

Navigating difficult-knowledge and discomfort

A HANDBOOK FOR EDUCATORS AND BEYOND





anything that is disturbing to or interferes with comfort;
a feeling of being uncomfortable physically or mentally;
the feeling of irritation, soreness, or pain that, though
not severe, is annoying.



This handbook is based on our experiences with DEFY spaces since 2023, including monthly deep dives, journaling seminars, conversation circles and *Shifting Edges*, an extended DEFY journey for educators which ran from January to September 2025.

We are grateful to all those who stepped into these DEFY spaces with us.

With thanks for reading,

Charlotte Bishop, Maja Dominič, Miriam Streit and Sive Bresnihan.

Handbook parts

Introducing the Handbook

PART 1: Being Present

...how to encourage a different kind of presence?

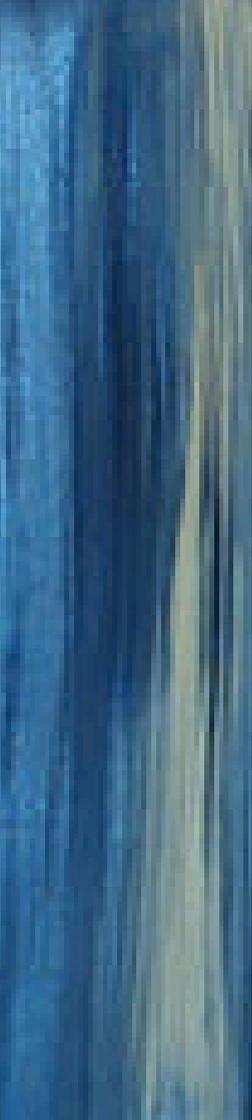
PART 2 Being Connected

...where do we find inspiration for a different kind of conversation?

PART 3: Dear Facilitators

...how do we show up? what do we consider?

Notes and References



Introducing
the
Handbook

The what, the how and the why

In this moment of multi-layered crises, what are you making space for in your (education) practice? What are you choosing to allow in? What (feelings) are you holding off? What comes in anyway? Where are there cracks and possibilities for different modes of engagement, for more depth?

Consider this a handbook for exploring such questions. Not a handbook that offers step-by-step instruction (sorry!). More like an invitation to experiment. Experiment with what?

Depth education- as described by the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective- is one that says, we cannot do this anymore. We cannot keep educating as if nothing is happening. We cannot keep educating in a way that presumes the continuity of the existing system, and keeps feeding the existing system (the one with comforts [for some] and equality [for some] and care [for some]) as if nothing- no collapse-is happening. Depth education asks how learning spaces- formal or otherwise- might support an unsettling of this pattern, and a recovery of what it means to learn, to relate, to imagine differently. Through more depth, a shift is sought "not unlike Galileo's. A radical decentering of ourselves and a radical centering of the world" (**quote from Sharon Todd in 'Landing on Earth: an educational project for the present: A response to Vanessa Andreotti**)

Over the last 3 years, DEFY has been experimenting with this idea of more depth, creating rare spaces for educators working in or adjacent to Global Citizenship Education (GCE) to explore 'what is', including entanglement in cascading crises of poverty, inequality, genocide, ecological collapse ('difficult-knowledge') and the discomfort that arises. We've been interested in how going towards this 'trouble' might prepare us to hold more space for others.

While purposeful, DEFY's experimenting never looked like a workshop, or a leadership training or a retreat. As Bayo Akomolafe writes, it was always going to be "an arrival into the slippery"
(quote from public notes, January 2026)

The pages that follow, present some of the elements that helped us arrive into the "slippery" - elements that built space for exploration of edges, resistances, patterns and habits. A variety of sources inspired us with these elements and we encourage you to explore them if this handbook grabs you (see the "notes and references" section for more). The voices, quotes throughout are those shared by educators who joined the DEFY spaces at different times. Additionally, this handbook is connected to two companion zines which capture voices from DEFY through art, writing and speech. We invite you to keep the zines close by as you move through this handbook.

This resource is for you, if you're interested in...

Getting closer to what education in times of crises and collapse - 'depth education' - might look like.

Becoming more familiar with (and exploring) your own edges, resistances, patterns, habits and thresholds for difficult-knowledge.

Building stamina for the 'elephants-in-the-room' (complexity, entanglement, contradictions, difference, conflict).

Expanding your picture of what belongs in an education space, and the role that emotion/affect/senses can (and does) play in learning processes.

We imagine that this handbook will resource those of you already working at the slippery intersection of difficult-knowledge and discomfort. We hope it may also encourage those of you who are curious about such a place - though it may be challenging for those expecting linear educational guidelines and for those who are newer to embodied approaches.

We invite you to try some of the things in the handbook; with yourself, or with colleagues/peers. You may also find something that's useful for the groups with whom you work.

As always with DEFY material, take your time, and go gently.

"I've become more attentive to the subtle dynamics of privilege, reference, and positionality within creative collaboration. [this practice helps] me move from wanting to be a "good ally" toward being a more self-reflective and responsive practitioner. I'm more intentional about naming where I speak from, inviting others to do the same, and acknowledging how our different standpoints shape perception. I try to slow down moments of tension instead of smoothing them over, treating discomfort as a signal rather than a problem."

Some terms we use

Difficult-knowledge: 'Difficult-knowledge' refers to knowledge that is difficult; both for the painful and traumatic material of the actual content but also because it 'makes demands' on us, asking us to analyse our own positionalities, our implications in and entanglement with structural violence and injustices. In this way, the learning space always has potential to become a 'pedagogical site of discomfort' and carries the risk of destabilizing our self-image and sense of who we are.*

Discomfort: For DEFY, exploring discomfort is not about (re) wounding or provoking states of distress. Instead it is about getting discomfited and getting better at being there. For DEFY, discomfort (or 'edge') has been an important/intricate source of learning and unlearning. Within the project this has looked like working with/through process, entanglement, exploring relationship to ___ (topic/theme of exploration) and connection to real-world systems, rather than the 'attaining of knowledge' or 'achieving of specific outcomes'.

**Explanation of difficult-knowledge, as coined by Deborah Britzman, found in Audrey Bryan's article, 'The sociology classroom as a pedagogical site of discomfort: Difficult knowledge and the emotional dynamics of teaching and learning'*



PART 1

Being Present

...how to encourage a different kind of presence?

...engaging with principles and returning to them over and over again

We ask groups to consider these principles from the East Bay Meditation Centre (there are many variations around and you could develop your own).

Staying mindful of several principles at the same time can be a lot. We ask, what happens when we commit to just one? How does our relationship to the space, to those in it, change? What do we notice?

Try It On:

Be willing to "try on" new ideas, or ways of doing things that might not be what you prefer or are familiar with. Trying it on requires flexibility and a willingness to experiment.

Practice Mindful Listening:

Try to avoid planning what you'll say as you listen to others. Be willing to be surprised, to learn something new. Listen with your whole self. This practice opens space to learn and connect, and from that connection to discover what's next.

Practice Self Focus:

This is about speaking from the "I" - and from your own experiences and responses. It can help you connect with what it is you may be confronting. Check yourself if you find you are speaking for a whole group or expressing assumptions about the experience of others.

Understand The Difference Between Intent & Impact:

This is about understanding and acknowledging the impact that your words/ actions may have. Intention matters, as well as the actual impact of our (and others) words/ actions. We grow and learn when we can receive feedback.

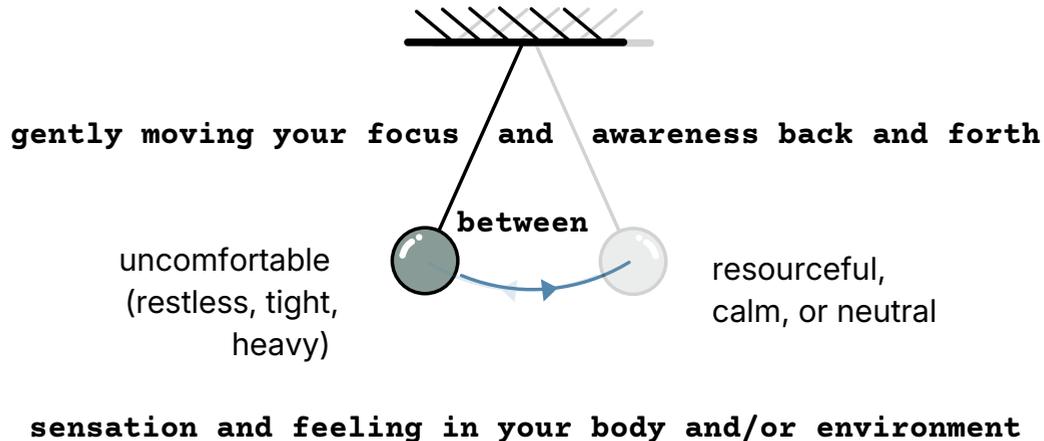
Move Up / Move Back:

This is based on awareness of privilege and how we are culturally conditioned to orient around systems of oppression. Practicing moving up and moving back allows an exploratory process to happen. Pay attention to how you and others are coming in, who is speaking and who is not.

Which one is resonating with you today?

"I feel challenged to see the points of difference between what I say I think and believe and what I do and how I act. It can be easy to put voice to a belief - much harder to live it out."

...trying the Pendulation Meditation



We use the pendulation meditation- somatic (body-focused) technique- to support moving between comfort and discomfort, without something blocking or interfering with the swing too much.

The practice invites contact with what is uncomfortable - it can help us get used to going there with intention, and to asking the question; 'How am I feeling right now?'. The practice cultivates connection to feelings and awareness that, within us, there is always a few things going on at the same time.

To start a pendulation meditation come to a comfortable seated position (closing the eyes, if this is comfortable for you).

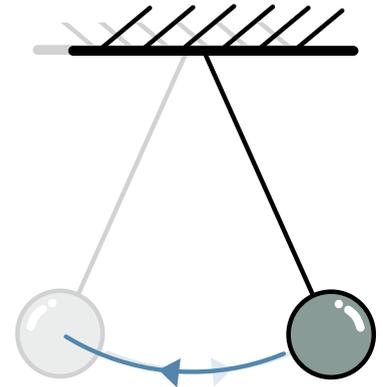
Take a few deep belly breaths, flowing with your attention, with the breath filling your whole body from the crown of the head all the way down to your toes (deepening the inhale and slowing down on the exhale with each next breath).

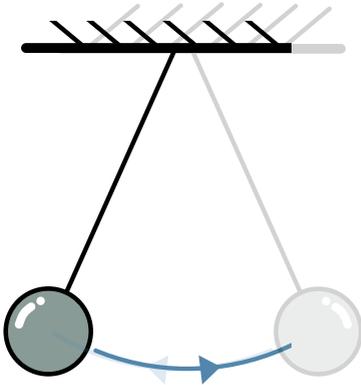
What comes next is a play/ practice of placing attention on:

- STEP 1: pleasing sensations in the body
- STEP 2: uncomfortable sensations in the body
- STEP 3: swinging between these sensations

The 'aim' with each step is to get to a place where you are able to feel each polar sensation throughout your body.

*SIDE NOTE: When practicing the swing between sensations, we advise finishing on the pleasing sensation in the body.





What sensations might you focus on?

- breath (deep and slow vs. shallow and quicker)
- muscle (relaxed and soft vs. tense and rigid)
- joints (loose vs. clenched)
- posture (open vs. closed)

Sensations might come from your external environment, internally (inside body) or might be that calling a particular image, colour, shape, feeling, memory, a thought. There is no right or wrong...what works for you, works.

And as you bring forth emotion, begin to track any sensations you feel aware of, let your attention rest and anchor on those sensations. Let your body get used to how it feels to place your attention on these sensations.

...Window/sea of tolerance

Smooth sailing: When we are in the main, calm flow of the sea (window of tolerance), we feel grounded, present, open and receptive. We feel able to manage even choppy waters without becoming overwhelmed.

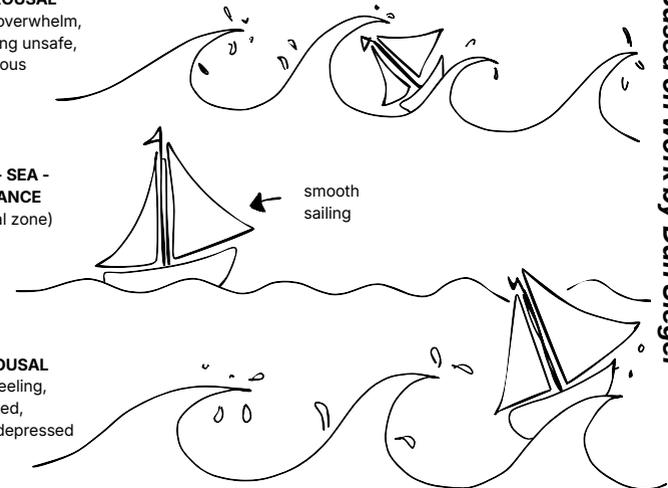
Stormy seas: Things in the environment can bring us outside our window of tolerance. We might feel panicked, anxious or, conversely, numb, lacking in energy. This is our nervous system responding to perceived threat, keeping us safe.

Getting familiar with our window of tolerance (which is different for each of us), can open up room for what we may need in a given moment - it can also help the window to expand.

HYPER-AROUSAL
emotional overwhelm,
panic, feeling unsafe,
angry, anxious

**WINDOW - SEA -
OF TOLERANCE**
(the optimal zone)

HYP0-AROUSAL
numb, no feeling,
disconnected,
ashamed, depressed



Based on work by Dan Siegel

What sends you towards the choppier waters? What is the nervous system feedback that tells you you are headed there? What helps bring you back?

...using poetry to support the dance with the unknown

We find that poetry offers windows, invitations into a topic, theme or space.

THE 'NEW' IS NOT 'FORWARD'.

It is not down the road.
Not within the algorithms of mere persistence.
Not within the logics of mastery, of hope,
or the cruel optimism sustained
in our longings for victory.
The new, instead, is a drifting to the side.
An attenuated intimacy with the peripheral,
with the minor key, with weird fidelities
that leak away from the pipeline
of the already organized,
the already diagrammed.
The new is a murmur, not design as such;
the flickering flame of a passing,
a sidenote.

by Bayo Akomolafe

AN INVITATION TO A BRAVE SPACE

Together we will create brave space
Because there is no such thing as a "safe space"
We exist in the real world
We all carry scars and we have all caused wounds.
In this space
We seek to turn down the volume of the outside world.
We amplify voices that fight to be heard elsewhere,
We call each other to more truth and love
We have the right to start somewhere and continue to grow.
We have the responsibility to examine what we think we know.
We will not be perfect.
It will not always be what we wish it to be
But It will be our brave space together,
And
We will work on it side by side.

by Micky Scottbey Jones OR by Beth Strano

**Poetry...
can help us to name 'it'
from the beginning', and
invite courage.**

**bridges the gap
between abstract and
tangible- let the words
linger.**

**We trust those in the
group to 'fill-in the gaps'
and meaning' for
themselves.**

We encourage creative expression through the medium of poetry. Here are extracts of poems written by those who have been in DEFY spaces

Intense
In a way
that makes more sense
than expected.

Let yourself fall
in a hall
of silence

From 'Intense' by Britta

In the liminal, the layered, the
learning
where every moment is a
teachable one
and every silence begs
reflection
on the call, the contradiction,
the constant
without losing myself?
[can I say no? not today]

***From "Shifting Edges, a poem" by
Mags***

Are you feeling a call to write...or to revisit the poetry of another?

“These kinds of offerings create space for both grounding and discomfort. I often found myself sitting in the “cracks” between vulnerability and clarity. ”

... silence

"I appreciate the ability to leave space for silence, the slowing down of dialogue."

...using movement and rhythm in space: finding (a) pace

We play with building (co-creating) a soundscape:

- STEP 0: create a circle (standing or sitting) so that everyone sees each other
- STEP 1: introduce one simple move that produces sound and keep the pace, interval of movement
- STEP 2: encourage individuals in group to (one by one) start coming into the space with their own 'sound contribution' and again keeping the pace, interval of movement

CONTRIBUTE:



with feet

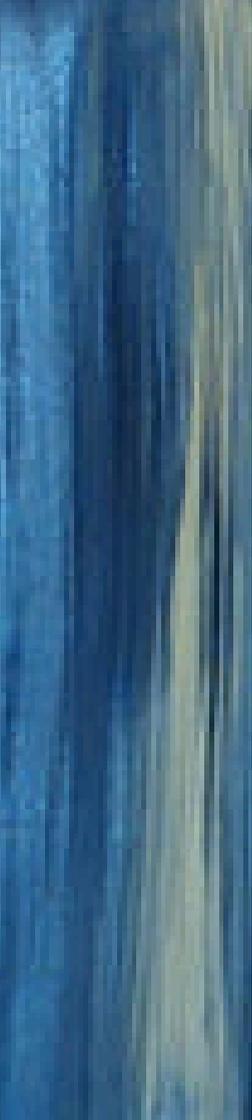


with hands



with voice

- STEP 3: encourage holding each 'sound contribution' for a few intervals - the outcome (how it sounds) is not as important as it is to focus on each individual contributing to collective 'success'
- STEP 4: encourage individuals coming in and out of the soundscape (introducing new movements that produce sound, changing intensity, stopping all together and observing)
- STEP 5: trust the process and invite a gradual stop
- STEP 6: encourage a few moments of silence once the sounds fade away



PART 2

Being Connected

...where do we find inspiration for a
different kind of conversation?

...using podcasts to begin conversations

"when you talk to people who are really in the middle of liberation struggles, a lot of the time what you hear is, "No, we don't want to have a world where there are just different people suffering. We want to have a world in which many worlds can flourish. We want to have a world that is transformed, not just reversed. We want to have a world in which everyone has enough to eat, and air to breathe, and water to drink. And we don't want that just for the human people; we want whole ecosystems to flourish."

Starting to expand the scope of our imagination so that our complicity and our benefiting from harm isn't the end of the story, but rather the beginning of a different story, is really important..."

Alexis Shotwell in Purity politics in compromised times (ep322)

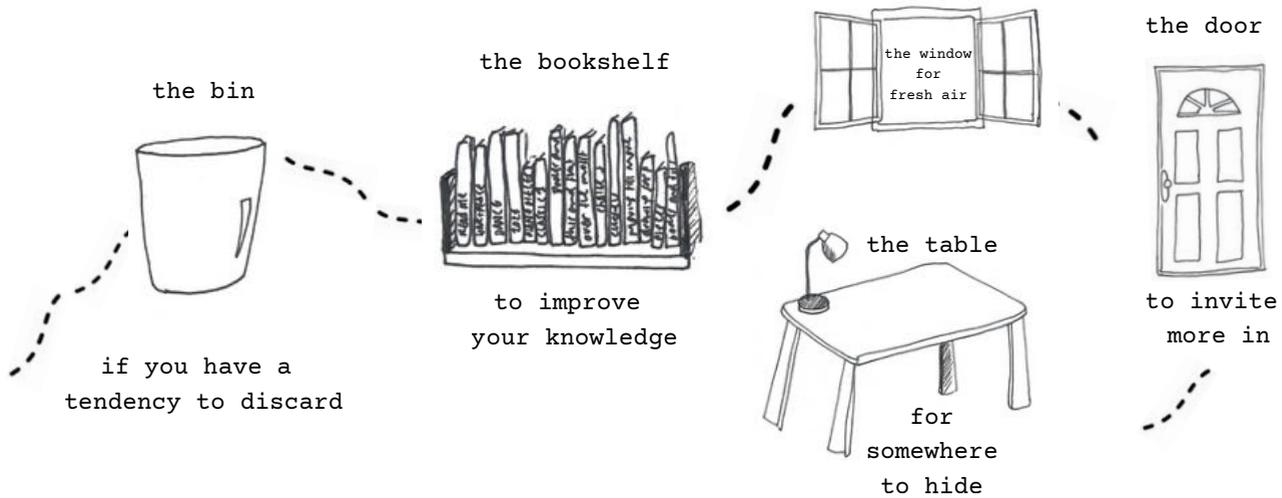
We come together as a group to listen to extracts of podcasts, pausing between sections to open up space for reflection. This allows for rich, generative discussion.

The Greendreamer podcast series is hosted by Kaméa Chayne. Here's an extract from an interview with Alexis Shotwell

...movement as metaphor: What is your pattern?

How prepared are you to open space for difficult-knowledge and discomfort (in the learning space? in yourself?)

We ask a group this question and invite them to move towards...



What did you move towards...and why?

...metaphor, maps and cartographies: The House Modernity Built

We try to start deeper conversations about modernity, about entanglement and with help from cartographies like The House Modernity Built.

The House Modernity Built tells the story of a house that, built on separability, is exceeding the limits of the planet. It tells of how violence is the basis for the house and how all of us are connected to the house in different ways. As a story, it's not setting out to describe reality accurately, but to move conversations beyond points where they often get stuck.

Based on literature from Indigenous, Black, Decolonial, Post-development, Post-colonial studies, Psychoanalysis and collaborations with "Teia das 5 curas", The House is one of several 'creative social cartographies' developed by the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures Collective (GTDF).

THE HOUSE
MODERNITY BUILT



<http://decolonialfutures.net>

HIDDEN COSTS



FLOORS



unsustainable growth, over-
surplus labor force
collapse

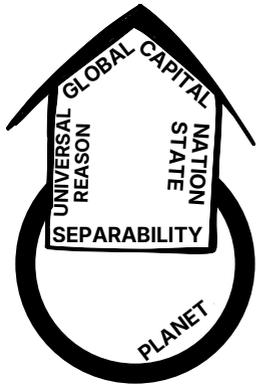


"The cartographies invite us to take a distance from our opinions and to see them with healthy scepticism. Then we can ask where the opinions come from, where they lead to, who decides, in whose name, for whose benefit, how come and how things could be imagined differently. They also invite us to consider what we could be gaining (affectively and materially) from holding on to certain ideas, hopes, desires, perceived entitlements and forms of relationship, and what we could also be blocking, losing and missing out in this process. We say that the cartographies help us to face our "constitutive foreclosures": what we have to deny in order to continue to believe what we want to believe in, and desire what we want to desire. However, they do not intend to take participants from A to B – to change their positions in a directed way. They do aim to shake things up a little by making hidden processes and gaps visible – and leave it up to each person to decide what to do next."

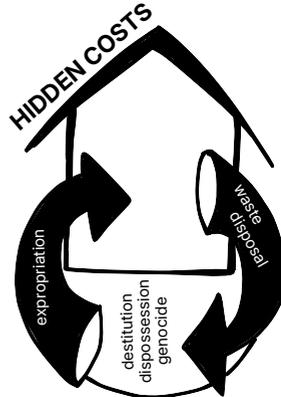
From the GTDF Global Citizenship Education Otherwise Study Programme



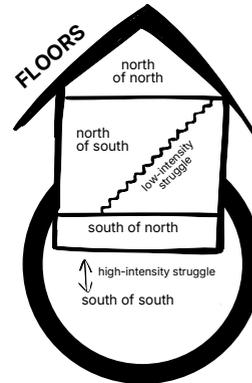
THE HOUSE MODERNITY BUILT



house exceeds limits of planet



house subsidised & maintained
by violence



false promise of universal
middle class

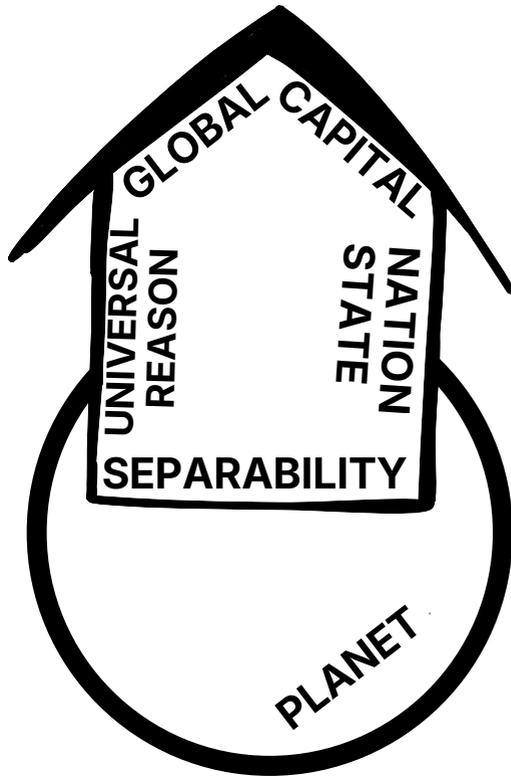


social, economic, political
& ecological crisis

Within DEFY we have our different ways into the House. In the following pages we offer one of those ways.

How does it land for you?

The House



house exceeds limits of planet

Once upon a time there was a house that sat on planet earth. There were a few curious things about this house:

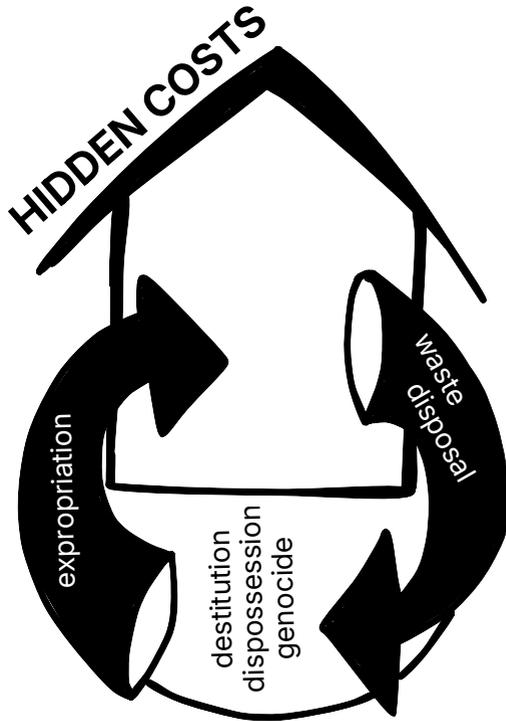
Firstly, this house was HUGE. In fact, it exceeded the limits of the planet.

Secondly, the floor or foundations of the house were very strong and very cemented and forced a very rigid separation between that which lay inside the house and nature/environment that lay outside. And that *idea* of separation leaked into everything- the separation within humans, between cultures, its boundaries decided by how much they were said to "contribute."

Thirdly, the walls. One represented borders and the state. The state which promised security and belonging...perhaps not necessarily to people but to property, or those with the property. The other wall represented logic and reason. There was a single story of progress and development. One story mattered above all others and no other story of progress was allowed. And so it meant that some people were 'there' and others weren't.

And then there was the roof...representing the main purpose of the house; that of making a profit.

The Family



house subsidised & maintained
by violence

There was a lovely family who lived in this house- parents, grandparents, some kids, you probably know their names, their jobs, education, hobbies.

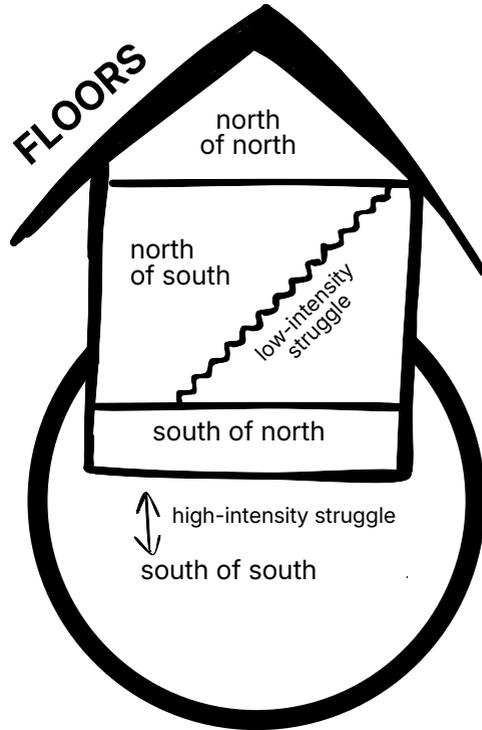
They lived comfortably- laptops, phone, good food, weekly take-outs, a car or 3. They ate a lot, they watched a lot, they consumed a lot. And all that they consumed came into the house through one big pipe. A second pipe brought stuff *out* of the house into the planet and emptied it of what those in the house no longer needed, dumping it into the planet.

I'd like to say that the family sometimes woke in the night with a few existential questions:

*I wonder what's happening outside the house?
What are the costs of keeping our comfort going?
Who's getting harmed?*

It would be a lie to say that that such questions ever came to them.

The Floors



false promise of universal
middle class

Something that the family didn't know was that living above them, in the penthouse, was a man living the finest of lives. Cars and holidays and luxuries...no one really knew how he'd made all that wealth.

The family lived on the second floor and they were highly invested in climbing the ladder, in social mobility.

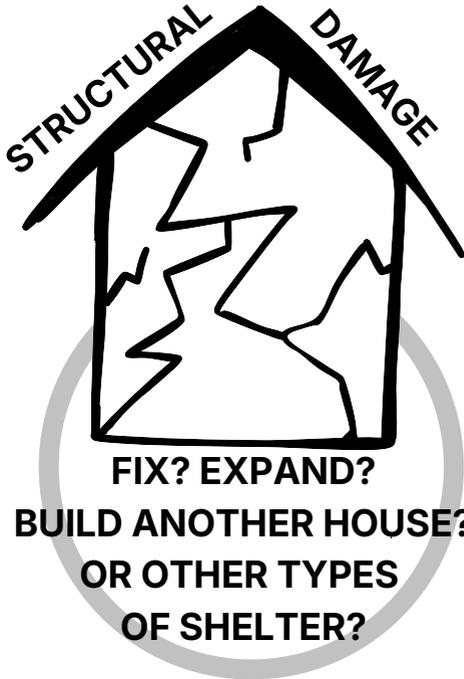
Just below them, in the basement, were those who have been exploited and marginalised in the house. While they did a lot to keep the house running, they didn't have access to the social mobility. At the same time, they needed the security the house offered.

Every so often, if they listened hard enough, the family could hear knocking coming from outside the house. Little did they know that there were a whole load more people living out where the pipes began and the pipes ended.

Why might some be knocking to enter? Why might others not be knocking?

Damage

unsustainable growth overconsumption
surplus labor force mental health crisis
cancellation of welfare and rights



social, economic, political
& ecological crisis

One day the walls of the house started to crack and crumble, in fact the whole house was starting to collapse... collapsing under the weight of social, ecological, economic and political crises, including unsustainable growth, overconsumption...

The house really didn't feel too liveable.

Do you think we need to fix the house?

Do we make it bigger?

Do we need to start imagining different kinds of homes?

The house and modernity are not an option, given the violence they require and the limits of the planet.

What do we do next?

...naming elephants-in-the-room

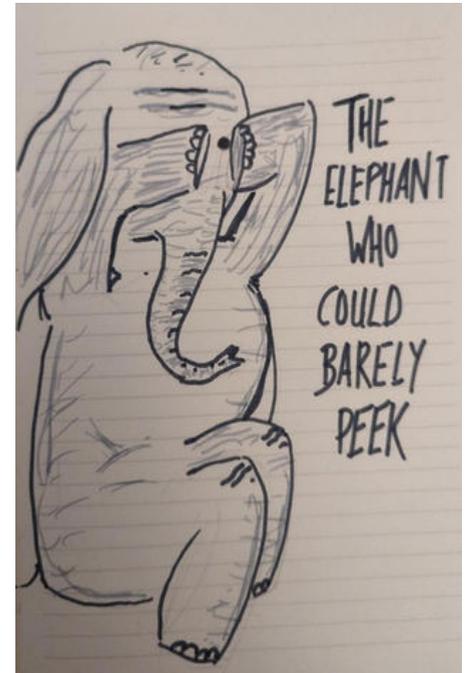
We ask groups to draw and create elephants

We invite them to draw, craft or design 'their' elephants-in-the-room. What's not being touched, mentioned and recognised because it brings discomfort?

Trying to name the elephant and giving it space, opens up discussions around feelings of discomfort and difficult knowledge in learning spaces.

The elephants represent difficult-knowledge but the crafting and drawing connects us to these elephants in a new and closer way.

*What about you? What do your elephants look like?
Is it possible to dance with them?*

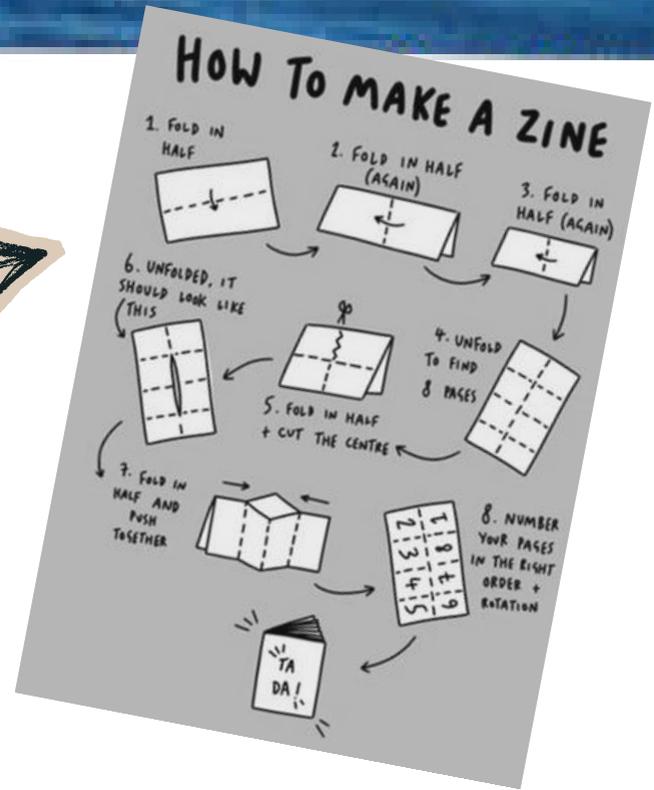


“I have started giving myself permission to see entanglement as a natural part of social and creative processes rather than something to simplify. I feel more curious about what lies beneath the surface tensions — the unspoken dynamics, contradictions, or “elephants-in-the-room” — and more motivated to explore them with others instead of avoiding them for the sake of harmony.”

...making zines

We ask groups to make elephant-in-the-room inspired zines

magazines, crepe paper, photos, coloured card, glue, pens, markers, scissors, pastels, string, ribbon are provided



There are so many different ways you can fold your page into a zine.

**We encourage those in the group to
choose a prompt- or write their own**

Your elephant(s) have followed you over the last
little while...where's your elephant now? Have you
a question/a prompt/something you want to explore
around it?

Exploring _____ (topic), makes me feel
_____ (because...._____)

Something I wish
I could say...

What (topics, feelings,
questions, elephants ...) do
I hold off or struggle to
make space for?

Would you consider giving this a go, on your own or with others?

and ask them to form small groups make their zines alongside one another

The creating, the crafting - using prompts as a base - offers a medium to support conversation about the elephants-in-the-room.



What emerges?

with thanks to Creativity & Change for zine images

...staying with the discomfort

The elephant work can be heavy because it's about acknowledging what is not given space. We use cards like these to help us stay with the elephants and the discomfort they might bring.

They offer the layer of 'this is nothing you have to resolve today but it's going to stay with you.' Their tenderness allows the body to move the intellect (rather than the other way around). They soften, but don't coddle.



Radical Tenderness Cards from GTDF



PART 3

Dear Facilitators

...how do we show up? what do we consider?

"I particularly value [a] facilitators' ability to hold complexity without rushing toward resolution and their openness about their own positions and uncertainties."

On safety

What we have been learning is ...

to go a little deeper, people need to feel 'held' (seen, heard, unconditionally regarded) and to know that they can opt out or pass at any time.

Some might say that this adds up to 'safety' but we rather use the word 'held'. The idea of 'holding' allows us to extend agency to those in the group to discern how the space feels. It also places onus on us to *attune* to how people are doing (rather than assuming), which feels right.

In the context of exploring difficult-knowledge and discomfort, 'holding' has been an important stance for us to maintain. It has reminded us that we are not there to coddle, comfort or fix. Noticing the impulse to coddle, comfort or fix has been integral to the practice.

As facilitators, we have been learning that our own, regulated presence is vital - a person can feel when they are being held and when they are not (their nervous system looks for the signals). Tending to ourselves if we are getting discomforted, is vital. There is risk for the process and for others if we do not.

On content

What we have been learning is ...

groups may learn about or be invited to take action on unfair systems and injustices - but what about positionalities, implications and entanglement in these unfair systems and injustices?

Some questions to engage positionalities include:

What do you do with what you know? How do you navigate / rationalize / minimize / deny / oversimplify things you learn about or encounter? Can you trace the assumptions and layered implications of your understandings?

Working with these kinds of questions requires a well-scaffolded space and readiness for what might surface (these questions illicit feelings). Loosening your grip on 'content' (information 'about' things) can also be challenging. With this approach, you work more with what's emerging from the group (which is uncertain). You may also have to contend with learner 'dissatisfaction' - learners come wanting to know more, and to be assured- they won't let go of these expectations easily.

Creating spaces that feel like they are beyond the structures we are used to, involves risk. The reward may be more depth - more presence, attunement, honesty - but it doesn't always come.

On certainty

What we have been learning is...

the importance of loosening the grip on 'the known' and embracing emergence of 'the unknown'

What is emerging in the present is as important- if not more important- to the learning process as 'sticking to the plan', the known. This involves both conscious choice and trust, as meeting the need for certainty can be a strong pull.

It's about making choices every step of the way and (as facilitators) attuning to 'what is there' for ourselves and the group. Throughout DEFY's ongoing exploration the only thing that has been certain is that discomfort accompanies this journey. And similar to 'safety', this is not a point that is arrived at, but rather an ongoing relationship to content, understanding of self and context.

It's about slowly moving away from certainty being a crutch and embracing it as the dynamic process that it is. It is about bringing more curiosity to the process of learning.

"For there are no new ideas. There are only new ways
of making them felt."

Audre Lorde



Notes and References

Please dig further...

We are grateful for the work and wisdom of the following:

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