

REFLECTIONS FROM THE 2014 STS ROUNDTABLE



A group of students and graduates from the **Human Systems Intervention M.A. program** at **Concordia University** in Montreal attended the **2014 Meeting of the Global Socio-Technical Systems Network** and met several times after the conference to discuss their learning and experiences.

They selected a number of striking moments — moments when something struck them as profound, exciting, insightful or emotional, something they will remember — and wrote a short description of that moment and what it meant to them. In this way they captured as much as possible of the whole experience, getting at the essence of why the Global Network is of such high value.

We will be posting their reflections weekly here on this blog site, in the sequence of the unfolding of the conference.

The topics of the students' reflections were:

- Pre-Conference Workshop: Positive Participative Innovation
- GE Bromont Site Visit
- STS Past and Future
- The Changing Workplace
- Information/Communication Technologies and their Impact on Work and Organizational Design
- Inter-organization Design
- Intra-organization Design
- Pecha Kucha

PRE-CONFERENCE WORKSHOP: POSITIVE PARTICIPATIVE INNOVATION

Positive Participative Innovation (PPI) was an opportunity to review some key concepts of Socio-technical Systems Design, Appreciative Inquiry, and Design Thinking. One of the first questions was: “What hopes/aspirations and/or capacities do you bring to this workshop?” Based on the fact that “The future is created with what we have,” this serves as a reminder for all groups that we can already find richness and variety in our competencies and backgrounds. It also reminds us that people in the system are their own experts in finding solutions.

The innovation challenge starts with a process to **Inquire** through conversation by asking ourselves novel questions — remember, asking questions is an intervention. Systems begin to move in the direction of the questions we ask — about a Transformational Inquiry topic: How have we...

This prompts a reflection on the importance of asking powerful questions:

- What we ask determines what we find;
- What we find determines how we talk;
- How we talk determines how we imagine together;
- How we imagine determines what we achieve together.

The next step, **Imagine**, requires that we put the result of our conversation (How might we...) into images, and that we take the conversation to a deeper level. We transition from Metaphor to Models, using sketches, diagrams, or any other means to dream our future.

During the 3rd step, **Invigorate**, we ask ourselves how we can test, mobilize and scale our proposal (How will we...), we plan the way to engage new participants and make sure that our innovation is viable, feasible, repeatable and scalable. We detect where is the energy that will make our project a success and how will we ignite this energy.

I liked this process as it is fuelled by passion and bold ideas. It echoes ideas about continuous improvement that were explored during Sylvie's Pecha Kucha presentation, where we were reminded that the light bulb wasn't invented by improving candles.

Other ideas I heard during the PPI workshop include:

- We live in an emergent world, rather than a predictable one.
- In the process of creation we change ourselves.
- Behavior emerges from the environment —K. Lewin.

Marcela Urteaga,
HSI 2012

Positive Participatory Innovation (PPI) Workshop engages participants in a live-case study on how to purposefully pursue the creation of healthy, humane, and innovative futures.

Despite all my planning and preparation, the week of the conference was harrowing, as I had to deal with a destabilizing work-related issue. My situation is not unique as many of us, perhaps too many, know that workplaces are at times sites in which larger systemic issues are played through people and by people, as victims and perpetrators caught in the web of a maladapted society.

In a turbulent environment in which feeling unsafe at work is just one item on a depressingly long list of issues, the PPI workshop was a hopeful experience. It was beautifully designed by DBD (Don, Bernard, Doug) and brought us together to build on each other's strengths while experiencing work in a productive and innovative temporary organization.

Although the groups experienced occasional fight/flight dynamics, my first 'striking' moment happened during the second day of the workshop, when participating in a large- group-data-clustering exercise. As I experienced the high-energy of a creative working mode, that might be the exact time when I realized that people with diverse affiliations and backgrounds are truly building on each other's work and generating a great momentum for future collaboration. As we were envisioning an issue-based ecosystem for more humane workplaces, I started to feel less tired, more energized, and definitely engaged.

Now, we are back in our organizations, communities, and families. Will we (GLOWIN) be able to maintain this momentum? Can we embody and enact in our local networks and workplaces the changes that we want to create?

Aurelia L. Roman,
HSI 2010

GE BROMONT SITE VISIT

During the 2014 Conference we had the amazing opportunity to visit GE Bromont, part of GE Aviation and the only GE plant designed using STS principles. It has been highly successful since its creation in the mid-90s . This plant is located in Bromont, Quebec, a small French-speaking community, 85 km from Montreal. They manufacture cutting-edge motors for commercial aircraft, military, marine, business and general aviation.

GE Bromont also hosts the GE Aviation Global Robotics, Automation and Instrumentation R&D Centre, and has not only contributed to the economic development of Bromont, but it has also hired approximately 100 workers since 1997.

We were welcomed by Philippe Simonato, the plant manager, who explained the culture, history and achievements of GE Bromont. GE employees gave us a tour for the plant and we had the opportunity to ask questions, observe their processes and the plant operation, and finally we had lunch in small groups where we continued talking about processes, technology, human systems and innovation.

We will have for you our reflections on the visit, as well as information obtained through interviews with experts on Socio-technical systems.

(Intro added by Marcela Urteaga, HSI 2012)

A particularly resonant moment for me was at the end of our exchange with the GE employees. We (the delegates from STS Roundtable) had spent about an hour touring their plant, an hour asking them questions, and maybe 30-45 minutes responding to theirs. The Roundtable organizers had decided to give Philippe a token of our appreciation for taking the time to host us. With the significant Belgian contingent at the Roundtable, some craft Belgian beer was decided on as the appropriate gift. At the end of the visit, a small box with maybe 4 beers was handed over to Philippe with a few words of thanks. Without missing a beat, he turned around and said "Thank you for your gift and for spending time with us today." Holding up the box of beer, "This will be a draw prize for all the members of the GE team who made this visit possible."

It was a simple gesture to turn this gift over to the team — one that was unnecessary, and had it been missing, would not have raised any flags. But for Philippe to so quickly move ownership of this ‘gift’ to the team was really remarkable to see. I had not expected to be so struck by that moment, but what resonated for me was “consistency”. From how Philippe talked about the GE Bromont plant, the team ownership of the well-being of employees, and deep-seated embodied understanding of the subject matter — this gesture markedly demonstrated that Philippe walked the talk. The employees also walked the talk. I didn’t hear a theoretical understanding of socio- technical systems or open systems theory — but there was a deep felt commitment to their participative management in an embodied, natural way, which drove a consistency beyond mere intellectual understanding. I am so thankful to have seen a living, breathing STS-designed organization. Like the difference between reading an old travel book for Asia, and stepping off the plane to feel the press of warm tropical air on my face — this visit made STS real.

Tristan Khaner,
HSI 2015

The plan was that during lunch we would have a facilitated discussion with our GE Bromont tour guides. My group finished the tour late, and as we assembled around the table, excited and famished, sitting arrangements were a second thought. Incidentally, I found myself at one end of the table with the guides, while the conversation was taking place at the other end, out of earshot. To strike up a conversation, I asked Sonny, our guide, how he had learned to speak English so well (remember that Bromont is in small town Québec). Our conversation moved on to Sonny’s personal story of how he ended up working at GE Bromont and what he had in plan for the future.

Suddenly Eli, who was sitting beside me, piped in, in English, with a powerful question: ‘what is the best thing about working here?’ Sonny answered that it was a great place to work that paid well and where he would want his son to work. Now that grabbed Eli’s attention! He explained he had the habit of using that query to ‘test’ workplaces throughout his long career; this was the first time he had someone answer that they wanted their children to work at the same place they did, as most people would like something better than what they already had for their children. Sonny argued that his current position was fulfilling and even enviable in his community. It then struck me that we had just visited an organization that made its workers fulfilled while outshining the competition, and had had the privilege of experiencing an exceptional workplace.

Besides providing a perceptive benchmark for workplace satisfaction, Eli’s question opened up a new line of inquiry for me.

Sonny's response touched upon the ideas of continuity and prosperity, and these are intimately linked to the wider environment, in this case, the community. What was the impact of the community on GE Bromont's success, and what are the impacts of GE Bromont on the community? How will they align their actions to ensure continued shared prosperity for the next generation?

Dena Duijkers,
HSI 2014

Attending the STS annual conference was a great opportunity to see how participative management translated to real life. I have been to manufacturing plants before, some traditional ones and some other working under STS principles, and what I learned during our visit to the GE Bromont plant is that regardless of the country, industry or technology used, the productivity, efficiency and employee morale are higher when the STS principles are applied.

At GE Bromont I witnessed the passion and the commitment that people bring into their work. Not only the hosts that received us, but also the rest of the employees that were working during our visit showed commitment and love for the job they've been doing for so many years and how engaged they are with GE Bromont. This engagement is not the result of a program or a quick fix, but it's something that the managers have been developing and co-creating with the employees throughout the years. It is the result of involving everyone in the decision making process, of understanding what people need to perform and giving them the tools and the trust to do it.

Being interested in collaboration, training, and organizational development, I asked several questions about these topics, and our hosts agreed that this was a great place to work and people felt proud and grateful of working at such a great place. Creativity, engagement and the need to solve problems in an efficient way, along with enough elbow room to take actions resulted in creative solutions, such as their own ERP, that stands for Excel Rapid Program, which has been a more useful solution for their needs.

For me, this visit was a great opportunity to confirm that STS principles are the best way to engage with the increasing demands of participation, engagement and teamwork that employees bring to the workplace.

Marcela Urteaga,
HSI 2012

STS PAST & FUTURE

As a newcomer to the field, I learned a few new things as I walked the gallery walls after the small group discussions on the history of STS. I noticed that several flip charts mentioned Cal Pava as someone who had made a significant contribution to the field. I hadn't come across his name before, and later at the gala dinner, I found out from Carolyn who he was and why I had never heard of him. Cal Pava was a seminal influence on 'new-STS' theory and his work examined the impact of technology on the field. Unfortunately, he published very little and passed away at a young age. But members of the STS RT have access to this otherwise 'hidden' knowledge. Proof positive that there was more knowledge in the room than on the Internet!

Dena Duijkers,

HSI 2014

What stood out for me in this session was the feeling of relevance. The STS past and future was the first working session of the conference. It was intimidating to join a group of STS seasoned practitioners and academics in this learning experience, questioning my relevance and what I can contribute to this wealth of knowledge. However, the process used to collect data on STS past was a reminder that even the (seemingly) insignificant knowledge is an invaluable part in the construction of the whole. This brings me to Ackoff's reflection on the whole being more than the sum of its parts. The collective knowledge in the room was bigger, more important (and complete) than any individual piece of knowledge. However, the personal experience of every participant – new or old to STS allowed us to create a collective reality that we all shared. How can we bring this lesson into creating a shared future vision and reality, where every member of the community will feel relevant?

Catalina Barbarosie,

HSI 2013

THE CHANGING WORKPLACE

As a first activity in the Changing Workplace session, participants were invited to gather into age groups and discuss the changes that they have witnessed in work and the workplace over the course of their lifetime, and to place their observations on a large-group timeline.

There was a fair amount of overlap among the findings of the small groups: the increased pace of work, the blurring of boundaries between private and work life, the increasing abundance of information and communication. Looking and the combined timeline, one participant summarized the feeling in the room: 'It's all negative.'

The majority of the people in the room though had taken part in the pre-conference Positive Participative Innovation workshop, and questioned their negativity in light of their recent energizing and productive experience provided by the positive approaches of AI, OST and Design Thinking. The need for a more optimistic outlook in facing these challenges was palpable in the room. Suddenly, Kristin offered her solution to the group: 'I like to frame it as 'I am learning how to...'".

Her intervention was met with nods of approval and smiles. Indeed, we are living in changing times. That is a fact that all our combined experience eloquently demonstrated. Framing our own challenges as practitioners within the context of learning and humbly viewing ourselves as learners allows us to embody the principles of the learning organizations we seek to design.

Dena Duijkers,

HSI 2014

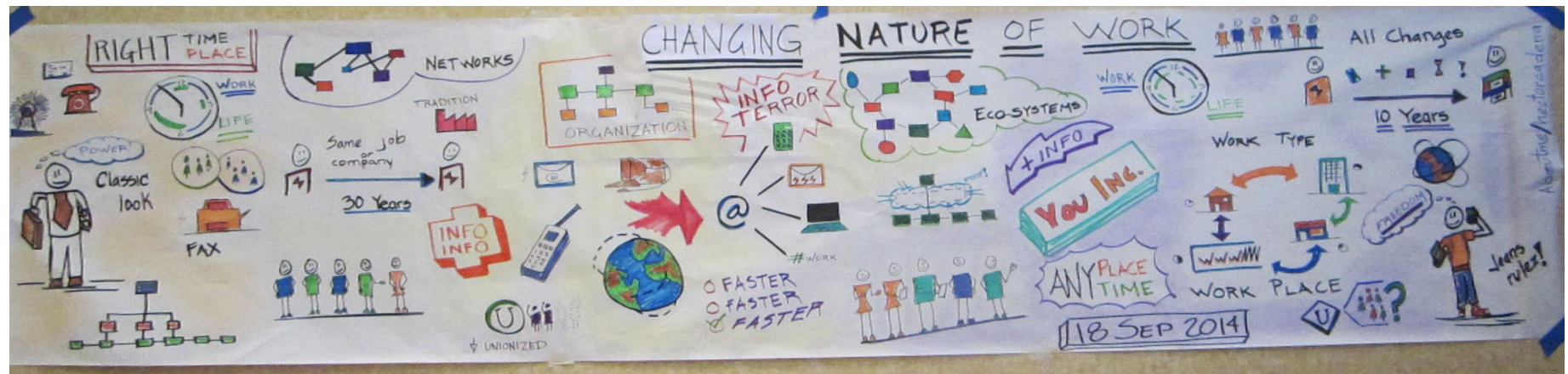
These are really interesting times in the workplace. Given the recent changes of society in face of new technology we're having 4 different generations at work (all of them with different characteristics, values, needs, which brings of course, a lot of

challenges. During this session we had the opportunity to reflect on the mutual influence of the way we work and technology. We are also experiencing more diversity and different ways of working than our parents. The mobility of the workforce has also a significant impact on the way that we work together, and all of these challenges should be considered when we redesign our organizations.

This conversation allowed us to see things from different perspectives and we had the opportunity to listen to the different generations explain how they perceived the evolution of the workplace. One of the concepts I heard that made sense in my experience was the concept of Info-Terror; it really reflects the feeling of a lot of people at work. This, combined with the “any time, any place” work definition hinders our ability to disconnect from work and limits our ability to recharge, or at least makes this process more difficult.

These new conditions require more creative approaches to organization design, and to the rest of the HR functions, as they are now responding to different needs.

Marcela Urteaga,
HSI 2012



INFORMATION/COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES AND THEIR IMPACT ON WORK AND ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGN

According to Maturana and Varela, human beings have developed the unique capacity of talking together and make meaning in language. We live inside our language and we create our world through the conversation networks that we share with one another. Considering that organizations emerge from dialogue, and that technology is changing the way we communicate, how is the new technology dialogue/lexicon impacting our behavior?

During this session we had the opportunity to reflect on how technologies are bringing teams together all over the world, are changing the conditions (time, place, schedule, etc) of work, reducing bureaucracy, increasing productivity and improving communication. The presentation was also an invitation to consider the social and environmental impact of the new technologies, to find the balance between high performance and happiness, and the concept of Sociocracy as a governance system (using consent-based decision making among equivalent individuals and an organizational structure based on cybernetic principles, Wikipedia dixit).

Technology is helping us to hear and include the worker, but it also limiting the access that people have to information. Therefore, we need to have proper processes in place to ensure we're not limiting our employees' voices by design.

Marcela Urteaga,
HSI 2012

The discussion on the low success rate of ERP/ ERM/ SAP implementation resonated with me. There is an expectation that

information technologies will increase the efficiency of the organization, however the rigidity of ERP systems 1) increase the hierarchy of the organization; 2) reduce the ability to make mistakes, learn and innovate; 3) the orgs mold to fit the ERP system and not the system to fit the organization, leading also to cultural change.

Catalina Barbarosie,
HSI 2013



INTER-ORGANIZATION DESIGN

This was a particularly impactful part of the conference as I realized there was a name and place within STS for the work I do in the community sector: inter-organization design. Not only that, I also realized that other people within the network are doing similar work, and facing similar challenges. It also meant to me that I belonged there at the conference and among the other participants. For the rest of the conference when others asked what kind of work I did, I started with the simple response: "I do inter-organization design." And they understood what I meant. It was blissful! I discovered I am not alone; there are people I can connect with about the unique challenges of multi-stakeholder work, and the additional challenges of applying STS where the environment becomes more complex, and the nature of the work and workflow more difficult to define (we are not making car

engines, we are attempting to make well-being!).

The beauty of inter-organization design is to tackle problems and issues that are beyond the scope of one single organization. Bringing together community organizations, government institutions, the private sector, and beyond, poses significant challenges when they all come to the table. The model presented by Carolyn was fascinating; I was in awe to see that other people had cared enough about both community and STS to put collective thought into creating a theoretical model based in STS and apply it to inter-organization design. I learn best when I can put theory to practice, and I was excited for the presentations that followed to help make sense of the abstract theoretical model. These examples were fascinating and inspiring. Being newbie to the STS conference and STS in general, I was relieved when I shared with the person sitting next to me that I had not managed to fully understand the model and she said she was in the same boat. Our impression was that the links between the conceptual model and the practical examples had not been clearly drawn. I was hungry to hash out these links and more thoroughly understand an STS model that I can apply to my community work. I am still very eager to tackle this and invite those who have a handle of it to contribute their understandings and increase our collective knowledge.

Carlye Watson,

HSI 2013

Learning about the philosophy of the models (three beliefs: agility, transparency and integration) used to create Inter-organization design was really inspiring and gave me the opportunity to reflect on the complexity that it involves. It highlighted also the importance of using an STS Collaboration platform to build the trust needed when the different organizations need to define social and technical systems in an emergent way. The discussion about the Macondo Disaster also brought the same questions and urgency about having a bigger vision — the eye that provides focus and responses that help to build not only collaboration, but accountability and ethical behavior. Other important topics were the importance of value-driven collaboration, the high value of inviting and respecting the input of others (with a provocative invitation), identifying the stakeholders by their interests, and the design of a process to allow participants define what their shared purpose is (where the accountability is related to the purpose, not only to the task).

Marcela Urteaga,

HSI 2012

Let me precede my little commentary by stating that I am an INFJ according to the Myers-Briggs personality type. So I'm a 'big feeler'. When I'm at conferences I learn by observation. I watch for the passion, motivation, and dedication in individuals.

And so it was with great interest that I was listening to one of our colleagues who had been involved with companies that were responsible for the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico several years ago. He spoke about how affected he was by both the disaster and by the lack of responsibility of some of the companies. He mentioned that his grand-parents had taught him that we do not own the land but are stewards of it. It made him upset knowing that these corporations were more interested in serving their self-interests than to serve the common good.

I've thought about that presentation several times since the STS conference in September. I do realize that it is important for corporations to protect their identity. Thousands of investors, employees, and communities depend on their existence. But as our colleague said in his presentation it would have been so much more honorable and upright had they taken responsibility from the very beginning rather than pointing fingers at prolonging the legal process.

In evading responsibility corporations evoke wariness and distrust regarding corporations. Once again the public looks at them as being very much self-serving. Unfortunately these corporations don't realize that there is a stigma that goes forward with them; who will not associate BP as a culprit in the future-one only has to check the Internet to what is considered the "BP oil spill." They're not doing themselves or their stakeholders any service.

Recently I was rereading Chris Argyris' work on Espoused Values and Theories-in-use. I'm sure many leaders in the above companies meant well but did not come through for the greater good. In my estimation, this may be caused by the leadership in corporations and possibly in the way they are structured. The way some corporations are run diminishes the role of values and affects the overall well-being of individuals. Unfortunately employees are too caught up in survival mode to take stock, often not having many other options.

But are they proud? I don't know about you but I become passionate when I see organizations that have a meaningful mission-

vision, produce for the common good, and go beyond the call of duty. For those organizations I will give 100%, with conviction and pleasure. That's how organizations did it in the past. Could we re-instill these values?

Although I am relatively new to STS, I trust that one of the components of redesign is to revisit and elaborate the core values in organizations through meaningful and relevant mission-visions.

Andy Malolepszy,

HSI 2003

This session was particularly memorable to me. I was touched by the discussion on Macondo blowout and the oil spill and what can be done to prevent similar tragedies in the future. The increased turbulence of the environment makes it impossible for any one single organization to respond effectively to external challenges. This idea is not new. Emery and Trist (1972) noted that “these fields are so complex, so richly textured, that it is difficult to see how individual systems can, by their own efforts, successfully adapt to them”. Here is some learning from this session:

Organizations must understand that they are insufficiently equipped individually to provide comprehensive solutions to any existing problems (sensitive responses to the weak signals). Any solution will be incomplete.

The purpose of the collaboration is to provide focus through a collective eye (like the eye of the fly which have the fastest visual responses in the animal kingdom).

The design question is where to place the collective eye. Since the most complete set of data is available where the operation is done, the collective eye should be placed on the drilling rig. This was a real life example how placing the command and control function with the people that do the actual job could have prevented a tragedy.

This session also left me with some broad questions about the design of the governance structure of the STS global network/community/ eco-system. How can we ensure that whatever we design passes the test of time and remains relevant and able to constantly adapt to the changing environment.

Catalina Barbarosie,



INTRA-ORGANIZATION DESIGN

For the final panel of the conference — intra-organization design — we were invited to literally roll up our sleeves and do some dirty work. Awaiting us on the opposite side of the room were impeccably set up tables laden with art materials, each one attended to by an art facilitator dressed in a spotless, brand-new apron. The main facilitator attentively read the instructions to the activity from a cue card, then invited us to don our own spotless, brand-new apron, form groups and join one of the art facilitators at a table to await step-by-step instruction. The task was to explore our creativity by creating a group painting starting from a piece of instrumental music; the art facilitators' role was to assist us in this task, a role they embodied mainly by carefully giving instructions one step at a time, managing access to materials, and more importantly, by giving us tips and techniques to perfect our final product.

As a student of Human Systems Intervention, I caught on to what was going on — at least for myself — very early on. After a few 'teachable moment' interventions from the art facilitator to 'help' us 'perfect' our group painting, I found my self-awareness kicking in; I was irritated, confused, and tempted to withdraw from the process. I felt the tension between the need for freedom

to experiment and what I perceived as the restrictive, rigid and invasive presence of the well-intentioned facilitator. Wasn't our painting good enough? I liked it just as it was, but I went along with each suggested 'improvement' although I had no idea what the end goal was.

I took a deep breath and tried to participate without being hindered by my feelings of inadequacy, but truth must be told, my creativity was definitely taxed as I increasingly felt as if I had to reach some unstated, and in my mind unattainable, standard.

During the debrief, my group mates reported having had different reactions to the facilitator's interventions, some were positive, but most were either negative or ambivalent. Then Jacinthe shared an 'a-ha' moment with the group: 'Is it possible that the people we work with as consultants feel the same way we felt just now?'

It was a glorious moment of self-awareness. STS seeks to involve workers in the design of an organization and its decision-making processes as well as foster continuous improvement and innovation. In participating in various groups, teams and committees, workers are invited to work among experts and other authority figures as equals. We had just witnessed — rather experienced — the subtle impact of the way we as practitioners embody these underlying principles and values of our field on the people we work with and the overall outcome.

Looking back at the intra-organization session with the distance of time, I only now realize just how much I was unconsciously dragging my past experiences along with me and allowed myself to be triggered by the dissonance I perceived between the rigid structure of the activity (and those spotless aprons!!) and its purported goal of exploring creativity. On some deep level I was reading the message NOT to color outside the lines. But creativity, at least in my mind, is a happily messy process. And that gap affected my participation and ultimately the end results in ways, unfortunately, we will never know. This leaves me with some broad questions: how to integrate complexity theory with STS practice to engage the whole person in the design process? How to effectively flatten out the power differential between authority figures, experts and other members of the organization on both the conscious and unconscious levels?

Dena Duijkers,
HSI 2014

PECHA KUCHAS

Pecha Kucha was a fun, fast-paced, and to-the-point way of getting to know more about the work conference attendees do and tap into their passions. Presentations covered a wide range of topics, from the plight of farm workers to the organization of health care, from the the inner space of the psyche to considerations about our planet and our species.

Jean-Phillippe's presentation on the importance of paying attention to emotions in organizational work stood out for me. The slide presentation, originally set to run at 20 seconds a slide as per standard Pecha Kucha form, started stalling one minute in due to technical difficulties. Jean-Phillippe was completely unfazed when this happened, and he very skilfully seized the emergent opportunity to ask the audience, in a slow, deep, inquiring voice, the catch-question of his presentation: 'How do you feel right now?'. The audience roared with laughter. The snafu ADDED to the presentation tremendously!

Humor aside, there is a deeper learning to be found here. How often do we as practitioners, while in the midst of our work with groups on a given task, take the time to ask ourselves that question and explore the impact of the answer on what we are doing? What would change if we did take the time?

Dena Duijkers,

HSI 2014

Source: Concordia University students`reflection, as posted here: <http://stsroundtable.com/category/concordia-students-reflections/>