



Graphics: George Pór

“The stakes are too high: our era is too complex, its challenges too significant, its promises too great, and its velocity too fast for us simply to react. Rather we must amplify the power of our brains, individually and collectively, to match our new circumstances.”

Eamonn Kelly – Powerful Times

Two sides of one thing

The art of hosting meaningful conversations – and the art of harvesting meaningful conversations are two sides of the same effort – namely to “amplify” our brains and our hearts, or to engage our collective intelligence and wisdom to find the emergent and sustainable solutions to complex challenges.

There is a popular quote by Oliver Wendell Holmes...

“I would not give a fig for simplicity on this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.”

I sometimes wonder if the Art of Hosting and Harvesting Meaningful conversations is not a gateway to the simplicity on the other side of complexity – even if the road to the other side goes through chaos.

“Chaos is creativity in search of form.”
John Welwood

Two different qualities

Even if we are talking in the art of hosting and harvesting meaningful conversations about one thing, the nature of these two “activities” may differ.

If the work of the facilitator or host is to engage everyone to speak “their truth”, listen openly, trying to understand differing views and to bring their best to the table and work at hand; the “harvesters” focus is on capturing the wisdom, remembering, seeing patterns and making meaning – and then making this meaning ‘visible’ and available.

The first may be predominantly divergent in nature – teasing out the different strands; the second convergent – weaving different strands together, although neither is solely one or the other.

It is as if the hosting is animating the discovery and learning process – whereas harvesting is trying to embed the insights and learning - to make them as relevant and useful in our own context as possible.

Circles



Circle by Barbara Bash

Harvest has a cyclical nature

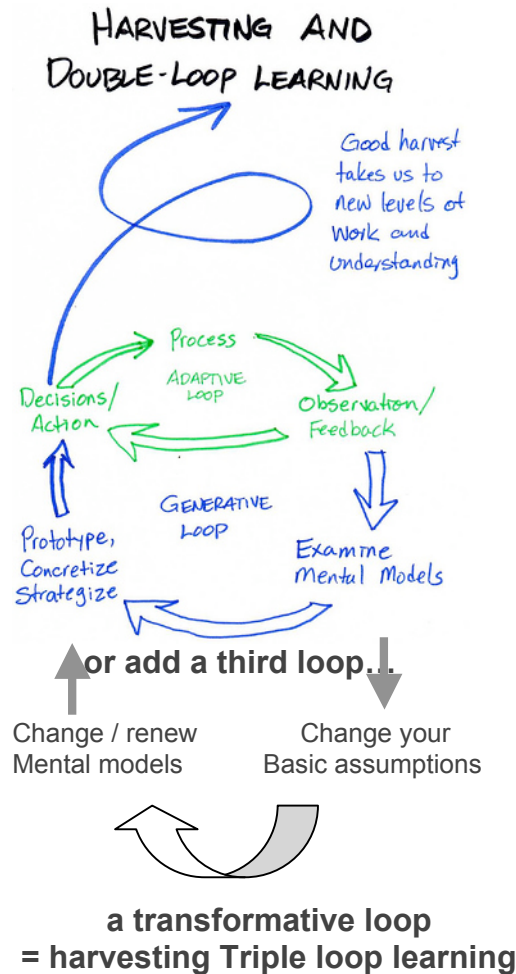
Winter - Rest, reflection and renewal – some things need time to ripen - the new impulse is born

Spring - planning, preparing, sowing, inviting, convening

Summer - working the field, weeding, tending, engaging, acting – immerse in the process

Autumn - harvest and process the fruits, chose the seeds to be planted the following spring.. Then Winter comes again with time to rest – reflect – renew...

Loops



Spirals

The idea of converging or harvesting is to conclude – get a grip of what we understand at this moment – and then introduce that insight or understanding “back into the system” – so that we can start the next conversation – on the same level of understanding as we left the previous conversation. ... so that our exploration can spiral instead of going round in circles....



Levels Artifacts Feed-back loops



Levels

Generally thinking about the harvest – we tend to think about 4 different levels

- **Personal level harvest:**
How can we enhance our personal learning, using time for reflection, journaling etc?
- **“Ground level” harvest:**
After each meeting or process how can we harvest what happened?
How can we create a collective memory and make collective meaning right now?
- **Community level harvest:**
What is useful for us as a community to remember or what do we need to share / feed-back and to whom and how is it best done?
- **Meta-level harvest:**
What is useful for our longer term learning and what would be useful to share with others, similar networks etc. – How widely could this harvest serve? Cyberspace may be the limit?

Artifacts

The other useful thing to think about is how can we best “capture” this harvest.

We tend to think in terms of an “artifact”, a memo, newsletter, drawing, video etc. that can best capture the harvest.

The challenge is to find that which communicates best for the purpose at hand.

Creating an intentional “artifact” is giving the harvest the attention and form it deserves in order to be taken seriously by others.

Feed-back loops

Having captured the harvest in an “artifact” the next question to ponder is how and where is this harvest or artifact going to be fed back into the system (the organization, the conversation etc.) in order to help us build on what we have already understood and to get to the next level of our conversation and our understanding.

What colour are your lenses?



“We do not understand what we see – but we see what we understand.”

Peter Senge

Holding an intent

Holding an intent for harvest will give a conscious and sharp set of lenses to focus your inquiry. Your harvest gets rich and focused and intentional.

Most strategic or meaningful conversations have a stated purpose – a reason for these conversations to happen and consequently the harvesting will serve this purpose.

One can harvest on **content** as well as on **process – output** as well as **outcome**.

Harvesting can happen on the level of creating a **record or memory** – as well as looking for emerging patterns and emerging meaning.

The process of **making meaning** – or collective meaning – may be a conversation on the next level / meta level. – What did we just notice? – What did we learn? – What is emerging?

Both memory and meaning are valuable.

Seeing what emerges

The downside of holding an intent – having a strong set of glasses, or a clear mental map - is that it may prevent you from seeing anything that is outside the map.

“Mental models are powerful filters. They help us make sense and meaning but filter out anything that does not belong.”

“If our mental map is wrong – our judgment or assessment will be wrong.”

Eamonn Kelly – Powerful Times

The alternative to holding a strong intent is to consciously step outside the mental map – or set it aside in order see what emerges.

Holding our mental models lightly – in a spirit of inquiry may prevent us from being blinded by them.

“Put your arms around as big an intent as you can hold!”

George Pór

The Cycle of Harvesting



The Art of Harvesting is a way to bring the Art of Hosting into its fruition.

Eight phases of harvesting:

1. *Sensing the need*
2. *Preparing the field*
3. *Planning the harvest*
4. *Planting the seeds*
5. *Tending the crop*
6. *Picking the fruits:
Recording – or creating a
collective memory.*
7. *Preparing and processing
the fruits: Creating
collective meaning*
8. *Planning the next harvest:
Feeding forward*

1. Sensing the need

Something shifts in the way things are – causing a need to shift or change something – to take action.

The first step is becoming clear about what the need or call is.

Picture a field in which someone has planted wheat.

We imagine the harvest from that field to look like a farmer using equipment to cut down the wheat, thresh it, and separate the seeds from the stalks.

Now imagine a geologist, a biologist and a painter harvesting from the same field. The geologist picks through the rocks and soil gathering data about the land itself. The biologist might collect insects and worms, bits of plants and organic matter. The painter sees the patterns in the landscape and chooses a palette and a perspective for work of art.

They all have different needs and will harvest differently from the field, and the results of their work go to different places and are put to different uses. But they all have a few things in

common; they have a purpose for being in the field and a set of questions about that purpose, they have a pre-determined place to use the results of the harvest, and they have specific tools to use in doing their work.

What's useful to note is that, despite the field being the same, the tools and results are specific to the purpose and the inquiry.

Sensing the need may at first be intuitive or very basic – like sensing hunger, but once the sensed need becomes conscious one can act on it.

We sense that we are hungry and from there we plant a garden, knowing that the work of planting and harvesting lies before us but that the end result meets the need for sustenance.

The need is not complicated; it is real and clear and it speaks deeply and inspires invitation and action. Everything begins from this need, and the way we hold it, and invite into it informs the harvest that we take at the end of the day.



“The quality of the field determines the quality of the yield.”

Otto Scharmer

“The quality of the intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervener!”

Bill O’ Brien

2. Preparing the field

“The quality of the field determines the quality of the yield.” This quote by Otto Scharmer talks about the importance of preparing the field – making it ready to nurture the seeds.

In some cases the caller creates the readiness of the field by creating awareness around the need. Others with a similar need will recognize the call.

In preparing the field – sending out the call, giving the context, inviting etc.– you set the tone of the whole process – the seriousness and quality with which you determine the quality of what you reap.

In other words – you start to think about the harvest from the very beginning – not as an afterthought.

The preparation of a field for planting involves intensive attention to the compost, the condition of the soil, the quality of the tools and the seeds before even anything is planted. The work of readying a field for planting can take a whole year during which you condition the soil, clear the rocks and

prepare things. What you are doing here is actually harvesting a field so that the seeds can be planted.

The quality of the field is set with invitation that arises from the need. Invitational practice arises from the presence of hosting the initial conversation. There is a seriousness and a depth there that is communicated in the process from the beginning.

This work looks like preparing ourselves and inquiring into the capacity of the system to actually do the work we are asking it to do.

Preparing ourselves as hosts is part of preparing the field.



3. Planning the harvest

Planning the harvest starts with and follows the design process.

What is your intention with the harvest? A clear purpose and some success-criteria for the process or the harvest itself – will add clarity and direction.

What you harvest is determined by what you sow.

3 principles for planning the harvest

Provided by Ivan Webb at the actKM discussion list and harvested and shared by Chris Corrigan:

“Three simple principles “...that will change the culture of most organizations and leads naturally to knowledge management being embedded in the organization’s activity.

It is everyone’s job to:

- **Know what is happening**
- **Work with others to improve what is happening**
- **Make it easier for the next person to do their work well**

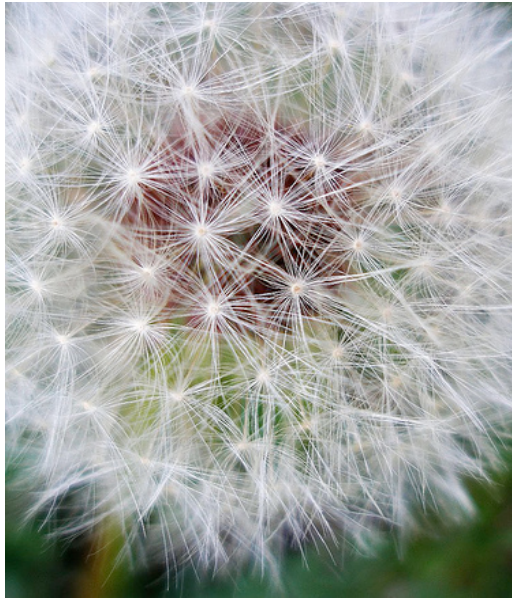
A checklist for planning the harvest

The question the harvester can ask himself is:

What would be useful and add value - and in which form would it serve best?

Translated into a simple check-list, it becomes:

- *What intent are you holding?*
- *Who is going to benefit?*
- *How can you add most value to the work at hand – how will the harvest serve best?*
- *What form or what media will be most effective?*
- *Who should host or do the harvest?*
- *What is the right timing?*



Kevin Kelly – a biologist and former editor of Wired magazine describes in his book “Out of control” – how after fires in the desert, - the seeds or plants that enter in the early phases, after the fire, determine what the ecosystem will be like – and what kind of plant habitat you will end up with.

... **“In all beginnings – and all endings, be careful!”**

Tao Te Ching

4. Planting the seeds

The questions around which we structure the hosting become the seeds for harvesting. In many cultures and places this act is accompanied by ritual. All gardeners and farmers know that planting seeds depends on the time and the conditions. One does not simply plant when one wants to. One plants once the conditions are right to maximize the yield.

In hosting practice this means being sensitive to the timing of asking questions.

In sowing the seeds that will drive the inquiry – *identifying and asking the strategic and meaningful questions* – you determine the output. So in planning the harvest, ask yourself what it is that this process needs to yield. What information, ideas, output or outcome will benefit you here and now, and what might take you to the next level of inquiry?

Even though the process of harvesting starts with preparing the field and the planning – the process itself is an on-going one.

With each part of the process you harvest something. Some of it you need to use right away, to help lead you into the next process. Some of the harvest you will need later.

So part of planning the harvest – is also to know *for whom, when and how* you need to use it.

Another part of the planning is asking yourself in which format the harvest will serve you best? Are there templates, sheets, colors, drawings, audio –or video recordings, etc. that can be used as aids in the harvesting?



5. Tending the crop

Protect the integrity of the crop. Nurture the crop as it grows, weed it and thin it to keep the strong plants growing and get rid of all that will not nourish or serve.

Gardeners scrutinize their plants - call it scouting. They look for pests and signs of under-nutrition, and seeing what they can learn about the crops as they grow. This involves a combination of feeding the field and letting it grow. But part of it also involves just sitting in the field. Holding space for what is emerging and enjoying it.

In process, take enjoyment in seeing your work unfold in all its complexity. The degree to which you can welcome the growth you are witnessing will translate into the quality of the harvest. Now you are in the pulse of noticing both the quality of the field and the quality of the crops.

This is where we engage in conversation and exploration – where the richness of the harvest is born. The richer the conversation or exchange, the richer the harvest!

6. Picking the fruits:

Picking the fruits corresponds to **recording – or creating a collective memory**. The simplest way to harvest is to record what is being said, done, the output of the conversations etc. This creates a **record** or **collective memory**.

Recording can be done in words.

- your notes, which will be subjective
- or transcripts of out-put produced in conversations, from tapes, etc., which will be objective.

Recording can also be done with pictures / photographs / videos / films.

- Pictures “remember” or “recall” feelings, atmospheres, situations.
- Or you can video the conversation - record both verbally and visually

It is helpful to give some thought in the planning phase to how you want to harvest. What kind of records, templates etc. will help you gather the relevant information or knowledge?



”

“A thought which does not result in an action is nothing much, and an action which does not proceed from a thought is nothing at all.”

George Bernanos

What if harvest is the bridge from thought to action or from conversation to action?

7. Preparing and processing the fruits

Creating a memory is the first step.

As we pick the fruits or seeds for processing, some will be used right away, some will be used for further processing and some will be used as seed for the next season.

Preparing and processing the fruits corresponds to creating collective meaning and value.

Making collective sense and meaning is the second step. This is where we add value and make the data useful.

There are many ways of making sense and meaning. The general idea is to go from loads of bits of information to “holons” or from bubbles to dots.

There are several ways to help in this process:

- Harvest in a systemic way. Ask collectively: What did you notice? What gave sense and meaning to you? Notice the

patterns! They indicate what is emerging!

- Metaphors are ways of making complex issues simple
- So are mental models, and
- Stories and..
- Graphic renderings. Drawings can make complex issues manageable and visible

Meaning-making can also happen in a conversation at the next level.

Harvesting from the past:

You may look back and ask: What did we learn? What made sense? Where are we now in the journey? What are the next steps?

Harvesting in the present:

What are we sensing? What are we noticing now? What patterns are emerging? etc.

Harvesting for the future:

You may also look forward: look for the issues or questions that you know will feed the next inquiry and feed those back into the system.

Harvesting for emergence:

“What question, if answered, would shift us to the next level?”



**The first people had questions
and they were free..
The second people had answers
and they became enslaved**

Wind Eagle
American Indian Chief

8. Planning the next harvest: Feeding forward

Most of the harvesting is done to bring closure, or bring us to the next level of understanding. More importantly, to enable us to know collectively, see the same picture and share the same understanding together.

These are the fruits of the harvest.

From Chris Corrigan:

“Once in a conversation with a client, I stumbled upon one of these hobbit tools of harvesting: have somewhere to take the harvest.

My client's vision was to convene a conference, produce a report and hope that the report inspired action. When we spoke about the real impact of the conference, it turned out she wasn't confident that the report would come to life on it's own. I challenged her to do more than that and to find a way to bring the conference proceedings to life. So we began to craft a strategy for the harvest of this event.

The plan became to harvest the results of the conference as both a record of the event and as an inquiry itself. We

shared the report but we also crafted a series of the questions - the questions we are left with after three days of deliberations - and these questions will be put to five different and specific forums. My client spent the month leading up to the conference talking to influential groups, organizations and forums to find five places that will commit to co-inquiring with her on the conference proceedings during the year following the conference. This plan was shared with the conference delegates in a pre-conference note that gave them confidence and inspiration that the conference will have an impact.

In the months following the conference, the report was taken from one gathering to another, and many eyes and hands worked through the ideas that were raised in the gathering. Harvesting into inquiry spreads the results and is a powerful way to create sustainable learning and engagement.



Who should do the harvesting?

*We need a harvester!!
Where is our secretary??*

I have heard this comment many times!

Having harvesting as an afterthought is like the farmer who is so focused on preparing the field and growing the crop, that he forgets about the harvest.

Going through all the trouble of preparing the field and tending the crops without harvesting is insane!

Picking the fruits – recording and transcribing – can be done by most people and can easily be delegated.

But making sense of the multitude of input, noticing the emerging patterns, finding the seeds/questions to feed forward etc. is where the fruits of the harvesting really lie.

Individual and collective harvest

Individual harvest can be done through reflection, journaling etc.

The individual harvest enhances the individual learning and the individuals' contribution to the collective inquiry.

My best experiences of harvesting have been when the stakeholders themselves have done it together, collectively.

Harvesting collectively seems to have a greater potential for emergence and yields more than harvesting alone. It becomes the next level of conversation, a meta-level, where we make sense together.

If the stakeholders cannot do the harvest, gather a good and inspired harvesting team and find a way to feed the harvest back into the system.

If you cannot get a team – but you are inspired – give it your best shot. Feed it back into the system and see if it stirs.



“Who we are together will always be different and more, than who we are alone.”

Margaret Wheatley

Harvesting for emergence

When a group of people has a collective purpose that they pursue together, then delegating the harvest to someone or doing it alone does not make sense.

Our friend and colleague Chris Corrigan put words to a ‘check-list’ for a collective harvest for a collective purpose.

Principles of a collective harvest for a collective purpose – pursuing emergence

Chris’ principles of practice:

1. Agree collectively on the purpose of the joint inquiry (uncover a government plan, build a new community-based approach to child and youth mental health, etc.)
2. Conduct gatherings to collect a lot of diverse wisdom and thinking about the inquiry.

3. Harvest detailed notes from initial conversations, but don’t make meaning from them right away.

4. Invite everyone to read whatever they want of the documents and select the pieces that seem to have the most relevance and benefit to the inquiry at hand. It would seem to be a good idea to have a large and diverse number of people to do this, especially if you have a substantial and complex inquiry and body of thought.

5. Make this second level harvest visible and begin pattern finding within what is emerging, all the while feeding that back into the system to both show progress and help people go back to and find additional meaning and wisdom to support what is emerging.

6. Have a further inquiry to tap creativity to fill the gaps that are being noticed.

A few words on visual harvesting

“Listening, as I said, is the most important aspect of the harvesting process for me as a graphic recorder, and it is a special kind of listening. For me, it is meditative, attaining a kind of flow, an emptying and a cleansing. Then whatever comes of the moment, comes, and I record it. It is being present (and not allowing any internal critics or voices to get in the way of the listening) and attending to every moment and everything that emerges in the room. Every recorder has their own style, emphasis, etc. What is truly important is that the work produced enables the participants to anchor their experience and relive it in a meaningful way.”

Conrad Tiu

(from the World Cafe Community)

Visual recording

Just as a written record, audio or video documentary creates a memory, a visual record can create a visual memory. Since most people are visually-oriented, a visual memory can be powerful and, like in a mind-map, a lot of information is available at one glance.

Visual storytelling or Visual landscape

I use visual recording as kind of visual storytelling where I visualize the process and harvest key insights on the drawing as we proceed in the process. This is like creating a coherent visual memory based on key insights.

<http://www.theworldcafe.com/graphics.htm>

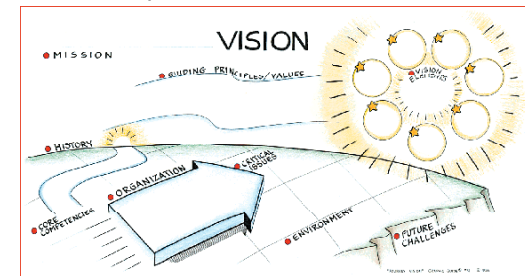
Visual facilitation

Visual means can be used as an aid or key element to facilitating the process itself. Here the visual map is a process tool used by a facilitator.

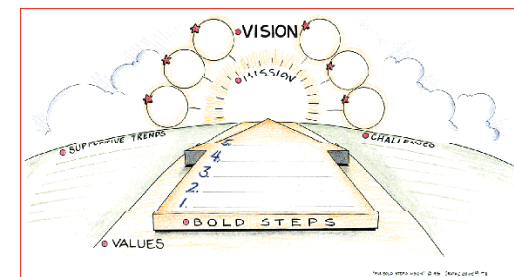
<http://www.grove.com>



Landscape



Worksheets from Grove



A few other things to consider



“Talking together is a way of thinking together, and thinking together creates these new possibilities that could not emerge from just one alone!”

Kathryn

Harvesting insights and learning is a prerequisite to renewal and new insight.

Harvesting the tangible and the intangible

Harvesting the “soft” is much more subtle and subjective than dealing with the “cognitive” or more hardcore parts.

Tangible results are measurable, in the way we traditionally understand the term.

Intangible results are harder to see, more difficult to agree on, may not have immediate results, but may in fact be more powerful in the long run.

I remember a case where we had facilitated a day for a department in a bank. The purpose of the day was to work with ideas for creating an even better workplace for everyone.

Twelve concrete suggestions for further improvement came out of the day.

Three months later the CEO was still pleased with the good atmosphere the day had created – but he was a bit concerned that it seemed as if only three of the projects were still “alive”. One month after that we met with the CEO and a representative from each of the project groups to “evaluate”.

We brought three simple questions to the meeting and mind-mapped our conversations around these questions:

1. *Where do we notice or see evidence that something has changed as a result of the day?*
2. *What is the situation / status of the various projects and what might be the reason?*
3. *How do we want to move on from here?*

I think we were all amazed at how much had resulted from that one day.

It seemed that the original projects had been just the first stepping-stones. Some of the projects had not manifested because the group had already moved on and where taking other initiatives. Some because the actual conversation about the “problem” had already shifted it towards a solution, and so on.

Furthermore, the relationships and open atmosphere that had resulted from the conversations had changed the climate and prepared the ground for other initiatives, some that the CEO did not even know about.

A qualitative inquiry into what we have noticed, what has shifted or changed in our relationships, in the culture or atmosphere may give us some information about the intangible part of the harvest.

Using Web-based tools and possibilities



Web-based tools open up a whole world of possibilities for connecting and sharing ideas, collective memory, creating new relationships and dealing with enormous quantities of data.

Tools for harvest

The web offers numerous tools for harvesting both individually and collectively. It is growing increasingly easy to use a variety of tools to make harvests visible, collective and participatory. What is becoming known as Web 2.0 are a series of online applications that make collaboration and participation simple and affordable. These applications can also work with “folksonomies”, user-driven ways of categorizing and labeling information. Here are a few that are free and easy to use.

Weblogs can be used as learning journals, records of projects and action, places to track individual and group learning, spaces to host conversations. These are among the most versatile web tools available. Visit wordpress.com or blogger.com to learn more.

Photo sharing sites such as flickr.com allow people to post photographs and invite comments and conversation.

Podcasting is a way of sharing audio files by subscription. Many sites offer free hosting for mp3 files, which will

store files for you and stream them on demand. Visit podcasting.com for more.

Voice-over-internet applications such as Skype and Gizmo allow high-quality conversations which can also be recorded. They are excellent for connecting and harvesting conversations between people working at a distance.

Wikis are collaborative spaces in which conference participants can co-create proceedings, and others can help edit, shape and make meaning. Wikipedia is perhaps the most famous of these applications.

Del.icio.us is a service for posting and annotating bookmarks.

Tools like these change almost daily. So keep exploring what is out there!



A last reflection

“I have walked away from these conversations with a deep and lively question: What if the Art of Hosting was actually the Art of Harvesting? What if we weren't planning meetings, but harvests? How would that change our practice?”

Why is this important? I think it matters that harvest, good harvest, moves organizations and communities forward, links leadership and action to conversation and makes the best use of the wisdom that is gathered from meetings. If you have ever wondered about meetings that seem not to go anywhere, this inquiry into harvesting, sense-making and iterative action holds the key to avoiding those kinds of situations. It's not enough just to have good process and a good facilitator - the results of the work must also be alive in the organization. That's where we are going with this.”

Chris Corrigan