



Australian Disaster Resilience
Conference 2021

**An Australia wide
learning network:
Grappling with
complexity to
sustain a responsive
community recovery**

Louise Mitchell
Social Recovery Reference Group

Paper for the Australian Disaster Resilience Conference 18-19 August 2020

An Australia wide learning network: Grappling with complexity to sustain a responsive community recovery

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Acknowledgements: The program was enabled through the SRRG and partnerships with the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience and Resilience NSW. The Evaluation of the program was conducted First Person Consulting.

1. Introduction

The Social Recovery Reference Group (SRRG) member organisations have a roles in supporting local government. This happens early on in the recovery process where they advocate for the establishment of and securing funding for Community Recovery/Development¹ Officer (CRO/CDOs) positions (note these are ‘Community Development Officer’ in Queensland) through the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements(DRFA) package for Community Development/Recovery Officers. These positions are intended to support the collective efficacy that enables better community recovery.

The Possibility Lab² was initiated in March 2020 in response to the many government funded CRO/CDO positions put in place across Australia after the 2019-2020 disaster season. We envisaged the need to support these often very isolated recovery practitioners through a professional body, or community of practice and imagined the benefits of a national network.

The program ran monthly from June 2020 to July 2021 and the evaluation found there was value in coming together across jurisdictions regularly, but without demand or expectation. This paper outlines the establishment, both the intentional and emergent design, the delivery and the findings from the evaluation of the program. Opportunities are being explored to support community development recovery practitioners in the future.

The need

Working as a Community Recovery Officer in a position that reports to a local government, with a community development approach is unenviably complex. Shevellar (2013) recognises that the role and practice of these community development roles “in a post-

¹ Throughout we will refer to the positions as CRO/CDO to represent Community Recovery Officers or Community Development Officers. In Queensland these positions are called Community Development Officers (CDO), not to be confused with the Department of Communities, Housing and Digital Technology positions named ‘Community Recovery Officers’ who support these CDOs. There are also other names for recovery positions funded through the DRFA in Victoria such as Place Based Managers.

² <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/possibility-lab-community-of-practice/>

disaster context is a relatively unexplored field that can create particular tensions and challenges". These challenges include trying to provide appropriate support at the right time while balancing the forces of:

- i. meeting the expectations of the role from the organisational (Local Government) context; and,
- ii. sensing into what is occurring in the community where people are adapting to their new and dynamic circumstances.

The complexity of this is increased with the need for the role:

- to work with people and communities who have experienced enduring stress, anxiety and/or trauma;
- to capture the dynamism of hopes, expectations, vision and energy in heterogeneous community and document some of this in a recovery plan (that may be owned by the local government on behalf of the community) when it may be difficult to deliberate together;
- provide information on, or assist with access or distribution of funds, with community groups and individuals, in real time as things emerge; and,
- evaluate how the process and outcomes of community recovery is going.

These workers are employed to do the demanding work of both weaving the fabric of community in a most intense period of loss and rapid change and meet organisational outcomes.

The purpose of the learning network

In response to this recognised need for a sustainable recovery workforce, in March 2020, the SRRG³, which has members who administer the roll out of the CRO/CDO program with the support of the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements, recognised the potential benefits of connecting the now significant number of people working in often isolated community development or community recovery roles across the nation. The intent was to create a living knowledge network that shares information, expertise, peers and other resources to support and guide good practice and decision making. The question that framed our learning space was:

What might be possible if we connected together, across Australia, to learn, share and sustain ourselves as we do our important work in community recovery?

³ The SRRG – Social Recovery Reference Group is a national independent advisory group established to drive the human services perspective in emergency management, promoting the centrality of community in all recovery efforts following a disaster event. The SRRG runs projects across and for all the Australian jurisdictions <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/social-recovery-reference-group/>

The program logic for the Possibility Lab network support is outlined in figure 1, Appendix A⁴.

The focus of the online, monthly Possibility Lab has been to provide a quality experience of connection and respond to the interests and needs of participants. Attendance was intentionally not mandatory, and members were encouraged to attend when they could, if it was of value to them. This catered for the often time-poor nature of this work without additional pressure, and the varied background and experience people brought to their roles. There was no fee for this 12-month program to ensure that administrative barriers were minimal and it was inclusive of everyone who wanted to attend.

2. How we went about it

Establishment

This became a project of the Social Recovery Reference Group (SRRG), for the 2020-21 financial year and was developed in partnership with and supported by the Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience (AIDR). Interested agency stakeholders were engaged as a Steering Group to act as conduits to the participants and included Resilience NSW, Bushfire Recovery Victoria, the Department of Communities, Housing and Digital Economy and The Department of Premier and Cabinet South Australia and the Australian Red Cross. The SRRG National Consultant Disaster Recovery along with specific Resilience NSW staff led the design and facilitation of the Possibility Lab.

The first monthly, ninety-minute, online gathering occurred in July 2020 and ten subsequent sessions were hosted on the fourth Tuesday of each month from 12 – 1.30 AEST/AEDT.

Design and Delivery

The focus in both the design of the delivery and the facilitation of sessions was on building connections and relationships and learning from the expertise within the group. We introduced some ways in which we were going to show up in the space, how we would create a container for learning together. The principles we agreed to created a group learning culture and safe space to show up in conversation. We brought in guests where appropriate and built-in time for conversations between participants in small groups. A record of Session Focus, guests, check in, breakout and check out questions is provided in Appendix C. Both the content and process were a focus of the session design and facilitation⁵ provided by Louise Mitchell, Peter Pigott, David Newell throughout and Sam Beattie in 2020. Modelling the creation of a learning space and a focus on relationships was seen to be a critical aspect given this is a primary capability for people working with communities in recovery.

⁴ Acknowledging First Person Consulting worked brought the program logic together.

⁵ Facilitator biographies are provided [here](#).

3. The value of the network

An evaluation⁶ of the value of the network to participants was conducted from May to June 2021. The evaluation framework is provided in Appendix C, Table 2 and available on the Possibility Lab web page. The value to participants was found to be high, providing:

- national perspectives
- networking opportunities
- collegiate support and
- access to lessons learned, resources and experts.

Who attended and why?

At the beginning of June 2021 there were 75 people were registered in the Possibility Lab. Thirteen have withdrawn over time, mostly due to moving on from their positions. Of the remainder 26 registrants have never attended a session and 34 attended only one. Reasons for this included high workload, prioritising responses to the crisis, conflicting meetings and whether they were interested in the session topic.

There were 12 people who attended between six and nine sessions for reasons such as the following:

- *“I find it uplifting and inspiring. I put attending sessions as a priority because of how much I got out of them.”*
- *“After it was clear from the outset how important these sessions are for learning and collaborating, I made sure I didn't miss out on this opportunity. It is so important in these recovery roles to pause and set aside some time each month to recharge and revitalise. The Possibility Lab makes that happen for me.”*

A visual representation of attendance as a Network Map can be found in Appendix D. This map can be explored (zoom in and out) online [here](#).

For those who did attend, what was the value?

The Possibility Lab was well-delivered, remaining in-scope and appropriate to the target audience and the intent of being adaptive over time. In particular, the flow and approach to facilitating the sessions allowed for open sharing and discussion. As participants shared their experiences and listened to others from around the country, a sense of collegial support built over the months and included a felt understanding that as community recovery practitioners, they are not alone in their role and the challenges they face. Participant comments demonstrate this:

⁶ The evaluation was conducted by First Person Consulting. The short and full evaluation report on the Possibility Lab can be found at <https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/possibility-lab-community-of-practice/>

- *“Provides a support structure to isolated recovery workers which is external to their immediate workplace”.*
- *“It reminds us to look after ourselves first, the way it is facilitated really emphasises and reinforces that.”*
- *“It provides a confidential space to share and debrief at no risk to your position.”*

There was a deepening of understanding of the contexts of community in which CRO/CDOs worked and the complexity of the dynamic environment of recovery. Dialogue ranged from issues at individual level through to the community and the systems we have designed that may or may not support the outcomes we are working towards.

Overall, members have increased their networks, connections, access to useful resources, knowledge and skills in community recovery as evidenced by some of the survey responses. Comments from participants are included under each of these categories.

Networks: *“I found it useful to network with other people who are in my similar role, and it provided an opportunity to share our learnings and experiences and for us to learn from other professionals who have been in recovery work longer.”*

Connections: *“There are also people I’ve connected outside of the sessions and that’s been really good, and someone who has only attended once or twice, I’ve supported him and have been working with him in other ways.”; “It has enabled me to connect and interact with people I wouldn’t normally get to. I’ve been able to connect with national people in disaster recovery to work on issues rather than just local teams.”; “I’ve called people from the Possibility Lab independently to share ideas and information as well as numerous emails.”*

Access to useful resources: *“It’s up to you to choose to participate, if there are useful resources that come up during a session I would always go back to the doc or email someone, it is always available.”; “My team has been able to have an offline session to try to resolve a complex problem. Fresh eyes, ears and different ways of thinking helped us find a way forward.”; “We are going through a lessons learned process at the moment and I did a request to the Possibility Lab if anyone had done something similar. I was able to find a neighbouring council doing similar things so that has been really good, a reminder that people are out there and willing to help.”*

Knowledge and Skills in Community Recovery: *“I’m a bit more thoughtful in how I design my community engagement approaches. I do more research about community needs, and expectations and being more realistic about how to meet them.”; “It’s the only opportunity I have to learn what is currently happening in the disaster and resilience space.”*

Facilitator observations on the quality of the learning environment included: *“During the session I hear people speaking with energy, passion, telling it like it is, speaking from the heart – I see that as an outcome in itself to be able to speak their truth in a group of their peers.”*

Through sharing our insights into the complexities of this work we were able to make some meaning and raise further questions that encompassed the micro through to the macro. In particular this was enabled without exposing individuals in their workplace.

4. Summary and next steps

The evaluation reflected a number of suggestions from registrants and participants about how the Possibility Lab could be improved to enable participant access in terms of session length, time, topics and potential face-to-face networking. These suggestions will be taken on board as we explore where to from here with this model of capability development.

The developmental learning model builds on a philosophical position that we all bring ourselves and our lived and professional expertise to the learning space. A living knowledge network, in a field where practitioners are working with communities and individuals who have experienced enduring stress, anxiety and trauma, can also significantly contribute to a peer to peer support model.

After the 2011 floods in Queensland, CRO/CDO networks were supported and after the 2019/2020 fires networks at the state and regional level have been emerging to support these positions in NSW and Queensland. Whether these will be short lived, or we will see a maturing of community recovery and resilience as a profession, in a move away from a reactive response through short term contracted positions, remains to be seen. One participant commented:

“From my personal perspective and one that we've discussed multiple times as so many of us are coming to the end of work contracts - there's a very large piece of work remaining to be done to realise the value of keeping a recovery officer position fully funded on a permanent full-time basis within a local council setting.”

So there is opportunity if a national Possibility Lab continues, whether positions become more enduring or not, to explore how a living knowledge network about regeneration in community before, during and after disaster might link in with existing or developing state, regional and local recovery networks as a to complement to these.

It makes sense to build a sustainable recovery workforce. These workers demonstrate courage, tenacity, commitment to community and great heart as they work in these complex roles in service of community. They bring a bigger picture to their work as expressed by some of the participants in closing comments from sessions as we took this learning journey:

- I'm leaving... *“feeling connected once again to good people doing very important work”*

- *“I’m leaving ‘encouraged – emboldened around the space of Council and community. How can communities feel that they are well supported in their efforts by council, or that they can work without Council in the needs they have – see where my efforts can support that”*
- *“I think I’m going to stop thinking about the limits of contract lengths and start focussing on work that will impact longer term change regardless of whether I’m in an official role or not.”*

Note from the author:

It has been an absolute privilege, alongside the guest facilitators, to create and hold a container for learning, dialogue and connection with these community and disaster practitioners who are aspiring to work toward community regeneration in a recovery context.

References:

Miller, Madelinne, Walker, Lucy, Smith, Justine, 2021, Evaluation of the Possibility Lab Learning Network, First Person Consulting for the Department of Families Fairness and Housing.

Shevellar, Lynda, Westoby, Peter, 2014, “Perhaps?” And “Depends?” The Possible Implications of Disaster Related Community Development for Social Work, Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education, Vol 16, No.2, 2014, pp23 - 35

APPENDIX A.

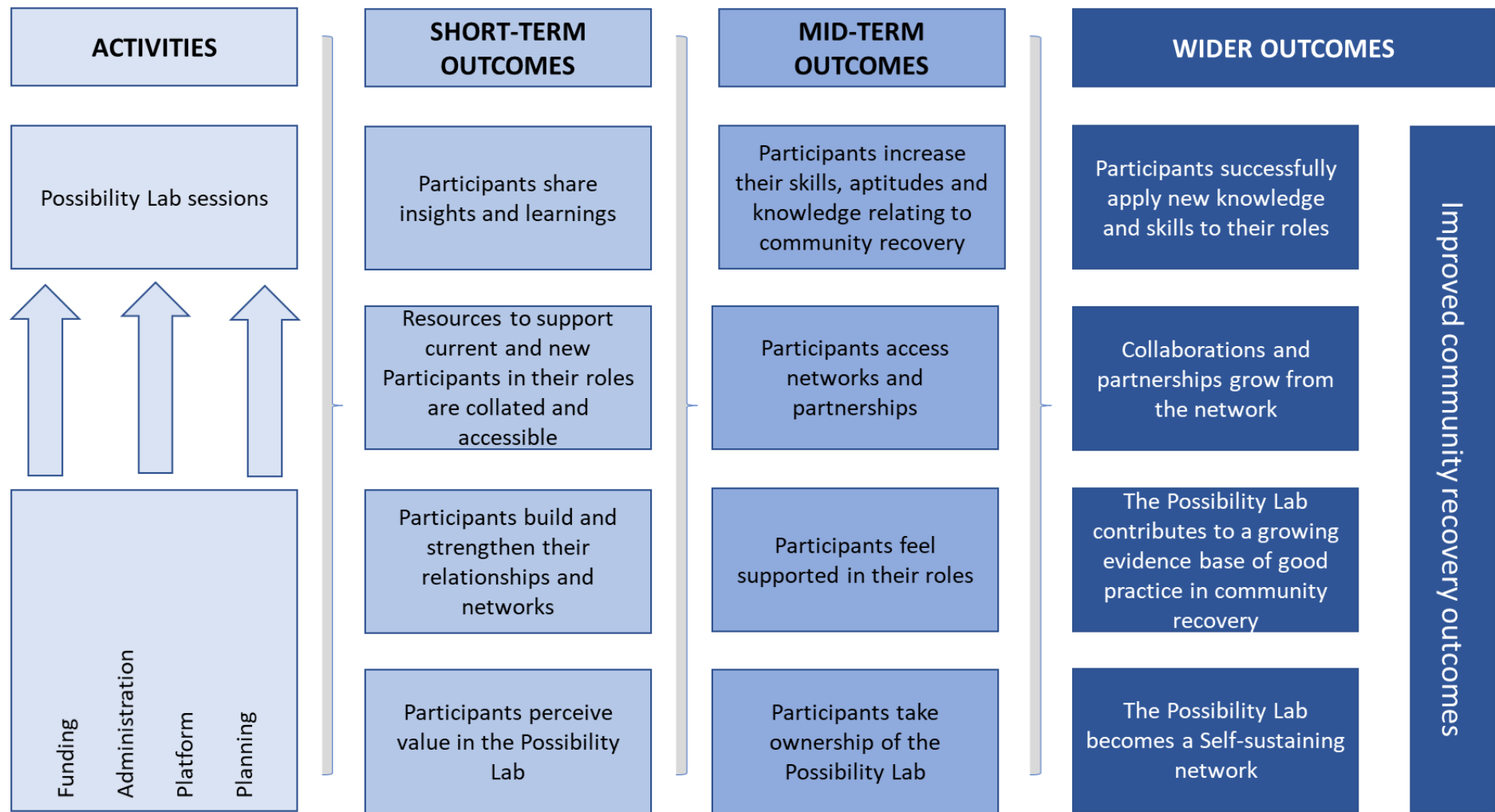


Figure 2: Program logic for the Possibility Lab

APPENDIX B.

Table 1. Session topics, check in questions and break out questions can be found in Table 1.

Session & Topic	Check in Questions	Breakout Questions
July 2020 The Dynamics of Collective Disruption Facilitators: Lou Mitchell, Peter Pigott, David Newell, Sam Beattie	What drew you to do recovery work? What drew you to be part of this group? What would you like to learn from this series?	How does the Chaordic Path as a framework, or the developmental 'vs' programmatic approaches speak to your experience of community work, of recovery work? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What resonates, what doesn't? - How have you made attempts to hold developmental and programmatic approaches together? To walk along the stepping stones of the chaordic path? - What are your questions or insights?
August 2020 Exploring Community-led Recovery Facilitators: Lou Mitchell, Peter Pigott, David Newell	Where is your energy meter on a scale of 0-10 and why do you think this is?	How do we best support Community-led recovery, particularly in this time of heightened uncertainty with COVID-19? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have you seen community-led recovery? - How do you support community-led approaches in recovery? - What are your questions or insights?
September 2020 Ritual/Anniversary, Symbol/Memorial Guests: Kelly Daryl Shona Whitton	What is one thing that is emerging for you, right now in your work?	When is your first-year anniversary of the disaster? What planning and processes are in place or being talked about? Might there be any tension points or groups that you need to specifically consider? What are the potential implications of COVID-19 restrictions on what might be possible?
October 2020 (extra session) Peer to Peer Consultancy Facilitators.	Opt in session using a 'Consultancy Protocol' including clarifying and probing questions.	Concluding: What was the group's experience of the consultancy process?
October 2020 Monitoring and Evaluation Guests: Alex Marsh and Linda Hygate, Queensland Reconstruction Authority	How was your morning?	What does success in recovery look like? Who has a stake in that success? Who might be involved? How am I going to know whether we've achieved that? How might I monitor and evaluate?
November 2020 Process tool – open space	What's your current energy rating?	Invitation to Open space breakout rooms: Supporting communities to plan for Climate Change in their recovery

	What are you finding gives you energy in the work you are doing?	Transition or 'exit' strategy Recovery Mapping Difficult conversations and engagement of services
January 2021 Community Recovery – Making the invisible visible Guest: Chuck Peters, Cedar Rapids 2009	How are you arriving today? How are you arriving into 2021?	Open questions in whole group format.
February 2021 Asset Based Community Development Guest: Michelle Dunscombe, Jeder Institute	What energy are you arriving with today?	In what ways have you supported community-led approaches? What have been the challenges that you've had in working in a 'bottom-up' way?
March 2021 Design tools for hosting a conversation with purpose	What's your weather report, inside and out?	What is showing up in our communities that needs our attention now?
April 2021 Working effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal people after disaster Guests: Rose Walley and Tim Muirhead	Something I wonder about, or feel uncomfortable about in striving for effective engagement between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Aboriginal people.	Open questions in whole group format.
May 2021 Community process after disaster Guest: Dr Rob Gordon	What are you observing in your communities (the dynamics, individual and collective)? What does this mean for your work?	Reflections (more depth) on the check in question.
June 2021 What is it to do this work? Guests: Helen Goodman and Bob Stilger	Where has your attention been in your work? What has astonished you?	What is important to know about the work that you do? What does it mean to do recovery work?
July 2021 Where to from here?	In the planning: What next and how would we like to use our insights from the last 12 months?	
<p>Check out questions in the series:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are you learning? • How are you leaving? • What's one wellbeing indicator that you would look to, to determine whether you are keeping well? • What is your energy reading as you leave today? • One key idea I'm taking with me about working effectively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities after disaster. 		

APPENDIX C

Table 3. Detailed evaluation framework

Evaluation questions	Sub-questions	Indicators	Existing evidence and data sources	Required evidence and data sources
Outcomes and effectiveness				
1. To what extent were intended program outcomes achieved?	a) To what extent have participants increased their knowledge, skills, aptitudes through participation in the Possibility Lab?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-assessed change in knowledge, skills and aptitude 	Shared documents: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative evidence of participant self-assessed change in knowledge, skills and aptitudes • Evidence of resource sharing via google doc • Qualitative evidence of participants learning and sharing with others • Some qualitative examples of participants gaining new relationships, networks and partnerships • Limited qualitative examples of how participants have put learning into action • Qualitative evidence of participants perceived value of the Possibility Lab 	Shared documents: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quantitative data on participant attendance via updated spreadsheet • Network analysis (based on availability data) Participant survey: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceived usefulness and accessibility of resources • Examples of how participants have applied new knowledge/skills • Evidence of building and accessing new connections
2. Were there any unintended outcomes?	b) To what extent has the Possibility Lab increased access to useful resources to support participants?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased access to useful resources 		
	c) To what extent has the Possibility Lab provided a space for participants to learn from others and share their knowledge and experience?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participant perspectives of learning and sharing with others 		
	d) To what extent have participants built networks and relationships through participation?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New relationships and connections formed 		
	e) To what extent do participants feel supported in their roles?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examples of how participants have put learning into action 		
	f) How have participants changed their approach or used knowledge gained through the Possibility Lab?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participant perspectives on the value of the Possibility Lab 		
	g) To what extent do participants perceive value in the Possibility Lab?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequency of participant attendance • Exploration of any other unintended outcomes (positive or negative) 		

APPENDIX D. Acknowledgement Author: First Person Consulting.

The network map in Figure 44 provides a visual representation of attendance at Possibility Lab sessions. This provides insight into session attendance, the core group of regular attendees and 'one-time-attendees.' Specifically:

- Grey lines connect attendees (red, orange and yellow dots) to session(s) (purple dots) they attended. Those on the outer attended less sessions than those more central in the map.
- Session One and Nine had both the highest attendance and number of 'one-time-attendees.'
- In total there are 34 'one-time-attendees' and 26 people who are registered but yet to attend a session
- The Hosts, shown (red dots), are central in the network and have attended 4 to 9 sessions.
- There are 10 participants who could be considered as 'regulars,' having attended more than half the sessions run to date (5 or more). One participant has attended all sessions, and two have attended 8/9 sessions.
- Full attendance statistics for each session (hosts, guests and participants), including the percentage of 'one-time-attendees' is shown in the report [here](#).

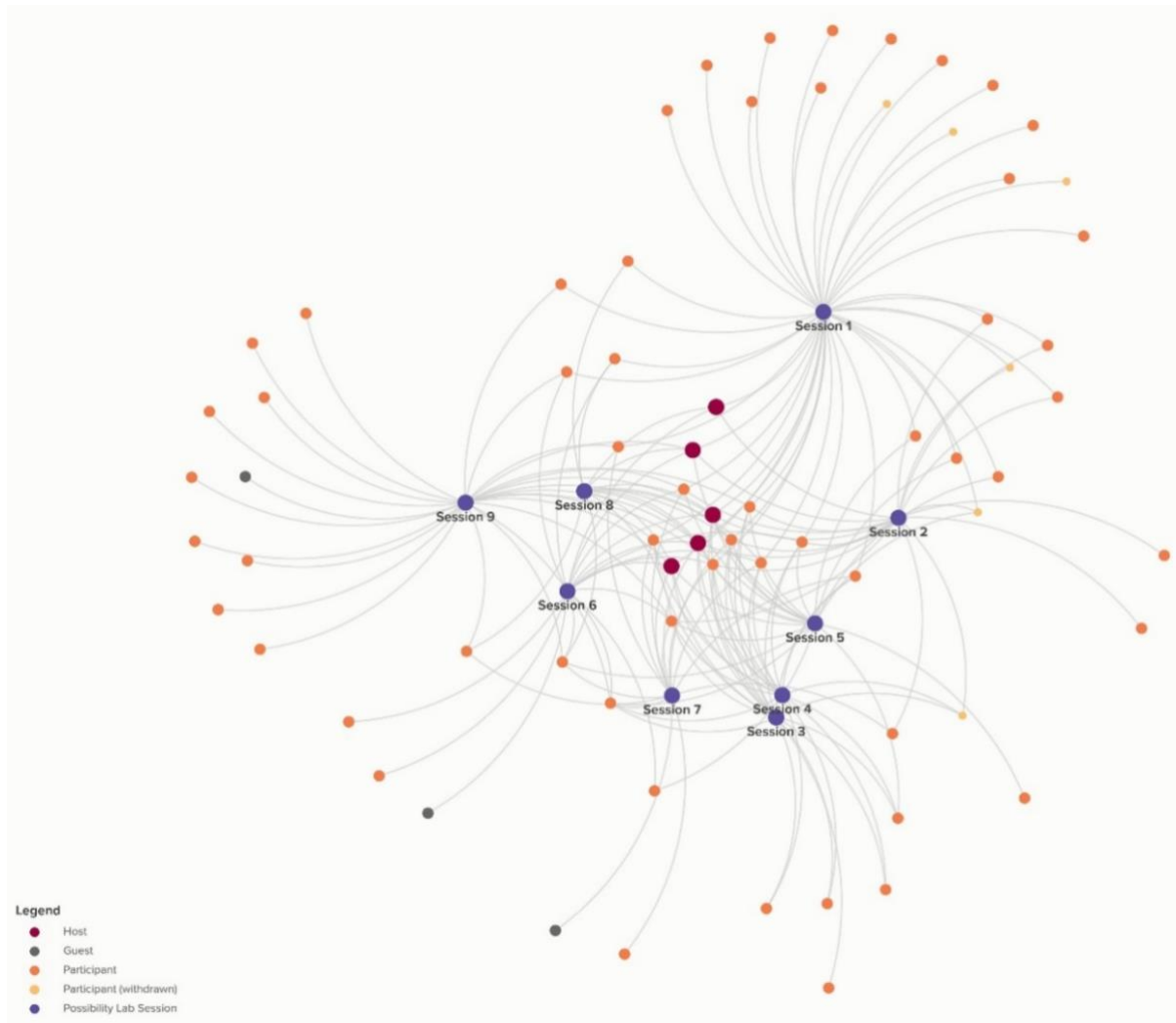


Figure 4. Network map of Possibility lab session attendance, connecting attendees (red, orange and yellow dots) to sessions (purple dots) they have attended (shown by grey connecting lines). This map can be explored (zoom in and out etc) online [here](#).