
Research Proposal:

How can the Thinking Environment build psychological safety in team meetings to improve the quality of individual and collective thinking and action?

MA Professional Practice (Neuro coaching)

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PROVISIONAL TITLE

How can the Thinking Environment build psychological safety in team meetings to improve the quality of individual and collective thinking and action?

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How effectively can the Thinking Environment approach be applied as a live learning experience in a team meeting setting?
2. To what extent can the Thinking Environment help build psychological safety in a team meeting setting?
3. What is the perceived impact of the Thinking Environment on individual thinking and action?
4. What is the perceived impact of the Thinking Environment on collective thinking and action?
5. What is the experience of the team, the individual and the researcher in this process?

CONTEXT

Market Context

The technological advancements of the 20th century have driven globalisation, changing how we live and work. Labour migration and technology, in particular influence the complexity that societies, businesses, teams and individuals are grappling with (Cox et al 2014). More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has led greater adoption of virtual and interconnected working (Mangla 2021, Reuil 2022). There is also emerging recognition of intersectionality and the far reaching implications of this (Zhang et. al 2021).

Organisations are facing the challenge of how to adapt working practices to support individuals and teams navigate cross-cultural and intersectional complexity (Cox et. al 2014, Booyesen 2015, Stout-Rostron 2017).

Literary Context

Culture

Early cultural theorists, such as Hofstede (1997), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) and Rosinki (2003) define culture as the constructed and collective understanding a group of

people differentiating it from another group, manifest through symbols and language, values and assumptions. However, as explored in their recent paper, this author (Britz 2022) concurs with more recent views that due to globalisation culture cannot be viewed as a single construct, rather as a shifting kaleidoscope of different dimensions such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, education etc.

Intersectionality

There is also an increasing dialogue on the need to recognise these layers of 'difference' or 'intersectionality' as the complex multiple realities and lived experiences that exist within individuals and group identities, especially for those who have experienced social injustice. Roche and Passmore (2021) express the view that, in trying to manage diversity, many organisations have inadvertently been deaf to the voices of unique difference and lived experience.

Psychological safety

To hear difference, organisations need to first create an environment where people feel they are listened to and safe expressing themselves openly without judgement. In her study 'Psychological Safety and Learning Behaviour in Work Teams' Edmondson (1999) defines team psychological safety as a shared belief that it is safe to take a personal risk such as speaking one's mind and a team environment "characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves" (p 354).

In a competitive business environment where innovation and improvement is vital there is a commercial benefit of psychological safety as seen in the longitudinal study by Google's People Analytics Group which indicated that psychological safety was a key characteristic of the company's high performing teams (Newman et. al 2017). Similarly Stout-Rostron's (2017) review of diversity studies in the workplace included how cognitive task performance and solution finding is better when there are differing opinions. However, research such as Singh et al (2013) also indicates that the greater the diversity of the group the more challenging it is to create psychological safety.

Introducing the Thinking Environment

The Thinking Environment is an approach founded on a positive philosophical belief in the capability of all individuals as independent generative thinkers that is enabled through the creation of a safe space of deep, respectful and appreciative listening without assumptions

(Kline 2020). The Thinking Environment methodology is imparted through a facilitated experiential learning process that calls on the individual and collective accountability of the group (Time to Think 2021).

As shown in Figure 1 (Time to Think 2021) below there are ten components which Kline (2020) suggests create the Thinking Environment when embodied by a group.

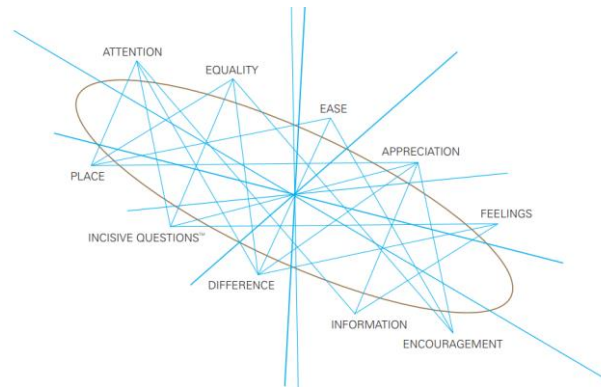


Figure 1: The Ten Components of a Thinking Environment
(Time to Think 2021)

One component is ‘information’ which includes all elements of an individual’s social context and the freedom to choose what to surface (Kline 2021). This aligns with Roche and Passmore (2021) who argue that to fully recognise the multiculturalism and intersectionality of today’s workplace it is important to also acknowledge the historical social injustice that was and still is present.

Organisational Context

Rio Tinto plc is an organisation that epitomises the influence of globalisation and intercultural complexity and intersectionality in the workplace. A multi-national company with over 40,000 employees located in more than 40 countries around the world, Rio Tinto is vocal in its commitment to increasing the diversity of its workforce and driving a culture of greater inclusion where “all voices are heard, all cultures respected” (Rio Tinto 2023).

JUSTIFICATION AND INTENDED VALUE OF RESEARCH

As a coach working with organisations of diverse workforces this author witnesses the challenges in navigating multi-cultural complexity and intersectionality outlined above and

agrees with the potential positive impact on the individual, team, organisational and societal level of finding ways to recognise and make space for diversity of thought and identity.

As a trained practitioner of The Thinking Environment this author seeks to conduct a work-based research study that explores how the Thinking Environment might be used to build psychological safety in diverse teams.

This author believes this research is timely and offers three core potential benefits:

- 1) To raise awareness of the layers of complex multiculturalism and intersectionality that exists in teams.
- 2) To further contribute to the research on psychological safety and diversity in team settings.
- 3) To provide practical and accessible guidance on the Thinking Environment as a methodology to support organisations in recognising and embracing diversity.

METHODOLOGY

The author believes that the ontology for this study is that of **Interpretivism**. The research is focused on understanding participants' subjective experiences and perspectives of the Thinking Environment and recognises their views will be influenced by their respective layers of intersectionality. However, the author also acknowledges she comes with her own personal layers of intersectionality and cultural influence which will influence her interactions with the participants and the analysis of the data. Both these elements echo Interpretivism¹ and in particular the Interpretivist approach of Symbolic interactionism².

The research will also be informed by the **Critical Theory of transformative learning**³ in line with the intention to contribute to the movement for positive social change by helping organisations challenge their traditional practices and find ways to better embrace diversity in the workplace.

¹ "Interpretivism argues that truth and knowledge are subjective, as well as culturally and historically situated, based on people's experiences and their understanding of them. Researchers can never be completely separate from their own values and beliefs, so these will inevitably inform the way in which they collect, interpret and analyse data" (Ryan 2018, p8).

² Symbolic interactionism has three core principles: 1) People's behaviour is based on their own meanings; 2) Meanings are generated from social interactions; 3) People may adapt meanings, based on their perceptions of situations or their experiences of them (Ryan 2018, p9).

³ The process of participatory research to build awareness of current state in order to identify opportunities for social change (Fleming 2021).

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This author suggests the research is conducted as a **phenomenological action-based case study**. Figure 2 below briefly describes these elements (Denscombe 2014) and their link to the research questions.

Research strategy	Justification
The case study approach, widely used in small-scale social research seeks to explore in-depth one, or a few elements of a particular phenomenon. The aim is to gather insights from study of that specific element with potential for broader implication. In particular, case studies explore relationships and processes in social settings and the interplay of elements present in that situation.	A case study approach will explore the specifics mentioned in the overarching question: <i>How can the Thinking Environment build psychological safety in team meetings to improve the quality of individual and collective thinking and action?</i> It will examine a specific situation that is a common phenomenon in the workplace, ie team meetings, with the aim of understanding the effect of the Thinking Environment on participants in that situation. It is concerned with exploring how the relationships between participants shift as a result of the process applied.
Action research is focussed on addressing issues and finding solutions in the 'real world' and is often used in small-scale social research and to help further professional development. It is also committed to incorporating the findings to become a cycle of research, often encouraging the participants to be involved in the design and implementation of the research rather than subjects of it.	An action research approach will help address the research questions: <i>How effectively can the Thinking Environment approach be applied as a live learning experience in a team meeting setting?</i> <i>To what extent can the Thinking Environment help build psychological safety in a team meeting setting?</i> The research seeks to help organisations make progress in addressing the challenge of embracing diversity and nurturing high performing team.
Phenomenology seeks to study the subjective experience of a participant and understand a situation through their eyes.	A Phenomenological approach will help answer the research questions: <i>What is the perceived impact of the Thinking Environment on individual thinking and action?</i> <i>What is the perceived impact of the Thinking Environment on collective thinking and action?</i> <i>What is the experience of the team, the individual and the researcher in this process?</i> This approach is selected in recognition of the highly subjective nature of the study and seeks to consciously consider the perspectives of the participants with their unique intersectional identities and how these will each be different from each other and the researcher.

Figure 2: Research choice described by Descombe (2014) and author's justification

The author is recommending a three-stage **mixed methods** approach as shown in Figure 3 below. Mixed methods is recommended for case studies to increase the strength of the internal validity through data triangulation (Crowe et al 2011).



Figure 3: A proposed three-stage research design

CASE SELECTION AND SAMPLING

Crowe et al (2011) and Denscombe (2014) both stress the importance of careful case selection in any case study research. Given the specific focus of a case study there is not a recommended sample size (Denscombe 2014) however Crowe et al (2011) offer three types of case study approaches as shown in Figure 4 below.

Intrinsic study	Case is selected for its own unique merits rather than being representatives of other cases.
Instrumental study	The case is selected as a 'typical' case where it is not about the unique characteristics of a particular case but rather provides opportunity to study an issue or phenomenon.
Collective study	Multiple cases are carefully selected to enable comparisons to be made. 'Typical' cases may be selected to enable analytical generalisation, or they may be selected for replication logic (to test a theory by seeking to replicate the findings in a second or third case)

Figure 4: Three case study types (Denscombe 2014)

For this study the author proposes to run an **instrumental case study** however, would like to potentially expand the research to a **collective case study** with two other cases to test application of the Thinking Environment with teams of varying levels of multiculturalism and potential intersectionality as outlined in Figure 5 below.

Primary instrumental case study

- Case A: the Rio Tinto Copper, Growth & Development team. A highly culturally diverse group of 10 individuals situated across multiple locations. The majority of team interaction is virtual and each is physically working in an environment of cultural difference. There is also a variation in age, gender, education and work experience.

Further collective case study

- Case B: a team from a New Zealand government agency situated across two locations with a mix of co-located in person and all-team virtual meetings. There is a mix of cultural heritage, indigenous identity, however with a dominant national culture. There is a range of age, gender and education.
- Case C: a small site-based co-located team within a subsidiary of Rio Tinto and based in South Africa. Team meetings are invariably in-person. All team members are from the same region and tribal affiliation however there is diversity in gender, age, education and experience.

Note:

- All cases will ideally comprise a minimum of four and maximum of 10 individuals (numbers provide some degree of difference to be present but numbers are still manageable for all voices to be heard in a one-hour meeting structure).
- At the time of writing this author has received formal approval from Case A found in Appendix C, with pending approval from Case B and C.

Figure 5: A two-part case study

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

There are five main ethical considerations for this study that the authored has identified which are outlined in Figure 6 including suggested mitigations.

Ethical considerations	Proposed mitigation
1. To protect the psychological safety and well-being of participants through the study	At the start of every meeting participants will be reminded of their autonomy in the process and their right to step off the study at any point should they not feel comfortable. A participant information and consent form will be shared for them to sign before the study commences providing full and transparent disclosure of the research aims, process and methodology. As an accredited coach with the International Coaching Federation (ICF), the author's practice is founded on the principles of the ICF's Code of Ethics (ICF 2023).
2. Confidentiality of the business information	The author will offer to sign an NDA with each of the organisations. No company information will be recorded in any way during any of the meetings.
3. Confidentiality of the personal perspectives that will be collected from the participants	All personal information will be gathered, stored and disposed of in line with GDPR principles as shown in Appendix D (GDPR 2023). This will include using data keys to separate identifying information from personal perspectives, encryption to store or send any data, and the destruction of all personal information upon completion of the research project. While the research will be conducted with participants in different jurisdictions no data will be transferred across borders, rather, all data will be gathered and stored in New Zealand where the author is located.
4. Respecting the cultural practices of participants	Given the research will be conducted with people from a range of different cultures and intersectional identities, it is important to recognise and honour the different cultural/ indigenous perspectives such as Aboriginal storytelling in Australia, honoring te tiriti o Waitangi in New Zealand, recognising the trauma of social and racial injustice that has and continues to be part of the lived experience of many South Africans.
5. Implication of being an insider researcher and the potential impact on the research process and results	Costley et. al (2010) refer to the risk of research influence through pre-existing relationships between the researcher and participants. The use of the participant consent form and the reminder at the start of every interaction of the purpose of the research and the frame of the interaction is intended to help boundary the research from any other interaction. Given the author's adherence to the ICF Code of Ethics, any conversations that occur outside of the research will also be bounded within those coaching interactions. The author is conscious that they are also involved in the research itself and so have built auto-ethnographic methods into the research and methods design to ensure those perspectives are captured and considered separate to the input provided by the participant. Participants will complete a reflective exercise during the intervention in line with action research and will also be invited to share their views on

Figure 6: Ethical considerations and proposed mitigation

LEARNING OUTCOMES

In addition to the Module 7 learning outcomes this author has three individual learning outcomes:

1. Building skill in conducting insider research
2. Deepening knowledge of cultural diversity and intersectionality, including in-depth literature review, and the implications of these for future society.
3. Expanding this author's consultancy to support organisations in their diversity efforts.

TIMESCALES

February	March	April	May	June	July
Engagement of participants					
	Pre-intervention test				
	Intervention process				
		Post-intervention test			
		Analysis			
		Draft and feedback review			
				Refinement	
					Submission on 12 July 2023

APPENDIX

Appendix A: Example of Edmondson's 7-point scale test for Psychological safety (Edmondson 1999)

		Strongly disagree		Neutral		Strongly agree
Part 1: Individual safety		1	2	3	4	5
1	In this team, it is easy to discuss difficult issues and problems.					
2	I won't receive retaliation or criticism if I admit to an error or mistake.					
3	It is easy to ask a member of this team for help.					
4	I feel safe offering new ideas, even if they aren't fully-formed plans.					
Part 2: Team respect		1	2	3	4	5
5	In this team, people are accepted for being different.					
6	My teammates welcome my ideas and give them time and attention.					
7	Members of this team could easily describe the value of others' contributions.					
Part 3: Team learning		1	2	3	4	5
8	In this team, people talk about mistakes and ways to improve and learn from them.					
9	We take time to find new ways to improve our team's work processes.					
10	Members of this team raise concerns they have about team plans or decisions.					
11	We try to discover our underlying assumptions and seek counterarguments about issues under discussion.					

Appendix B: Indicative pre- and post-intervention qualitative questions for interviews

- Intersectionality is defined as the different layers of our identity such as ethnicity, national culture, race, gender, age, education, heritage etc. Please share some of the elements that in your view make up your identity.
- Please describe which if any of these elements of identity do you see in your team?
- Do you feel that this presence, or lack thereof of shared identity elements influences how you interact in team settings?
- How would you describe the dynamics of your team meetings?
- What is the impact, if any, of these dynamics on your ability to think fully and generatively in team meetings?
- How would you describe the team's collective thinking?

Appendix C: GDPR Principles relating to processing of personal data (GDPR 2023)

1. Personal data shall be:

- a) processed lawfully, fairly and in a transparent manner in relation to the data subject ('lawfulness, fairness and transparency');
- b) collected for specified, explicit and legitimate purposes and not further processed in a manner that is incompatible with those purposes; further processing for archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes shall, in accordance with [Article 89\(1\)](#), not be considered to be incompatible with the initial purposes ('purpose limitation');
- c) adequate, relevant and limited to what is necessary in relation to the purposes for which they are processed ('data minimisation');
- d) accurate and, where necessary, kept up to date; every reasonable step must be taken to ensure that personal data that are inaccurate, having regard to the purposes for which they are processed, are erased or rectified without delay ('accuracy');
- e) kept in a form which permits identification of data subjects for no longer than is necessary for the purposes for which the personal data are processed; personal data may be stored for longer periods insofar as the personal data will be processed solely for archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes in accordance with [Article 89\(1\)](#) subject to implementation of the appropriate technical and organisational measures required by this Regulation in order to safeguard the rights and freedoms of the data subject ('storage limitation');
- f) processed in a manner that ensures appropriate security of the personal data, including protection against unauthorised or unlawful processing and against accidental loss, destruction or damage, using appropriate technical or organisational measures ('integrity and confidentiality').

2. The controller shall be responsible for, and be able to demonstrate compliance with, paragraph 1 ('accountability').

Appendix D: Organisational approval for research

MA Proposal



Hannigan, Dom (RTS) <Dom.Hannigan@riotinto.com>
To: Alannah Britz

[Reply](#) [Reply All](#) [Forward](#) [Share](#) [More](#)

Fri 20/01/2023 12:14

Dear Alannah,

Thank you for your proposal for our team in Rio Tinto, Copper Growth & Development to be part of your MA Research Project.

After sharing the proposal and talking with the team, and with Munkhsukh as our MD, I can confirm that we'd be delighted to take part.

We are a team of approximately 10, with our locations in Brisbane, Perth, London, Tokyo and Ulaanbaatar.

We are looking forward to hearing from you and getting started.

Dom

Dom Hannigan
General Manager, Growth & Development, Rio Tinto Copper

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