

LiFT Case Book

**LiFT** Leadership  
for Transition

# Hosting Collaboratories: Insights and learnings from different cases

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## 7. Mini- Collaboratory at the TRANSIT academic conference in Rotterdam

*By Iris Kunze, with contributions from Bettina Geiken; final editing: Elke Fein*

This book has been compiled and written during  
the Strategic Partnership Leadership for Transition  
(LiFT 2.0), 2015-2018, **Intellectual Output N° 3**  
[Published online August 31, 2018](#)



Co-funded by the  
Erasmus+ Programme  
of the European Union

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### Hard facts

<i>Date:</i>	September 14 <sup>th</sup> , 2017, 14:30 – 16h
<i>Place:</i>	Blue City conference Centre, Rotterdam (The Netherlands)
<i>Host:</i>	Iris Kunze as researcher of TRANSIT; TRANSIT final conference “Learning for Change”
<i>Participants:</i>	25
<i>Topic:</i>	Organisational Forms in transition. Co-creative explorations based on learnings from TRANSIT and social innovation initiatives
<i>Facilitators:</i>	Bettina Geiken, Iris Kunze
<i>Duration:</i>	1,5 hours
<i>Language:</i>	English

### Specific challenges

- The short time frame of only 1,5 hours
- Competition with parallel session, spontaneous decision of participation
- Short-term- cancellation of a presenter
- Integration of different stakeholder groups (practitioners, academics, politicians)
- Multiple roles of the main author of this case study (host, expert, LiFT co-facilitator)

### Specific resources:

- The host, LiFT co-facilitator and author was a researcher within the TRANSIT project who knew and was well familiar with the organizers of the conference, the topics and the overall context.
- The participants (representatives of initiatives) were mostly open and experienced in interactive process methods and participated actively.

### Main learnings:

- The Collaboratory can be adapted to an academic conference context by making a few concise design choices to match the needs of the audience.
- Mini-Collaboratories can be designed as time-efficient ways to give audiences that are new to collaborative and co-creative approaches a first “taste” of the method.
- Thorough preparation, strict timing, as well as clear communication and facilitation build the ground for opening up deeper levels of exploration and for nurturing the unfolding of creativity.
- Academic audiences are an extremely worthwhile target group for the Collaboratory method if chosen and approached adequately: Given their natural sense of rigor and curiosity and their focus on progress and meaningful outputs, they proved to pick up the essence of collaborative inquiry intuitively and be able to easily join into the spirit of experimentation and co-creation. Science Collaboratories are therefore a promising avenue for further action research, even in relatively short time frames.

## A. The context and preparation of the Collaboratory

### Place

Located at the harbor in Rotterdam, the 'Blue City' conference center, a former spa, provides an innovative space for conferences. Young and ecologically minded entrepreneurs, such as a startup working on growing mushrooms on coffee waste, have their office spaces there, too. The EU-funded research TRANSIT project wanted to set a signal to host the final conference of the project in such a place for attracting innovative and engaged citizens, instead of choosing a conference center in the political district of Brussels. The room where our session took place, was literally a 'Fishbowl', with glass at both hall ways, so that everyone passing by could watch our process.

### Context and host

"Learning for Change" was the final conference of the large EU research project [TRANSIT](#) (transformative social innovation), which included 35 researchers from 14 partner universities in 12 countries. The project had been funded by the EU-FP7-program on empowering people and changing societies. TRANSIT had researched the transformative potential of 'social innovation initiatives' for four years. The final conference aimed at bringing together scientists and politicians with practitioners from the initiatives under study. For the conference, innovative formats of facilitating the sessions were explicitly invited. Therefore, it seemed obvious to try out the Collaboratory there, in view of exploring its potential for applications in academic contexts.

With the transdisciplinary ambition of the project, representatives of the examined initiatives have been invited to the final conference besides the researchers themselves. They were given the role to open a platform of dialogue and discussion about the project's research results from studying these initiatives, focusing on each of their contributions to social innovation for changing societal systems. By this, it was aimed to give the social innovation initiatives a clearer voice. Therefore, other presentation formats than the usual academic papers had been explicitly invited. Initiatives were asked to present their projects either in the form of a market place, in discussions or as a tandem presentations together with us researchers. There was a special dedication towards methods empowering the initiatives and giving them a voice in the conference and while presenting the project results. Another core endeavor of the conference was to work out a 'manifesto of social innovation'. This process was facilitated, and the final version of the manifesto was approved and signed by researchers, politicians and representatives from the social innovation initiatives who were present at the conference.

### Preparation

From the perspective of experimenting with the Collaboratory in scientific contexts, it could have been interesting to try and facilitate the process of working out the 'manifesto for social innovation' by using tools from the Collaboratory. For this was a process with multiple stakeholders, which had been offered to the conference organizers by the main author of this case study. However, the manifesto process at the conference had already been taken care of by the leading professor of the research project. Therefore, as one of the researchers in TRANSIT, the main author subsequently hosted a

thematic workshop session on a topic close to her own expertise, the sociology of intentional communities and their forms of coordinating and organizing their life.

In order to be clear about her own role, the main author and initiator of this session decided to take the role as an expert and co-host for this session, asking a colleague from the LiFT team – Bettina Geiken, who also has broad experience with EU research projects – to take over the role as a lead facilitator. Both of them planned the mini-Collaboratory together, but facilitation was handed over to Bettina.

### Issue at stake, concern and main focus

The host chose “Organisational Forms in Transition” as the topic for this session, which allowed to draw on the research results of TRANSIT and bring in the experiences of social innovation initiatives in this area. The research outcomes of TRANSIT show, on the one hand, that individual members of the communities under study held a wide range of subjective, controversial positions in view of which organizational forms they preferred, including decision making and power issues. On the other hand, it made clear the ‘objective’ need to have adequate structures in place for running these initiatives. Many initiatives suffer from not having developed their organizational structures in an optimal way. It seemed therefore, that there was a lot of discussion potential around this, and almost all initiatives had experiences to share in this regard.

The session thus intended to open a space for dialogue between actors from social initiatives, policy makers and researchers to exchange existing experiences, and, beyond this, to co-creatively explore what innovative principles of organization might look like that can support learning, exchange and networking, as well as “walking one’s talk”.

The host and facilitator had co-developed three main questions to carry the group through the whole Collaboratory:

1. Where do you see challenges to existing organizational forms in society?
2. What examples of innovative organization have you seen in the experience of TRANSIT?
3. What could be the basic principles of ‘enabling structures’, that are empowering and socially innovative?

These served as an internal orientation and were later slightly modified and adapted to what the team found most appropriate for the given group in the moment (see below).

The intention was to use the Mini-Collaboratory to jointly explore which of the experiences and the innovative tools and methods used by existing initiatives could be transferrable to other contexts in society. Can mainstream politics be inspired by these innovations?

### Participants’ and their familiarity with process-oriented group methods

It was no surprise that the representatives of the initiatives were quite experienced and able to skillfully communicate in a facilitated Collaboratory setting in deeper dialogue mode. It seemed that the researchers rather observed the process and showed some reluctance to participate. A few policy makers who participated in the entire conference had also come to the session. Whether or not they had previous experience with collaborative methods is hard to say.

From among the expected group of participants, the host had invited **three inputs** beforehand that would represent three different angles: an academic input (by the main author herself), a practitioner input from a community-oriented initiative, showing how to translate communal living into an appropriate organizational structure, and thirdly, an input from someone representing a more business-oriented initiative. The latter was a professional in organizational development, working on empowering structures. These three perspectives were to represent the different research outcomes in the area of TRANSIT's research on initiatives. Unfortunately, the person representing the third perspective canceled her conference participation at short notice, so that we had only two presenters.

## B. The Collaboratory itself

### Overview of the process

The following table gives a high-level overview of the actual process, the timing and the elements of this Collaboratory event, before describing the whole process in detail.

time	What happened (Collaboratory elements/ facilitation tools)	Default design phases
14:30h	Start with few minutes delay: Framing and introduction to the aim, the context and the topic of this session	<b>Introduction, opening</b>
14:40h	Framing: introducing the session as a reflective and co-creative dialogue, rather than long individual presentations, statements and a discussion of opinions	
14:45h	Walk through the schedule	
14:50h	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Asking who is in the room: hand signs: activists from initiatives, politicians, researchers, other?</li> <li>Introducing two inputs from a researcher and a practitioner, each 5 min, on the three questions.</li> </ul>	
14:55h	Input 1: research result of the TRANSIT project (by Iris Kunze)	<b>Phase I: open mind</b> Downloading
	Input 2: practitioner view from the Global Ecovillage Network – GEN Europe (by Robert Hall)	
15:05h	10 minutes sharing in break out groups <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3 people in 3 x 2-3 min sharings = 15 min (Dialogue groups)</li> <li>the youngest may start, the two others are just listening, shifting was indicated</li> </ul>	<b>Phase II: open heart</b>
15:20h	Coming back into the plenary, rearrange to Fishbowl setting, "sit where you feel comfortable"	
15:25h	Those who sit in the middle will give a short statement /communication from the breakout groups to the three questions <i>(asking 2-3 people from the audience to capture the essence of what is being said on two flipcharts)</i> <i>(facilitator reminds of the questions, esp. question 3)</i>	<b>Phase III: open will</b>  <b>Phase IV: Harvesting</b>
15:50h	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Closing Fishbowl</li> <li>Inviting the Flipchart writers to summarize the main insights</li> <li>Invite participants to be topic-holders for these main issues</li> </ul>	<b>Phase V: Harvesting Prototyping</b>
16h	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Information on publications from TRANSIT and about this session</li> <li>Inviting people to network in the coffee break, esp. approach the topic holders</li> </ul>	<b>Phase VI: Rounding up, closing</b>



Note that the presencing /visioning phase (bottom of the U) has been absent in this setting as an explicit step. However, given the fact that many participants came from academic backgrounds, where these kinds of settings and modes of conversation are not (yet) common practice, entering a fish-bowl setting after a short dialogue in small groups was supposed to provide a first “taste” of a deeper kind of communication, if not a presencing phase at the bottom of the U. This choice had also been motivated by the time constraints of 1,5h.

To capture the outcomes, it was assured that minutes were taken.

## The process in detail



dialogue phase, then a Fishbowl for sharing in the plenary and finally harvesting and formulating some follow-up ideas.

The facilitator and the host had arranged the room with two half circles, a projector and two Flip Charts before the start of the session. The host opened the session by briefly announcing the topic and introducing Bettina Geiken as the facilitator. Bettina took over, explaining that this is an interactive, co-evolutive session, and walking the participants roughly through the schedule, starting with two brief inputs, then a

Next, the facilitator read out the three **guiding questions**, which were also visualized on the screen. As indicated earlier, these had been adapted from the initial guiding questions and ultimately revolved around the following:

1. What kind of elements are in place in your initiative that constitutes a successful organizational structure? (E.g. ownership structures, legal forms, community building, social relations, personal and professional development)?
2. What is the essence of the innovative principles your initiative has used in its organizational structures?
3. Where do you see a need for further development and learning?

After that, she introduced the first presenter who gave a five minutes input with slides answering the three questions. In her role as host, the first presenter then introduced the second presenter, the representative from an initiative who gave his five minutes input without slides.

After this concise “downloading” phase, the facilitator invited the participants to group up with two other persons and exchange what their insights and experiences were with regard to the three questions, or any responses they had to the previous inputs. Each person had three minutes to share with the two others, while the latter listened.

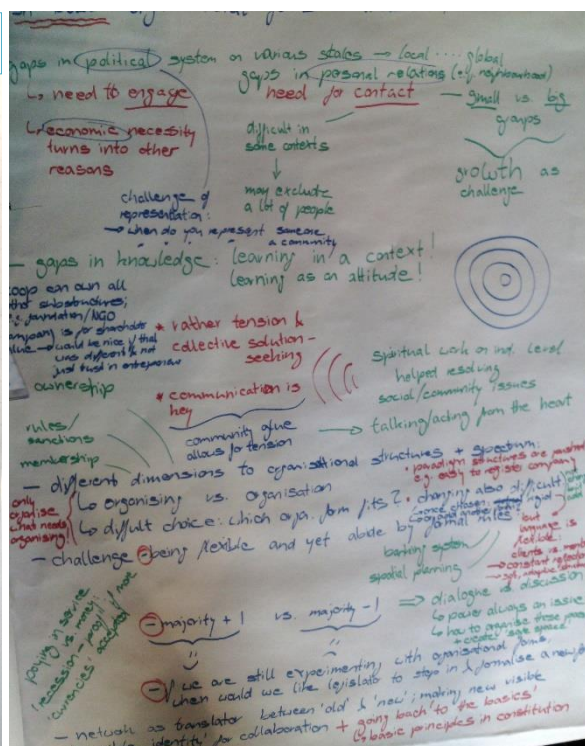
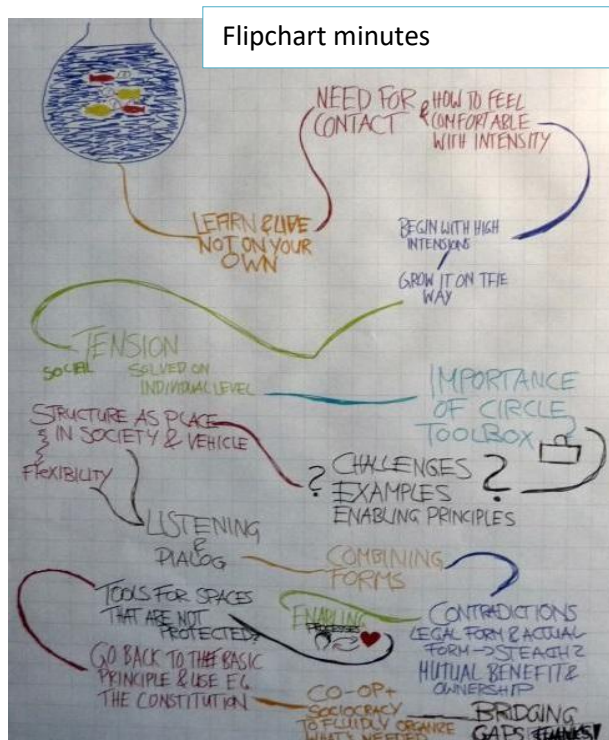
When time was up, the facilitator called them to come back into the big circle with a cymbal gong.

Then the host and facilitator asked for help to arrange two circles for a Fishbowl setting. The facilitator also invited two volunteers from the audience to harvest and write down the main insights from the Fishbowl conversation on the two flip charts.

During the Fishbowl, practically every participant of the session had taken one or two turns sitting in the center circle for contributing something. The participants were very disciplined and kept their contributions to 1-2 minutes as they had been asked to. The three questions were present on the screen, and the facilitator especially recalled the third question, pointing into the future, at some point. The main insights were captured by the minute takers and visualized for everyone – helping to keep track of the dialogue.



Less than ten minutes before the end of the session, the facilitator closed the fishbowl by asking the two minute-takers to wrap up main points of the dialogue. After they had done so, people were asked if they want to hold one of the topics, so that people could approach them after the session for potential follow-up conversations in the coffee break and beyond. The host also suggested to build a forum for exchange on innovative forms of organization amongst initiatives to carry on the work of the session. Even though this seeding of follow-up activities could not be done in a very structured way at this point, many people went out talking lively after the final announcements about potential further networking.



## Follow-ups

Directly after the session, many participants, including the main author herself and some of the ecovillage activists had some inspiring talks on the topic, discussing potential ways of how to improve the organizational structures e.g. in specific ecovillages and in their networks on different levels.

After the conference, some of the sessions and outputs were published in a conference blog. The host wrote a blog on this session, reporting content as well as the methodological process of this improvised mini-Collaboratory. A few months later, the TRANSIT project came to an end. The blog text can still be read online here: <http://www.transitsocialinnovation.eu/blog/learning-for-change-conference-archive>

The slides of the session can be downloaded here:

<http://www.transitsocialinnovation.eu/content/original/Blog%20Images/Organisational%20Forms%20in%20transition%20Kunze.pdf>

The TRANSIT research project has also developed a database of critical turning points in initiatives by interviewing representatives of selected social innovation initiatives. The database has been put online shortly before the conference and continues to serve as a reference for follow-up research, exchange and knowledge: <http://www.transitsocialinnovation.eu/sii>.

The authors could not keep track of any other concrete follow-ups.

## C. Reflections

### Reflections on this event

Concerning the very limited timeframe of just 1,5 hours, it was helpful to design every minute of these 1,5 hours in some detail beforehand, during the preparation phase, even considering individual sentences, which pieces of information to give when, and which arrangement of the room was needed in which phase. This enabled a clear and efficient start and first third of the session that was dense and characterized by a straightforward intention and atmosphere. Towards the end, more and more space was allowed for spontaneous action.

A unexpected situation occurred after the dialogue groups at the beginning of the fishbowl: the participants sat down before the facilitator could announce that they should select someone to share their break-out group insights with. This situation probably turned out even better because (academic) people were pulled to spontaneously share their most important insights without falling into controversial discussions. Nevertheless, it was also important for the effectiveness and for moving both deeper into the topic and up to a meta-perspective that the facilitator asked to provide only essential insights to be shared in this Fishbowl arising in response to the three questions.

In terms of learnings about how facilitation methods have been applied in the session to achieve a certain quality of conversation and type of outcomes, it was observed that the process managed to meet various kinds of needs. In the first part, it facilitated the need of getting information (by the concise inputs). Then it catered for the need for bringing the participants in touch with each other on a more personal level, and for them to express and share their own experiences in relation to the inputs (by giving space to talk for everyone in break out groups). This then prepared a good basis for the more extended sharing and discussion in the Fishbowl. From the host's and facilitator's perspective, the latter can be considered a successful session because, first, each of the 25 participants



have been in the inner circle of the fishbowl and made focused and valuable statements, and, second, a decent number of outcomes that had been developed in a co-creative way were captured on the Flipchart. Even though no direct follow-ups could be created in the given timeframe, the experiment can be considered as a successful example of ‘walking our talk’: It offered a practical exercise of implementing innovative formats while exploring innovative organizational forms.

### Reflections on applying the Collaboratory in a scientific context

The experiment of testing the use of a Collaboratory in an academic context has been realized by applying a condensed version, a mini-Collaboratory that has been especially adapted to the given context and setting. Within the extremely limited timeframe of a 1,5 hour session, it was possible to walk the audience through a number of “fields” (Scharmer) or qualities of communication that resembled the downloading, dialogue and co-creating phases in the Collaboratory prototype. The communication and facilitation tools of the Fishbowl, the dialogue groups, and the visualization by harvesting results on flipcharts, as well as the communication rules that have been used, seemed to have “landed” extremely well with participants from both academia and from among the social initiatives.

At the same time, this extremely condensed form of the mini-Collaboratory was of course limited in that it could not really provide the experience that is possible in a more extensive process, namely of taking the group through the deeper levels of the U process, especially the presencing.

However, it has become clear from this experiment, that in the case of a hosting context such as TRANSIT, that was characterized by enough openness to dare trying experimental formats, at least in a workshop session, the tools and deeper wisdom of the Collaboratory offer promising strategies for exploring and approaching complex challenges in innovative ways.

The fact that such innovative formats have been explicitly invited by the TRANSIT conference – as, by the way also by other, similar conferences (see Transformations conference, IST conferences etc.) – mirrors a trend towards transformative science. This includes a willingness for more innovation in the sense of including true dialogue, co-creation and an integration of practitioner knowledge in the academic context. Similar aspirations are increasingly voiced and triggered especially by young scientists. This is a promising trend, even though the final decision about how to organize a conference mostly remains with the established professors even in these cases – and all the more in other, more conventional ones. We can only assume that many of them feel a certain need to “play it academically safe” by applying ‘business as usual’, given our experience of how difficult it still is to get other formats on stage more prominently.

However, innovative formats do get increasing space in ‘side’ sessions. The TRANSIT conference provided an interesting context to explore the Collaboratory in an academic setting. Maybe the potential for accessing deeper levels of insight and knowledge generation, and for triggering co-creative practices is currently underestimated and under-acknowledged, even in transdisciplinary science. In this situation, the Collaboratory approach can provide a promising avenue, and, if applied professionally, a ‘safe’ container for taking transdisciplinarity further into this direction. LiFT therefore encourages pioneers who are interested in partnering up about similar experiments, to get in touch with us at [info@leadership-for-transition.eu](mailto:info@leadership-for-transition.eu).