

## **Ukraine Community Facilitation and Facilitator Training Far in Far out Programme**

### **Introduction**

In this article, we will share highlights from a four-day Intensive workshop that we conducted with 50 Ukrainian people in Lviv, in August 2022, just five months after the large-scale war between Russia and Ukraine began.

Boris' connection with Ukraine started three years ago, when he was asked to teach large group facilitation and conflict resolution in Kiev. Over the years, we continued to build strong connections, through teaching and supporting local leadership. Boris' father has lived in Ukraine for 20 years, which has also influenced and encouraged our link with the Ukrainian community.

The desire to organize a four-day intensive meeting in Ukraine arose from the certainty that to mitigate the impact of war and work towards peace, it is necessary to gather and support community interaction, and to pass on facilitation tools. This is what we mainly wanted to offer during these four days. We wanted to hold a space in which people could express their experiences and thoughts related to the war and do this in community, and at the same time to offer tools to process the impact of war that could be useful immediately, and in the future.

We also wanted to learn. To better understand people's experiences and needs, and how the knowledge and practices we can offer could be useful in wartime. With the intention for this project to continue, the first meeting was also an opportunity to connect with people and the field, to bond and understand the processes and dynamics that need support, and to assess the contribution we can make.

In the entire process - preparation, conducting the workshop, and reflection - the support of CFOR's FIFO program has been absolutely crucial and critical. Without the support of our mentor, Arlene Audergon, through the several sessions we had before, during, and after the workshop, as well as the support of Tajana Vlasisavljevic as project manager, and the financial support we received, none of what we will report in this article would have been possible.

In our sessions with Arlene, as mentor, we received necessary support to prepare for conducting a workshop in such extreme circumstances. But the support went even further, including phone calls at 10 at night, or mentor sessions in the middle of the day when things were getting more complicated. We want to thank the FIFO program for all this, Arlene for her presence and being behind us in such a way, and the spirit of Jean-Claude that has been with us and will be with us at every step of the way, appearing in our dreams and inspiring us in so many ways. Additionally, to have been able to provide a safe learning environment to 50 Ukrainian leaders, with amazing opportunities for networking and feeling supported - all this without fee thanks to the FIFO project funding - was itself healing. Participants told us many times, and in many ways, how crucial it was for them not only to receive all the learning but also to feel that someone, somewhere cared about what is happening in

Ukraine Community Facilitation and Facilitator Training  
'Far in Far out' Programme December 2022  
Boris Sopko and Neus Andreu Monsech

Ukraine. For that, we do not have enough words to thank the Far in Far Out program.

### **Preparation Phase**

My wife Neus and I are both facilitators and international teachers of Process Work. Process work is a method developed by Arny and Amy Mindell and their colleagues that has a broad range of applications. We are especially drawn to the interplay of 'inner work' and 'world work', combining deep personal or individual work with supporting and facilitating group interactions around collective themes.

In this situation, we were preparing to focus on the impact of the war both on individuals and collectively – the impact of the war on individual lives, and on communities and society as a whole, as well as facilitating participants, as they discover pathways forward.

During our preparation, we processed within ourselves, and between us, the theme of safety on one hand, and on the other hand the need to use our skills and knowledge and to share them with our friends, students, and others we did not yet know in Ukraine. We were aware that we were going into a war zone. Even though the western part of Ukraine was relatively safe at that time, we naturally did not want to put ourselves and our young children in direct danger and threaten their and our health and lives.

In one meeting during our preparation, we went for the first time deeply into our concerns, consciously giving space to express our fears connected with our journey, and then also making space to access our deeper motivation for going there. This was also the moment when I had an "absurd" fantasy of what would happen in war zones, if, instead of our natural reaction of running away from a war zone, the whole world did the opposite and came to the war zone.

Process work has a systemic perspective concerning the connections between individuals and the larger field they are part of. We believed that by consciously exploring our process, including the subtle sensations within ourselves, we would get to know more about the field we were entering, which would in turn help us in our work there. So, instead of marginalizing or suppressing our fears, we listened to them as well as our need to go to Ukraine. We then made our decisions about when, how, and for how long to go to Ukraine, based on this.

One unexpected moment connected us with feeling vulnerable, and that was very helpful because embracing our vulnerability and including it in our decision-making showed us the way. Here is what happened. At one point, we had everything planned for our arrival in Lviv, Ukraine. But on the day before our departure, one of the organizers realized she could not find seats for our children for her car and did not see a way to solve the problem. Suddenly, we realized how we also depend on people - the organizers and participants - and that without their help and care, we would not be able to do what we wanted to do. That was an interesting moment, because before this, we felt more connected with our privilege and strength and giving, and suddenly we were emotionally connected with our vulnerability and fears.

Ukraine Community Facilitation and Facilitator Training  
'Far in Far out' Programme December 2022  
Boris Sopko and Neus Andreu Monsech

It was very important for us to perceive our wholeness and inner diversity, and also to bring this into our relationship with the organizers. Later, we met similar dynamics in some of the interactions during the Intensive, where participants tended to welcome and need the identity of staying strong and had an understandable tendency to marginalize their vulnerabilities. We will describe that in more detail later in this text.

So, we asked for help and got it, and arrived safely in Lviv.

### **Lviv**

I remember the first hours of being there before the beginning of the seminar, when the first participants started to arrive. As mentioned, we knew some of them from before. It was very emotional to meet in person, feel our bodies, hug each other, no words, just tears of relief and a sense of connection and having the gift of being together for a few days. It was very powerful to be part of that and to also witness the importance of reconnecting and creating new connections between people and organizations.

We had five days in front of us. Four days with 50 participants from different parts of Ukraine (Kyiv, Lviv, Kharkiv, Mariupol, Zaporozhye, to name a few) and from different professions including psychologists, psychotherapists, CEOs of important foundations in Ukraine, people from the corporate world, actors, and volunteers from war zones, just to name a few. And then one extra training day for students interested in Process Work.

We had an intense and wonderful time together. We did a combination of group interactions, exercises in dyads or triads, individual work in the middle of the group, and presentations of some theory. The whole seminar was focused on the impact of the war on people, processing traumatic responses, and supporting the creation of new connections between people.

Our idea was to address and process the current impact of the war on individuals in order to prevent the development of post-traumatic stress disorder. We aimed to bring awareness to the experiences of individuals – experiences which are often marginalized and can lead to problems in our personal lives and relationships over time. For example, during the seminar, there were several instances where participants were able to cry for the first time in five months, since the beginning of the war. This happened when we were processing experiences related to hopelessness, one of the most difficult emotional states to deal with. Hopelessness is often accompanied by feelings of helplessness and a sense of one's own vulnerability. Many people are afraid to confront these feelings, fearing that they will become "crazy" or sink into depression, or that they will lose their strength. These are all understandable fears, and we all have a tendency to create protective "walls" within ourselves in response to these fears. We were also interested in what happens when we take a moment to slow down and focus on these "walls" within us and our fears and despair.

One of the roles of a facilitator is to enter unknown or scary territory for the group. During a group interaction, Neus, one of the facilitators, found herself in this position.

Ukraine Community Facilitation and Facilitator Training  
'Far in Far out' Programme December 2022  
Boris Sopko and Neus Andreu Monsech

It was a moment when we as facilitators felt that we were unable to facilitate effectively and that our usual interventions were not working. The group went in their own direction, and we felt like we had "failed". After a lunch break, we focused on our own emotional state, trying to process our inner criticism and address any potential disagreements between us, but nothing seemed to change our emotional state.

We then hypothesized that the intensity of this emotion was a signal that this process belonged to the group in some way. It had started during the group interaction, so we decided to bring it back to the group and try to find its meaning together. When we returned and decided to share our experience, the group was immediately interested. With the consensus of the group, Neus consciously delved deeper into her despair and feelings of hopelessness, crying in front of the group and showing them what she was feeling inside. Step by step, more and more people started to cry as well. By expressing her feelings, Neus opened the door for others to connect with their own feelings, something that had previously seemed unimaginable. In doing so, she not only helped herself but also modeled the process for the group.

After this, we provided space for participants to talk and several of them shared that it was the first time in the five months of the war that they had been able to cry and felt relieved by doing so. They also realized that they were not going "mad" or breaking down. Some expressed a desire to work on themselves individually in therapy after reconnecting with their feelings and experiencing a sense of aliveness and richness. One participant mentioned in a follow-up online meeting that this connection with her own feelings had helped her in her work as a group therapist and facilitator, allowing her to better understand the dynamics of the moment and work more effectively with groups of soldiers.

### **Two People, Three Kings**

On the morning of the third day, we faced an important crossroad in the group regarding leadership and decision making. After brainstorming different options for our next focus as a group, we reached a point where several people had strong ideas about how to proceed, but the rest of the group was not following. It was a tense moment. In this situation, we decided to take on this leadership role in a very congruent way. It was a shaky moment, and Neus was able to be congruent and clear with her proposal, direct, and ask for trust while still being related to the participants. It was also significant that she did this as a woman. At one point, a participant, a man who had previously been leading in a different direction, came to her and hugged her, showing respect and support. This was an important moment of transformation in terms of trust, as it is a big thing to trust others and trust leaders. We believe that this moment laid the foundation for the next step, which occurred during the group interaction about patriotism in Ukraine.

After going through the previous threshold, we had a very interesting and deep conversation about patriotism in Ukraine. People expressed their love for their land and country in a variety of ways, and shared their creative methods of defending it. The range of experiences was broad - from a woman in her 20s who had been directly involved in the war in Donbass for two years, with tears in her eyes as she spoke about her willingness to die for Ukraine, to an older woman in her 60s who

Ukraine Community Facilitation and Facilitator Training  
'Far in Far out' Programme December 2022  
Boris Sopko and Neus Andreu Monsech

started producing sweets from the fruit in her garden and sending them to the soldiers. Over time, her initiative grew as she received positive feedback from the soldiers, who told her how much they appreciated the sweets and how helpful they were in staying awake at night.

At one point, some participants realized that what we were doing as a group was unusual - everyone was bringing a different, original perspective, different experiences, and people were not getting into fights or disagreements, but were able to listen to each other. They connected this to their culture, and someone else brought up the saying "Two people, three kings", which helped us understand the whole process around leadership and our "failure" to facilitate the group interaction the previous day. The message of this saying is that there is a strong tendency to lead and talk, and a difficulty in really listening and following. When this was pointed out, everyone burst into laughter and it energized us all, somehow giving even more meaning to what we were doing. It felt like we were changing the culture, as everyone had enough space to talk, express themselves, and be listened to. It felt like the work was done, a sense of momentary completion.

### **Gender and our teamwork**

At the end of the next day, when we were collecting feedback and reflections on the event, many people mentioned three things that stood out to them. Firstly, they appreciated the location we had chosen, which was located far from their homes and felt like an oasis where they could be taken care of. Secondly, they were surprised by our effective teamwork and co-facilitation, and particularly the gender dynamic between us. They noted that as a woman, Neus took the lead in moments of tension, while Boris provided support as a man. This was unusual for their culture and western culture, but they appreciated the way we shared the space equally and navigated any tensions that arose. Overall, people took away a positive experience and a sense of being cared for during the event.

Following the intensive, we stayed in touch with the participants through Telegram channels and organized two more online meetings. We also have begun to organize another Intensive to continue the work we started in late July. We recently held one online meeting, with ten people from the original group. While this is not many participants, we are very aware of the extreme conditions that people were facing, with unpredictability and instability increasing, including prolonged periods without electricity, water, or heat in Western Ukraine. I just spoke with my father, who is living in a small village next to L'viv. He is 73 and has lived there for almost 20 years. Like many people in the Ukraine, he does not want to leave. He normally does not express his feelings easily, but today he told me how sad it is to be there, and that they don't have electricity, water, or enough heat to stay warm during the coming winter. My father is a social and active man, so hearing him say that brought tears to my eyes. It is heart-breaking to also think about all the people living in horrible conditions, including those who are being directly impacted by ongoing bombing and are stretching and sacrificing their own lives to help others. In this difficult and uncertain time, we remain committed to supporting the community through our work and staying connected through online meetings and future community forum and training events.