality of contributions impacted grade)</td>
<td>Eclectic experiments searching for effective modes of online exchange</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whole-group Dialogue</td>
<td>fish-bowls, buzz-in-pairs/fours/whole group; plenary facilitated discussions and intentional dialogue (inspired by 'calling the circle')</td>
<td>Regular reflection on small group exercises – and stories from action experiments between sessions</td>
<td>World Café, Fishbowls, ‘speaking to the centre’</td>
<td>Regular reflection on small group exercises – and stories from action experiments between sessions</td>
<td>World Café, Open Space and intentional dialogue</td>
<td>Post-field trip facilitated plenary</td>
<td>Regular use of large group plenary conversation to aid group in identifying emerging themes/issues/learning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Appendix 6: Imagining future AR practices in the 'Digital Wilds'

Practising ‘Wild Mind’:
In the spirit of Gary Snyder:
‘[Wild Mind] means self-organizing.... It means elegantly self-disciplined, self-regulating, self-maintained. That’s what wilderness is. Nobody has to do the management plan for it.... Practically speaking, a life that is vowed to simplicity, appropriate boldness, good humor, gratitude, unstinting work and play, and lots of walking, brings us close to the actually existing world and its wholeness.”

The Wild Mind of Gary Snyder, Trevor Cornish, Shambala Sun, May 1995

Gamifying the ‘Digital Wilds’:
A Digital version of Transition Town Anywhere:...

“This morning we are going on a journey together, a journey into the near future, look ahead of you into the empty space...all we have to take with us is our experience, each other and our imagination, we have the chance today to build a thriving, connected town centre together, ... are we ready to go?.......once we cut the ribbon we will be there”...

Ruth Ben-Tovim’s simulation at Transition Towns 2012 conference, written up by Rob Hopkins at http://transitionculture.org/

Constellating the Digital Wilds:
Adapted from “family system constellations work”

“In a group, a person can select representatives for the members of his family and place them in a space in relationship to one another. And as soon as those people have taken up their places they feel like the people they represent without knowing them. So by means of the Family Constellation, we get a real picture of what is going on in the family.”

(Bert Hellinger interviewed at http://www.constellationsolutions.co.uk/or_g.htm)...

Wilding Social Media:
The art of letting social media loose into the wilds?
I once asked my Dad about the origins of my surname. He said that ‘Wilding’ is both a crab apple and (in archaic use) the first chick to fly the nest. An appropriate term, therefore for a new art of unleashing our social media into the digital wilds? We can note also that in restoration ecology ‘Re-Wilding’ is “the scientific argument for restoring big wilderness based on the regulatory roles of large predators,” according to Soulé and Road Noga in their 1998 Wild Earth article “Re-Wilding and Biodiversity.” Source: http://rewilding.org/