Healing Dragons
Manual for Youth Workers

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Co-funded by the European Union

Foreword

The manual at hand is developed to familiarize youth workers, trainers, educators, and facilitators with a specific participatory research method—the Dragon Dreaming Approach (DDA)—and its practical application, particularly in the context of youth mental wellbeing and empowerment. However, the exploration of Dragon Dreaming in this manual also highlights the broader potential of participatory strategies to be applied across various contexts, as their core principles foster collective visioning and transformational learning. By emphasizing inclusivity, shared responsibility, and co-creation, the Dragon Dreaming Approach serves as a powerful tool for enabling dialogue, self-awareness, and community-driven action in diverse settings.

This manual explores the origins, core concepts, and evolution of Dragon Dreaming, providing both theoretical insights and practical applications for real-life settings. It delves into the background of the approach, its foundations in systems thinking and Indigenous wisdom, and how it fosters sustainable, people-centered initiatives. Additionally, the manual offers a step-by-step breakdown of the Dragon Dreaming process—Dreaming, Planning, Doing, and Celebrating—to equip practitioners with the necessary tools to facilitate workshops and projects effectively. By the end of this manual, readers will not only understand the theoretical basis of Dragon Dreaming and its place within the broader participatory research landscape but also be familiar with its practical implementation in fostering mental wellbeing and youth empowerment. Moreover, the reader will gain insight into the preconditions, settings, and facilitation techniques required to conduct a successful Dragon Dreaming workshop, as well as the expected outcomes for participants.

This manual has been developed within the framework of "**Youth Wellbeing Recovering Kit**", an Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnership Project in the field of Youth. The project brings together partners from Austria, Croatia, Latvia, and Poland, working collaboratively to promote participatory methodologies for youth development, mental health awareness, and collective empowerment.

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1.1 Overview of the Dragon Dreaming Approach (DDA)

The Dragon Dreaming Approach (DDA) is an innovative, participatory project management and personal development methodology that empowers individuals and groups to collaborate in creating and achieving shared visions. It draws heavily on systems thinking, ecological awareness, and Indigenous knowledge, particularly the wisdom of Aboriginal cultures. At its heart, DDA is more than just a project management tool—it is a holistic approach that integrates personal growth, community development, and environmental sustainability.

Unlike many traditional methodologies that are task-driven or focus on outcomes alone, Dragon Dreaming encourages participants to approach challenges with creativity, compassion, and a long-term vision. It invites individuals to face their "dragons"—the fears, obstacles, or internal challenges that might hold them back—and turn them into opportunities for growth and transformation. By embracing challenges, participants learn not only how to overcome obstacles but also how to harness them as catalysts for achieving their aspirations.

Origins of the Dragon Dreaming Approach

The term Dragon Dreaming comes from the idea of using one's imagination (dreaming) to confront and transform personal and collective challenges (dragons). The methodology is inspired by the work of John Croft, an ecological activist and educator, and his deep exploration of Indigenous Aboriginal cultures in Australia. These cultures place a strong emphasis on interconnectedness—between people, the land, and the universe—which is a core tenet of Dragon Dreaming. The methodology reflects these values through a collaborative, non-hierarchical process that fosters empowerment and ownership within a group.

In traditional Aboriginal culture, dreaming holds a profound significance. It represents the foundation of knowledge and the shared stories that link past, present, and future. Dragon Dreaming integrates this notion into its process by using collective dreaming as the starting point for any project or initiative, recognizing that meaningful and sustainable change can only emerge from a shared vision that connects everyone involved.

John Croft: The Visionary Behind Dragon Dreaming

John Croft is the creator and driving force behind the Dragon Dreaming Approach. With over four decades of experience in the fields of community development, social justice, and environmental sustainability, John developed Dragon Dreaming as a way to unite individuals and communities around a shared vision of transformation. His background in ecology and social innovation, combined with his extensive work with Indigenous knowledge systems, led him to recognize the power of participatory methodologies in creating sustainable, people-centered projects.

John's work is deeply rooted in the belief that traditional Western approaches to project management, which often prioritize efficiency and outcomes over process, fail to address the complexities of real-world problems. He designed Dragon Dreaming as a more holistic alternative that nurtures the personal, collective, and ecological dimensions of life. Central to his vision is the idea that personal growth and community well-being must go hand in hand with environmental sustainability.

Purpose and Benefits of Dragon Dreaming

DDA is designed to enable individuals and teams to co-create innovative solutions to complex challenges while ensuring that personal, collective, and ecological needs are met. It is particularly suited to projects in areas such as social innovation, youth engagement, mental health, community development, education, and environmental sustainability. By using Dragon Dreaming, participants not only work toward achieving tangible results but also experience personal and collective transformation. The methodology encourages deep reflection, emotional and intellectual engagement, and a shared sense of responsibility and ownership for both the process and the outcomes. The approach fosters:

- **Empowerment and personal growth**: Participants develop greater self-awareness and confidence as they confront and overcome their fears, gain new skills, and take ownership.

- **Stronger community bonds**: By creating space for every individual to contribute meaningfully, DDA strengthens the relationships and trust within a group, whether it is a community, a team, or a network.

- **Innovation and creativity**: Through collective dreaming and planning, Dragon Dreaming helps groups generate creative, out-of-the-box solutions to their challenges, empowering participants to explore new ideas without fear of failure.

- **Sustainable results**: Projects designed using DDA are deeply aligned with the needs of both people and the environment, ensuring impactful and sustainable outcomes.

The Four Phases of Dragon Dreaming Approach

The DDA process is divided into four distinct but interconnected phases: **Dreaming**, **Planning**, **Doing**, and **Celebrating**. Each phase plays a critical role in bringing a shared vision to life while fostering collaboration, reflection, and adaptability.

In the **Dreaming phase**, participants come together to co-create a shared vision for the future. This stage allows individuals to imagine freely, exploring what they truly want to achieve both individually and as a group. Inclusivity is key here, as every participant's dream is valued. Through dialogue and active listening, a collective vision begins to emerge. Participants often ask questions like "What does success look like?" or "What do we hope to achieve together?" This phase opens the space for creativity and deeper exploration of personal and collective goals, building emotional investment in the project.

Once the dream is articulated, the process moves into the **Planning phase**, where the dream is translated into a realistic and achievable plan. Planning in DDA is a participatory and collaborative process. Each member of the group contributes to identifying the specific actions needed to achieve the shared dream. During this stage, obstacles, or "dragons," are identified, and strategies are developed to overcome them. These obstacles could be practical barriers such as lack of resources, or personal fears that may inhibit progress. This phase ensures the group's collective energy is directed toward concrete, manageable tasks. Tools like brainstorming and mind mapping are mostly beneficial in this part to develop clear, actionable steps. Participants ask questions like "What steps can we take to achieve our dream?" and "What resources and support do we need?"

The **Doing** phase involves putting the plan into action. As the process progresses, the group maintains communication, provides feedback, and supports one another. DDA promotes a culture of learning and adaptation, encouraging participants to see challenges as opportunities to reflect and adjust, rather than as failures. Everyone plays a crucial role in ensuring the process's success, and collective efforts bring the dream to life. Throughout this phase, challenges are addressed, and small victories are celebrated along the way.

Finally, **Celebrating** is the ultimate integral aspect as it recognizes group's achievements, the progress made, and the personal growth experienced by individuals. This phase helps to reinforce the bonds within the group, maintaining motivation and creating moments for reflection. Participants evaluate what worked, what didn't, and how future projects can be improved. Celebrations can take many forms, from simple expressions of gratitude to formal ceremonies. Participants reflect on questions like "What did we learn?" and "How can we continue to support one another?"

1.2 Applying DDA in Youth Mental Wellbeing

DDA is uniquely positioned to address contemporary issues in youth mental wellbeing and empowerment. In a world where young people face mounting pressures—such as identity challenges, societal expectations, and global crises like climate change—mental health has become a critical concern. Many youth struggle with anxiety, depression, and isolation, fueled by the overwhelming influence of social media, academic stress, family dynamics, and the broader uncertainty of today's world. In this context, Dragon Dreaming offers a structured yet flexible framework that empowers young people to confront these challenges head-on through collective visioning, collaboration, and concrete action.

Rather than tackling these mental health issues in isolation, Dragon Dreaming encourages young people to work together, creating a supportive environment where they can share their struggles, articulate their dreams, and collectively imagine a future where they can overcome their personal and societal "dragons." This process not only alleviates feelings of isolation but also fosters a sense of shared purpose and community, which is vital for improving mental health outcomes.

Why Youth Mental Wellbeing and Empowerment are Urgent Issues

Young people are particularly vulnerable to mental health issues due to the developmental stage they are in, a period marked by significant physical, emotional, and psychological changes. During adolescence and young adulthood, individuals are in the process of forming their identities, building emotional resilience, and learning how to navigate complex social environments. This is a time when they are highly susceptible to external influences and pressures, which can shape their self-perception and mental health. Unrealistic standards perpetuated by social media play a large role in exacerbating these vulnerabilities, as constant exposure to idealized images of success, beauty, and lifestyles can lead to feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and social comparison. The pressure to meet these unattainable standards, compounded by academic expectations and family dynamics, often results in heightened anxiety, stress, and fear of failure. Furthermore, today's youth are growing up in a world that is increasingly unpredictable and fraught with large-scale global challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic, for example, disrupted the normal routines of life, resulting in social isolation, academic uncertainty, and significant health concerns. Simultaneously, the ongoing climate crisis and other global issues add layers of fear and existential anxiety, leaving many young people feeling overwhelmed and powerless to effect change in the world around them. These external crises often amplify internal struggles, making it difficult for young people to cope with everyday challenges.

How Dragon Dreaming Supports Mental Wellbeing

DDA is particularly effective in youth mental health initiatives because it engages young people in a process of self-discovery, empowerment, and collaborative problem-solving. By participating in the dreaming, planning, doing, and celebrating phases, young people are empowered to take ownership of their mental wellbeing while confronting and transforming their fears and challenges into opportunities for growth.

- **Dreaming Phase**: This phase allows young people to reflect on their personal experiences, emotions, and aspirations for mental wellbeing in a safe, non-judgmental environment. By dreaming collectively in a group, participants realize they are not alone in their struggles, fostering solidarity and mutual support. Articulating these dreams helps them identify what a state of mental health looks like for them, free from societal expectations or fear of judgment. This step is crucial for fostering self-awareness and serves as the foundation for future action.

- **Planning Phase**: Once youth have defined their wellbeing goals, the next step is to co-create actionable plans to achieve them. Dragon Dreaming's collaborative planning process encourages each participant to contribute their ideas and experiences, fostering a sense of shared responsibility. This phase empowers young people by actively involving them in determining the steps necessary to achieve emotional balance and mental health. It also supports the development of practical strategies for coping with mental health challenges like stress and anxiety.

- **Doing Phase**: The doing phase is where young people implement the plans they have created, whether through adopting self-care routines, seeking professional help, or establishing peer support networks. This phase is transformative, as it turns abstract ideas into concrete actions, building confidence and a sense of accomplishment. As young people see the tangible impact of their actions, they develop emotional resilience, empowering them to manage their mental health and help others do the same.

- **Celebrating Phase**: Celebration is an integral part of Dragon Dreaming. It provides young people with opportunities to reflect on their progress, acknowledge their achievements, and celebrate both individual and collective successes. This process reinforces positive behavior and fosters a lasting sense of community. Celebrating progress—whether through small improvements in mental health or large-scale empowerment initiatives—helps solidify the connection between effort and outcome, promoting long-term engagement with mental wellbeing practices.

Youth Empowerment Through Collective Action

At the heart of Dragon Dreaming is the belief that true empowerment comes from the ability to dream, act, and create in collaboration with others. In the context of youth mental health, empowerment means more than just coping with emotional challenges; it equips young people with the tools to take charge of their wellbeing and, in turn, support others. By participating in the Dragon Dreaming process, young people become active participants in their own healing and the improvement of their communities.

The participatory structure of Dragon Dreaming fosters peer-to-peer learning and mutual support, which is crucial for youth who often feel isolated in their struggles. By working together to solve problems and confront challenges, young people build networks of trust and collaboration that provide emotional and psychological support. This sense of community is essential for sustaining mental wellbeing, as it offers a safety net during times of stress or hardship.

Additionally, Dragon Dreaming equips youth with collaborative problem-solving skills that extend far beyond mental health. Through this approach, young people learn how to work together, listen to diverse perspectives, and find innovative solutions to complex issues. These skills are critical for youth empowerment because they prepare young people to be proactive, creative leaders in their communities and beyond. In a world that can often feel chaotic, Dragon Dreaming provides a pathway for youth to reclaim their sense of agency and purpose.

A Path Forward for Youth Wellbeing and Empowerment

Incorporating Dragon Dreaming into youth mental health and empowerment initiatives offers a structured, supportive framework that enables young people to confront their challenges and grow from them. By emphasizing collective dreaming, shared responsibility, and continuous celebration, Dragon Dreaming offers a sustainable approach to improving mental wellbeing and fostering a sense of belonging among youth. At a time when many young people feel disconnected and disempowered, Dragon Dreaming provides a clear path forward—one in which they are active participants in their futures, capable of transforming challenges into opportunities for growth and collective healing.

In conclusion, Dragon Dreaming is more than just a project management tool—it is a transformational approach that helps today's youth build resilience, foster emotional wellbeing, and develop the skills they need to thrive in a world filled with challenges. Through the four phases of dreaming, planning, doing, and celebrating, young people are empowered to take control of their mental health and create a more connected, compassionate, and resilient future for themselves and their communities.

Principles of DDA (1/3)

In both theory and practice, Dragon Dreaming is built upon a set of fundamental principles that guide its process, ensuring that it remains participatory, transformative, and sustainable. These principles reflect the core beliefs of John Croft, the influence of Indigenous knowledge systems, and elements of participatory research methodologies. The foundational building blocks of Dragon Dreaming can be summarized as follows:

Dialogue as the Key to Collective Dreaming and Action

Dialogue is central to Dragon Dreaming, serving as the mechanism through which dreams are shared, obstacles are identified, and solutions are co-created. The entire process—from identifying aspirations and fears to developing strategies for change—is conducted through open and inclusive communication. Dialogue ensures that all voices are heard, respected, and integrated into the collective vision, making the process deeply participatory and democratic.

Knowledge is Ever-Expanding and Created Through Collective Learning

Dragon Dreaming recognizes that knowledge is not fixed but constantly evolving through the contributions of all participants. Each participant brings their lived experiences, insights, and perspectives, which, when shared and explored in a group setting, contribute to a greater understanding of challenges and possibilities. By fostering an open learning environment, Dragon Dreaming encourages curiosity, adaptability, and innovation in problem-solving.

Every Participant is a Catalyst for Change

In Dragon Dreaming, all participants are regarded as active agents of change. The approach is rooted in the belief that each person has the capacity to contribute meaningfully and that transformation arises from shared effort rather than top-down directives. Because every individual plays a role in shaping the process, their contributions—whether through ideas, actions, or reflections—can become the turning point that shifts perspectives or inspires new solutions.
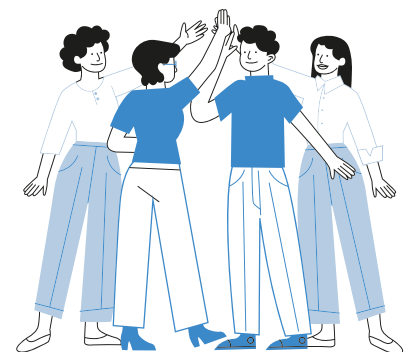
Principles of DDA (2/3)

The Value of Lived Experience and Internal Knowledge

Dragon Dreaming recognizes that each individual carries unique wisdom shaped by their lived experiences, making this internal knowledge just as valuable as formal education. Unlike traditional learning models that rely on external expertise, Dragon Dreaming fosters an inclusive, participatory space where knowledge is co-created through personal stories, shared struggles, and collective insights. By encouraging participants to openly express their fears, challenges, and aspirations, the process builds emotional engagement and a sense of belonging. This approach is particularly impactful for youth mental wellbeing, as it provides a platform where their voices are heard, valued, and actively shape the process. Instead of relying on imposed solutions, Dragon Dreaming ensures that actions are rooted in real-life challenges, making them practical, relevant, and more likely to succeed. When participants see their experiences reflected in the process, they develop a deeper sense of ownership and motivation to implement change. This empowerment not only strengthens self-confidence and resilience but also cultivates a supportive community where individuals work together to overcome obstacles. By bridging personal insight with collective action, DDA transforms individual experiences into shared knowledge, fostering solutions that are innovative, sustainable, and directly aligned with the needs of the people involved.

No Predefined Answers—The Group Defines the Path

Unlike traditional participatory research models that rely on predefined goals and predetermined solutions, Dragon Dreaming embraces emergence—the idea that the direction of a project unfolds organically through collective exploration. The group itself defines the challenges it wishes to address, the strategies to overcome them, and the vision for success. This ensures that the process remains responsive to the specific needs, dreams, and realities of those involved, rather than being imposed from an external source.

Principles of DDA (3/3)

Reality in Dragon Dreaming

Reality plays a central role in the Dragon Dreaming process, particularly in how participants perceive, explore, and act upon their personal and collective experiences. The approach emphasizes three key aspects of reality:

1. Reality is Subjective and Multidimensional
   - Dragon Dreaming acknowledges that reality is not a single, objective truth but a complex interplay of different perspectives. Each participant sees the world through their own unique lens, shaped by their experiences, emotions, and cultural background. The approach values these diverse viewpoints, encouraging a pluralistic understanding of reality.

2. Reality as the Basis for Collective Awareness and Action
   - Dragon Dreaming is rooted in the real-life experiences and needs of participants. The issues explored are not abstract concepts but actual challenges that affect the group and their community. Through dialogue and reflection, participants work toward an authentic and shared understanding of reality before taking meaningful action.

3. Creativity and Imagination as Tools for Reinterpreting Reality
   - While grounded in reality, Dragon Dreaming also embraces imagination as a tool for re-envisioning the future. By allowing participants to dream beyond their immediate constraints, the approach helps them see new possibilities, unlocking potential solutions that might not have been initially apparent.

Rather than viewing reality as fixed or limiting, Dragon Dreaming encourages participants to reframe challenges as opportunities for growth and transformation.

Key Elements of Dragon Dreaming Approach (DDA) as a Participatory Research and Awareness-Raising Tool

For a Dragon Dreaming (DDA) workshop to be conducted successfully and to generate meaningful outcomes, certain essential elements must be met. While the approach is highly flexible and adaptable, it is grounded in participatory principles that require practical and structural conditions to ensure effective implementation. These key elements help create a safe, inclusive, and collaborative environment where participants can dream, plan, act, and celebrate together.

1. Group Composition and Size

Dragon Dreaming workshops thrive in a collective, interactive setting, making the group dynamic a crucial element of success. The ideal group size is between 10 and 15 participants, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives while maintaining an environment where everyone has the opportunity to actively contribute. The recommended duration for each workshop is up to three hours, allowing sufficient time for deep discussion, idea generation, and collective problem-solving without overwhelming participants.

A diverse group is ideal, bringing together individuals from different backgrounds, societal roles, and perspectives. The process is enriched when participants represent a variety of experiences, viewpoints, and aspirations, as it encourages deeper dialogue, mutual learning, and creative solutions. The aim is to foster a coexistence of diverse voices in a space where every participant is valued equally.

2. The Role of the Facilitator

While Dragon Dreaming operates on the principle of equality, the workshop still requires a facilitator (or coordinator) to guide the process, ensuring that the key principles of DDA—participation, collaboration, and non-hierarchical decision-making—are upheld. The facilitator's role is to support rather than lead, ensuring that discussions remain constructive, inclusive, and aligned with the collective goals of the group.

The main responsibilities of the facilitator include:

- Ensuring constructive dialogue: Facilitator ensures that each participant has time & opportunity to express their thoughts, share their insights, and be actively heard.
- Maintaining participatory balance: It is essential that no dominant voices overpower others, and that active listening is practiced throughout the session.
- Encouraging reflection and creative thinking: The facilitator fosters an environment comfortable for sharing their dreams, fears, and ideas without judgment.
- Recording key insights and findings: Since Dragon Dreaming is a process-based approach, the facilitator takes notes on key discussions, discoveries, and conclusions, ensuring that the outcomes of the workshop are captured for reflection and follow-up.

The facilitator is not an authority figure but a participant who assumes the responsibility of ensuring a smooth and balanced process. They should also actively participate in discussions to maintain the reciprocity principle, where all members—including the facilitator—contribute equally. However, they must also ensure that power is distributed evenly across the group, preventing any one individual from dominating the discussion.

3. Essential Qualities of a Dragon Dreaming Facilitator

Facilitating a Dragon Dreaming workshop requires specific skills and traits, as the process is highly participatory and expriential. A facilitator should:

- Empower participants rather than dictate solutions: They must allow participants to develop their own insights, rather than imposing pre-determined ideas.
- Encourage open dialogue and manage conflicts constructively: This includes ensuring that differences of opinion are handled collaboratively and creatively rather than leading to division.
- Create a space for deep listening and emotional safety: The facilitator should ensure that all voices are respected and acknowledged.
- Be receptive, adaptable, and creative: As discussions unfold organically, the facilitator should be flexible in guiding the group without controlling the process.
- Balance time management with process depth: While discussions should be rich and meaningful, the facilitator also ensures that the group moves forward through the different stages of Dragon Dreaming.

Additionally, the facilitator must have strong emotional intelligence, as they need to "read the room" and ensure that discussions remain positive and solution-oriented. This is particularly important when discussing sensitive topics like mental health and wellbeing, where participants may share deeply personal experiences.

4. Physical Setting and Atmosphere

The physical environment of the workshop significantly influences group engagement and comfort. To reinforce the non-hierarchical and participatory nature of Dragon Dreaming, it is recommended that participants sit in a circle, ensuring:

- Equal visibility and shared space: No one is in a position of dominance, reinforcing the principle that everyone's contributions are equally important.
- Openness and connection: A circle fosters a more collaborative and trust-based atmosphere.
- A clear view of each participant: Encouraging eye contact and interaction strengthens engagement and mutual respect.

The environment should also be warm, inviting, and relaxing. Ideally, Dragon Dreaming workshops are held in natural settings or calming indoor spaces, as being in a non-intimidating and open environment reduces tension and enhances creativity. Nature-based locations, in particular, help create a sense of connection to the world and the community, reinforcing the holistic aspect of the approach.

5. Materials and Documentation

Dragon Dreaming does not require complex materials, but the documentation of discussions, insights, and action plans is crucial. The facilitator should use:

- A flipchart or whiteboard to visually capture key points, mind maps, and ideas that emerge during the workshop.
- A notebook or digital tool to record the group's key discussions, challenges, and proposed solutions.
- Creative materials such as sticky notes, markers, or visual representation tools to support brainstorming and planning phases.

The process of recording the workshop's findings serves not only as a reference for participants but also as a means of tracking progress, refining strategies, and following up on commitments made during the session.

By ensuring that all participants are equally valued, actively listening to diverse perspectives, and encouraging critical self-reflection, it empowers individuals to take ownership of their dreams and challenges. Through deep conversations and collective exploration, the process transforms aspirations into concrete, actionable plans that lead to real-world impact. By promoting group ownership, solutions emerge organically from within the community rather than being externally imposed, making them more resilient and sustainable. As both a research method and an intervention strategy, Dragon Dreaming enables youth and communities to explore pressing social issues like mental health and wellbeing while actively working toward meaningful change.

How Does DDA Create Change?

Through its participatory, communicative, and non-hierarchical approach, Dragon Dreaming serves as a powerful tool for personal empowerment, collective transformation, and societal change. Unlike traditional models that impose predefined knowledge or solutions, Dragon Dreaming positions participants as the drivers of knowledge creation, problem identification, and solution-building, ensuring that change emerges organically from within the group rather than being dictated externally.

John Croft, much like Danilo Dolci, emphasized the distinction between power and domination, a key principle that differentiates Dragon Dreaming from conventional, top-down decision-making processes. In this approach, power is seen as inherent in all participants, and the process itself is designed to help individuals recognize and activate their own capacity to influence change. By unlocking personal power, individuals move from a state of passive participation to active engagement in shaping their reality. This stands in direct opposition to domination, which is understood as a system of control that concentrates influence in the hands of a few while limiting the agency of others. Dragon Dreaming redistributes power, ensuring that all voices are heard, valued, and incorporated into the collective process.

By validating the lived experiences, knowledge, and contributions of each individual, Dragon Dreaming fosters a sense of relevance and agency, particularly among those who may feel excluded by traditional systems of education, governance, or social structures. In many institutional settings, knowledge is created and disseminated in a rigid, one-directional manner, which often leads to exclusion and alienation of those whose perspectives do not align with dominant narratives. This can leave individuals feeling powerless, inadequate, and disconnected, reinforcing cycles of disengagement and social inequality.

DDA challenges this dynamic by embracing diverse perspectives that ensure collective decision-making is inclusive, participatory, and co-designed by all involved. Instead of simply allowing participation, it actively encourages and values contributions from all participants, fostering an environment where different backgrounds, opinions, and knowledge sources contribute to shaping solutions. By creating space for broad coalitions of participants, DDA cultivates a shared reality where decisions are made collaboratively, rather than imposed by a select few. This co-creative process is not only more democratic and representative but also leads to more sustainable, community-driven outcomes that reflect the true needs and aspirations of those involved.

5.

DDA procedure and steps

DDA WORKSHOP PREPARATION

Although the DDA follows an organic and participatory process, some preparation is necessary to ensure that the workshop unfolds in a structured yet flexible manner. Dragon Dreaming is not merely about asking questions and receiving answers; it is about cultivating, inspiring, and sustaining a deep, collaborative dialogue, where every participant contributes meaningfully and each voice holds equal relevance.

The process of continuous, expansive dialogue is central to Dragon Dreaming, as it serves to motivate action and transform ideas into real-life practices. For such meaningful dialogue to take place, preparation is essential. While Dragon Dreaming emphasizes spontaneity and co-creation, it must still be rooted in the needs and realities of the group. A needs analysis of the participants—whether explicit or implicit— is key to shaping the experience, ensuring that the workshop remains relevant, engaging, and impactful. The ultimate purpose of a Dragon Dreaming workshop is to spark transformation, foster awareness, and catalyze concrete actions toward change.

5.1 Preparing a Dragon Dreaming Workshop

The facilitator (coordinator) is responsible for preparing and structuring the workshop, ensuring that the conditions support participatory dialogue and collective visioning. Unlike traditional teaching roles, the facilitator in Dragon Dreaming does not dictate or transfer predefined knowledge. Instead, they prepare by:

1. Selecting the necessary materials that can inspire group engagement and reflection.
2. Choosing an appropriate physical space that enhances collaboration and equality.
3. Formulating guiding questions that will stimulate collective exploration and help participants define the topics, challenges, or dreams most relevant to them.

Unlike conventional methods, the facilitator does not impose fixed topics or solutions. Instead, they prepare broad starting points to shape the discussion organically. The group collectively identifies problems, dreams, and opportunities, making each workshop unique and tailored to the lived realities of the participants.

5.2 Materials for a Dragon Dreaming Workshop

Unlike traditional training sessions that rely on pre-structured content, Dragon Dreaming workshops use materials that inspire creativity, engagement, and emotional connection. These materials should stimulate reflection, storytelling, and collective imagination. Facilitators may bring:

- Poems, songs, artworks, images, or videos that encourage emotional and intellectual exploration.
- Storytelling prompts that help participants share personal experiences.
- Creative tools like sticky notes, colored markers, or mind-mapping sheets for visual brainstorming.

Additionally, tracking and documentation play a key role in capturing the group's progress. Facilitators may use:

- Flipcharts, whiteboards, or notebooks to document key discussions, decisions, and breakthroughs.
- Audio or video recordings (with consent) to capture insights in more depth.
- Participant-led documentation, where individuals take personal notes or use templates (such as the ones included in this manual's annex) to track their reflections and key takeaways.

It is crucial that any recording or documentation does not interfere with the natural flow of dialogue. Participants should feel free and uninhibited in expressing themselves.

5.3 Selecting the Physical Space

The environment of the workshop plays a significant role in fostering openness, participation, and collaboration. The ideal setting for a Dragon Dreaming workshop should:

- Be in a natural environment or a calming, informal space, where participants feel comfortable.
- Encourage a circular seating arrangement, reinforcing equality and shared power —ensuring no one is in a dominant position.
- Be free of distractions, allowing participants to fully engage in the process.

While outdoor settings or spaces surrounded by nature are preferred, any venue can work as long as it allows for openness, shared engagement, and a sense of collective ownership over the process.

5.4 The Role of the Facilitator

While participants are not required to prepare in advance, the facilitator plays a key role in ensuring a meaningful experience. However, their role is not that of an instructor or authority figure. Instead, a Dragon Dreaming facilitator:

- Guides the process without controlling it—ensuring that all voices are heard and that dialogue remains inclusive and participatory.
- Encourages self-discovery—helping participants identify their own challenges, dreams, and opportunities rather than imposing predefined solutions.
- Acts as an equal participant, sharing in the experience rather than leading it.
- Manages group dynamics, ensuring that the dialogue remains constructive, that power is equally distributed, and that conflicts are transformed into opportunities for learning.

For the non-hierarchical nature of the workshop to be preserved, it is recommended to rotate facilitators if possible. This prevents the establishment of a single authority figure and ensures that multiple perspectives are embedded in the process.

5.5 Ensuring a Transformational Experience

A Dragon Dreaming workshop is not simply about discussion—it is about transformation. The process of dreaming, planning, doing, and celebrating allows participants to:

- Explore meaningful ideas collectively.
- Feel heard, valued, and empowered in shaping solutions.
- Take concrete steps toward action, ensuring that the ideas generated are translated into real-world impact.

By maintaining an open, participatory, and structured-yet-flexible approach, Dragon Dreaming workshops become catalysts for personal, group, and community transformation, providing a space where dreams become reality through shared vision, strategic planning, and collaborative action.

Structure and Conditions for a DDA Workshop

The ideal conditions for a DDA workshop include a maximum of 10-15 participants with one facilitator and a supporting assistant, for a total duration of up to three hours. The workshop should be conducted outdoors if possible, or in a spacious room where participants are seated in a circle, reinforcing the principles of equality, openness, and collective participation. Every DDA workshop is guided by an overarching topic, which serves as the foundation for exploration and action. To create an environment of trust, openness, and deep engagement, it is recommended to approach any topic through a series of at least three workshops. This structure ensures that discussions evolve meaningfully, allowing participants to reflect, explore needs, and co-develop action plans. While the number of sessions can be adapted based on the group's needs, a minimum of three workshops is suggested:

1. Workshop 1 – Introductions and Collective Visioning
   - Establishing trust, setting the foundation, and exploring participants' aspirations and fears.
2. Workshop 2 – Self-Reflection, Needs Analysis, and Shared Challenges
   - Identifying obstacles, understanding personal and collective barriers, and mapping potential solutions.
3. Workshop 3 – Strategic Planning, Implementation, and Reflection
   - Co-developing practical action steps, assigning responsibilities, and setting up a system for follow-up.

For this manual, youth mental wellbeing and empowerment will serve as an example theme, but Dragon Dreaming can be applied to a wide range of topics and communities. The examples provided here are guidelines rather than fixed prescriptions, and participants are encouraged to define and modify their own topics based on their specific needs.

The facilitator begins the first DDA workshop by briefly introducing the fundamental principles and setting the stage for the process. This does not require an extensive theoretical explanation of DDA but rather a practical introduction to the framework and workshop expectations. The facilitator establishes the following guidelines to ensure a smooth and participatory process:

- Participants are encouraged to express their thoughts freely, while respecting the circular discussion structure to ensure inclusivity.
- No interruptions while someone is speaking; active listening is key.
- The circle format provides an organic speaking order, but participants can raise their hands if they feel ready to contribute.
- The facilitator actively participates in discussions, maintaining reciprocity without imposing their views or steering the discussion in a particular direction. Their role is to support, not lead, and to ensure that contributions emerge naturally from the group.
- Participants are encouraged to document key ideas throughout the session, either through personal note-taking or collective brainstorming on a flipchart. The facilitator may also record discussion points to ensure that insights and action steps are not lost.

Considering the topic at hand would concern youth wellbeing, an overview of three DDA workshops in line with this example is as follows:

DDA WORKSHOP 1 – INTRODUCTIONS
Workshop 1 – Part 1: Sharing Dreams and Building Trust

At the beginning of the first Dragon Dreaming (DDA) workshop, the facilitator introduces themselves to the group, sharing not only their background but also a personal dream. Since this workshop is focused on youth mental wellbeing, the facilitator might choose to share a dream related to emotional resilience, self-growth, or creating safe spaces for young people to express themselves. The dream should be authentic, personal, and meaningful, as it sets the tone for openness and vulnerability within the group. By modeling genuine sharing, the facilitator creates a safe and trusting environment, encouraging participants to do the same.

Following this, each participant introduces themselves one by one and responds to the guiding question:
"What is your personal dream for your mental wellbeing?"
This exercise serves multiple purposes:
- It helps identify the key concerns, hopes, and aspirations of the group related to their mental health and emotional wellbeing.
- It reveals underlying challenges young people face, such as stress, anxiety, or lack of support, providing insight into the collective needs of the group.
- It fosters empathy and connection, as participants begin to recognize shared experiences and mutual struggles.
- It creates a foundation for deeper conversations, allowing participants to reflect on what wellbeing means to them and what factors impact their mental health.

The process of dream-sharing and self-expression helps participants recognize common ground, facilitating a sense of solidarity, understanding, and collective visioning. This phase is not about problem-solving yet; rather, it is an opportunity to listen deeply, appreciate diverse perspectives, and set the emotional foundation for the following workshops.

This session should last approximately 45 minutes, during which the facilitator takes notes on key themes, recurring challenges, and shared aspirations that emerge from the discussion. These insights will serve as the basis for the next phase of the Dragon Dreaming process, where the group analyzes their needs and begins to develop action plans for mental wellbeing.

DDA WORKSHOP 1 – DEEPENING DISCUSSION & REFLECTION

Workshop 1 – Part 2: Exploring Challenges and Perspectives

Following the sharing of personal dreams, the group engages in an open, participatory discussion, deepening their exploration of mental wellbeing. The facilitator ensures a respectful and balanced dialogue, maintaining the circle structure to allow each participant to contribute freely. The discussion is guided by key questions, such as:

- What are the biggest challenges affecting your mental wellbeing?
- What support systems currently exist, and how accessible are they?
- How do personal struggles like stress, anxiety, or self-doubt shape your daily life?
- What external pressures (social media, societal norms) impact your wellbeing?
- What role do you play in shaping your own mental and emotional health?

The facilitator's role here is crucial—not to dictate the conversation, but to encourage deeper reflection and critical thinking. When participants express strong views, the facilitator gently probes their ideas, asking follow-up questions to expand perspectives and challenge assumptions. This process strengthens self-awareness and fosters mutual learning, as they engage in collective reflection rather than just storytelling.

While the facilitator encourages dialogue, the group itself drives the discussion, allowing shared themes and insights to naturally emerge. The session lasts 45-60 minutes and should result in concrete takeaways that inform the following workshop. The key findings may be recorded on a flipchart or whiteboard for later review.

Workshop 1 – Part 3: Summary and Reflection

The final stage of Workshop 1 provides a structured reflection on the session's progress. The facilitator summarizes key themes, allowing participants to confirm, clarify, or amend their contributions. This moment of reflection helps consolidate the shared learning and ensures that all voices are acknowledged.

Participants are invited to provide feedback on the workshop—how they felt, what they learned, and any insights they wish to carry forward. Feedback can be given informally through discussion or using a structured evaluation template.

To close the session, the facilitator:

- Recaps key discussion points and themes that emerged.
- Introduces the next workshop, including time, place, and focus.
- Encourages participants to reflect on the session in their own time and bring any additional insights to the next meeting.

This final part lasts 20-30 minutes. If the next workshop follows on the same day, a break is provided before continuing. The session ends with a sense of progress and collective purpose, reinforcing the idea that participants are co-creators of their own wellbeing journey

DDA WORKSHOP 2 – SELF-REFLECTION, NEEDS ANALYSIS, VISIONS
Workshop 2 – Part 1: Vision Building

The second Dragon Dreaming (DDA) workshop begins with a short introduction, though this time it does not require participants to reintroduce themselves or share personal dreams again. Instead, this phase serves to set the atmosphere for continued self-reflection, needs analysis, and vision-building.

The facilitator initiates the workshop by guiding a reflection round based on insights from the first session. Some guiding questions for discussion may include:
- How do you feel about the previous workshop?
- Did you reflect further on the key themes that emerged?
- Did the previous discussion inspire any new thoughts, emotions, or actions?
- What are your expectations for today's session?

The main goal of this workshop is to deepen self-analysis and explore the collective needs and aspirations related to youth mental wellbeing. Participants discuss current emotional challenges, the resources and support systems available, and gaps that need to be addressed. The discussion may also focus on visions for personal and collective growth, identifying steps needed to transform these visions into reality.

The conversation flows organically, with participants encouraged to speak freely and listen actively. As in previous sessions, mutual respect and inclusivity are essential, ensuring that all voices are heard without interruptions or judgment.

This phase lasts approximately 45 minutes, with key insights and shared themes recorded to inform the next stages of the Dragon Dreaming process.

DDA WORKSHOP 2 – SELF-REFLECTION, NEEDS ANALYSIS, VISIONS
Workshop 2 – Part 2: Deepening the Discussion and Identifying Needs

Following the initial reflection phase, this part of the workshop allows participants to engage more deeply with the topic of youth mental wellbeing, freely exchanging insights while maintaining mutual respect and active listening. The facilitator encourages open dialogue, ensuring contributions remain constructive and inclusive.

Guiding questions for discussion include:
- How confident are you in your ability to manage your mental wellbeing?
- What are the biggest challenges affecting your emotional and mental health?
- What external pressures (e.g., social media, academic stress, societal expectations) impact your wellbeing the most?
- What support systems or coping mechanisms do you currently use?
- Are there specific topics or issues related to mental wellbeing that you want to explore further?

The facilitator's role is to maintain balance, ensure inclusivity, and challenge participants to reflect more deeply. Instead of contradicting viewpoints, the facilitator asks probing questions that help participants explore the origins, impact, and validity of their ideas. This reflective process benefits the entire group, allowing them to analyze their own perspectives in relation to others.

This phase lasts 45-60 minutes, with key insights documented for future reference.

Workshop 2 – Part 3: Summary, Reflection, and Next Steps

The final part of Workshop 2 provides a structured summary of key discussions and insights, allowing participants to reflect, validate, or refine their contributions. The facilitator recaps the main themes, ensuring that all perspectives are acknowledged and that participants feel heard and valued.

Additionally, participants are invited to provide brief feedback on their experience in this session. Feedback can be shared verbally or through an evaluation template, helping shape the next workshop to better meet the group's needs.

To conclude, the facilitator outlines the next workshop, confirming its time, location, and key focus areas. If the next session occurs on the same day, a break is provided before continuing.

This phase lasts 20-30 minutes, ensuring that participants leave with a sense of clarity, direction, and collective ownership over the process.

DDA WORKSHOP 3 – SELF-REFLECTION, NEEDS ANALYSIS, VISIONS
Workshop 3 – Part 1: Vision Building

As the third and final DDA workshop begins, the focus shifts toward reflection, integration, and action planning. At this stage, participants no longer need to introduce themselves or restate their personal dreams. Instead, this opening session is designed to revisit key insights from the previous workshops, reinforcing shared learning, common goals, and emerging themes.

The facilitator initiates the workshop by guiding a structured reflection round, prompting participants to review their experiences from the first two sessions. This serves to reaffirm collective insights and establish a focused, intentional space for deeper engagement.

Participants are encouraged to consider and discuss the following questions:
- How do you feel about the previous workshops?
- Did any discussions resonate with you on a personal level?
- Have you reflected further on the key themes that emerged?
- Did the previous sessions inspire new thoughts, actions, or changes in perspective?
- What expectations do you have for today's session?

This reflection helps participants recognize their growth, reaffirm their connection to the process, and prepare for the transition from exploration to action. It also ensures that no important insights are lost before moving into planning.

The third workshop builds on previous discussions & moves toward needs assessment and strategic planning. The facilitator introduces the key focus of this session:
- Synthesizing insights from previous discussions.
- Identifying priority areas for action.
- Exploring resources and support systems needed for implementation.
- Creating an action plan for individual and collective mental wellbeing initiatives.

At this stage, open dialogue remains essential, but discussions should progress toward tangible solutions. The facilitator encourages an inclusive and respectful environment, ensuring that all voices are heard and valued.

The conversation should flow naturally, allowing participants to share their reflections openly. However, to maintain clarity and engagement, the facilitator may use visual aids such as a flipchart or mind-mapping exercise to document emerging themes. Participants are encouraged to identify patterns, key takeaways, and shared aspirations from previous discussions. This will serve as the foundation for the next phase, where they will co-develop strategies and concrete steps for improving their mental wellbeing. This introductory phase lasts approximately 45 minutes, with key reflections documented to inform the next stages of the workshop.

DDA WORKSHOP 2 – SELF-REFLECTION, NEEDS ANALYSIS, VISIONS
Workshop 3 – Part 2: From Needs to Action

In this phase, participants shift from identifying challenges to transforming insights into concrete action plans. Following the reflection round, the facilitator encourages free interventions while maintaining the circle structure and ensuring all voices are respected. The goal is to define priorities, resources, and strategies needed to address the issues raised in previous discussions.

Guiding questions for this part include:
- From the needs identified, what are the most urgent priorities?
- How do we decide which needs to address first?
- Who should be involved in making change happen?
- What resources (people, knowledge, spaces, funding) do we need?
- Can you share ideas that might be relevant or innovative solutions?
- What concrete steps should we take to move forward?

The facilitator's role is to ensure respectful and inclusive dialogue while also encouraging critical reflection. Rather than dictating solutions, they probe deeper into ideas, ensuring participants challenge their own assumptions and think through practical steps. This allows the group to refine their understanding and develop meaningful strategies for action. This part lasts 45-60 minutes, with key findings documented to inform future follow-ups or projects.

Workshop 2 – Part 3: Summary, Reflection, and Next Steps

The final phase of Workshop 3 consolidates the entire journey, ensuring that participants leave with a sense of clarity and direction. The facilitator summarizes the key themes, commitments, and ideas generated throughout the workshops. Participants are invited to:
- Reflect on their learning and insights.
- Confirm, refine, or amend their contributions.
- Provide feedback on their experience.

To close the session, the facilitator:
- Reinforces the key takeaways and highlights the group's shared vision.
- Encourages participants to commit to small, actionable steps they can take beyond the workshop.
- Invites feedback, using discussion or a one-word summary exercise.

This part lasts 20-30 minutes, with time set aside for evaluation using a structured reporting template if needed. The workshop closes with a sense of collective empowerment, ensuring that participants feel equipped and motivated to carry their insights into real-life action.

Expected Learning Outcomes (Skills, Knowledge, Attitudes)

The learning outcomes of Dragon Dreaming (DDA) workshops differ from traditional educational approaches that focus solely on knowledge acquisition. Instead, DDA fosters collective exploration, participatory learning, and shared reflection, leading to the development of skills, knowledge, and attitudes that empower individuals and communities. By engaging in DDA, participants cultivate personal growth, emotional resilience, and collective problem-solving skills, all essential for addressing youth mental wellbeing and empowerment.

Skills

Through participation in DDA workshops, participants strengthen the following skills:

PERSONAL EXPRESSION
Participants become more confident in expressing their thoughts, feelings, and dreams in a safe and supportive environment, enhancing self-awareness and emotional intelligence.

ACTIVE LISTENING
Participants develop the ability to listen attentively and empathetically, fully engaging with others' perspectives while interpreting ideas within a broader collaborative context.

Patience and Open Communication
By practicing non-judgmental dialogue, participants become more patient and considerate, allowing others to freely share their views and emotions while waiting their turn to contribute.

CULTURAL CONSIDERATION AND SENSITIVITY
Participants enhance their awareness and respect for diverse backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives, ensuring open-minded and inclusive discussions that embrace differences.

CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING
Participants recognize that mental wellbeing is influenced by personal, social, and systemic factors, learning how to view challenges within a broader framework to find meaningful solutions.

Empathy and Emotional Support
Participants develop a deepened sense of empathy, recognizing the importance of emotional validation and support within peer networks and the broader community.

Knowledge

Following participation in DDA workshops, participants gain insights into:

Participatory Research and Collective Wisdom
Participants understand the value of knowledge-sharing and co-creation, learning how to identify and analyze challenges through collective engagement.

Stakeholder Collaboration and Engagement
Participants recognize the power of diverse contributions in solving complex issues, understanding how different stakeholders can play a role in mental wellbeing initiatives.

EXPLORATION, EXPERIMENTATION, AND PROBLEM-SOLVING
Participants develop an action-oriented mindset, learning to explore, test, and refine ideas through experimentation, ensuring that solutions are adaptable and relevant to real-life challenges.

Attitudes

DDA workshops encourage the development of key attitudes that empower participants to take ownership of their mental wellbeing and drive positive change.

PERSONAL VALUE AND SELF-AWARENESS
Participants recognize their own worth, learning how to trust their instincts, experiences, and critical thinking while refining their perspectives through shared dialogue.

POWER-SHARING AND COLLECTIVE ACTION
Participants understand that power is not imposed but shared, recognizing the importance of collaboration, mutual respect, and co-creation in effecting meaningful change.

CHANGE AS A PROCESS OF GROWTH
Participants embrace the inevitability of change, acknowledging that they have the capacity to shape their lives, communities, and mental wellbeing through collective action.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY AND SOCIAL IMPACT
Participants develop a sense of accountability, understanding how their actions contribute to personal growth, community well-being, and societal transformation.

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