



August 25, 2016

*[Nadia Chaney](#)

Dear 3rd Thursday Assemblers! Welcome back, or, if it's your first time WELCOME! This is an exciting new format we have been developing where people contribute and discuss a niche aspect of group facilitation.

Below you will find: A Check-in Question (please answer!); Goals and Agreements for today's session (please add anything you need/want to the agreements, and hit "like" to agree to uphold these agreements during the session); 4 discussion questions and 4 case studies (posted approximately every ten minutes; answer in any order). I will be facilitating this experience for 90 minutes. There will be a pdf transcript posted on the pyeglobal.org website, as well as the files of this facebook page, in a short while. These transcripts are so great we're thinking of making a book out of them!

This month we are discussing WORKING WITH THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

The phrase "the elephant in the room" is an English metaphor that refers to a big, obvious truth or issue that no one wants to discuss. It is deliberately ignored, usually to avoid embarrassment or conflict. As a facilitator our ability to work with these elephants is of utmost importance. What is NOT being said can often be at least as influential in a group's development as what IS being said. When big issues go unaddressed it can cause frustration, distraction, confusion, delay and mistrust.

There is another story about the Elephant in the Room. While I don't want to confuse our topic (WE ARE TALKING ABOUT THE ELEPHANT ABOVE, THAT THING EVERYONE KNOWS BUT NO ONE WANTS TO TALK ABOUT), I still feel that this story can help us see from another angle in our discussion today. It comes from a very old traditional story, found in Chinese, Hindu and Sufi traditions.



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My favorite version is in the Persian poet Rumi's book Masnavi-I Ma'navi:

Some people had brought an elephant for exhibition and placed it in a dark house. Crowds of people were going into that dark place to see it. Finding that ocular inspection was impossible, each visitor felt it with his palm in the darkness.

The palm of one fell on the trunk.

'This creature is like a water-spout,' he said.

The hand of another lighted on the elephant's ear. To him the beat was evidently like a fan.

Another rubbed against its leg.

'I found the elephant's shape is like a pillar,' he said.

Another laid his hand on its back.

'Certainly this elephant was like a throne,' he said.

.....

As facilitators we want to be able to work with both of these elephants. The one that everyone is pretending not see and the one that everyone thinks is something different, when it is all really the same beast. This is one of the trickiest and most satisfying aspects of facilitation isn't it? To help a group become aware of its own areas of unawareness and illusion towards a goal of deeper understanding and communication.

With that, let us begin! The check in question is below.

[Nadia Chaney](#) Hi Khuyaq Sandra! It's great to see you here! We are just about to wrap up the facilitated portion, but you'll see the discussion stays open and active for quite a while. Feel free to add anywhere you like!

[Khuyaq Sandra](#) Hi Nadia and everyone, thank you for adding me. I look forward to catch up, read, and participate. So far topics and questions look really good!



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Check-in Question for Aug 25 2016: If the way you feel today was an animal in the jungle, which animal would you be and what would you be doing?

Nesreen Ali I would be a cheetah, chillin, and lounging but ready for the attack !

Nadia Chaney love it Nesreen!

Nadia Chaney I think I would be a big spider, hanging out in my web, swinging a little in the breeze and waiting for something taaasty to come by!

Kelsey Jensen I gotta say I'd be like a mutualistic fungus.... taking... giving.... processing. Learning a lot today like a little sponge!

Clarinda R. Laforteza Lion - king of the jungle - sleeping

Nadia Chaney just posted the first discussion question...

Thandile Giyama I'd be a hunting black mamba...

Arindita Gogoi I'd be a Giant Panda in a wild bamboo grove; reminds me of my home town where there are lots and lots of bamboo grove and since I am sleep deprived, I'd like to nibble into a few bamboo leaves and just nap. Zzzzz.....

Vanessa Richards A bird that goes from treetop to treetop, enjoying the distinct perspectives, different fruits, proximity and distance, grounded in plant power and flight who sings with pals at dawn and dusk.

Silvia Giovannoni Webster An orangutang scratching my head as I look to what branch to swing to next and grab hold of. waiting to hang out with my peeps later on. (*i'm en route to an appointment but will follow here and comment as much as possible).



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[Lindsay Ganohsanohwe Bomberry](#) A sloth moving rather slowly and with gentle calm and tenderness, yet still climbing and moving, probably with plenty of rest today. I have to pick up my little girl very soon so I will not be able to participate for very long today.

[Nadia Chaney](#) Wonderful to have you here, Lindsay!

[Nadia Chaney](#) (I just need to say how humbled and tickled I am by all the fabulous facilitators in the house right now.)

[Nadia Chaney](#) [Sunshine Turner](#) here it is :)

[Sunshine Turner](#) thanks! I'd be a bee, buzzing around from flower to flower, collecting pollen and working super hard!

I'm also here with my friend Gunes, who would be a grizzly bear, chilling in the shade. (it's hot here today)

[Nadia Chaney](#) Hi Gunes!

[Simon ThePeacock Meshugana](#) Today I am a leopard in a tree. I am feeling ready for excitement but lazy in the dripping humidity. And I am going to prowl my way through all of the comments that I'm coming late into!

[Nadia Chaney](#) great to have you here!

[Meharoonah Ghani](#) Today I'm a turtle - moving slow, feeling each part of my foot on land, each muscle and tendon soaking it all in slowly but surely.

[Khuyaq Sandra](#) Today I will be a guacamayo (a large and colourful parrot from the Amazonian jungle) I am hanging with a large group of guacamayos near a calm though large river, getting warmed up by the beautiful sun this day has given us



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Goals and Agreements for this session on Aug 25 2016:

- 1) To explore the idea of an “elephant in the room” from the point of view of facilitation
- 2) To learn to facilitate tough conversations more effectively
- 3) To develop our scope as facilitators in order to address more complex issues and conversations
- 4) To share our diverse experiences, activities and best practices in facilitating the elephant in the room
- 5) To support each other in strengthening our ability to help our communities transform

In order to achieve these, here are some suggestions for COMMUNITY AGREEMENTS to make our time together flow really well. Be sure to add what you need or want AT ANY TIME DURING THE PROCESS. Let the group know or privately message the facilitator if you are concerned that an agreement is being broken.

- 1) No put downs of self or others. Keep a positive, lift-up vibe. If the facilitator finds your comments aggressive or inappropriate in any way you will receive a personal message.
- 2) Be willing to entertain simultaneous truths. Rather than proving a point, try to listen to understand, and be willing to agree to disagree. At the same time, if you have a strong belief be willing to stand up for it. This will make our conversations rich!
- 3) Show your presence, by LIKING and by responding to keep the flow. Ask questions, make comments, connect. The technical trick for this format is to REFRESH your browser fairly often. The questions move around depending on



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how many people are answering, so please scan the whole page for new questions now and then.

4) Maintain CONFIDENTIALITY by not sharing names or personal information about the participants in your groups, sharing from your own perspective, and asking permission before sharing someone else's story.

5) Answer any questions in the COMMENTS below the question to keep the conversation organized and readable. Only open NEW questions in new threads.

6) You can come and go as you please, take as long as you like to respond, and basically enjoy the text-format to make this work no matter whether you are just waking up, just going to bed, or on your lunch break (time zones unite!!) A pdf transcript of the conversation will be provided. Feel free to continue the conversation even after the 90 minute period has ended.

[Nadia Chaney](#) Hi Kelsey Jensen, Clarinda R. Laforteza and Arindita Gogoi! Great to see you here!

[Nadia Chaney](#) Vanessa Richards! Lovely to see you! And Thandile Giyama!

[Meharoonah Ghani](#) Apologies I am late Nadia Chaney. I'll catch up quickly. <3

[Nadia Chaney](#) no problem at all Meharoonah Ghani! Glad to have you here!



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Discussion Question #1: How do you recognize there is an elephant in the room? What clues and signs might you notice?

[Kelsey Jensen](#) Silence!

[Nadia Chaney](#) Nice. Is there a particular quality of silence that let's you know there is an elephant in the room?

[Kelsey Jensen](#) Uncomfortable-looking body language, lack of eye contact, or piercing eye contact. Fidgeting.

[Nesreen Ali](#) thick tension that you can feel, intense staring, whispering (when there doesn't need to be) and clear segregation of groups.

[Nadia Chaney](#) Yeah. Is there any time that you see these kinds of signals and it is NOT an elephant in the room?

[Nadia Chaney](#) I just posted Question 2, but that does NOT mean this one is closed! I'd love to hear more detail and nuance here...what about your own body? What signals do you get internally?

[Vanessa Richards](#) My heart beats faster and there's a constant interior commentary running beside whatever else I may be trying to say or do. I feel impatient and lose focus until I address it.

[Silvia Giovannoni Webster](#) Vanessa Richards yes! I really relate to that

[Nadia Chaney](#) Vanessa Richards that's amazing. That interior sensitivity is so important. It leads us to question 2 below (or above, fb like to keep us on our toes.)



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[Vanessa Richards](#) My task is usually to try and address it before it builds up too much pressure and comes out with, well, too much pressure.

[Vanessa Richards](#) How do you manage that Silvia Giovannoni Webster?

[Silvia Giovannoni Webster](#) Vanessa Richards I like to think that I am mostly able to name it. Well first of all, ground myself and check-in so that I'm not assuming anything but rather name what I experience and ask whether the group resonates with any of that.

[Arindita Gogoi](#) I think energy is the biggest indicator. You can feel the missing cohesiveness as you start off. Also body language....many a times I see that a group in which people are familiar with one another, there could be eye communication, non verbal gestures that kind of indicate that there is a touchy topic and people are not willing to freely discuss it.

[Nadia Chaney](#) Beautiful. Is there a difference between people being uncomfortable because the space is unfamiliar and there being an Elephant in the room?

[Kelsey Jensen](#) The likelihood of there being an elephant in the room with a group of mostly strangers is far less than the likelihood of uncomfortable expression being in an unfamiliar space.

[Arindita Gogoi](#) Nadia Chaney I feel it works both ways. Familiarity sometimes scares people of judgment and repercussions. And unfamiliarity sometimes brings in pre-conceived notions of whether or not one's idea will be accepted. It could happen both from self doubt, superiority complex, inferiority complex. It is a huge role that the facilitator has to play to gradually make the environment safe and give assurances where the elephant no longer remains so. Had an extremely interesting experience recently with a group of youngsters...at the end of a two day workshop, this boy actually spoke up about his sexuality, because he felt safe speaking about it. Also, we had spoken a lot about honouring the space and not letting conversations out of the room without consent.

[Nadia Chaney](#) Kelsey Jensen that is a very interesting spectrum you've just given us there. The relationship between elephants and familiarity. Super useful.

[Nadia Chaney](#) Arindita Gogoi WOW. Thank you for sharing that story. So are you co-relating safety and elephants? How does safety affect the appearance AND disappearance of elephants in the room?



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[Arindita Gogoi](#) I feel the elephant is most likely to find a voice, hence clarity and better chance of addressing it, if a safe space is created. I do not feel the necessity to address the elephant right away. It should happen, according to my understanding, gradually as people get comfortable, understand that the space is non judgmental, and is willing to discuss without compromising with their safety in whichever way.

[Silvia Giovannoni Webster](#) I sometimes feel discomfort in myself. My own body sometimes picks up the energy and I either feel a knot in the stomach or light headed/confused.

[Nadia Chaney](#) That's brilliant. Isn't it fascinating that your own confusion can actually be an indicator of a state in the group itself?

[Silvia Giovannoni Webster](#) Nadia Chaney yes! I feel like all the signals are blurred and I can't read them anymore

[Nadia Chaney](#) There's an important paradox here, Silvia Giovannoni Webster. We need to be able to both read our own state and act on it, but at the same time mitigate its impact. Subtle work. But when I'm in balance with it, the intuition can really get stoked up and THAT'S when I can start working with teh Elephant

[Meharoon Ghani](#) I do too (relate to Silvia's comment about discomfort in oneself). My body signals me. And being someone with MS I have constant "rubber band" that holds me around my ribs. When that tightens due to a feeling in the room, an energy then I know something's not right. Although it's hard for some folks to sometimes hear that I've actually turned my MS into my radar, it has become this. I also look for various body languages in others, silence, and I ask questions. I've learned that silence means so many things - at times I had thought it meant folks didn't relate or shut off and now have learned that each person has a different processing time going on in their mind. I've had to learn to slow down my mind and assumptions because my mind is ticking fast. Again MS is my radar - because I'm physically slow - i use it as a guide to slow my mind. I also use my heart as a signal - deep breath in and go into my intuition (I call my Spirit Guide) - I ask the Divine. And other times I admit my truths - I say my fears outloud (from my heart) and it opens the space to others fears. I do struggle with my blurriness between my body, mind and heart - and parking my own past triggers to keep neutral and open for others' fears/pain.



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[Nadia Chaney](#) Meharoona Ghani thank you so much. There is so much nuance in this post. One thing I want to pull out of it is the importance of slowing down when the radar is alerted.

[Clarinda R. Laforteza](#) the one who is aware is the one who recognizes

[Nadia Chaney](#) interesting, Clarinda! Could you say more?

[Clarinda R. Laforteza](#) suppose the more difficult thing to be or have is awareness

[Clarinda R. Laforteza](#) How do we become more aware of "issues" that need to be addressed?

[Clarinda R. Laforteza](#) b/c then the "elephant in the room" may just not be intentionally ignored/neglected depending on the understanding of the ppl. in the room

[Nadia Chaney](#) Clarinda R. Laforteza that is a great question. That awareness can come from various sources. What do people think? How do you make yourselves aware of issues that might be in your groups?

[Clarinda R. Laforteza](#) reading into the well being of ppl. may be a good start

[Vanessa Richards](#) I think about the power dynamics related to if it's peers or if someone with more authority is in the room. I ask the host whose invited me in advance. Personal stuff is harder to track and I'd like to know more about how to feel or eek that out.

[Nadia Chaney](#) Nice, that will get us into Question 3, I believe, Vanessa Richards

[Sunshine Turner](#) Like Silvia, I also sometimes feel uncomfortable, darting eyes in the room, awkward silence..

[Lindsay Ganohsanohwe Bomberry](#) Depending on the group you are working with, there may be issues that are occurring in community that many are bringing with them to the space. There may be various members of factions involved in a greater dispute. The elephant was obvious to everyone who entered the room and despite any agreements we have made to hold space



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together, there is very little that can be accomplished outside of dialogue regarding that bigger issue.

[Nadia Chaney](#) That's why it's so important to have facilitators who know the communities, isn't it?

[Vanessa Richards](#) [Nadia Chaney](#) it's great, when we can/do and what about when we are brought in without previous relationship?

[Lindsay Ganohsanohwe Bomberly](#) It is made obvious by the general energy of the room, the feelings within my own body, the tension that many express with their bodies, the arrangements of how they are seated and interacting. Yes it is vital to have facilitators who know the community they are working within and take a balanced approach, eliminating bias as much as possible. Though that may not be 100% possible

[Nadia Chaney](#) Vanessa Richards, as Lindsay Ganohsanohwe Bomberly says too, it's not always possible...it happens to me quite often in the international venues. Even when I have been briefed and have a local co-facilitator I still barely know what's going on. In those cases I find myself really holding on to a) my own body and it's impulses and b) asking the best, clearest questions I can muster.

[Lindsay Ganohsanohwe Bomberly](#) It's interesting to think about what it means to not have a previous relationship because being "brought in" essentially means that someone within the community has connected you. Depending on their position within the community, they may influence facilitators from outside the community based on this.

[Sunshine Turner](#) Nadia Chaney Yes, I was also thinking what about when you don't know the communities, it's so much harder to address the elephant, or have the time to make the connection with the group. What do you do when it's a one off workshop? or short project?

[Nadia Chaney](#) Sunshine Turner it's not always a good in itself to expose the elephant. I think there are ways to work with them that are more subtle and even sometimes where being a stranger CAN be helpful, in a trickster sort of fashion. But it takes a lot of sensitivity and humour!

[Lindsay Ganohsanohwe Bomberly](#) having a stranger in the space can open up the potential for participants to displace themselves from the elephant, even briefly. It would take considerable sensitivity (and yes humour ideally) and also an obvious investment in



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the wellness of all participants involved. Each individual in various ways would need to be given acknowledgement and validation.

[Lindsay Ganohsanohwe Bomberry](#) well maybe not displace, rather step back from their own emotions that may be triggered in sharing space with others involved in a dispute or conflict.

[Nadia Chaney](#) Questions 2 and 3 are lonely, good people.

[Vanessa Richards](#) I'm thinking about how different societies express themselves. This week I was learning Appalachian music and the facilitator mentioned that it is common for the music to be sung with little facial expression and that the mouth doesn't open much. It made me recognise why one of my fave artists expresses the way she does (!) If I were to read that same style in a conversation, I'd think of disinterest. Surely, if everyone had the same flat style I'd recognise it as cultural but I've missed the obvious before when it comes to cultural norms. Thinking of how youths from some Asian cultures address 'teachers' and how I misunderstood respect for disinterest.

[Nadia Chaney](#) SO IMPORTANT Vanessa Richards Thank you. This is the heart of the paradox of body language and subtle group work isn't it. Would you give us a story about this in Question 4?

[Vanessa Richards](#) I will. Let me remember a good/difficult one...

[Nadia Chaney](#) just posted a couple of case studies.



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Discussion Question #2: How do you identify exactly what is the elephant in the room? How do you test your assumptions?

[Nesreen Ali](#) You have to spend some time observing behaviour. If you have time prior to meeting with folks, if there were certain people you had a connection with before you could perhaps ask. depending on if it was impacting the group dynamic, you could find a way to address it collectively (still learning about how to do that...)

[Clarinda R. Laforteza](#) is it outside of JOY & PEACE?

[Arindita Gogoi](#) 1) For a group where people are familiar to one another (and I am familiar to the group): I might already have an inkling about the elephant. Sometimes it is related to organisational behaviour, some times it is about seniors and people are in fear of some kind of reprimand in case they open their mouth. In that case I'd do a secret survey giving them the assurance of anonymity. 2) For a group I may not be familiar with, but I feel that there may be an elephant, I'd do an activity I call Questions from a Hat. I still use anonymity, but ask everyone to write their concern or issue in a paper and put it inside a hat. Then I take out the chit and without naming anyone state the issue and invite collective solutions.

[Nadia Chaney](#) Yes! Lovely. Anonymity is a powerful tool when used well.

[Kelsey Jensen](#) Asking questions in different ways can bring the elephant into the light... a combination open ended questions with yes/no questions can spark conversation. Allowing silence and thought provokes deeper answers.

[Nadia Chaney](#) oooh I LIKE this! It kind of reminds me of the SECOND elephant story...letting people talk about the elephant in different ways, from different angles...rather than approaching it head on.

[Kelsey Jensen](#) I used this tactic last night actually, and I was pleasantly shocked at how far my open ended question went.... the connections between people were significantly deepened. And my heart sang.



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[Nadia Chaney Kelsey Jensen](#) wonderful!

[Simon ThePeacock Meshugana](#) Having done a lot of the same workshop with the same population, (assertiveness/consent educ. with young men), I know one big familiar elephant is often perception of judgement from the group/inclusion with the group. I test the assumption with low risk trust building (icebreakers, respectful name intros) and gauge the group dynamic. Also, I sometimes step into spaces where I am the only white person and I find it really helpful to just name that very early and open the conversation.

[Nadia Chaney](#) Ah. We are collecting elements of working with elephants...familiarity with your own material is good one. Thank you, Simon ThePeacock Meshugana

*[Nadia Chaney](#)

Discussion Question #3: How do you address the elephant in the room? What are the pros and cons of your methods?

[Clarinda R. Laforteza](#) asking how ppl. are feeling can be good indicators assuming that their response is honest

[Nadia Chaney](#) What might be the pros and cons of this approach?

[Michael Schacherl](#) Pro: Gives opportunity to express, for participants to bring it out...or tease it out together.

[Sunshine Turner](#) You could do a temperature gage of the group on a scale, how you feeling from 1-5, using the body, you could also do this with eyes close..



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[Michael Schacherl](#) Pro: Allows expression from folks who might not feel comfortable speaking if the group is asked how they are feeling.

[Lindsay Ganohsanohwe Bomberry](#) possible con: it may trigger eruptive emotions that are sitting below the surface. This may bring any unresolved issues within the group into the space and it may be necessary for the facilitator to assert certain agreements that were already established. The pro might be that common ground may be forged even if the larger dispute isn't resolved.

[Nadia Chaney](#) Lindsay Ganohsanohwe Bomberry I am always on the watch for that CON. What is the whale just below the surface, and WHEN and HOW is it going to burst through...

[Lindsay Ganohsanohwe Bomberry](#) My experience has been that certain agreements may need to be revisited and refined. This is very delicate if emotions are triggered however. I found that with a reworked possibly reworded agreement there is an opportunity for greater connection based on those agreements. Agreements in and of themselves can become better understood, meaning that the importance of establishing agreements becomes paramount.

[Nadia Chaney](#) Lindsay Ganohsanohwe Bomberry, that's very helpful. What kind of steps do you take between the trigger event and returning to the agreements?

[Michael Schacherl](#) Giving people the space to reflect and write and maybe even share in pairs and smaller groups with a guiding question seems like it could be a useful way of allowing the whale to ease its way up to the surface rather than explode out of the water.

[Lindsay Ganohsanohwe Bomberry](#) It definitely takes quick response and decision making on the part of the facilitator. A break may be necessary if communication is breaking down. I was about to write something similar to Michael :)

[Lindsay Ganohsanohwe Bomberry](#) Depending on the group, ritual may be developed to change the energy of the space. Sensitive to the cultures present and led by the culture that the ritual is pulled from.

[Kelsey Jensen](#) I imagine that for a facilitator to deliver their facilitated event, they'd have to analyze how limiting that elephant is to the activity at hand... if it's not too limiting, leave it alone to address at a later/more appropriate/private time.... but if it's REALLY limiting, then flat out



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ask if people are comfortable addressing it so we can air it out and continue on with the schedule activity at hand.

[Nadia Chaney](#) another great scale. We're building something here, people!

[Kelsey Jensen](#) Pros of addressing it: clearing the air; letting emotions flow; hope to resolve conflict!

Cons of addressing it: don't get to the activity at hand; letting emotions flow!; accepting the challenge of moderating difficult conversations.

[Michael Schacherl](#) As mentioned below, sometimes we don't have as much knowledge as others in the room and so sometimes taking note of it and either calling for or waiting for a break and then checking in with some folks about it privately can be useful...also gives us a moment for how we want to address it or to prepare emotionally.

[Michael Schacherl](#) Also...doesn't have to be an actual break...can be a small group activity where you have an opportunity to chat with some folks.

[Nadia Chaney](#) What kinds of elephants are best left invisible in the room, and if you make that choice, how to you manage it?

[Sunshine Turner](#) Good question, first things that came to mind, personal hygiene, obvious use of drugs prior to the session..

[Nadia Chaney](#) hey all, discussion question 2 has fallen BELOW one of the threads from last month, so please scroll down there to see it. Wish I could control the order of posts on this page!

[Sunshine Turner](#) Yeah, I can't find the check in question..

[Nadia Chaney](#) I'll tag you in it now

[Kelsey Jensen](#) If you have time to prepare for a well-known elephant, another strategy is to separate facts from emotion. Present the facts for discussion, leaving emotions at the door. This binary approach favouring the facts can be effective especially with more analytical/businessy



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minds. However, favouring the emotional considerations may be more appropriate with an arts-focused group.

[Meharoon Ghani](#) I open up by stating a truth around what I perceive and I also say out loud that I'm vulnerable and willing to go there yet acknowledging and apologizing the assumption I am making and would like to hear from others, then I ask questions and others' thoughts. Pros - by stating my own truth (fear or obvious) and taking the risk - opens the space for others. Cons - not everyone is at the same place as I am in opening up personal truths and being vulnerable.

*[Nadia Chaney](#)

Discussion Question #4: Can you share a short story that tells us about a time you addressed an elephant in the room and it either went very well or was a big lesson learned (or both)?

[Nadia Chaney](#) Vanessa Richards...here's the Q I was referring to.

[Kelsey Jensen](#) There's SO many stories that come to mind, but all of them share the common thread of appropriate timing... it's hard to predict when another person or group of people are willing to invest the energy and mental stamina to address the elephant. Just because you're willing to address does NOT mean others are. There's consequences to bringing it up. Delicacy is required. I've been in the situation on a number of occasions where I leave feeling like it would have been better for me personally not to have said anything at all.... but I also then feel like that disperses the responsibility of taking on a challenge and more often than not it's left as a dark shadow over a group.

[Nadia Chaney](#) oh, Kelsey Jensen, I can RELATE. Timing. An important aspect of elephant-izing. Yes.



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[Vanessa Richards](#) This summer I worked with a group of youths new to Canada from China. I had the good fortune to have been able to include a youth worker called Yu-Han, from the Neighbourhood House many of them attended. This was a golden gift and I didn't realise till late how exceedingly important that was. I was sharing with her my frustration at how to invite the youths to participate more fully when I "invited" them to share their thoughts or aspects of their project we were developing. Yu-Han told me that inviting created the option and that we'd have better participation if I kindly asked them. Eliminate the option and lead as a 'teacher'. I had to behave in a way that was counter intuitive to me so that they had the confidence and permission to 'show-up' rather than feeling like they were 'showing off'. This worked well on this project.

[Nadia Chaney](#) Wow, Vanessa. That is so powerful. Thank you for adding your learning to this process. Being that flexible takes so much self-awareness. I'm curious about how you've developed the ability to work against your own inclinations. Does your arts practice have anything to do with it?

[Vanessa Richards](#) Thanks. That was a hard one to figure out and then it was crystal clear...

[Meharoon Ghani](#) Wow - that is great insight Vanessa Richards - choosing between option and invitation and becoming the "teacher". I had a similar but different experience. I was facilitating a room of about 200 people. I was pleasantly surprised that my session invigorating so much open dialogue that at that moment I went off my plans and gave an option to continue the bigger group dialogue. Upon reading the evaluations I conducted, I learned everyone like it but there were a few who would have preferred that I stayed on track with the smaller group discussions. It was good learning for me that I needed to be the "teacher" stay on course and not fall into a feeling/collaborator role.

[Arindita Gogoi](#) Was facilitating with a group of Post Graduate students in a University and they were from various departments. There was a boy who I felt wanted to say something but stopped himself each time...I even asked him if he'd like to say something but he refused to speak. His body language I felt said something else. I had done an intention exercise right in the beginning and had read a few intentions...one said: To be comfortable and be accepted as who I am. I somehow had a hunch and went ahead with my strategy. Generally, in India, I use activities in which matters of homosexuality are brought in, in a very matter of factly way. And not as a primary point of discussion (unless it is a gender and sexuality related workshop) so that the session becomes more inclusive. I did one activity which basically calls in people of similar thoughts or events that have happened in their lives to swap spaces while they stand in a circle. It



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starts off with humour; e.g. Who hasn't bathed today, or who has fallen off from their bike as a kid, who needs a haircut etc. and depending on the conversation we want to start we keep adding layers to it: Like who thinks Section 377 (Homosexuality is criminalised) in the Indian Constitution should be repealed. To my delight every single person swapped their space. It was 3 days after Charlie's death, and I created a gratitude circle in which I expressed my gratitude to Charlie for PYE because of the influence it has had in my life...and I did mention that he passed away in the company of his husband and loved ones. I could see faces shifting when I mentioned 'husband'. I think without vehemently discussing sexuality, bit by bit, a safe space was created (my co-facilitator was also highly instrumental because he did a quick session on identities), and eventually this boy actually spoke about his sexuality in the circle.

[Nadia Chaney](#) Arindita Gogoi thank you for sharing this important story, and also for honouring our dear Charlie in your work <3

[Arindita Gogoi](#) I honestly don't know if it was a success or lesson learnt, but I had noticed casual behaviour and remarks about sexuality in that campus before and I was nervous about bringing it in to the space.

[Arindita Gogoi](#) But I saw that boy really happy after that.

[Vanessa Richards](#) It's as though the elephant in the room can be acknowledged and 'de-sized'.

[Vanessa Richards](#) This makes me so happy to think of how this young one can walk in his skin having seen all those peers support the decriminalization of facets of himself.

[Nadia Chaney](#) Vanessa Richards ...there is a great teaching piece emerging in this conversation isn't there. I'm starting to get a picture of how to teach facilitators to work with elephants in a new way!

[Arindita Gogoi](#) Vanessa Richards The conversations that started after that...I was so amazed and exhilarated to see these students coming over and talking to this boy, even asking me what can be done to repeal this act...aweh! And to think they had entered this workshop (and they told this to me on day 1) so that they did not have to attend their classes and they get a certificate at the end of it...and on day 2 they actually got more students enrolled and brought them in...and did not want the certificates any more...



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[Meharoona Ghani](#) Many many years ago I was facilitating a gathering about creating response mechanism to racism and hate in Fernie. The participants were various community members and representatives from various organizations. I had gathered info about what was going on in the community in advance with the organizers. The head of the RCMP detachment was there and said there is no racism since no one reports it. I observed an indigenous woman went silent and put her face down, eyes downcast. At that point I stopped the meeting for a break. I approached the woman and said I've noticed a shift, would she be willing to tell me what's going on. Then she proceeded to tell me about the RCMP going into the indigenous school and the racism that took place etc. She didn't want to speak about that publicly and wanted to focus on solutions. We reconvened. This was a delicate one because the organizers of this gathering wanted to get reps from various organizations to attend (RCMP was hard to get) and to have everyone hear/share and then all sign on to an agreement to prevent/respond to racism. When I reconvened I re-acknowledged the presence of each person's in the room and the goal of the organizers. I picked up the RCMP officer's thread and thanked him for speaking up. I discussed perceptions and unreported situations and stated respect for this, I talked about my own personal story and then I said: if this is his perspective, I respect it. So from his perspective there is no racism since no one is reporting it BUT WHAT IF there was - how would he respond? Then he provided some great advice. Then I asked - what would he do to prevent future racism and hate - he gave a lot of ideas. Then suddenly the indigenous woman's face lit up too and she gave input and began to talk about the racism incident and how these got unreported. It was like a shield dropped and they all started talking to each other. It felt like the RCMP officer had never been asked his idea in the context of WHAT IF... somehow it made it safe for him and the others without any blaming and then he heard what had been going on. He actually remained involved over the 3 year process with the organizers (this was a 3 year process program for an prevention/response agreement in the community).

[Nadia Chaney](#) Amazing story with such a powerful teaching. Thank you so much for sharing this. Wow, this session has been full of so much wisdom. I'm really moved.

[Meharoona Ghani](#) Thank you Nadia Chaney for including me in this platform. I am moved by the number of amazing comments, ideas and experiences of the people here. WOW!!! So much to read and learn from others. Very humbling. Thank you!

[Arindita Gogoi](#) Thank you for sharing Meharoona Ghani! Powerful story!

[Meharoona Ghani](#) Arindita Gogoi you're very welcome.



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[Vanessa Richards](#) Powerful! WHAT IF. Love it.

[Sumanth Raj](#) I worked with young people Sing n dance about elephant it was amazing experience They r really enjoyed the song (its kannad song)



*[Nadia Chaney](#)

CASE STUDY TIME! Last month Ezra Bridgman asked me where I get the case studies...they're mostly from my own glorious failures...I tweak them a little to make them more useful but, in the end, it's all from the book of life. Here's the first one for this week:

Case Study #1: You are facilitating an after school arts program, two evenings a week. There are youth from two different schools, one in a very wealthy community and one in a much poorer community. As the weeks go on you begin to notice how this difference is affecting the group dynamic. A) what are some of the signs that you notice? B) how and when do you address this with the group? C) what could go wrong?



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[Arindita Gogoi](#) Ahhh! Has happened to me before :)

[Nadia Chaney](#) do tell!

[Sunshine Turner](#) A) Signs: Language used by the groups, sometimes grasp of language, colloquial language, differences in clothing, footwear and tools available e.g. access to books, mobile devices, gadgets etc. behavioural differences, thinking in abundance next to thinking in lack..

[Michael Schacherl](#) ...cliques, some people speaking more, some people willing to take on leadership roles, tones of voice within and across the two groups, inside jokes...

[Sunshine Turner](#) I would address specifically what comes up for the group there and then and try not to bring my own ideas and experiences in the world. To be honest, I don't know how to bridge this gap other than through dialogue, encouraging the group to share their perspective and experience so that both groups can come to a greater understanding of the other

[Nadia Chaney](#) I agree, Sunshine Turner. For me, in cases like this I like to rely on structures for dialogue, so that there is a container for personal story and a ritualized way of hearing. Metaphorical activities (like Blind Taps, remember that one) help me to keep the experiences in the room, and not to get into my personal opinion (though I fall over on that one all the time.)

[Arindita Gogoi](#) A) My case is similar, in fact may be worse. I had a group of school students with me for a history and architecture tour and they were from an elite school in Delhi. They had paid for this program. There were few students in the group who were called EWS (Economically Weaker Section) students. It is a mandate by the government where each school has to support 2-3 students in each class. Now these students did not have to pay for the program, and I could actually see a real segregation; they'd usually sit in one corner of the bus. And decisions taken would be never shared or their inputs would never be asked because the other children I felt believed that they had a sense of entitlement because they paid for everything. B) In my case, I was so caught up with the pace of the program and delivering a scholastic objective that it pained me to not to be able to address it well that time. In case of the case study you're giving here, I'd say we do a lot of team activities where they all are split and no ghettos are formed. All members of the team get a voice to express their thoughts. Do lots and lots and lots of hilarious fun games that transcends boundaries (I highly recommend Play for Peace game



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modules.) C) Time: Biggest issue is opening a wound that we cannot stitch. I'd address it as an intervention only if I have the luxury of time. If not, then I'd try to create a fun environment where there is maximum intermingling and scope to express.

[Nadia Chaney](#) wow. This sounds like a very big learning experience, Arindita. When you mention the pace of the program, I think back to Meharoona Ghani's comments earlier. I like the idea of activities that help people to mix across differences

[Nadia Chaney](#)

Case Study #2: You are facilitating a group who want to address racist violence that has been happening in their community. There are people of multiple different races, as well as people of mixed racial heritage in the room. What elephants might be in the room? (Think of both kinds of elephants, the one no one wants to talk about and the one everyone sees in the different way.) How can you help the group address the elephants? What are you cautious about? What resources do you need?

[Nadia Chaney](#) maybe I'll post the other ones, in case these first two aren't lighting your fires

[Lindsay Ganohsanohwe Bomberry](#) I want to come back to this one, I have to leave right now, but I have to focus on this more later.

[Nadia Chaney](#) Lindsay Ganohsanohwe Bomberry thank you for ALL of your insight!! These will stay up here, and the transcripts don't get made for a day or two...



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*[Nadia Chaney](#)

Case Study #3: You are designing a team building session for a local group who have come together to create a plan for more citizen engagement and activity in your city. The group includes: youth from ages 13-19, students from the local college, activists, the mayor and some council members, people from a local senior citizens housing, and a local celebrity. What design elements will you include to try to identify and address the elephant(s) in the room?

[Vanessa Richards](#) Ohhh would love to hear more about this. Firstly I would use a graphic facilitator to illustrate a number of questions/issues and these would be at different eye levels so that folks could be taken out of an assumed way of seeing. It would be effective to take play into the space to open people up and equalise the energy and let them know this is what we are doing - on purpose. Example: I'd try something where the people mingle and then lower the lights till it was dark and then ask questions to the group who could respond with their voices but in a unique and discreet way. Example - If you believe a new park, bigger than a kitty litter box, is a good investment meow like a cat. That might be a bit of a later question...

[Nadia Chaney](#) oooh different eye level is fresh!

[Vanessa Richards](#) yeah as long as i kept different bodies in mind so that none felt compromised.

[Nadia Chaney](#) wonder how else you could play with sensory assumptions...

[Vanessa Richards](#) Asking folks to write or speak from the perspective on a seemingly inanimate object like a street lamp, skateboard park, parking meter or any object associated with their focus. I'd go on to ask them to do the same for the non-humans impacted by that process and ask them to draw it out in groups.

[Nadia Chaney](#) love that...there's a somewhat similar process in Joanna Macy's "Work That Reconnects" Love how you've adapted it here!

[Vanessa Richards](#) I need to read/do her work sometime. I am familiar only by reference. Where would you recommend one start with Macy's work?



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[Nadia Chaney](#) ooh big question. I'm itching to do a training in the Work that Reconnects...and then of course she did a translation of Rilke's Book of Hours that YOU will LOVE. I read Thinking Like a Mountain first...but Active Hope might be a good place to start...

[Vanessa Richards](#) Nadia Chaney I look forward to when you do that training and thanks for the book leads. Job well done today. Thank you!

***[Nadia Chaney](#)**

Case Study #4: You are doing some team building in a very well established NGO who have been having problems with employee retention. In your pre-workshop interviews you heard very different stories as to why people are leaving the organization. When you arrive in the morning it is very tense, and people are sitting in little cliques. What might be the elephants in the room and how might you address them?

[Nesreen Ali](#) Perhaps there is someone/a bully who has made it difficult for people to feel comfortable, or there was a situation of victimisation (verbal abuse etc.) that has prevented people from feeling like they were a team. I would initially use the silent survey (suggested in an earlier question) to assess how open people are to disclose. as well, be prepared to have people express strong emotions that may be pent up. in terms of overcoming cliques, it would perhaps be key to mix up the groups and put them in different space so they can focus on engaging with one another. ask folks to turn off cell phones, and engage in a simply 'getting to know you' exercise that helps build compassion i.e. what is your story in 5 minutes.

[Arindita Gogoi](#) Wow! Today I feel like an octogenarian in regards to elephants in the room...I guess my country gives me the opportunity. I have noticed, elephants in such cases largely are



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people from senior management, nepotism, decision-making issues and non-acknowledgment of contributions. Like Nasreen mentions, the 'bully'.

[Arindita Gogoi](#) Also micro-management and control by senior management, managers etc. I was reading a book where I found a very interesting statement - People do not leave organisations; they leave managers. Isn't it largely true?

[Arindita Gogoi](#) How to Deal: There is an exercise I do, which is actually a mindfulness exercise. I ask them to write whatever is bothering them, anything on their task list, anyone's behaviour, self behaviour - anything, at this point, in a span of two minutes (the time limit is to bring out some subconscious thoughts). Then ask them to work with the Circles - Inside the Circle of Control, Outside the Circle of Control. And now create a priority list of issues and how can you tackle them. And it goes on into a priority list matrix. Team Building: There are various ways to build teams (lots of games), but I think we need to start with an empathy exercise where people start looking each other as equals...Once I worked with a Common Question: Sharing something about grandparents...it suddenly became a fun as well as emotional space, also historic because many of their grandparents were migrants from Pakistan...and suddenly a new space of empathy had started developing.

*[Nadia Chaney](#)

Well, thus endeth our 90 mins together this month. This has been a really useful session, thank you everyone for bringing your experience, curiosity, and witnessing to the process. Thank you for your depth, compassion, insight and intelligence this month. I have some amazing new ideas about working with elephants, and I hope you do, too. PYE will soon post the transcript and this page stays open if you would like to add anything to any of the posts. We are always open to new topics for the upcoming sessions. If you have any ideas please feel free to post them on this page. If you enjoyed today's session please tell your facilitator, teacher, manager, social worker, group therapist, activist and social



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artist friends! Don't forget to check www.pyeglobal.org for upcoming trainings, too, there's some new ones just posted.



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[Arindita Gogoi](#) Thank You Nadia Chaney for brilliantly facilitating this; I am so moved by all the sharing and case studies and solutions and ideas that have been shared. One of the most powerful sessions we've had I think.

[Nadia Chaney](#) Me too...

[Sunshine Turner](#) Thank You Nadia! I got pulled away near the end by the phone but look forward to reading over the rest of the comments.

[Meharoon Ghani](#) Thank you Nadia Chaney. This was great. One other thought I had and failed to mention anywhere was the use of humour. The pros and cons I've experienced with using this in a careful way. For another time, perhaps. :-)