

Integration of Art of Hosting methodologies and principles into the Social Innovation Lab practice: A case study from a Social and Public Innovation Lab in New Brunswick, Canada

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Abstract In September 2017 the first multi-year standing lab undertaken by NouLAB was launched on the topic of Economic Immigration. Along with more the more traditional Social Innovation Lab methodologies such as design thinking, systemic design and Social Labs structures as defined by Hassan (2014), Jones (2014), and Westley et al. (2015), NouLAB employed the participatory practices of the Art of Hosting and Harvesting Conversations that Matter (AoH) to design and facilitate lab sessions.

The Economic Immigration Lab (EIL) has run for 18 months, and two full cycles. NouLAB has identified the linkages between the AoH approach and the systemic principles of design. Of specific interest is how multi-stakeholder participants' learning and capacity is effectively enabled by the philosophy holding space, encouraging an atmosphere of psychological safety, experimentation, and learning, addressing root causes of problems not merely symptoms.

Keywords: Social Innovation Labs, Art of Hosting, Participatory Practices, Public Sector Innovation, Systemic Design

1. Introduction

Social Innovation Labs (Labs) are inherently transdisciplinary. They borrow methods and tools from design thinking, systems thinking, participatory practice, policy development, human centered design and more (Binder & Brandt, 2008; Bason, 2014; Gryszkiewicz, Lykourantzou & Tuukka, 2016). Sometimes called Public Sector Innovation Labs, i-Labs, or Social Labs — these forums for multi-stakeholder engagement have gained popularity in the public sector worldwide with a burgeoning number of these labs in Canada (Tonurist, Kattel & Lember, 2015, 2017; Westley et al., 2015; McGann, Blomkamp, & Lewis, 2018). The exact approach varies and is highly dependent on the skills and experiences of the individuals running the lab process. This paper is an investigation into the methods of facilitation for Social Innovation Lab processes and specifically, how the suite of participatory practices, the Art of Hosting and Harvesting Conversations that Matter (AoH) played out in a lab on Economic Immigration in the province of New Brunswick, Canada.

As Social Innovation Labs have evolved and progressed over the past decade, there are a few ‘must-have’ features. As described by Hassan (2014), Social Labs are experimental, multi-sectoral and systemic. Labs are facilitated processes and these three factors are satisfied through designed engagements. There has been work on building a codified practice of facilitation but experience and practice are essential to guiding stakeholders through a meaningful and fruitful co-creation process (Vorberg, Bekkers & Tummers, 2014; Aguirre, Agudelo & Romm, 2017). In the policy realms where Public Sector Innovation Labs are employed, the issues are complex and, according to the Cynefin decision-making framework, the most appropriate response is to probe, sense and then respond (Kurtz & Snowden, 2003). As the tools created to accomplish this task and facilitate increasingly higher orders of complexity have been taken up in policy creation, including Systemic Design practices (Considine, Alexander & Lewis, 2014; Jones, 2014; Ryan, 2014), the question arises of who is equipped to deal with the organisationally emergent qualities of facilitating through this complexity (van Alstyne & Logan, 2007; Lichtenstein, 2014). The work of Quick and Sandfort (2014) identifies that the practice of deliberation in policy creation can be effectively ingrained in facilitators through training in the Art of Hosting and Harvesting Conversations that Matter, a suite of participatory practices that facilitates new ways of working through the complex challenges of our time. The AoH practice shifts the locus of direction from facilitators to participants, more effectively tapping into the innate knowledge and wisdom of the participants, while providing workshop tools to work in collaborative spaces, enabling and enhancing effective creation of system interventions.

The authors of this paper come to the Social Innovation Lab space through careers in nonprofit management, fundraising and a shared experience of a Masters programme in Strategic Leadership towards Sustainability, awarded by the Blekinge Institute of Technology. Their other combined experience is that of the Art of Hosting, being ‘hosts’, or facilitators of the process, and participants. As such, while planning the Economic Immigration Lab (EIL) processes and practices that come from Art of Hosting were deeply integrated into the all aspects of the workshop experience. At the time of the lab, both authors were employed by NouLAB – New Brunswick’s Social and Public Innovation Lab as the Lab Manager and Knowledge Manager.

2. The Economic Immigration Lab: A response to the immigration challenge in New Brunswick

The Economic Immigration Lab began out of an identified need between the New Brunswick Multicultural Council and the New Brunswick Business Council to address a lack of immigration and retention of immigrants in the province. New Brunswick was expected to have the worst economic growth out of the ten provinces in Canada in 2018 (Jones, 2018). Exacerbating this economic trend is the fact that there will be fewer workers to fill the unfilled jobs. According to the New Brunswick government’s population growth strategy, there will be 60,000 job openings to be filled between 2018-2023. This, coupled with the expected 110,200 exits from the workforce from now until 2026, has led the province to look to international immigration as a source for ready-to-hire workers (NBjobs.ca, 2017; The Public Policy Forum, 2018). In response to this, and in coordination with the Atlantic Immigration Pilot Program (AIPP), the EIL was launched in September of 2017 as a crucible for ideas on increasing immigration to the province and for sustainable results-oriented action. NouLAB functions as an authorising environment for the work of delving into the root causes of problems and securing support for working in a truly multi-sectoral fashion (Bason, 2013). Looking to Jones and van Patter (2009) the EIL is firmly situated in Design 4.0 with societal transformation as an objective. To achieve this, government policy makers are imbedded on teams with representatives from the private sector, non-profit sector, academia, government and immigrants to New Brunswick, with the purpose of achieving requisite variety for systemic change to occur (Jones, 2014). This has resulted in new and deeper policy interventions that aim at the root of the problem rather than symptomatic responses.



Figure 1. Graphic recording of lab session

3. The Art of Hosting and Harvesting Conversations that Matter

The Art of Hosting and Harvesting Conversations that Matter is a set of participatory practices that enable groups to navigate complex challenges and create spaces for people to come together in different ways (artofhosting.org, 2019). These participatory practices are predicated on the idea that we collectively have the resources and wisdom to solve the complex challenges we face, if we provide the time and space for that wisdom to emerge (Jones 2003; Sandfort, Stuber & Quick, 2012). AoH processes such as Open Space Technology and World Cafe, give space for the self-organisation and participation necessary to enable “increase[d] awareness, incentives and social motivation to accelerate learning behaviors” (Jones, 2014, p. 120). AoH assumes that our knowledge of and about the world is dependent on our position in society, and it places the practitioner within a larger community of practice, supporting collaborative innovation, including multiple sectors in the design process (Bommert, 2010; Torfing, 2019; Sandfort, Stuber & Quick, 2012). AoH fosters a community of practice whereby facilitators actively support and share with one another. This is especially important because “systemic social innovation and transformation processes do not occur due to the activities of only a single leader or ‘hero-preneur’; rather, it is through distributed agency” of stakeholders within the system (Considine, Alexander & Lewis, 2014; Moore, Olsson, Nilsson, Rose, & Westley, 2018, p. 1).

In the lexicon of Art of Hosting, ‘hosts’ play the role of designers/facilitators as they are known in more traditional lab-speak. Hosts legitimise the wisdom of the collective (Quick & Sandfort, 2014) and serve the function of creating a container for dialogue to occur (Isaacs, 1999), pushing participants to their learning edge (Holman, Devane & Cady, 2007) and hold space for emergence to be possible (Senge, 1990) before converging too quickly on solutions without hearing from all participants in the group (Kaner, 2014). The intentionality of design is paramount to the way hosts operate (Ryan, 2014). Hosts sense the needs of the group and are responsive to provide intervention when needed with the aim of empowering people to contribute with their whole selves to the issue at hand. The philosophy behind the hosting concept is very much akin to the philosophy of Christakis & Bausch (2006) that all participants are designers themselves (Jones, 2014).

The Art of Hosting connects deeply to individual values and belief systems as essential elements to work with in order to enact change. Connecting this theory to design literature, Valkenburg & Dorst (1998) also note that the individual or biographical vantage point has as much influence on design as the context or the problem being addressed. Allowing and encouraging products or policy development to align with purpose of individual value systems gives strength and longevity to projects, especially in their nascent stages when long-term commitment and funding has yet to be secured (Jones, 2014).

4. Learning from Eighteen Months in: Change happens at the level of relationships

The Economic Immigration Lab was established as a three-year project. After eighteen months, and two cycles, the following constitute some of our observations. When looking at the change within the immigration system in New Brunswick, our theory of how systems change is deceptively simple – it’s

essentially this: Systems change happens at the level of relationships – with the Self and others. Those new relationships, through dialogue, action and reflection, hold emergent potential for change which could not be foreseen. Both the relationships and the byproducts of them (emergent change) ripples out into networks within the system, eventually resulting in a tipping point of systemic change (Lichtenstein, 2014). In other words, our theory of change is some combination of these two aphorisms: “The success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervenor” (Bill O’Brien, quoted in Scharmer & Kauefer, 2010), and “Change happens at the speed of trust” (Covey & Merrill, 2006).

We are not alone in this conclusion. According to Drimie, Hamann, Manderson, & Mlondobozi (2018, p. 2) in *Creating transformative spaces for dialogue and action: reflecting on the experience of the Southern Africa Food Lab*, “social innovations emerge from new ideas supported by new relationships and new commitments emerging from within transformative spaces that lead to action in the system.” In systemic design, the principles of self-organization and requisite variety can be fulfilled through the creation of these new relationships amongst groups selected from their diversity in power, age, department, sector and life experience (Jones, 2014). This was the case in the first cycle of the Economic Immigration Lab, where a month long process of interviewing more than 70 applicants led to the selection of 54 participants on the basis of those factors.

The polarisation of factious groups in any complex challenge means that simply applying design thinking will not have the desired impact of creating systemic change. Instead, we need tools that help us to be in conversation with one another, help us to really listen to one another, help us into a co-creative state with one another. Therefore, bringing people into new types of relationship with themselves and one another, encouraging horizontal structures that have inclusion, diversity, equity and access as central pillars, and giving intentional space for people to get in touch with their true Selves and their Work is just as important – if not more important – than the actual tools we use (Newman, Bloom & Knobe, 2014).

‘Creating a container’ is a term taken from the Art of Hosting, which unsurprisingly, uses the tenets of hosting to reimagine collaborative spaces. Imagine you invited someone over for a meal. You would endeavour to be welcoming, to make them feel safe and comfortable and valued. You might set the scene with beautiful objects or art or candles. You would listen attentively to your guest, you would honour their boundaries, and you would show them respect by behaving authentically and in allegiance with your values. Why then, do we abandon these principles in the workplace?

At NouLAB, creating the container means holding the lab in spaces that are beautiful and accessible. It means checking-in in circle (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010). It means spending a lot of time up front on getting to know one another, as people, apart from the work we are gathered to do. It means listening deeply. It means honouring each person with the opportunity for equal voice. It means acknowledging the expertise, the privilege and the power in the room. It means care for the community and ourselves. It means showing up as facilitators and modelling authenticity, vulnerability, comradeship and failure.

4.1. Results of creating a Container

The impacts of creating a good container can be hard to measure but 100% of lab participants agree or strongly agree that they had the opportunity to meet and work with compelling people (NouLAB, 2018). Policy creators were face to face with stakeholders of the problem they were working on -

sometimes for the first time. Government workers who were in charge of designing policy that impacted immigrants to New Brunswick were in conversation with immigrants to New Brunswick and learning from their experiences in order to design better policy - collaboratively. Immigrants to the province were hearing first-hand about the limitations of the business and political structures and realising that the challenges they had faced when immigrating to New Brunswick were systemic, rather than personal. When interviewed, 93% of lab participants agreed that their understanding of both the newcomer and employer experience had increased and 95% of participants were happy to have been able to analyze opportunities and barriers to immigrant attraction and retention within New Brunswick in order to prototype new paths forward (NouLAB, 2018).

Furthermore, lab participants are rejuvenated by being in the lab and experiencing work in a different way. One participant raved: "I have worked in government for 10 years and needed new wind in my sails, and this lab gave me that". Another participant said: "On a personal level it was a profound experience, and very gratifying". Yet another participant explained that it had helped their entire portfolio, saying, "it allowed my other work to accelerate. I feel satisfied that I have a map and a destination, but still discovering the exact terrain and vehicle" (NouLAB, 2018).

Participants cite the atmosphere created by the hosting team, the encouragement to show up in new ways, the opportunities to engage with people holding different perspectives on the issue, and the space to reflect on how personal values and beliefs impact their vantage point and therefore understanding of the system. Systems change relies on those on either side of power to come into relationship with one another and, in so doing, begin to transform their understanding of the system as a whole, their part in it, and the leverage points for action available to them (Torfing, 2019). It would appear that the most meaningful and revolutionary aspect of the lab is simply bringing folks with different lived experience, different understandings of the challenge and different capacities to interact with the system into conversation with one another. After all, "one cannot expect entire systems to radically shift if one cannot practice and embody a microversion of this in one's conversations with everyday colleagues" (Moore, Olsson, Nilsson, Rose, & Westley, 2018, p. 9).

As evidenced by its name, the Art of Hosting and Harvesting Conversations that Matter is a set of engagement tools to facilitate participatory and democratic *conversation*. It is ultimately an attempt to provide the best circumstances for dialogue to happen. "Dialogue is inherently relational," (Drimie, Hamann, Manderson, & Mlondobzi, 2018, p. 2) and it both deepens and widens over time. At its most basic level, there is knowledge exchange, but methodologies that use dialogue build empathy and connection between participants, which contributes to their desire to find solutions that work for everyone (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2005).

Art of Hosting practices are designed to be customisable, responsive and emergent instead of being "oriented to a method of set 'best practices'" (Sandfort, Stuber & Quick, 2012, p. 5). As facilitators, we work collaboratively, intuitively and with the expectation that the participants in our programmes will co-create them with us also. This is another principle from the Art of Hosting, where "there are no explicit leaders who command authority; rather [a focus on] creating learning experiences (Sandfort, Stuber & Quick, 2012, p. 3). We check in with participants every day, ask them how they're doing and what they need. And their answers influence our design of the next day – or the next few hours. We've thrown out plans because we have heard that that is not what participants need. Giving participants agency over their experience, invites a new structure of working, where collective intelligence, self-organization, continuous adaptation, and feedback coordination are possible because of the readiness of hosts to make changes and assess situations in real time.

4.2. A Co-created World Café – Tools for Self-organization

In the first cycle of the Economic Immigration Lab, we opened with a World Café that asked: *When we invite people to live and work in NB, what are we inviting them into?* What came out of this World Café question was a churning up of some of the deep-seated racism in New Brunswick. It was an opportunity to discuss what it means to be a newcomer in NB, which for some, was shocking. It became very apparent that the time allotted to these conversations wasn't enough, and so the design was altered for the next day to include an Open Space Technology session with the question: *What conversations do you need to be having now?*

During this session, participants took the opportunity to discuss the experience of being a newcomer through economic, cultural and gendered lenses. Observing the room, the level of attention was palpable. Everyone was leaning in. These conversations were so important for opening up a level of authenticity and vulnerability that influenced the prototypes they tackled and the way they related to one another in the days and weeks to come. Facilitators heard from participants that this session directly impacted how they felt they could show up in the lab and resulted in at least two people choosing prototype topics and teams that they felt called to on a personal level, as opposed to the ones that they might naturally have joined because of an alignment with their work.

It may seem inconsequential – but when the facilitators show up in a different way, it breaks the traditional, hierarchical power dynamic that exists – the one that gives certain people with certain voices more power than others. By sitting in circle to collectively hear and resolve the issue, we invite perspective from everyone – equally.

“The invitation to participate in a community – of co-learners and co-producers of knowledge – also reflects hosting's distinctive and democratizing philosophies about deliberation and design, namely that all people in the room have wisdom, that deliberation enables the sharing of knowledge, that facilitators and others aim to decentre the authority of their position and expertise in the room and that participants coproduce deliberative policy processes as well as decisions” (Quick & Sandfort, 2014, p. 317).

4.3. Disruptive Potential: Understanding the System and Self in New Ways

These practices don't only serve in times of conflict, but throughout the process. By addressing dynamics of identity, power and privilege, we are furthering our disruptive potential towards systems change (Quick & Sandfort, 2014). Furthermore, “at the heart of the disruptive process of social innovation lies a need for a type of institutional reflexivity; that is, the capacity to see, interrogate, and reimagine the taken-for-granted structures that sustain current systems and people–planet relationships” (Moore, Olsson, Nilsson, Rose, & Westley, 2018, p. 3).

Indeed, this is the case for one of the lab teams now prototyping a streamlined process to allow employers and potential employees to navigate the government services they need to meet the requirements for hiring and being hired in New Brunswick. Team members from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) - the national governing body for immigration in Canada, Post-Secondary Training, Education and Labour, J. D. Irving Ltd. (the province's largest private employer) and Practical Human Resources Services Inc. came together across the national/provincial governmental divide, the public/private sector divide, and with newcomers to the province in order to flesh out the immigration process as it is experienced by immigrants, employers wishing to hire

immigrants and the governing institutions for immigration. With this deeper and broader understanding of the system as a whole, the team was able to identify leverage points - or opportunities - for new policy development. Currently, the team, in collaboration with the provincial and federal governments, is prototyping a Concierge Service that will help immigrants and employers navigate the immigration system, as well as track their experiences in order that those learnings be used to inform further policy changes down the line.

The learning from this prototype is scalable throughout New Brunswick, as employers and employees currently have no resource, or are forced to rely on private concierge services to aid their recruitment efforts, which is not an option for many small and medium enterprises in the province. And, with IRCC involved in this prototype the learning could have impact at a national scale.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Economic Immigration Lab turned out to be more than just a space to prototype solutions to the immigration challenges New Brunswick faces. By using Art of Hosting practices, the team at NouLAB managed to: create a container which enabled participants to show up in their work and relationships to one another in new and deeper ways; harness Systemic Design elements, enabling self-organization, feedback coordination, continuous adaptation, requisite variety, appreciating complexity; establish a precedent for co-creation which gave participants agency over their experience and thus over the subsequent work and prototypes that were developed in the lab; encouraged a transformation of identity, relationships, and dynamics of power and privilege, thereby allowing for a reflexivity in the system not otherwise possible.

These features are consistent with Transformative Learning Theory, and “the importance of transforming perspectives by undertaking a critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychological assumptions; examining one’s self, including feelings, roles, and competencies; exploring and provisionally trying new roles, relationships, and actions; acquiring new knowledge and skills; and building competence and confidence in new roles and relationships” (Moore, Olsson, Nilsson, Rose, & Westley, 2018, p. 5).

While not explicit in the field of Social Innovation Labs, we contend that the transformative experiences of coming together in conversation in new ways, reorganising traditional hierarchies into distributed horizontal leadership approaches, and co-creating the structure as well as content of the lab in order to increase the self-reflexivity of the system accounts for the performance and success of the lab thus far. The methodologies and principles within the suite of the Art of Hosting and Harvesting Conversations that Matter gave structure and guidance to be able to offer these transformative elements to lab participants.

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