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## Our global learning community in the clouds: Adaptive ecological elements and practices

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## Our global learning community in the clouds: Adaptive ecological elements and practices

### Abstract

Research around learning community models often shows a structured and defined model to follow with the underlying assumption being if the steps are followed, the results will come. The model we offer in this paper is rather counter-cultural as it was not a specific process or practice we followed; rather, we found ourselves in a highly engaging, safe, kind, and productive learning community unlike most we have encountered in academia. We asked ourselves, “Why?” and engaged in reflection, questions, and research to define our unique community. Six themes emerged that form our ecological learning community; these themes are in motion, intertwined, and co-dependent on one another. Our model is not linear, instead, it is fluid and organic, moving from firm boundaries to more porous edges or shapes that respond to the needs of the group and communities around us to create an inclusive environment. The six themes are: 1) organic trust, safety, and belonging, 2) shared collective vision; 3) cultural humility; 4) inclusion—a commitment to diversity of perspectives; 5) shared leadership; and 6) practices in alignment with values. We offer suggestions for practices for learning communities that similarly aim to be responsive and adaptive.

### Keywords

Learning community, inclusion, emergent, ecological, adaptive, responsive

### Authors

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Our learning community, a unique scholarly collaborative, initially formed in the summer of 2017 for the purpose of creating an International Day of Listening to be a part of the International Transformative Learning Conference at Teachers College in New York in November 2018. We were responding to the ongoing global strife in the world with the intention to offer an opportunity for people to come together, to sit with each other despite their differences, and to practice authentic listening to one another without judgment. When the conference ended on November 10, 2018, our group continued to meet monthly, sometimes weekly, producing research to validate the Listening Protocol we created, developing practices, providing opportunities for authentic listening, and presenting at conferences despite living globally on four continents across 12 time zones. This article offers a description and analysis of our lived experience and is the result of self-reflection brought on by our mutual appreciation of a unique experience. Eight seasoned educators with a range of experience from 20 to 40 years identify this community as a once or twice in a career experience.

We were curious about how to describe and share the model that emerged from our group practice as a tight-knit community of academics and practitioners. As part of our emergent process, we used grounded theory "in which theory is allowed to come to light through systematic data collection and analysis...a research approach committed to discovery, direct contact with the social phenomenon" in this case the phenomenon of our group dynamic (Human, 2007). Through data collection and analysis of the group member's experiences, six key themes emerged that contribute to the model and are an integral part of the whole. Emergent theory postulates that "emergence occurs when an entity is observed to have properties its parts do not have on their own, properties or behaviors which emerge only when the parts interact in a wider whole" ("Emergence", 2021). Our model is organic; rather than progressing through a set process, it shifts and adapts to the needs of the group and contexts of various situations. This allows for the flexibility and agility to be responsive and adaptable to multiple settings and cultures. We begin with a description of the model that emerged from our practice and self-reflection, and then we describe its place in learning community literature and suggestions for replication, application, and further study.

### **Emergent Ecological Model**

The model that emerged from the lived experience of our learning community encompasses six themes represented by the six cloud formations in the figure below. The metaphor or imagery of the clouds allows us to imagine different, permeable collections moving in and out, near and far, merging and separating, one central, then not. Imagine clouds moving in the sky on a bright day, forming different patterns as they float along. This is an ecological or circular process for

which there is no beginning or ending. These six themes (clouds) have taken on different forms, and each emerges as a necessary part of the life of the group. We attribute the effectiveness of the learning community to these elements and believe they are replicable for those who desire to develop them as part of their practice.

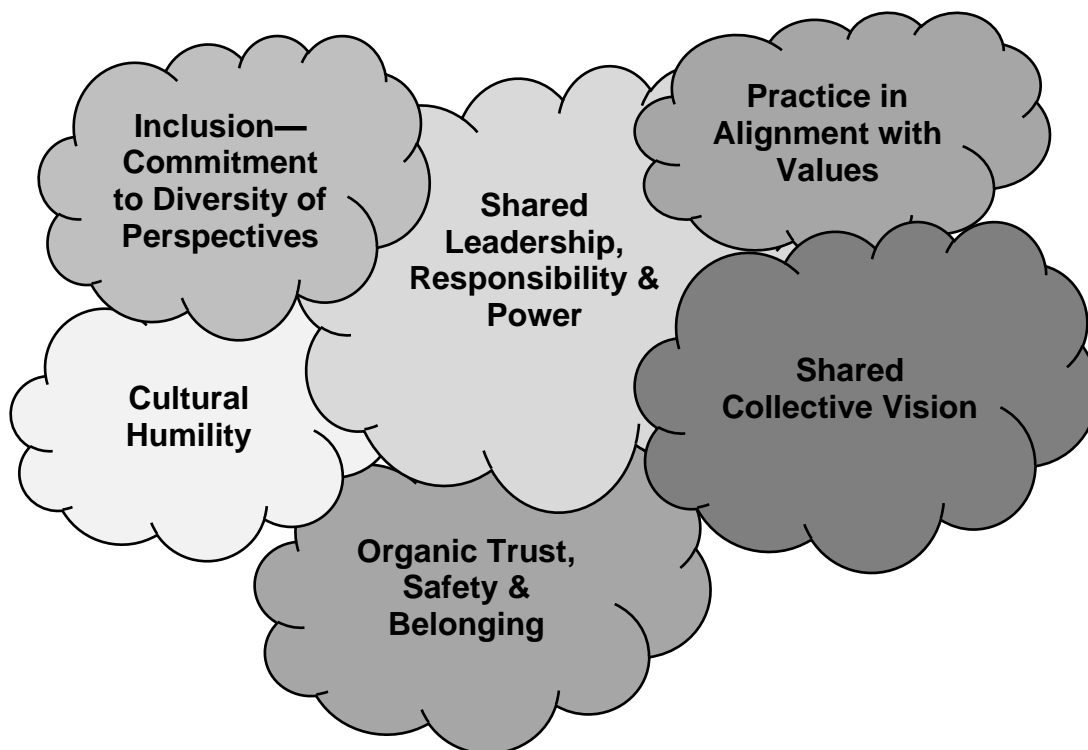


Figure 1 Emergent Ecological Model

### **Unpacking the themes**

The six core themes that emerged from our data collection and analysis are explained in paragraphs below in no particular order with some overlap.

#### **Organic trust, safety, and belonging**

These three intertwined components emerged as central to allow for growth and development in the group. Each member is seen as equally valuable, and each contribution is considered and treated with respect. Kegan describes this mutual developmental environment in adult development literature as a holding environment, where “opportunities for growth and development are created by sharing diverse perspectives from all members and engaging in dialogues that

surface and test assumptions” (Taylor, 2006, p.213). This space to speak and be listened to creates trust between group members and as a result the collaborative fosters a safe space. Kegan offers that “relationships with peers can provide an opportunity to ‘get inside’ a view separate from one’s own” and provide a mix of support and challenge that nurtures growth (Love & Guthrie, 1999, p.75). The level of intimacy that develops in a group that knows each other personally and professionally over time fosters an environment where “they can speak openly about what they believe, feel, think, and aspire to be...balancing inquiry and advocacy” (Senge, et al., 1994, p.70-71). A member shared:

Over time it feels like we have bonded – seeking to learn, support, and grow with one another. ... As a group, we tend to one another. What I mean here is we support one another, build on each other’s ideas and suggestions, and collectively work towards a common good.

A member shared:

I feel challenged intellectually and relationally. I feel supported in making mistakes and growing. I feel stimulated and part of something bigger than myself. I feel that I belong and am valued for my contributions.

Conducting collaborative research also gives each member a voice to contribute and to share from their areas of expertise. Efforts are made to include everyone who desires to contribute to various projects and conference presentations.

### **Shared Collective Vision**

We came together to make the world a better place and create avenues for authentic listening and this is our mission. Torbert's Collaborative Inquiry model says to “optimize internal commitment of partners to shared vision” is the first step, building on Argyris and Schon’s Model II, to help professionals act in ways that increase group learning, trust, and efficacy (Torbert, 2021, p.371). We all unite around a desire to make a difference in the world at large through supporting people in listening to each other, to hear each other’s stories so that we all would grow in empathy and understanding toward one another. This collective mission is the focus of our collaboration and is one thread that both unifies and grounds us as a learning community. Senge et. al. frame the building of a learning community as “at first a small group of believers tends to emerge - people who can reinforce and coach each other. The leadership of this cadre becomes sustained not through their personalities or influence, but through their concepts; they refine and shape the goals of their learning community so their vision becomes more than just a ‘do-good’ idea.” (Senge, et al, 1994, p.503). One member shared:

In addition, this group formed shortly after the 2016 election took place and the world seemed to be becoming more and more polarized and less inclined

to healthy discourse and dialogue. Being part of a group to promote healthy listening and being [sic] making a contribution to this end excited me.

### **Cultural Humility**

Having a shared common mission to bring unity to the world through greater attention surrounding authentic listening is also supported by the cultural humility from which we engage with each other. Hook et al (2013) conceptualize cultural humility as the “ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented (or open to the other) in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the [person]” (p. 2). It is rooted in three things: a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique, a desire to fix power imbalances where none ought to exist and to develop partnerships with people and groups who advocate for others (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). Embodying cultural humility precludes cultural safety that provides space for each person to feel safe in their nationality, culture, gender, and race. In addition, humility keeps one in a questioning and learning posture rather than operating from a position of power or greater knowledge. Our curiosity about each other’s backgrounds, values, and perspectives contribute to an egalitarian rather than hierarchical learning community. A member shared:

Being in this group offers a space for sharing and discussion, fosters a process of decolonization of our lenses (the ways we look at the world and at the others) that elicits self-questioning and critical reflections.

### **Inclusion--Commitment to Diversity of Perspectives**

Diversity of perspective is sought within the group process. Our philosophy is that different perspectives will make any project better. We move from the adage, “two heads are better than one” to a more sophisticated statement in areas such as creative problem solving. The underlying question is: what views will lend themselves to the growth of the group? And the response is: diverse perspectives. We contend we have created a community of learning which “can deal with the problems and opportunities of today, and invest in its capacity to embrace tomorrow, because its members are continually focused on enhancing and expanding their collective awareness and capabilities.” (Senge et al, 1994, p.4)

In this particular learning community, the international perspective is highly valued as the initial challenge focused on the global need for listening and understanding. A member shared:

I found in the group brilliant scholars, faculty, colleagues that come from a variety of nations and that I didn't meet in person (or I met no more than once in my life), who zoom by zoom became more and more similar to an

international family...we bring different perspectives and an academic rigor to our work, approaching the work as an action research project, integrating theory and practice.

Meetings are planned to accommodate individuals across continents and times are chosen that work for everyone. For diverse perspectives to be heard, it is necessary to facilitate full participation and easy accessibility to the meeting times.

Valuing diversity in educational perspective is another factor we consider. Learning communities may occur within a single institution, type of institution, or like-minded individuals. In this learning community, there are a variety of institutional types from research institutions to four-year institutions to K-12 perspectives. Though not consistently represented, there have been those from social service areas that have enriched the group. Commitment to diversity of perspective manifests itself in terms of membership by type of institution, nationality, language, stage of career, and roles. The approach to diversity may change from one learning community to another, but the valuing of alternative perspectives and facilitating their visibility is essential.

### **Shared leadership**

Sharing leadership may be the biggest challenge in any group, though professed by many. The process goes beyond policy, procedure, values, and group dynamics. In the model presented here, the leadership is intentionally shared and passed like a baton from one to another on a regular basis. While this process evolved organically in the Learning Community that promoted this model, it is a process that can be adopted at any point in the life of a group.

This Learning Community had a brief exposure to a shared leadership model titled “sociocracy”, but it was the organically developed process from an interest around circle process that has kept the leadership shared. The expectation is that everyone will take part in the shared leadership process. When life gets in the way, then others help. This is one way we share authority and responsibility together.

The practice has been simple, rotating from meeting to meeting who leads the agenda and who takes notes. The note taker becomes the leader for the next meeting. Anyone can contribute to the agenda as each person may bring ideas to the group for consideration and action. Notes from one meeting generally lead the agenda for the next. A shared drive for keeping records has been useful. In this case, it is Google drive and everyone has access to all the materials. This access to material, ranging from meeting notes to document drafts, is significant. No one individual owns the documented work of the group. A member shared, “Not sure how it started, but the shared processes... leading, note taking, etc.... and the check in... seemed like a group self-awareness that is unique.”

Power is shared and no one has more status than another. Some may speak more than others, but the practice has evolved where acts of inclusion prevail. If one person has been quiet then invariably someone else will draw them into the conversation. Individual needs are recognized in terms of group process, and in terms of each person's life and needs. Lead author on a recent group publication was determined by consensus examining who needed that most for their career. There is a sense of community and wholeness that pervades this process. Another member shared:

I also like how we share responsibilities, be it note-taking, chairing meetings, writing, or other tasks. We all take turns. There is a feeling of shared responsibility – no one person is a leader, no one person has the power. It is distributed.

### **Practices in alignment with values**

Practicing in alignment with our values is an active and essential part of our learning community. The example of a prefigurative community reflects our community's ethos as we embody the change we want to see in the world through our democracy, authentic listening, inclusion, and kindness (Monticelli, 2018). It requires our individual as well as group willingness to self-reflect and to direct behaviors to align with professed values. Too often, groups often form without any clear definition of values or process. This happens both in formal as well as informal groups. The quality of group life is informed by the congruence of values and practice. A member shared:

The International Day of Listening group seemed aligned to my interests and values, so I thought I would join. I also believed it was an opportunity to work and learn with like-minded individuals and become part of a community.

A very simple practice of checking in and checking out serves as affirmation of the valuing of each individual in the group as well as recognizing the affective component of the group's life. We begin each meeting with a simple check-in facilitated by the person managing the given meeting. The facilitator has both freedom and responsibility to bring the group together. This allows the individual to share part of themselves and their personality and the activities have ranged from poetry reading and reflection to deep breathing to seated qigong. This process has also been helpful as this learning community does not have any face to face contact outside of monthly zoom meetings as might occur in place-bound groups.

Authentic listening is a key focus of this learning community, and consistent with that focus it is practiced within the group. Everyone has an opportunity to speak, though this is not formalized as it might be with use of a talking stick. We affirm each other's comments and include them in our discussion. All opinions and



input are important. This practice integrates with trust and safety by supporting the belonging and worth of each member.

Individual self-reflection about contribution to the group has not been addressed directly but is perhaps assumed in the attention to the group life. It is common during a check-in at the start of a meeting for a member to identify what they have or have not done to support the group between meetings. This is not an evaluated process, but a recognition of the life process of each person as a part of the collective. The posture of the group is forward-looking and accepting of what we can contribute and not deficit-oriented focusing on what is not done. In doing so, our group is affirming and supportive of a healthy work-life balance.

## **Theoretical Background**

### **Making sense of where we are**

As we reflected on the uniqueness of our learning community, we sought to understand where we fit in relation to learning community models described in the literature to understand what was forming who we were. We describe theories that we brought into the formation of the collaborative, namely circle process, that were foundational to what evolved into our emergent ecological model as well as other theories that help to place our work within the learning community literature. To that end, we did a brief literature review of other learning community models but did not find a specific one that matched our group.

### **Models of Learning Communities**

A review of the literature concentrated on an evaluation of other learning community models. These were compared with the Transformative Listening Collaborative to assess if an existing model incorporated the key themes and values our community embodies.

The Principles-Focused Evaluation Approach (Wolfe et al., 2020) aligned most closely with our learning community. It was formed as an alternative to the Collective Impact Model explained further below. Here, the authors brought together two different approaches into a coherent model for use when evaluating collaboratives focused on issues of social justice. This approach is applicable in a variety of environments and has similarities to the model developed here, though the authors of this article maintain that there are distinctions of note. The key principles in the principle-based framework include choice, collaboration, cultural humility, empowerment, safety, trustworthiness.

The concept of a Collective Impact (CI) Model provided another lens through which to examine the Transformative Listening Collaborative. As explained by

Stachowiak & Ackey (2020), such a group has a common agenda and a commitment to solving a specific social problem (Kania & Kramer, 2011) Our social concern is listening, and much of the initial attraction to the group was the idea of an International Day of Listening, an idea that did not materialize. Reviewing the collective impact concept showed five elements that arise as conditions for evaluating the group. The rubric includes backbone support, common agenda, mutually reinforcing actions, continuous communications, and a shared measurement system. As Wolfe et al (2020) postulate, the CI Model falls short of identifying racial justice, equity, and system-level change, nor does it use adequate support for both community change and collaboration.

The Social Network Analysis (SNA) (Varda & Sprong, 2020) is used to examine networks by focusing on organizations, connections, resources, and quality of exchanges in groups. It uses the PARTNER (Program to Analyze, Record, and Track Networks to Enhance Relationships) tool to gather data to analyze existing relationships to assess the gaps to be addressed for improvement. While this instrument is helpful in identifying areas of weakness to be strengthened, it was not as useful in developing a model of a successful learning community.

The model for collaborative evaluations was created to guide the formation of collaborative groups. Developed by Rodríguez-Campos et al. (2020) there are six components in the model: 1) identify the situation, 2) clarify the expectations, 3) establish a collective commitment, 4) ensure open communication, 5) encourage effective practices, and 6) follow specific guidelines to support collaboration. This model was more linear in practice and did not highlight our organic adaptive practice.

While there were aspects of each model that resonated with and were reflected in our Transformative Listening Collaborative, each model fell short of incorporating the key principles that created space for as well as formed the bonds of our learning community. Therefore, we surveyed each group member to find common themes regarding our group process and learning community. The six themes that emerged from our survey are used to define and explain our ecological model. One defining practice in our group is that of shared leadership.

### **Shared Leadership Using Circle Process**

The original group was led or co-facilitated by three volunteers who lead the group in preparation for the International Day of Listening at the 2018 ITLC conference. Two of the leaders stepped down from the committee after the conference. Two of the remaining members offered the circle process as a possibility for continuing the group to which all agreed.

Circle process originates with the work of Baldwin and Linnea (2010) in their seminal book, *The Circle Way, A Leader in Every Chair*. We felt particularly

attracted to this model because we knew that we each had much to offer the process and we respected what each of us could offer the group dynamic and outcomes. In addition, a key element of the work aligns with our focus on listening and we wanted our practice to model what we hoped to bring to our communities. Baldwin and Linnea offer, "The greater the number of people who understand where the application and experience of circle can take us, who have the confidence to put a candle or photo or mission statement in the middle of a shouting match and suggest a return to listening, the more empowered we will be to create the kind of world for which we long and on which our ultimate survival depends" (p.14) A consistent center of our group is attention to listening and forming connections. The practices of the circle that resonated for us, "attentive listening, intentional speaking and contributing to the well-being of the group" (p.72) helps to create the space for our work and transformation.

The three principles of the circle that we implemented that help to create the collaborative model include: rotating leadership, shared responsibility, and reliance on wholeness. Each person in the group contributes to the details of facilitating one of the monthly sessions, sharing in the responsibility of both moving the project forward while also attending to each member and our ability to contribute to the group.

## **Methodology and Data Analysis**

### **Methodology**

Since this model was emergent and not formed according to a set of principles or guidelines, we reflected on what emerged to define what makes our group not only unique but also both generative and a true community of belonging. The methodology for our study or self-reflection of our collaborative work is rooted in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). as we first collected the data and then analyzed it to see what different themes were mentioned. Emergent theory informed this process as we attempted to categorize the individual parts that were contributing to our collaborative and generative community. Human (2007) describes that "Emergent theory (ET) is an outcome of organization research in which theory is allowed to come to light through a systematic data collection and analysis process called grounded theory, a research approach committed to discovery, direct contact with the social phenomenon."

In our process, two authors first reviewed literature around learning community models, particularly those that focused on evaluation. Reflecting on both the literature and our learning community, a rough concept map of emerging themes was generated to present to the group. After this, each group member filled out a survey (Appendix A) regarding the key ideas that contributed to their

continued engagement and enthusiasm related to the Collaborative. The survey results were tabulated according to the key themes that emerged. Then, the original concept map was edited to reflect the key themes from the survey and finally cross-referenced with existing learning community models. The results showed something unique and specific to our learning community. To represent the adaptive and responsive nature of our model, clouds were chosen as an appropriate visual representation.

### **Evidence of the Model's Effectiveness**

We offer as evidence of the effectiveness of our learning community the following two areas: ongoing commitment and artifacts.

#### **Ongoing Commitment**

As explained previously, this group was originally birthed as a planning committee for a Transformative Learning Conference. At the end of that conference in 2018, there were several who wanted to continue to meet and to retain the focus on listening which showed a commitment to the value of listening that extended beyond the initial charge. Since that time the group has undergone minor changes in participants and has met voluntarily every month for almost three years. Meeting virtually through a variety of platforms some individuals have found themselves rising early in the morning, some at mid-day and some late evening. While this may be identified on a CV, it is a commitment to the mission and to each other that has kept the group together and is offered as a singular piece of evidence.

#### **Artifacts**

There is also evidence in the output produced by this group ranging from joint presentations, individual sessions, as well as shared research efforts and writings. Everyone has contributed to the development of the Transformative Listening Protocol<sup>1</sup>, testing it independently and at times co-facilitating the process to gather data for validation of the Protocol. While there has been anecdotal validation of the Protocol, the group has challenged itself to collaborate in an international research effort to examine the Protocol across cultural and international boundaries. In addition, three categories of artifacts speak to the generative and collaborative of our learning community.

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<sup>1</sup> The Transformative Listening Protocol is available on a public Facebook Group page called the Transformative Listening Collaborative. Search for @TransformListening.

### ***Co-authoring***

Both conference proceedings as well as journal articles and a book chapter present strong evidentiary examples of our learning community success. One of the more significant elements has been the process used occasionally for choosing the order of authorship. While the writing has been done by teams, the first author has led the team and has been the individual deemed to have the most to benefit individually, such as someone needing additional publications. When a smaller group has taken on the primary responsibility for writing, they create drafts that go to the whole and then back to the team allowing for the document to become a true contribution of the whole. Most publications and presentations have recognized all collaborative members as contributors. The community relationships have expanded collaborations beyond such that different members have connected on topics unrelated to the Transformative Listening Collaborative.

### ***Co-presenting***

Presentations at conferences have, for the most part, followed a similar process as publications. A team, usually those who can participate in the conference, designs a presentation, shares it with the whole, and all are invited to contribute their input. Every effort is made to cite all members of the Collaborative even if they were not significantly involved in the development of this specific project. Instead, this shows the value that each member has brought at certain points to the collaborative and honors each member's contribution.

### **Individual work**

Each group member has the responsibility to test the protocol in whatever context in which they are working. Some have used classroom settings, conferences, faculty development, or even community-based settings. At times two or more individuals have been able to physically work together to conduct the Protocol, usually in a conference setting. On a pilot study basis, each has shared observations or evaluations based on that experience back to the group. This system has served as a pilot for research that is planned. Transformation by group members through this organic experience results in us pulling in these practices to other settings and other groups in which we are involved.

### **Future Work and Practice**

We find this process of self-reflection and adaptation to be integral to our ongoing work. We intend to continue to reflect on our group process along with

creating and sharing new knowledge around listening and connection. Currently, we have several articles in progress and are considering how social media can be used to make our work accessible. In addition, we envision continuing to do further research around listening in different cultural settings. We also hope to hear from others outside our Western perspective acknowledging that we have much to learn.

To reflect our ongoing mutual and individual work based on our shared vision, we recently renamed ourselves the Transformative Listening Collaborative. This represents all of us even if we are working on different projects at different points. Everyone is contributing and everyone is valuable--even this contribution is reflected in the cloud visual as at points some may have more capacity to take on additional work while others may not have the time. This reshaping is in constant motion and continues to readjust itself.

We offer our emergent ecological model to other learning communities to reflect on how they can incorporate these six themes into their groups. Just as our model illustrates, this will look different for each group. Each theme can also be posed as a question for each learning community to raise self-awareness and to promote active discussion as to how these themes can be individualized for each group.

### **Conclusion**

Over the past four years, our global listening collaborative has been privileged to connect and engage with each other on a deeper level not often experienced in the competitive world of academia. Even more surprising, our engagement has remained constant despite attendance and contributions being voluntary and across 12 time zones. We collectively realized that something unique was happening and set aside time over the past year to reflect on what the reasons could be for this life-giving experience. After surveying the group and analyzing the results, six main themes emerged that were adaptive and responsive. The picture of clouds moving and shifting across the sky best reflects our learning community in motion and growth whose strength is not in its solidity and structure but in its flexibility and adaptability to best support each individual member and optimize our growth and connection in our community.

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## Appendix A

Survey Questions (assigned August 17th).

Please do not spend longer than 30 minutes on this.

- What motivated you to join the group, ‘The International Day of Listening?
- What has kept you in this group and showing up each month?  
What is it that we do as a group that has kept you coming back?
- How does being in this group make you feel? What are the actions in our group that support or contribute to these feelings?
- What value do you get from being part of this group?
- Was there any experience that you had with listening that caused you to be initially interested in this group?
- How has your perception or understanding of listening changed since joining this group?

Emerging Themes from the Survey (after one read through):

- Shared Leadership/Process
- Collaborative Work/Research/Writing
- Equality
- Strength in diversity, nationality, culture, language
- Some were invited to the group; some responded to the call from Michael P.
- Common Motivator-- "make a difference in the world"
- Friendships within the group have emerged
- Research partnerships within the group have also emerged.