

Integral Practitioner in Praxis Gathering

Tlholego EcoVillage – North Western Province, South Africa - May/June 2012.



In 2010 Paul and Barbara van Schaik of integralMENTORSⁱ and Integral Without Bordersⁱⁱ began to explore the idea of having a regional gathering in Southern Africa.ⁱⁱⁱ The idea for this gathering was to embed the process in actual live examples of international development projects. Thus to explore, expand and advance integral theory in live situations with actual 'players' in their projects. Thus 'Integral Practitioners in Praxis.'

With this in mind we teamed up with Paul and Stephne of the Tlholego Ecovillage while on a visit to Cape Town, South Africa. Paul and Steph are both experienced integral practitioners with substantial experience of working in the rural areas of South Africa.

An important aspect of this conference was that we did not want to 'parachute in' experts with little or no regional experience to facilitate the gathering. We therefore decided to work with the highly experienced South African facilitators Anna Cowen and John Ziniades from Meshfield. They both have extensive international integral experience (in both theorica and praxis).

Below are two perspectives which we hope will give an idea of the interesting and creative process of the gathering - which is still unfolding in its outcomes.

Perspectives of the Organizers

Paul and Stephne Cohen – Rucore Sustainability Foundation & Tlholego EcoVillage

The Tlholego Ecovillage and Learning Centre was originally inspired by the work of the Esalen Institute (USA) - following a purpose of discovery and emergence of our human potential in the face of global sustainability challenges and opportunities. It was especially rewarding for us as the Tlholego founders to receive such positive feedback from all those present as to how well Tlholego's physical and community space supported our groups engagement with integral theory in a practical and well-grounded way.





The group met in various spaces - most of the time in nature under the winter crisp blue sky shaded by trees and surrounded with very active and vibrant birdlife. The earth architecture and circular designs of this space supported the flow of conversation, gatherings and intimate sharing.

Tasty, well thought of nutritious meals served by our catering cooperative were greatly enjoyed - often around the warmth of the fireplace. In fact the quality was such that we were soon anticipating what meal time would bring.

Something unique happened over these five days within the groups unfolding process - a quality of coherence and crystallization emerged that is most often only thought about in these types of gatherings. The 'great group' that emerged was palpable, far greater than the sum of its parts; as contrasting threads of space relationships, worldviews and intention wove themselves into a fabric of profound potential.



The rich mix of facilitation and group experience freed people's perspectives on the challenging issues of international development to synthesize as the days moved along through practical engagement in the different projects. Each project informed the other. Each project challenged the other. People were deeply moved by the content and context of this learning experience.

The presence of Tai Ji and body awareness and movement sessions assisted the often-intense physical discomfort experienced during some challenging group processes. For many of us, Tai Ji in the garden was one of the high points of the week; especially considering that food systems resilience formed such a central focus of our work together. At least a few participants were inspired to sign up for a new Ilhologo weekend workshop on the Yoga of gardening.



Sunset in the bush with shamanic drumming

Perspectives of the facilitators:

Anna Cowen and John Ziniades from Meshfield (www.meshfield.com)



It was a great privilege to provide process design and facilitation for the recent five-day Integral Without Borders seminar at Tlholego. Whilst John and I held the majority of the "on-the-ground" facilitation, the faculty consisted of 6 core members: Paul and Stephne Cohen honouring the Body - hosting the group in their physical spaces, feeding us nourishing food, and bringing their exceptional skills as body practitioners into the mix, and then Paul and Barbara van Schaik holding space as elders (not that old :)), sharing their decades of coal-face experience as global development practitioners. What a joy to work/play so consciously with a team of people where, during regular check-ins during the 5-day process, we sought and named the ways that the shadow dynamics of the larger group were mirroring in our core team and supported each other in reading the energy of the group and adjusting the design, accordingly.

We were a small group – 18 in total, a good number for building trust and intimacy. Four of us had first met at the Integral Sustainability Intensive in Westminster, Colorado in Sept 2006, and we wove into the process one of the most moving practices from that week - a Diamond Heart practice from Almaas – as a way to open to each other at various moments during the week in Tlholego. Sitting facing each other in twos, we took turns to ask of each other, "What is it, that you are really here to do?" with our responses deepening into silence as the week progressed.



For John and me, one of the greatest delights of facilitating groups is how utterly surprising each session always is, and how the process design is nothing more than a very rough guide. Dropping into the ebb and flow, bobbing and weaving in response to whatever is emerging. We are grateful for the trust vested in us by the group, and for the openness in which they received our, "We've changed the plan, again".



Spontaneity and flexibility notwithstanding, the five-day process was carefully designed to consciously weave between the individual and the collective, theory and practice. On one level, the week presented a challenge in that half the participants had no prior knowledge of Integral Theory, whilst others were skilled and experienced practitioners. We chose to weave the theory inputs throughout the week as opposed to attempting to introduce all the main elements on the first day, gradually giving flesh to the AQAL elements, one piece at a time.

Applied theory was then explored through three 'live' projects, each one being presented by a person directly involved in each project. Each project was workshopped by the group for a full morning, and after allowing for some settling, we revisited each project from a slightly different perspective, as appropriate, throughout the week. Each of the 3 projects, presented to the group, happened to be at different life stages and spanned different physical scales: the first was well into the implementation phase, and focused on supporting the transition of a group of tobacco farmworkers to landowners and independent, self-sufficient farmers. The second was a project still in the proposal stage, the development of a food security strategy for a small town in a winegrowing region in the Western Cape, and the third - extending across the whole of Southern Africa - was a multi-sectoral initiative in its third year, focused on developing sustainable food systems for Southern Africa. The project owners ranged from development agencies funded by a multinational corporation, to research NGO's, to academic-led and donor-funded cross-sectoral collaboratives.



The curious and topical threads of addiction (tobacco, wine, fossil fuel...) and food security played out through the week at both a personal and collective level, as did the story of colonial subjugation through substance dependence (the Dutch arriving in the Cape in the 1600's, with arms of tobacco, in exchange for the fat tailed sheep of the indigenous Khoi).



Process innovations and highlights included an adaptation of the 3:2:1 shadow process (usually done by an individual) explored as a collective, combined with voice dialogue, and group visualisations. As a group we inhabited the third, second and first person perspectives of some of the key stakeholders in all the projects - development agencies, multinational companies (Corporate Social Investment division), incumbent white farmers, and displaced black farm workers.

We also used a "Fishbowl" process, whereby the group observed 6 experienced Integral practitioners who sat in the Fishbowl, exploring the institutionalization of the Southern African food-lab, while leaving 2 chairs open for any of the observers to join the fishbowl. We then "inverted" the fishbowl, with the experienced practitioners, getting an opportunity to become the observers, with fascinating insights emerging through the switched roles.



At the individual level, the inquiry throughout the week focused on "Self as Instrument"

and we provided incremental support to each person to develop their own personal Integral Life Practice (ILP). Here we referenced the amazing work of Cindy-Lou Golin, and the 8-week ILP course she gave to Integral Theory Masters students of the JFK University, Integral Masters Program. The attendees moved from Intention, Visioning, Strategy to selecting Practices that supported their unique work in the world, in each of the 4 modules – Body, Mind, Shadow and Spirit.



Some initial lessons learnt.

Size – max. 24 including facilitators, for intimacy and connection as a group.

Number of facilitators - surprisingly perfect, thought we were too many at first (integral intensive care!), but it was ideal, given that we all played such different roles. (the ration was 1 to 3)

Facilities and ambience - being in nature really helps - facilitation by nature... . also range of physical spaces good. Building form and spaces should be alive and dynamic not anonymous and soulless (Tlholego EcoVillage is a very good example of what works well).

Context - being embedded in appropriate context helps too - not looking in from the outside, from ivory towers - sense of real development opportunities and challenges made evident in just being at Tlholego.

Activities – voluntary body-mind activities in the early morning and evening are an important part of the process and should be included.

ⁱ For more details see www.facebook.com/integralmentors and www.integralmentors.org.

ⁱⁱ For more details see www.facebook.com/integralWithoutBorders and www.integralwithoutborders.org.

ⁱⁱⁱ Previous gatherings have been held in Perpignan, France 2006; Istanbul 2008 and 2010; and Vancouver - a regional gathering - in 2011. The next gathering will take place in Peru in October 2012.