

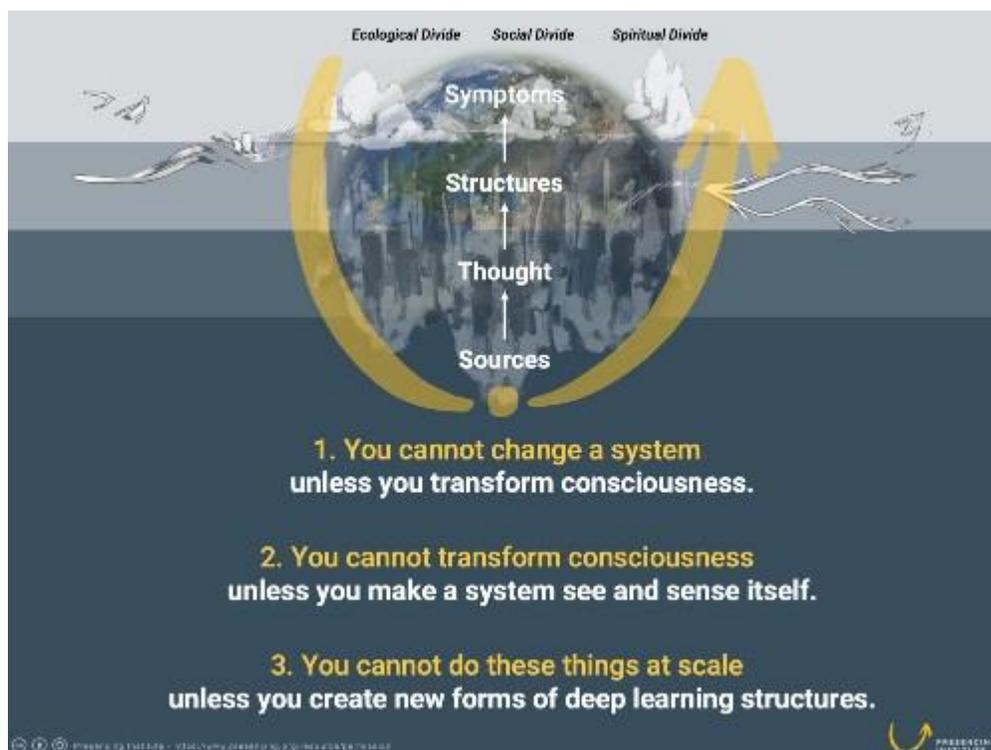
# Democratizing Access To The Tools For Transformation

**In the face of accelerating social and environmental breakdowns, how can we build our collective capacities for transformation to bring about a just, inclusive, and regenerative society for all?**

Otto Scharmer

Aug 19, 2021

Key Lessons Learned:



In our work over the past two decades at the Presencing Institute, we have learned a few key lessons in regard to building our collective capacity for transformation.

- 1. You cannot change a system unless you transform consciousness.*
- 2. You cannot transform consciousness unless you make a system sense and see itself.*
- 3. You cannot do these things at scale unless you create new forms of deep learning structures.*

In my [letter to the Presencing Institute community](#) last month, I touched upon how we are living in the Age of the Anthropocene, the age of humans, and how **all the challenges we face on a planetary scale are caused by.... ourselves.**

I also shared how we are at a profound planetary threshold moment where we are each invited to respond to the critical question,

***What is my and our response to all of this, how am I – and how are we – going to show up in this moment?***

Now really is our time. It was heartening to read your responses, from the personal to the societal and collective.

Miriam Heskamp shares that she is going to show up

*“...by leaning into what feels uncomfortable and to learn from that.”*

Anupama Khatana reflects

*“I want to educate the children about nature, about our interaction with nature and not just climate change.”*

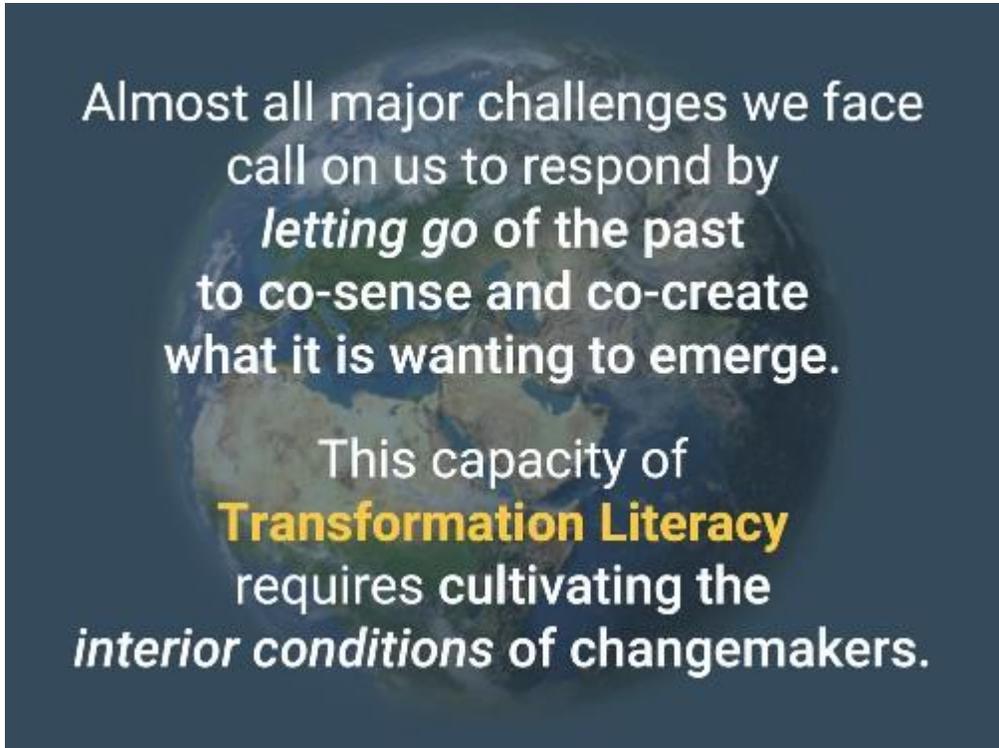
Manoj Onkar says he will

*“Spread the awareness of the 3 divides and create a movement: Awareness based collective action across educational institutions, NGOs, government and society at large.”*

## **Building Transformational Literacy**

What we have learned over the past two decades is that we need to build **transformation literacy** at scale.

*“Transformation literacy is the capacity of a system to move beyond what most systems today are designed to do: optimizing the status quo, i.e., optimizing the past.”*



Almost all of the major challenges that we face call on us to do something different than just more of the same. They call on us to respond by *letting go* of the past to co-sense and co-create what it is wanting to emerge. What we have learned is that this capacity to let go of the past in order to co-sense and presence the future as it emerges requires an inner leadership work of cultivating the *interior conditions* of the changemakers.

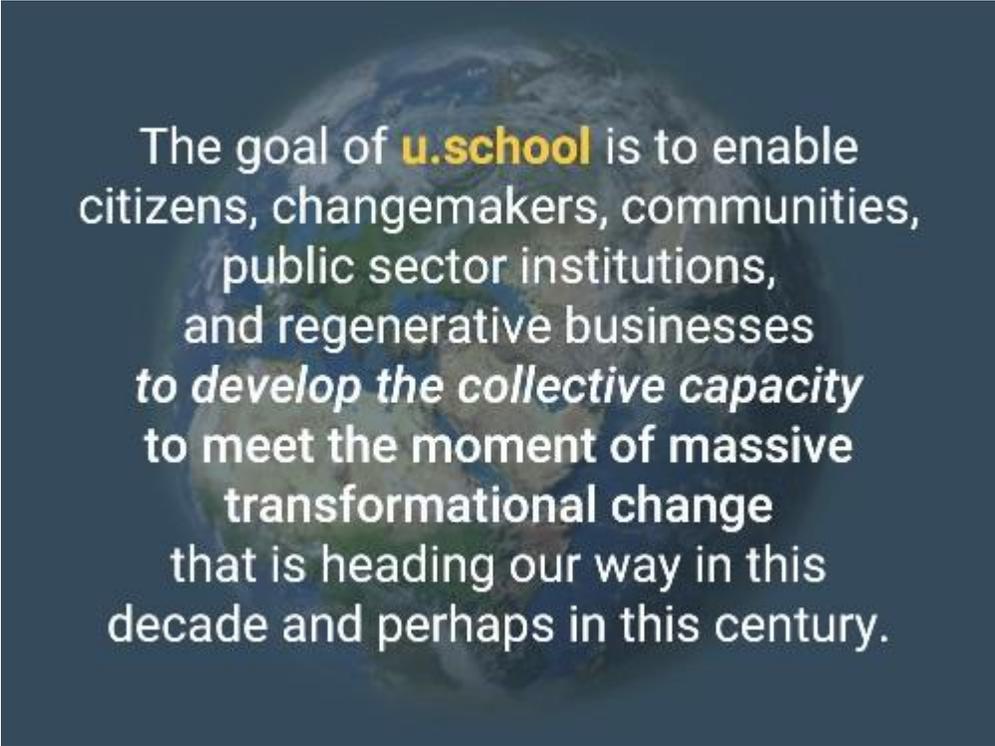
And that inner cultivation work requires support.

That support structure is what we call *u.school for transformation*.

The **u.school for transformation** is a vision to democratize access to whole-person and whole-systems innovation and learning, integrating both head, heart, and hands, as well as the micro and the macro.

## A School Without Walls

***u.school of transformation*** is a school without walls, because it connects changemakers and movement makers ***across*** systems and borders, supporting them with an action-learning environment that is designed for collaboration and co-creation across localities, sectors, and systems.



The goal of **u.school** is to enable citizens, changemakers, communities, public sector institutions, and regenerative businesses *to develop the collective capacity to meet the moment of massive transformational change that is heading our way in this decade and perhaps in this century.*

Over the past two decades, the Presencing Institute has prototyped all required core components of such a new infrastructure on a local, regional, or global scale.

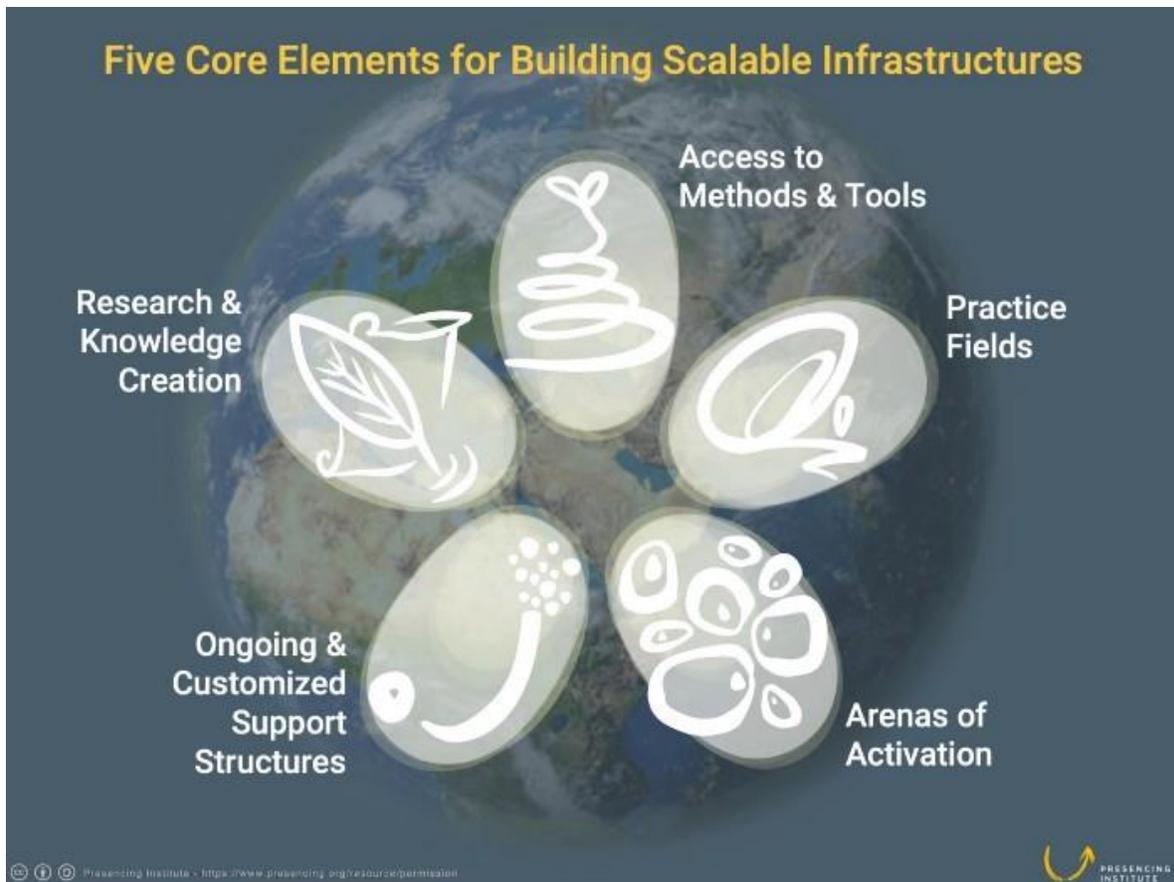
We believe that now is the time to bring all these diverse elements together by launching the ***u.school for transformation***.

*“The goal is to enable citizens, changemakers, communities, public sector institutions, and regenerative businesses to develop the collective capacity to meet the moment of massive transformational change that is heading our way in this decade and perhaps in this century.”*

What kind of support structures does it take to help leaders and changemakers to flourish in the face of increasing disruption?

## **Five Core Elements**

Here are five core elements that we have found to be ***essential*** in building scalable infrastructures that support the journey of transforming self and system. They are:



## Methods and Tools

### 1. Access to new methods and tools

- Over the past years, the Presencing Institute team has built methods and tools for social transformation and has made them freely available under creative commons to everyone.
- These tools and resources have been translated into more than a dozen languages.

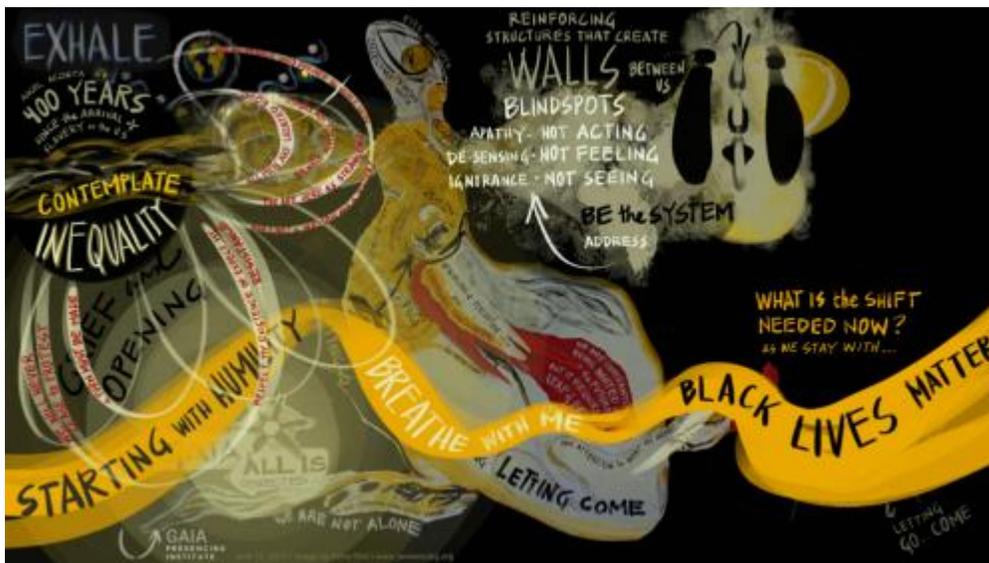
- Examples of these [methods and tools](#) include the Four Levels of Listening, Stakeholder Interviews, 3D Mapping, and Journaling.

However, we have also learned that just providing methods and tools is not enough. To engage in new behaviors, changemakers need something else:

## 2. Practice Fields

*Changemakers need access to practice fields.*

- Changemakers need practice fields that help them adopt new behaviors and to work with new tools in safe, supportive, and generative environments.



- Examples of generative practice fields include Case Clinic Circles, Solidarity Circles, Social Presencing Theater practices, and Visual Scribing practices.
- In our work, we have found that some of the most important keys for creating powerful practice fields lie in the use of awareness-based social arts, such as Generative Scribing or [Social Presencing Theater](#).
- These practice fields help a lot, but we have also learned that simply providing both of these things, *tools* and *practice fields*, is still not sufficient:

### **3. Arenas of Activation**

What's often missing are *Arenas of Activation* — that is, arenas that help us as changemakers to spark and connect with our highest aspiration, our best future potential, and to sense the fields of resonance with fellow changemakers across other sectors and geographies, while beginning to operate from that felt connection in the now.

The Presencing Institute (PI) provides these Arenas of Activation year-round with free public offerings ([u.lab 1x](#) and [GAIA](#)), as well as in customized ways in institutional settings (see below).

In 2020–2021, [GAIA](#) has engaged a community of 15,000 and [u.lab 1x](#) has engaged a community of 19,744 registered participants from 155

countries. Since 2015 we have had more than 200,000 registered participants in our free online-to-offline arenas of activation.

These three core components represent real progress. But then there is something else that is often also called for:

#### **4. Ongoing and Customized Support Structures**

All transformation journeys require *ongoing support structures*, i.e. containers or holding spaces for supporting the changemakers and leadership teams to review, refocus and regenerate as needed, and to support each other on current challenges. These support structures vary according to context and place. Examples from the past year include:

- **u.lab 2x: A free (application-based) change accelerator** in 2021 that helped 340 teams across sectors and systems to move their prototype initiatives from idea to ecosystem impact within a period of four months. (This involved thousands of stakeholders and core team members along the way).



Scribing by Kely Bird at the Global Forum 2021

- **Global Forum:** In June 2021, PI organized a Global Forum that spotlighted transformation cases and connected changemakers. The “audio garden,” co-created by the community, explored more than 80 change stories from around the world, engaging the community with 8,172 downloads in just a few weeks. The audio garden helped Forum participants unglue themselves from their screens and take a deep dive into their local contexts through stories, soundscapes, and deep reflection practices. (For further information, [visit the website](#)).
- **The U.Academy:** A digital capacity-building infrastructure with monthly programs that are geared toward changemakers

and leaders in institutions working on societal transformation. PI aims to make this arm of its operation profitable by 2022.



Scribing at the United Nations by Kelvy Bird

- **Customized Institutional Infrastructures:** One example for institutional support structures for transformation are our three lines of current work with the United Nations and its various agencies:
  - a) A UN-wide Dialogue Series on Transforming Systems in the Decade of Action;
  - b) A UN Action Learning Lab for 450 changemakers across all major world regions; and

c) A set of 14 SDG Leadership Labs that focus on accelerating the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in the specific context of the respective countries.

## **The Fifth Element**

While the four above core components all are critical, we also learned that without the fifth component they will not be enough.

## **5. Research and Knowledge Creation**

The ultimate currency for large-scale movement activation must be grounded in cutting-edge research-based knowledge creation. Here are some recent milestones on that score:

- The launch of a peer-reviewed academic journal: [\*Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change\*](#).
- The purpose of this journal is to advance systems science in regard to making visible the invisible (field) structures of deep systems change. The founding editorial board of the journal includes a globally diverse group of academics, including leading Indigenous scholars.
- The publication of seven books, the latest two in 2021:



- *Just Money: Mission-Driven Banks and the Future of Finance*, which explores how to use finance as a tool to build a more equitable and sustainable society;
- *Social Presencing Theater: The Art of Making a True Move*, which is a journey into the origins, principles, and practices of an innovative social art form co-created by Arawana Hayashi and colleagues at the Presencing Institute.
- Advancing the methods and tools of Social Presencing Theater not only for intervention purposes but also for research purposes makes better visible the largely invisible structures

of social systems and social fields. (Social fields are social systems, but seen from within, from their interior conditions).

- The publication of our *Field of the Future* blog to connect the community and showcase initiatives and new ideas.
- Launching a 10-year research initiative on inventing and advancing methods and tools of awareness-based systems change and making them mainstream.

Tools, practices fields, arenas of activation, ongoing support structures, and advanced research and knowledge creation — these are five core components that we believe are critical building infrastructures for transformation at scale.

We have tested and refined all these components.

But now the time has come to bring all these learning experiences and components together in order to help us to meet the moment of transformative change on the scale of the whole.

**Our Goal: Launch u.school For Transformation & Activate Millions of Changemakers Globally**



Activating 1 million changemakers at the *u.school for transformation*

Over the next 10 years, the *u.school for transformation* aims to form a new set of partnerships with like-minded institutions that help us to reach and support millions of activists and changemakers who will be crucial in this journey of the multi-local, place-based, and yet planetary consciousness-based journey of transformative change in the decades ahead.

This new type of *school without borders* will:

- Further *activate* a vibrant global ecosystem of changemakers who facilitate local and regional “hubs”; organize around issues such as climate change, regenerative agriculture,

women's rights, racial equality, financial inclusion, as well as reimagining and reshaping education around human flourishing;

- Provide **customized capacity building** mechanisms on Pathways of Transformation for grassroots changemakers, for institutional professionals, and for researchers on **awareness-based systems change**;
- Offer university students a complement to their core curriculum, linking learning with opportunities for real-world action and change while **cultivating the interior condition** of the intervenor;
- Offer universities **pathways to reimagine and reshape education** for the needs of this century, linking systems thinking with awareness practices as well as hands-on aesthetic, and ethical literacy;
- **Co-initiate journeys of transforming self and systems** across sectors and geographies;
- Develop the body of data, experience, and knowledge necessary to **advance the field of awareness-based systems change**.

The **u.school for transformation** is grounded in a shared understanding of the dormant creative capacities that human beings and our planetary ecosystem possess and that if activated, can generate

and amplify the next wave of awareness-based civilizational renewal that in so many places and communities is already well under way.

The Presencing Institute is seeking partners that share such an intention, and that can bring a range of resources and capabilities to making the u.school without borders a reality.

Our collaboration will include the launch of an “[Opportunity Fund](#)” to raise \$5 million over the next 4 years to build the infrastructure, curriculum, and partnerships that will allow the u.school for transformation to reach scale.

Other partnership initiatives will include staff secondments, platform-sharing with university campuses, and the formation of national and regional labs that become expressions of the u.school in local contexts. Once taken to scale we believe the u.school will be able to generate revenue in the form of earned income, and community contributions that will make it largely self-funded in the decades to come.

That is what we in the Presencing Institute core team feel called to do when we lean into our current moment of disruption.

## **What is it that you feel called to do now?**

**If you feel a resonance with the aspiration and vision outlined above, and want to support the *u.school for transformation*,**

please do [join our special email list](#) and be the first to hear all our latest updates.

Our official campaign will be launching soon.



If you're interested in exploring u.school tools and practices, you may consider joining the new cycle of u.lab 1x which begins on September 9th.

**Register now on our website:**

[www.presencing.org/ulab](http://www.presencing.org/ulab)

*I want to express my gratitude to [Kelvy Bird](#) for creating the visuals and to [Priya Mahtani](#) and [Rachel Hentsch](#) for their editorial work on the draft.*

Written by

Otto Scharmer

Senior Lecturer, MIT. Co-founder, Presencing Institute.

[www.ottoscharmer.com](http://www.ottoscharmer.com)