

Nurturing resilient communities of practice

Ark knowledge management health and social services event, April 2004



Picture taken by Fiona Incedon in Kerala, 2004 – fisherman hauling in their nets. They chant as they haul.

### **SYNOPSIS OF OUR CONTRIBUTION (AND THINGS WE DID NOT HAVE TIME TO DO BUT WOULD HAVE DONE IF WE HAD HAD LONGER...)**

We concentrated on people participating as private individuals, participants in private networks, so that we could draw out good experiences which could be accumulated into general principles, draw directly from personal experience, around what makes resilient networks and communities. Victoria then responded by summarising some of the key patterns we have found in our work on communities with different clients.

If we had had more time, we would then have made explicit connections to work communities, disappointing communities, and well recognised branded communities to see what threads could be drawn. But in principle you have always to start with the warm experiences that people bring of private communities, since community is essentially an accumulation of consenting

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individuals. What works in private life works in public life in this instance in particular.

In other times and places when we have explored this subject, we have also introduced case studies of cross-border work communities we have worked with, and then invited people to build on these with practical tips and hints which lead to a co-evolved handy guide which participants can take away with them. A complete experience would then loop back round, explicitly to pick up and reincorporate the connections between private and public experiences of community and the detailed lessons that can be learned by the latter from the former.

What follows here is in three parts. The first is a description of some of the background to the method of narrative emergence which Spark has developed as part of its storytelling repertoire, and where we have drawn this from. The second is the feedback generated from this group on this occasion. The third is a set of fragments, offered by from sources which they have found to be useful in developing their individual approaches to sustainable communities as well as from other work with clients and at events. We hope these are useful. As with all these offerings, we invite you to take, test, us, and let us know what the consequences are, and due consideration to the effort we make to balance preserving client confidentiality with showing you our raw work.

Fiona Incedon

Victoria Ward

10<sup>th</sup> May 2004

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## 1 STORY BRICOLAGE

This is a technique that has been developed by Spark to capitalise and consolidate small moments of private spoken experience, so that some kind of visible *bricolage* of these small components might provide insight into themes that are otherwise hard to detect. It also seeks to hold to the principle that more abstract or strategic themes should emerge directly from individual experiences and informal words, and stay connected to these, not cut adrift from them in the destructive generalisation of the written language of most organisations. (There is a theoretical paper on the importance of slow knowledge that explores some of these concepts in more detail if you are interested – see [www.sparknow.net](http://www.sparknow.net), follow then link to press at the top of the page, then look for the pdf called 'Slow knowledge – uses of the postcard in reforming organisational time, place and meaning' ).

The technique also builds specifically on 2 other approaches, both to do with effective dialogue (which in turn leads to good storytelling and good understanding.) This section paraphrases wildly from memory with both, so it would be important to consider direct source explanations for a proper understanding of either.

The first of these is the BT Talkworks model for conducting *a good conversation*. In this model, derived in part from Gerry Egan's world-recognised work on effective models for counselling). In the Talkworks model there are only two roles in a conversation, that of the Teller and that of the Understander (important to note that this is the person understanding the teller, which goes beyond mere listening and implies a responsibility to understand.) In essence, the model oversimplified would boil down to:

*Take turns*  
*Connect*  
*Build each on what the other says*  
*Work together to co-create the outcome.*

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There are many useful aspects to *Appreciative Inquiry*, which Spark draws on for several of its methods. As its name implies, it is a method that accentuates the positive. In this instance, what we have used, apart from looking for lovely stories, is the principle that every voice should be heard, plus the idea of pyramiding: you are told a story, you then become the *custodian* of the story in the telling of it to another couple. If there is more time, then next step (which can be adapted in many ways depending on the purpose) would be to regard the 4 stories as a pool of materials which can be used to assemble a larger story which encapsulates the most memorable and important aspects of the individual stories. These larger stories can then be shared and be a basis for all kinds of strategic, policy or planning work. For example, once we used this technique with frontline health workers in the UK to help them develop the brief for an architect's competition to build a new integrated health centre.

The basic idea can use postcards in two ways (well, probably in lots of ways). Sometimes it involves translating nuggets of insight from the 4 shared stories into postcards allows you a moment of reflection. The smallness of the space allowed for this can help force a distillation. The origins of the story subject are retained (in a way this would be like the picture on the front of a postcard), and this is accompanied by a very brief summary of the insights you could draw from this one experience that might have broader capitalisation value.

There are various ways to share the postcards. If you have very little time you may decide simply to make it a voluntary exercise and allow it to have its own rhythm and shape. In other circumstances you might use them in other ways.

On this occasion, we used the postcards at the beginning (the eliciting) rather than in the middle (synthesising, shaping, conveying, holding onto the connection between the general to the concrete). So we used the prompts on a postcard whose image we hoped would connect with deeper memories of community. We also asked more questions on the postcard than we knew could be covered in the session, because we wanted the participants to go on asking themselves the questions after they had left the session. Ideally, individuals would feel impelled to contact us with thoughts they had not

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shared, ideas which came to them afterwards, which we could then incorporate into the final write up. This has not happened.

One other important underpinning of the exercise comes from story and narrative. This is the importance of *reincorporation*. At each stage of the exercise elements of the last part of the exercise are reincorporated in some way, so there should be an unbroken thread of narrative which gets strengthened with each repetition, new voice, adaptation. The emotions, insights, feelings and experiences that emerge from the exercise can be fed into and contribute to additional sessions, perhaps seeking to probe deeper into specific themes or create future stories which use insights from the past to inform and shape a vision of the future.

Finally, when designing an event around developing communities, it is worth thinking through the extent to which the experience itself embodies the principles of effective community, so that the 'situated learning' (as Lave and Wenger would describe it) of the process itself, as well as what emerges, both provoke new insights, connections and reflections.

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Think of a particular time when you have really enjoyed being part of a community. What things contributed to this enjoyment?

Think of a brand which seems to have the qualities of an effective community (e.g. Weight Watchers). What things seem to underpin this apparent success?

Think of a time when you have felt disappointed by a community. What things could have been done to make this an enjoyable experience instead?

## **2. WHAT THE EXERCISE YIELDED**

### Group One

- sharing experiences with other people both related and working with
- having goals
- there are good and bad times

### Group Two:

- we didn't have all the answers but you can find out things from each other
- having fun and working hard
- results

### Group Three

- shared vision and goals
- mutual dependency
- listening and empathy

### Group Four

- genuineness of relationships
- trust
- something at the end of the day

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#### Group Five

- sharing of experiences
- never feeling alone
- size of community

#### Group Six

- common purpose
- sense of belonging

#### Group Seven

- common purpose
- empathy
- common objectives

*Note that few of the groups fed back while retaining the idea of the original stories which were told, and this diminished the impact of the feedback. This was partly due to the way the explicit instructions were conveyed by Victoria, partly due to shortage of time. People did build their feedback one group on the next, but there was a loss of resonance because people did not list the original stories as they have done on other occasions. There is an organizational tendency to generalize when summarizing which often loses these concrete ties to the origins of something, which is worth bearing in mind. Note also that the particular image we chose (fishermen pulling in their nets) reminded one Australian of the tugs-o-war which were part of the bonding for different faculties at university, so the image prompted at least one unexpected private memory to resurface.*

### **3 SPARK'S RESPONSE (INCLUDING FRAGMENTS OF RESEARCH AND CLIENT WORK)**

***Anonymity/vulnerability/neutrality/safe space***

***Recognition of ability/ability to ask for help***

***Risk taking, physical and whole body experiences***

***Rituals of introduction and maintenance***

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**Tips emerging from a similar exercise run at the Gurteen conference by Victoria Ward and Elizabeth Lank in September 2003, but with the postcards used in a difference way:**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Common purpose</li> <li>- Shared experience</li> <li>- Time to socialise and build bonds outside social/ choir members</li> <li>- Support</li> </ul>	<p>Singing in a 6<sup>th</sup> century church in Istanbul with the BBC Symphony Choir</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Common aim and</li> <li>- Freedom to act</li> <li>- Willingness to take risk</li> </ul>	<p>3 Tutors making a failing course work</p>
<p>Finding ways of communities valuing uniqueness in individual (that may not stand out because of a foreign accent). Allows work to feel less like work.</p>	<p>Working as an Englishman in a foreign country and standing out in the work team. Being heard and of interest because of foreignness. Also, slowed conversation to go beyond work</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Out of zone ? seemed alien/ male dominated before</li> <li>- Pleasure at being surprised she enjoyed it</li> <li>- Physical (vs. sedately) challenge/ pain</li> </ul>	<p>Paintballing</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A common goal is a sufficient bond</li> <li>- Learning together</li> <li>- Understanding everyone's needs</li> <li>- Supportive environment</li> </ul>	<p>Dancing ? learning to ballroom dance in a small group of people you have never met before and apparently have little in common with.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Common problems shared</li> <li>- Support with detachment</li> <li>- Able to find creative solutions</li> <li>- Formal process too.</li> </ul>	<p>Working with a business support group to stay debt-free while running a business.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Common aim</li> <li>- Time-bound</li> <li>- Social interaction important</li> </ul>	<p>Group being outside normal environment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Peer acceptance</li> <li>- Use of previously learned skills in a new context</li> <li>- All interest outside the 'normal' structure</li> </ul>	<p>Netball Team</p>

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Safe</li> <li>- Environment</li> <li>- To share</li> <li>- Ideas</li> </ul>	MBA Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- fills a gap</li> <li>- tests self</li> <li>- whole body experience</li> </ul>	e.g. buying a Harley Davidson
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Network was a test of whether an interest was substantial</li> <li>- Fulfilling a need to do something different</li> <li>- Discovery of a diverse group of people with a common passion</li> <li>- Club fostered different skill levels - shared skills</li> </ul>	Amateur Cinematographers Club	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- mutual support</li> <li>- similarity of Life Stage</li> <li>- Tolerance</li> <li>- Emotional</li> <li>- Knowledge sharing</li> <li>- Common 'enemy'</li> <li>- Shared experiences</li> </ul>	National Childbirth Trust
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Shared interests</li> <li>- Loyalty</li> <li>- Mutual support</li> <li>- Shared purpose</li> <li>- Shared problem-solving</li> <li>- socialise</li> </ul>	e.g. organising a festival <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- chess team</li> <li>- football team</li> </ul>	Attributes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Team working</li> <li>- Common purpose</li> <li>- Mental and physical challenge</li> <li>- Socialising</li> <li>- Learning/ developing as a group</li> </ul>	Team sport <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Long standing club</li> <li>- Major sporting event</li> </ul>
Principles <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Physical location</li> <li>- Shared circumstances</li> <li>- Shared outlook</li> <li>- Leadership instruction</li> <li>- Common interests</li> <li>- Individuals (no kids)</li> <li>- Enforced structure/ mingling</li> </ul>	Tramps Supper <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Neighbourhood dinners</li> <li>- Every 3 months</li> <li>- 15 couples</li> <li>- Rotate locations</li> <li>- Rotate between courses</li> </ul>	Principles <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Common Purpose</li> <li>- Generates other ideas (creative)</li> <li>- Build trusting relationships</li> <li>- Subjugated to the task</li> <li>- Not personal advancement</li> <li>- Honest, authentic</li> </ul>	Example <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Family</li> <li>- Book Club</li> <li>- PTA project</li> <li>- International based learning</li> </ul>
Important Part of Experience <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Common Purpose</li> <li>- Shared interest</li> <li>- Cause to fight</li> <li>- Creative</li> <li>- Building trusting relationships (honesty/ authenticity)</li> <li>- Leadership distributed</li> </ul>	Example <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Work</li> <li>- School - creating additional space for classroom</li> <li>- Family</li> <li>- Book group</li> </ul>	Learning across and from the different generations	Sidmouth Group

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### **Lessons from stories shared during an similar exercise run for Aslib on virtual communities in 2001**

1. The sense of achievement without a dominating single force (trust)
2. You need self-esteem at the outset and to build esteem through community so people feel confident.
3. Trust (safety from which to take risks, somewhere to go home to, a place to be vulnerable and exposed. To what extent does a face to face community foster trust and how can this trust be replicated in virtual communities? How do you create trust between strangers?)
4. Reciprocal support. Sharing.
5. Appreciate and learn from differences (importance of diversity)
6. Potential afforded by anonymity (e.g. Community Network telephone groups for Joseph Rowntree Foundation for agoraphobics, NSPCC chatrooms, Scope chatrooms, National Autistic Society have found anonymity to be a strong benefit of different media. Also, good article in this week's New Statesmen about an accidental community between Israeli's and Palestinians which came from someone dialling a wrong number one day. Now there is a full blown anonymous exchange which allows them to speak across the divide, in which some 600 people have taken part. 'I just rang to say, 'shalom!'. Michael Bond reports on how ordinary Israelies and Palestinians, using a special telephone service, have found a way to talk across their war-divided communities. NS 28 April 2003)
7. Power of community versus that of individual is very satisfying. Group greater than individual achievement. (note that collective can also afford anonymity - see 6 above.) (e.g. user groups who create strong negotiating position with supplier and share detailed knowledge as by-product)
8. Benefit of a common purpose. Also simplicity of task (e.g. singing in a concert - music is set, people are cast in different roles, only job is to concentrate on making the performance the best possible.)
9. Advantages of a short timeframe and programming of activities with short timeframes to sustain momentum. (e.g. singing in a concert , running this workshop...)
10. Space in which to develop own skills and abilities by participating.
11. Social cohesion. Sense of belonging, security and safety.

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12. Need for respect for credibility of sources, or ways to test credibility of sources
13. Difficulties of networks with stronger personalities – how to accommodate? (E.g. Sparkknow)
14. Recognise informal networks and their role (e.g. smoking room)
15. Find ways to plug into informal networks without invading them.
16. How do you exclude or close down people who are being inappropriate?
17. What is the role of the moderator? Can it include exclusion of individuals/enforcement of protocols? (note, Mark Field of CLIP can demonstrate how many virtual communities are self-moderating – relates to 12. above)
18. Need to value a set of rules but probably more effective to find the rules through experience rather than have them thrust upon you through formal induction.
19. The structure needs to be enabling, not threatening.
20. Useful role of a welcoming letter by way of introducing protocols/conditions – this works better with professional level communities who have shared tacit assumptions about the role of rules.
21. Flexibility of ways you can contribute and your relationship with community over time. (Implies lack of hierarchies which is not the same as lack of leadership.)
22. Query whether it must always be volunteering. People are lazy. How do you make communities inviting enough, or nudge them into communities which are necessary but which they are avoiding through laziness? People need pushing if they are used to being led.
23. Need to allow communities to fall into disuse, even if idea is right, if timing is wrong or aspects of structure are wrong (e.g. Lloyds user group)

(Note, some things we did not discuss but were implicit)

24. Importance of shared stories and shared memories as a trigger for virtual community (e.g. internet archive which rekindles family life in the shtetls, the European Jewish villages razed in the Holocaust. Guardian, Friday January 3 2003. E.g. radio drama in Burundi which is bringing people together: 'Burundi heals its wounds with soap' The Observer, 4 May 2003)

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25. Note that sense of purpose often has quality of campaign, so not-for-profit organisations are normally better at semi-formal community than other types of org.

BOILS DOWN TO 6 RULES OF THUMB FOR CLIVE [HOLTHAM- THE CONFERENCE CHAIR] ABOUT VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES:

1. Create conditions of trust, value diversity and prize anonymity
2. Make the most of the strength/power which comes from being a group fuelled by the synergy and motivation of a shared purpose and the potential influence/voice.
3. Develop protocols (rituals? Preferably not rules) which create and reinforce a secure, non-hierarchical environment.
4. Ensure conditions of give: get. Exchange. Volunteering implies two-way effort and flexibility.
5. Foster and value a sense of achievement which comes from a common purpose or a really simple goal, and notice the benefit of the development of individual skills which comes from participation.
6. Communities are organisms, not machines, and so need programming which sustains momentum without freezing things into inflexible structures and processes.

**Note these insights, which came from a presentation during a piece of client work:**

A network is an instrument to achieve objectives, not an objective in itself.

There is a growth in personal and professional interest on part of the participants in the network.

Managing the exchange, sharing and management of experience, knowledge and information and ensured in a structured way, so useful beyond network.

It's just a way to become conscious of what we are doing and help us to use the resources strategically

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**Research on learning communities (in this case school communities):**

1. Sense of identity of learners
2. Rootedness
3. Meaningfulness
4. Relatedness

**Social capital - bonding capital and bridging capital - an email extracted from the Gurteen newsletter and an email from me**

Dear David,

*'Social capital is a well recognised concept in the field of human development - see for example the Department For International Development's (DFID) framework for analysing livelihoods; social capital is often found to be a significant assets in the livelihood options of people living in poverty. ' says Lucky in her email which you reproduced in your newsletter*

I thought Lucky was interesting about social capital and its relevance in human development. It's certainly true that we have come across it quite a bit in the context of km, story and aid work. You might also be interested in the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit's report a couple of years back for closing the employment gap for ethnic minorities in Britain. This makes a useful distinction between bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital is the resource provided by connections you make within your predictable social circle. In the case of marginalised groups in the workplace, this does not allow them to escape the poverty trap. What they need to create bridging social capital, with people outside their normal world view, social circles etc, in order to develop the connections and resources which will springboard them out of the trap and into new possibilities. I find this distinction useful beyond this context.

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## Dialogue

Reference BT Talkworks, available from Dave Hancock at BT Corporate Social Responsibility (Effect ways to tell things, and understand things being told to you)

Improvisation, see [www.allthatmullarkey.com](http://www.allthatmullarkey.com)

Appreciative Inquiry

Habermass on communications (heavy going, inspirational)

'Gladness not sadness is talkative' – Hannah Arendt, German Philosopher

Read also 'Sensemaking in Organisations' Karl Weick, Sage 1995

**Living Networks**– leading your Company, Customers and Partners in the Hyper-Connected Economy

Ross Dawson, Butterworth, 2003. Good book. Mainly private sector. 10 rules

1. We will soon be immersed in connectivity (access will spread and bandwidth will become greater)
2. Transparency will drive business and society (suggesting that privacy will vanish)
3. Collaborative filtering will be at the heart of networks
4. Information filtering will be an evolutionary battlefield (marketers trying to insert messages and technology and other means available to exclude them.)
5. Open, accepted standards will predominate
6. Almost all value creation will stem from collaborative relationships
7. Collaborative intellectual property models will flourish.
8. Highly virtualised organizations will be a dominant force.
9. The rapidly increasing pool of free agents will be polarised (the rich will get rich, the poor poorer)
10. People and networks will merge (technologies for integrating the human and the machine are developing.)

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**London International Festival of Theatre Business Arts Forum:  
framework for establishing networks without headquarters**

**Human contact** - how often, if ever, does the network need to physically meet? How else do they communicate meaningfully? What does face to face meeting provide which needs to be replaced? How can this happen?

**Faith and trust:** how do you ensure that people believe in what the network is doing and contribute to it?

**Ownership:** how to create this among network members? How do you create a sense of connection and motivate members to contribute? How do you avoid abrogation of responsibilities and engender mutuality, reciprocity and shared experience?

**Time and track record:** how long does it take for the network to become established and for participants to trust in it? How do you keep momentum over time?

**Size:** how big can the network be and still be manageable? Does this change over time? Can one have smaller networks within the network?

**Technology:** What benefits and disadvantages does new technology bring?

**Rituals:** how do you create, use and sustain explicit and tacit codes of conduct?

**Administration and roles:** who makes the final decisions? Who controls the budget? How do you keep the practical side of things going? What mix of roles and responsibilities is need to catalyse and sustain networks which rarely, if ever, meet

**Language:** what effects can choice of language have on communication within the network? How do you deal with misinterpretations due to cultural difference, or the perceived connotation of certain words or terms?

*Derived from a detailed framework developed by Daisy Froud for the London International Festival of Theatre Business Arts Forum and reproduced here with permission and thanks. The BA Forum is a excellent source of ideas on these matters, and well worth joining. Julia Rowntree, who set it up, has just finished writing a book on the evolution of the forum and is highly insightful about the issues involved in building networks that last over time.*

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### **Pumpkin n.**

Aka patch pumpkin, pumpkin holder

[Perl hackers] A notional token passed around among the members of a project. Possession of the patch pumpkin means one has the exclusive authority to make changes on the project's master source tree. The implicit assumption is that the 'pumpkin holder' status is temporary and rotates periodically among senior project members.

This term comes from the Perl development community, but has been sighted elsewhere. It derives from a stuffed-toy pumpkin that was passed around at a development shop years ago as the access control for a shared backup-tape drive.

[www.elsewhere.org/jargon/html/entry/patch-pumpkin.html](http://www.elsewhere.org/jargon/html/entry/patch-pumpkin.html)

Provided by will, our web designer [www.spanner.org](http://www.spanner.org)

### **Notes written for a client following an international workshop to develop a global community of practice.**

*[Context note: what follows is a lightly edited version of notes taken during a storytelling session for a global aid agency. The session was intended to use storytelling techniques, and other methods, in order to build the first steps towards a community of practice.]*

Dear Friends

This document sets out a list of qualities which the xxx Network at yyyOrg may want to be in mind as it evolves into a global communauté de savoir, with regional and local groups, communities and networks.

The material in here comes directly from what was said by participants at a recent conference. It summarises what emerged from around 45 short private conversations in pairs and small groups, 7 – 8 brief presentations and about 30 postcards. These all explored the values and qualities which

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Individuals treasure in networks, groups and communities they have participated in, both in their professional and in their private lives. I have also added some important points which I think came from a case study of a community which was presented. I have not tried to polish this document, only to expand when this seems necessary. Since it is a collection of fragments, it may therefore feel odd to you at the moment, but please do not let that put you off.

The best way to use this document might be as a short list, a reference point to which you can return over time to

- o use as an aide-memoir to remind yourselves of what you said at the time,
- o see whether you find your global and regional networks to have some of the qualities you have said you value,
- o learn whether you have discovered other qualities which are equally important,
- o continue to refresh your insights about developing an effective communauté de savoir by drawing on experiences from all aspects of your life and updating this, or writing a new and related document to distil your most current shared thinking.

But before you can use it, you should reflect on whether it is reasonably accurate as a current mirror of your feelings about the essence of a good community. You may also feel I have put some things in the wrong grouping, or misunderstood what you wrote or said, or that you want to chose different language for this record. I have put some comments in more than one grouping too, so there is some repetition which you might find jars with you.

I invite you to offer ideas for improving this so that it is a foundation document with real shared meaning which you can use over time. With best regards

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Victoria ward, sparknow 10<sup>th</sup> May 2004

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What qualities do you value in a network?

You shared experiences from networks which ranged from yoga lessons, football clubs and hiking groups, to work groups and political movements. You shared some experiences which happened 20 years ago or more (but you are still in touch with the group you shared an experience with then).

From the stories you shared and transcribed, there seem to be 8 themes:

Together we stand

The strength of diversity when united by the same passion

Exploration and discovery

Small and beautiful lessons

Rules, roles and casting

Resourcefulness

Making something happen together

Personal and professional growth

Dancing in the rain

"On the final day, at the open-air conference dinner, suddenly it started to rain. Amid all these people scurrying around, trying to remove all the tables, all these people in beautiful conference dinner clothes getting very wet ... some were trying to shelter but then suddenly two women ran out into the centre of the courtyard where the band was still playing and started to dance, in the rain. So I looked at my boss, who was standing next to me, I said "right, come on, we're going to go too!" So we ran out and started to dance, and then more and more and more women... and a few men... ran into the centre of the courtyard and also started to dance, in the rain, with no dinner. And the band continued to play and it was just the most wonderful experience of bonding, and all these laughing dancing women who had been working together for the previous four days."

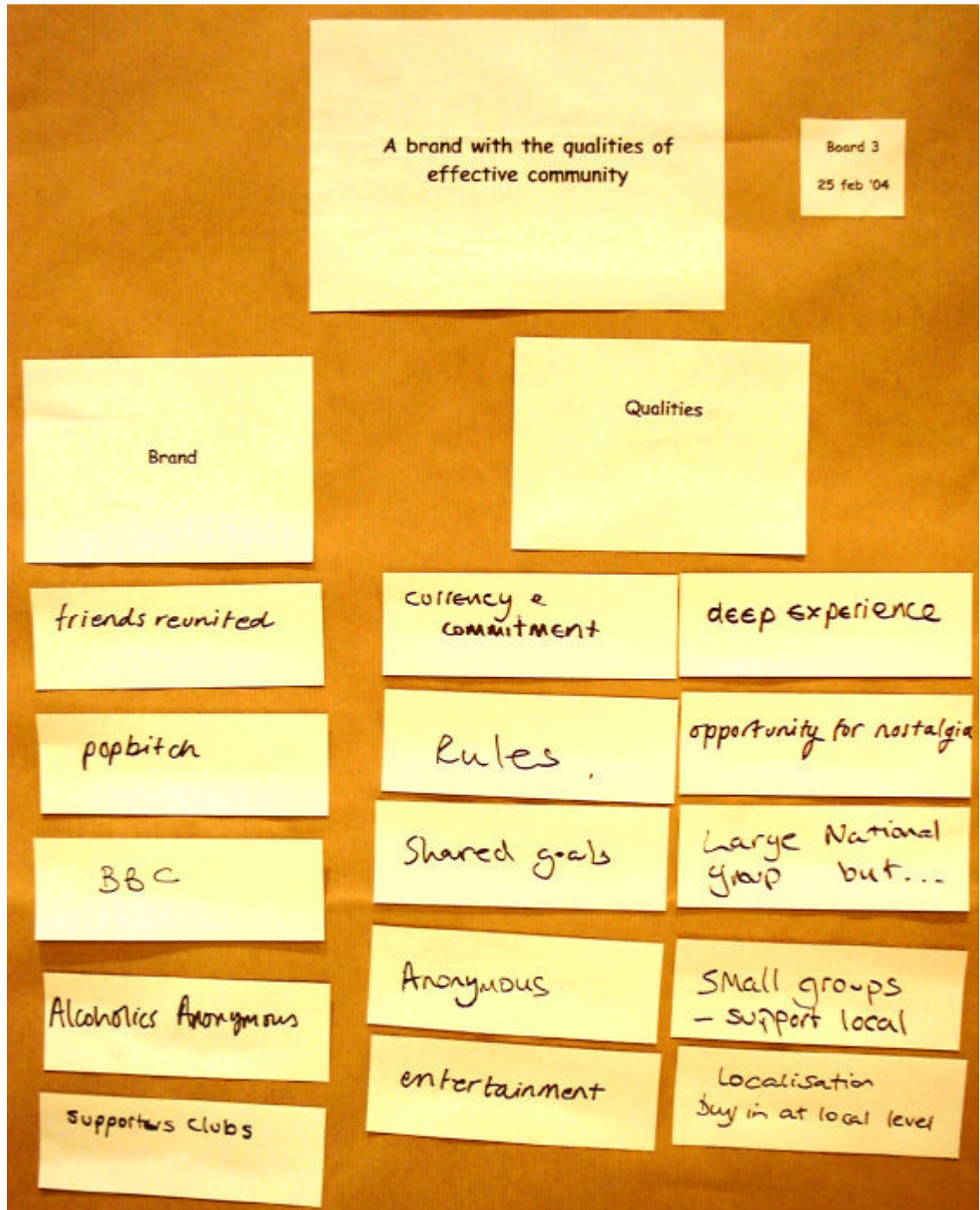
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**Think of a brand which apparently has the qualities of effective community? As run at a client session on developing virtual communities:**



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