

**u.school:** an awareness-based global leadership platform  
*building cross-sector capacity for resilient societies*

DRAFT 2.0<sup>1</sup>

Otto Scharmer  
Dayna Cunningham  
Katrin Kaufer

Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)  
Presencing Institute  
Cambridge, MA USA  
May 2011

## Executive Summary

This proposal describes a global action-learning platform that engages and connects leaders across sectors, cultures, and generations to create system-wide societal innovation. We are calling this platform u.school for its emphasis on self-awareness as a core capacity of 21<sup>st</sup>-century leadership and for its use of Theory U, and other awareness-based practices, as a meta-frame for integrating state-of-the-art methods of systems thinking, participatory innovation tools, mindful leadership practices, and generative stakeholder dialogue techniques.<sup>2</sup>

The u.school and its global network of hubs for societal innovation will be co-created by institutional partners from all of society's sectors—civil society, government, and business—and by a web of global thought leaders and inspired change-makers. Together, these partners will explore, test, and provide thought leadership on how to advance our economic, democratic, and educational institutions in ways that create well-being for all. Some of the proposed elements of the u.school already exist both virtually (in a 5,000-person global online community of practice) and physically (in institutional nodes of activity in the US, Europe, Brazil, Indonesia, the Philippines, South Africa, Namibia, and China). (See Appendix A, which describes some of the u.school-type initiatives that have been developed by participants in MIT- and Presencing Institute-sponsored programs over the past several years.)

The Presencing Institute (PI), as a precursor of the u.school, currently offers courses and programs in both the global North and global South, online and in-person networks, a global ecology of multi-sector initiatives, and a growing web of institutional partnerships. An action research PhD program in collaboration with Witten/Herdecke University (and other universities) will be launched in 2012. Over the next five years, the u.school will expand its networks, practical work (through “innovation labs”), and degree programs (partnering with selected universities) and will build hubs in Europe, the US, Brazil, Asia (China, Indonesia, India), and Africa (northern and southern).

The practical u.school work will be structured as “innovation labs” around specific focus areas: food security (Sustainable Food Lab); health and well-being (Health Lab); education and entrepreneurship (e.Learning Lab); cities and democracy (Resilient City Lab); and banking (Conscious Capital Lab). These interconnected labs will work collaboratively to transform their systems from being driven by a few special interest groups (egosystem awareness) to systems that cultivate the commons and support the well-being of all (ecosystem awareness).

## Context

Leaders in all institutions face unprecedented challenges: climate change, food and water crises, peak oil, financial and educational crises, unemployment, lack of health services, social exclusion, and massive “unforeseeable” disruptive events such as 9/11 and Fukushima. As the intensity of the disruptions and conflict around strategic resources continues to increase over the next decades, new rapid-response and leadership capacities are needed that move beyond “quick fixes” and address the root causes of these challenges.

In banking, for example, the systemic roots of the financial meltdown have not been addressed and banks that are “too big to fail” continue to reinforce the system’s crisis points. Today’s institutions and their leaders have limited capacities to do what is most needed: sense and understand the entirety of a crisis; identify its underlying causes; explore and test effective responses; and translate effective responses into institutional innovations throughout the system.

The interconnected set of critical challenges now facing the world calls for new global strategies that bring together leaders from developed, emerging, and also non-industrialized countries to build the collective capacity to act. Systems thinking, cooperation, and innovation are more important now than ever before. These activities must take into account all the relevant stakeholder groups, even those that are not yet organized, such as future generations and children.

Despite the importance of confronting global challenges for the future of our children, our society, and our planet, currently there is no place dedicated to creating cross-sector collective leadership capacity. Such leadership development does not exist in our institutions of higher education, which are fragmented into academic disciplines. And it doesn’t exist in organizational or leadership training programs, which are often narrowly focused on single organizations or sectors, or only on individuals.

The Leadership Learning Matrix below (Table 1) describes nine spaces of leadership and learning by types of knowledge and by the levels on which an intervention in a system can occur—individual, institutional, and systemic. Most current leadership and learning activities are focused on the upper left corner (technical knowledge, individual skills) and therefore miss the full complexity of problems they are trying to solve. The number one bottleneck in all deeper systems-change efforts is in the lower right corner, i.e., the transformational capacity building that connects the key decision makers to the dynamic context of their entire system. The failure to make this connection is the blind spot in our current understanding of leadership.

The u.school will address the blind spot by convening key institutions across society to jointly form a new platform for collective capacity-building and innovation.

<b>Knowledge Type</b>	<b>Intervention Points</b>		
	<b>Individual</b>	<b>Institutional</b>	<b>Whole System</b>
<b>Technical knowledge (technical skills)</b>	Individual technical skill building/ Training	Institutional technical skill building/ organization-wide training	System-wide technical skill building/training of stakeholders in the whole system
<b>Relational knowledge (stakeholder management)</b>	Individual capacity-building for communication  (multi-stakeholder dialogue)	Institutional capacity-building for communication  (multi-stakeholder dialogue)	System-wide capacity-building for communication  (multi-stakeholder dialogue)
<b>Transformational self-knowledge (identity, will)</b>	Individual transformative leadership capacity-building	Institutional transformative leadership capacity-building	System-wide transformative leadership capacity-building

Table 1: The Leadership Learning Matrix

## Purpose

The u.school will help leaders and change-makers in all sectors of society collaborate and innovate across institutional boundaries in order to generate well-being and resilience for all communities, even in the most marginalized sectors. These multi-stakeholder constellations will co-sense the larger system, open up the widest possible opportunities, and co-create prototypes that explore the future by doing. They will also leverage their learning through the powerful collective networks that the u.school partner institutions bring to the table. The u.school founding partners will work through “labs” organized around five loosely coupled areas of societal innovation. Each lab will work with regional innovation hubs to link and leverage diverse local insights and practices. These connections will further the goal of the u.school to work at the scale of the global system and for the benefit of the whole.

## Methodology

The u.school will teach state-of-the-art multi-stakeholder innovation methods that blend Systems Thinking, sensing practices, stakeholder dialogues, Scenario Planning, “World Café” techniques, Social Presencing Theater, Appreciative Inquiry (AI), Open Space, Storytelling, mindful leadership practices, “Presencing” practices, visioning, Process Consultation, and rapid-cycle prototyping, as well as methods for leading a journey of transformational institutional change.

The meta-framework and language that participants will use to share their own lessons and learn from the projects, systems, and cultures of others is grounded in Peter Senge’s framework of systems thinking and Otto Scharmer’s framework of awareness-based leadership and systems change (Theory U).<sup>3</sup>

## Principles and Practices

Einstein’s dictum that “problems cannot be solved at the same level of thought that created them” describes the point of departure for the u.school. Our biggest leadership and innovation challenges cannot be solved at the same level of awareness that created them.

All u.school labs, programs, and platforms will be grounded in the following set of principles and core practices:

1. **Co-initiating:** Engage the whole system by convening key stakeholders across sectors to form a microcosm that mirrors the complexity of the whole. For example, the Sustainable Food Lab<sup>4</sup> began by interviewing and convening players throughout the value chain, from farmers to consumers. Eventually, it co-initiated a two-year multi-stakeholder innovation journey that led to the creation of prototypes and collaborative activities that today engage more than 70 organizations in Europe, North America, and Latin America to mainstream sustainable food production practices.
2. **Co-sensing:** Break down the boundaries between individuals and institutions by going on sensing journeys that facilitate seeing situations from the edges of the system (e.g., from the view of the most marginalized). Then use systems thinking to create a shared understanding of the whole. For example, when a maternal health team in Namibia (supported by PI) went into the field to learn more about the health care needs of pregnant women, they learned that many had to travel long distances to a hospital and then, with no place to stay, had to camp under a tree next to the hospital while seeking treatment. Knowing this extended the focus and commitment of the team to improving access to care for people from remote areas.
3. **Presencing:** Presencing is a blended term that combines the word ‘sensing’ and ‘presence’ and means to sense and actualize one’s highest future potential.<sup>5</sup> The presencing process includes deep reflection practices on one’s individual and collective leadership journey: Who is my Self? What is my Work? In a recent PI

- consulting project with a large Danish hospital, the leadership team reported that through their various sensing journeys they engaged in deep listening to the people on the periphery of their own system. Throughout that process they came to realize that what happened in their hospital deeply impacted the entire regional health care system, not just their hospital. As they began to see themselves through the eyes of their patients, their general practitioners, and their colleagues in the various smaller local hospitals, they developed a new collective identity that included the whole region. As a consequence, they were able to develop better collaborations and more effective use of shared resources with their colleagues in smaller hospitals and clinics.
4. **Co-creating:** Explore the future by prototyping—by linking head, heart, and hand—and by quickly learning from the feedback that the prototypes generate from the stakeholders. In the maternal health project in Namibia one prototype focused on cutting the wait time at the clinics by half. Another one created a “regional delivery unit” (RDU) that brings the entire system’s chief decision makers (chief medical officer, head of the Hospital, administrators) as well as frontline practitioners (nurses, physicians) together weekly to review and evaluate their ongoing efforts to improve maternal health.
  5. **Co-evolving:** Sustain and scale the new throughout the system. In the Namibian health project, the knowledge transfer does not focus on the final outcome of the innovation process, but on the process itself and the innovation infrastructure. Accordingly, each regional delivery unit (RDU) approach is replicated in the regions according to the specific needs and intentions of the key stakeholders.
  6. **Mindful Systems Change:** The research program of the u.school will blend prototyping-based action research with systems thinking (understanding the dynamics of the whole system), systems sensing (experiencing the system from the edges), deep structure mapping, and mindfulness, each of which brings a deeper level of understanding to the surface and into the awareness of the participants. Over the years we have learned that the success of any multi-stakeholder process is a function of a deeper shift in awareness, in which people let go of their small institutional identities and begin to associate and align with the health and well-being of the larger system. At the end of one retreat workshop of the MIT ELIAS program (Appendix A), the country head of a global company said: “I am no longer working for my company. I am working from my company.” We interpret this to mean that he felt his identity was no longer limited by the boundaries of his institution but is connected to the well-being of all the stakeholders in the system.
  7. **Collective Intelligence:** The quality of results achieved by a system’s stakeholders is a function of their quality of awareness. And their quality of awareness depends on the cultivation of three instruments: the Open Mind, the Open Heart, and the Open Will. In order to develop authentic leadership presence, all three of these intelligences need to be developed and cultivated.<sup>6</sup>
  8. **Power of Place:** Innovation happens in places. Places and their physical, social, mental, and intentional context are powerful enablers of both individual and collective creativity. Hence, the u.school will leverage and interweave two types of communities of practice: Web-enabled communities and hub-based

- communities. Already, 5,200 practitioners from more than 110 countries are part of the PI network, and we have incipient regional hubs in several places both in the global North and the global South.
9. **Power of Intention:** The power of intention is the ultimate experience of all business entrepreneurs, social entrepreneurs, creative people, and movements on the planet. It's the idea behind the statement: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."<sup>7</sup> Unlocking the dormant power of intention in both in individuals and dispersed communities will be part of the core curriculum of all u.school offerings.
  10. Using the principles of **Open Source** and the **Creative Commons**, the u.school will put its core technologies into a creative commons license that facilitates its rapid replication in projects, organizations, and communities worldwide. By 2020, we envision the u.school having roots and collaborative communities in eight world regions, engaging leading institutions from all sectors and cultures, and inspiring networks of as many as 100 million individuals.

## Outcomes

The u.school innovation ecosystem of change-makers, thought leaders, and institutions will lead to the following types of outcomes (see figure 1):

1. **Vibrant Living Prototypes:** Each class of u.school fellows will generate a set of prototype initiatives for testing, advancing, and evolving collaborative innovations across institutions, systems, and sector boundaries. The u.school prototypes will focus on innovation and leadership in health care, education/learning, agriculture/sustainable business/climate change, participatory democracy/community development, and banking/finance.<sup>8</sup>
2. **Leadership Capacity-Building:** The u.school will build individual and collective leadership and innovation capacity on site and online, through its foundation programs, online programs, masterclasses, and ELIAS-type high-potential programs (see Appendix A for descriptions). Our global classroom technology enables us to provide high-quality low-cost learning environments that blend live presentations, local/regional peer group coaching, and the practical application of tools in the work context of the participants, to a global community of change-makers.
3. **Innovation Labs.** The u.school will co-create platforms for cross-institutional learning and cross-sector innovation around its five focus areas: Food Security, Health Care, e.Learning, Resilient Cities, and Conscious Capital. Each lab already exists in an early stage, with some of them (such as the Sustainable Food Lab) quite well established. The u.school will create a global infrastructure that will allow the labs and their members to learn across regions and across systems.

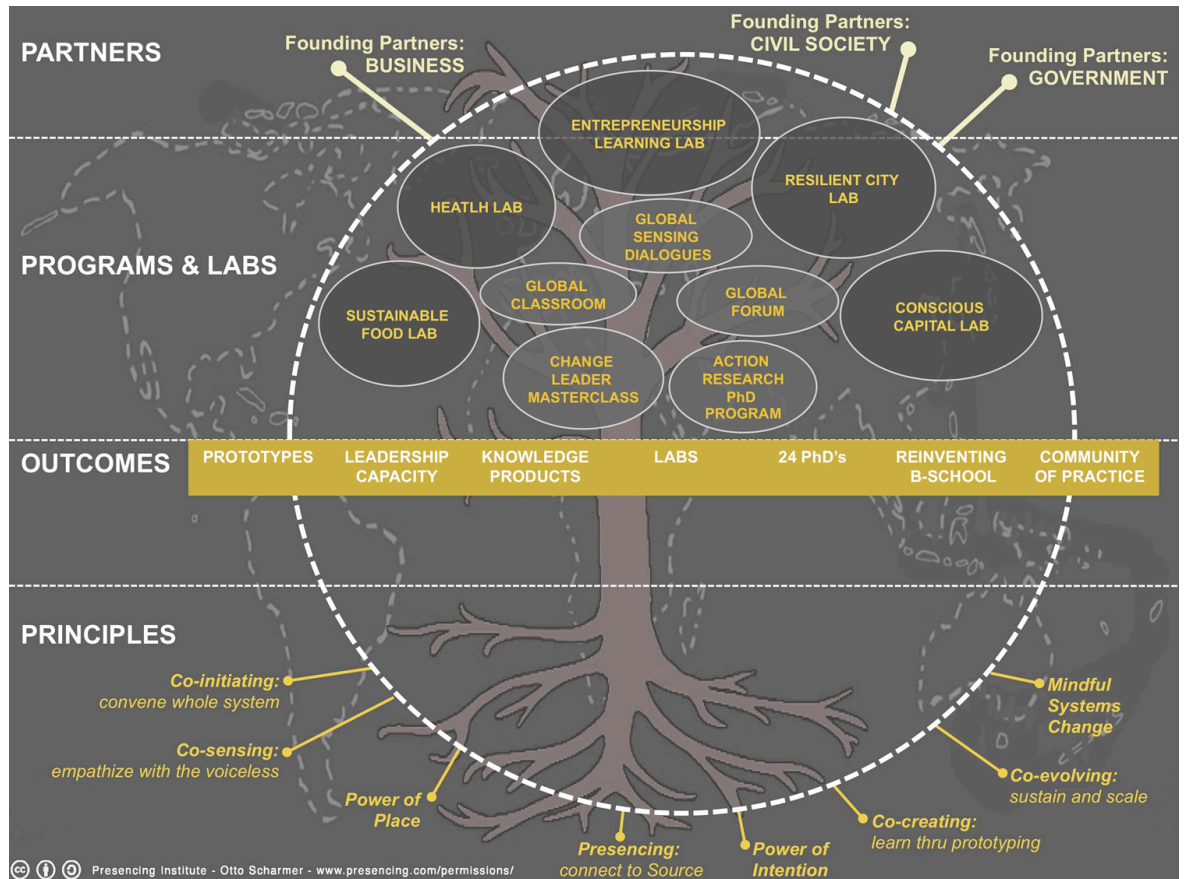


Figure 1: u.school: Principles, Programs, Labs, Outcomes

4. **Knowledge Products:** The u.school will hold global roundtable discussions with simultaneous sessions in its hubs in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas using state-of-the-art video conferencing technologies. The global/regional roundtables and experiments will result in a stream of video clips, films, articles, books, as well as a vibrant Web-based social network. These innovations are currently in varying stages of prototyping via the Global Classroom and PI websites.
5. **Reinventing the B-School for the 21st Century:** Through a strategic partnership with the World Business School Council for Sustainable Business (a consortium of twenty leading sustainability-focused business schools),<sup>9</sup> the u.school will leverage and scale its educational innovations to collaboratively reinvent the 21st-century business school.
6. **Action Research PhD's:** Through partnering with a small number of research universities, u.school will give special support to a group of twenty-four to fifty doctoral fellows that will earn a PhD in the first five years of its operation. For this group of student fellows, u.school will offer regular research retreats, coaching sessions, and access to the worldwide web of hotspots for societal innovation. A small number of additional doctoral students will be admitted each year so that the u.school supports a continuous stream of future leaders, scholars, and educators.

7. **Advanced Community of Practice and Global Thought Leadership:** The u.school will sustain a core group of master practitioners and global thought leaders that is dedicated to holding and cultivating the space in which all of the above can happen. This group will be constituted and scaled across systems, sectors, and cultures.

To create a set of cross-institutional innovation hubs in society—places that nurture and build transformative leadership capacity—different levels and mechanisms of engagement will be required. Each has been successfully prototyped through MIT and PI, but they have not yet been combined in a single, integrated design (figure 1).

## Learning Architecture

The evolving learning architecture of the u.school will build from existing infrastructure (See Appendix A) and will create the following additional elements for maximum global impact:

1. **Executive Champions Circle (ECC):** The ECC blends a high-quality learning environment for executives with the function of an executive steering group that provides intention and guidance for u.school activities. The ECC consists of senior executive leaders from key government, business, nonprofits, media, and academic institutions with a shared intention to bring about change. (One to two meetings a year)
2. **Student Entrepreneurship Labs:** These labs will convene young leaders and stakeholders across institutions, sectors, and focus on the prototyping initiatives that the mid career and senior leaders of the Labs and ELIAS programs have defined. They will take these prototyping ideas and move into action under the guidance by the institutional “owners” of the prototype and the larger networks of change-makers that the u.school partners provide.
3. **Action Research PhD Program:** This program will be launched in 2012 by a network of collaborating academic and research institutions, supported by the u.school and hosted by Germany’s Witten/Herdecke University. The program will educate the next generation of faculty members and practitioners in using u.school principles. The u.school will support this program through ongoing coaching and semiannual research retreats for action researchers.

## Contact

Otto Scharmer  
scharmer@MIT.EDU

Dayna L Cunningham  
dayna@MIT.EDU

Katrin Kaufer  
kauer@MIT.EDU

## APPENDIX A

The u.school will build on the following existing programs:

1. **ELIAS: Emerging Leaders Innovate Across Sectors:** This existing MIT and Presencing Institute program brings together strategic constellations of high-potential leaders across sectors who need each other in order to transform their systems.<sup>10</sup> While staying in their “day jobs,” these leaders meet five times over nine months, going on a journey of simultaneous system- and self-discovery designed to transform their relationships within their contexts— with each other and with themselves. They develop high-impact prototype initiatives for advancing and transforming the systems in which their institutions operate. (Four to five modules over nine months, currently delivered in Indonesia and the Philippines, and starting in 2011 in China)
2. **Presencing Foundation Program:** The introductory presencing program “Leading Profound Innovation and Change” takes leaders from society’s three sectors on a four-day experiential workshop journey that focuses on reaching a deeper understanding of systems and the self—and on the practical methods and tools that we can use to co-sense and co-create the future that wants to emerge. (Ninety participants; currently delivered in the US, South Africa, Asia, and Europe)
3. **Global Classroom:** The Global Classroom offers high-impact, low-cost capacity-building programs that help to scale profound innovation and change methodologies across institutions and larger systems.<sup>11</sup> With the help of a live video stream, participants are able to hear presentations and connect via Skype for small- group discussions. They also use specific tools and processes in their own contexts. Current program: The Presencing Global Classroom is a four-week introductory program that incorporates small learning groups, personal reflection practices, and tool applications in the local context. Led by Otto Scharmer, with an introduction to Process Consultation led by Ed Schein, The Global Classroom will continue to broaden and deepen its suite of offerings.
4. **Presencing Masterclass:** Advanced practitioners meet to build and advance the delivery capacity for large-scale innovation and change interventions (consulting and capacity-building mechanisms). The Masterclass is a two-year program that includes monthly online coaching sessions and a twice-yearly in-person four-day meeting. The first two modules of the Masterclass were held in October 2010 and May 2011 in Boston with seventy-five participants from twenty-five countries. The final module of this first Masterclass will be held in Berlin, Germany, in the summer of 2012.<sup>12</sup> The network of the Masterclass Fellows will be an important resource for the u.school as it scales up regional delivery in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas.
5. **Global Forum:** At this annual summit, social entrepreneurs and professionals working in different systems will meet to talk about their own change experiences, reflect on what they have learned, and connect the dots between major change initiatives and change-makers across sectors, countries, and cultures. The 1<sup>st</sup> Global Forum will take place Oct. 24–25, 2011, in Boston. The

2<sup>nd</sup> Global Forum will be held in Berlin in June 2012 at the intended launch of the u.school Europe. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Global Forum could be held in Beijing or Bali in 2013.

---

1 *Special thanks to Elizabeth Hoffecker Moreno, Erica Dhawan, and Gregor Barnum for their helpful comments.*

2 *Scharmer, C. Otto (2009). Theory U: Leading from the Emerging Future as It Emerges. The Social Technology of Presencing (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler). Senge, P., C. O. Scharmer, J. Jaworski, and B. S. Flowers (2004). Presence: Human Purpose and the Field of the Future (Cambridge, MA: SoL Press).*

3 *Senge, Peter (1990). The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization. Scharmer, C. Otto (2009). Theory U: Leading from the Emerging Future as It Emerges. The Social Technology of Presencing (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler).*

4 <http://www.sustainablefoodlab.org/>

5 *Scharmer, C. Otto (2009). Theory U: Leading from the Emerging Future as It Emerges. The Social Technology of Presencing (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler).*

6 *Scharmer (2009). See also the MIT Center for Collective Intelligence: <http://cci.mit.edu/>*

7 *The statement is widely (but possibly wrongly) attributed to Margaret Mead. [http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Margaret\\_Mead](http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Margaret_Mead)*

8 *The 2006–07 MIT ELIAS program resulted in the creation of several new ventures, as well as innovations in participatory governmental policymaking (in Indonesia) and in cross-sector leadership programs in five countries to date (South Africa, Indonesia, the Philippines, Namibia, Holland).*

9 <http://www.wbscsb.com/>

10 *At MIT this program is today delivered as a 9-month tri-sector country program called IDEAS (Innovative Dynamics Education and Action for Sustainability). <http://mitsloan.mit.edu/globalmitsloan/custom.php>*

11 *See <http://presencing.com/capacitybuilding/globalclassroom.shtml>*

12 *See <http://www.presencing.com/fst/>*