Dialogue

> Dialogue is an essential ingredient of any intervention directed at changing a situation and is a vital competence for any adviser. While it is not easy to facilitate true dialogue, it is a capability that can be developed in its own right. Real dialogue can create collectively shared and owned understanding and an agreed direction of effort as well as clarity about divisions of tasks and responsibilities.
>
> This chapter by Marianne Mille Bojer reviews factors critical to the success of capacity-development processes that use dialogue as a key philosophy. Her excellent menu of dialogue tools and approaches shows the reader what is on offer and how to choose between them. She also provides concrete examples of how some of these methods have been used.

The Place of Dialogue in Capacity Development

Marianne Mille Bojer

Introduction

Dialogue is an essential ingredient of successful capacity development interventions. The intention of this chapter is to explore the power of dialogue in supporting sustainable change, to look at some of the critical elements of effective dialogue processes, and to offer a menu of possible dialogue tools and approaches for practitioners to draw on.

Dialogue is essentially a practice and discipline of *creative* conversation. The word 'dialogue' is often used very loosely to denote any kind of conversation between two or more people. At the same time, we often hear people making statements like 'that was not a real dialogue'. This is usually because the conversation was not participative and creative, but rather a competition between points of view, or simply a transfer of knowledge from one actor to others. What makes a dialogue *real* is the emphasis on listening, questioning and thinking together that makes it a genuinely creative process.

In 2007, I was invited to work with my colleague Busi Dlamini on a capacity development programme in Alexandra township in South Africa. Our partner organization had noticed that there were many good community-based service providers, but that they were duplicating services, rarely collaborating, and not managing to refer people on to each other where necessary. During the first workshop, we explored with the group what capacity means and what capacities the programme was intending to build. What emerged was that the most crucial capacities the group needed were the capacity to collaborate with one another, and the *capacity to build their own capacity*. Both of these objectives became central to the process over the ensuing months. Neither was about pre-defined skills that could be trained but rather about collective results that could only be reached through an emergent and experiential group process with continuous dialogue. The experience greatly deepened our understanding of community capacity and the importance of dialogue as an essential ingredient.

There are a number of reasons why facilitated dialogue is such an essential ingredient of any intervention designed to increase the power of a social system – any inter-dependent web of actors, be it an organization, a sector, a multi-stakeholder team, or a community – to perform, sustain and self-renew. Dialogue enables the system to *perform* because it generates *movement*. Often groups or collective efforts get stuck because they have lost sight of where they are going; roles and responsibilities are not clearly defined or fairly distributed; or underlying relational dynamics are getting in the way of taking decisions. Dialogue processes can enhance shared and collectively owned vision, purpose and direction, as well as role clarity, and the ability to take decisions, thus releasing energy to perform.

Dialogue enables the system to *sustain* itself because it generates *health*. A system may be unhealthy and therefore unsustainable if it is fragmented because its different parts are not communicating with one another; if people are afraid of contributing or saying what they think; or if conflicts and tensions are consistently brushed under the carpet. As participants in a dialogue process listen to one another, the process increases trust, openness, connectivity and understanding, and participants learn how to resolve conflicts. This value is something that may be difficult to measure and is not necessarily about transfer of knowledge or practical skills, rather about the more intangible but extremely influential field of relationships.

Finally, dialogue enables the system to *self-renew* because it generates *learning* and *creativity*. It creates spaces for the system to see itself, its strengths and weaknesses, and its context more clearly. It can create opportunities to pay attention and learn from past experiences and opens space for the diversity of voices, including the younger or less powerful ones, to be heard and harnessed, thus creating new paths that weren't apparent before.

It is important to understand that in relation to capacity development, dialogue is both process and substance. This means that a capacity development intervention will be far more successful and sustainable in its impact if the facilitator manages not only to create dialogue and apply dialogue methods *during* the intervention, but also to embed dialogue practices that are relatively easy for the system to *continue* applying after the intervention. So the intervention must not only use dialogue in its approach but also include dialogue in the capacities to

be developed. This can be done by explicitly articulating what is going on when dialogue capacities are being worked on, creating time for reflection on how these capacities and processes may be useful to the group beyond the current intervention, and allowing participants to take over the process and facilitate themselves at times while the facilitator plays more of a coaching role, providing supervision and feedback.

Critical elements of successful dialogue programmes

Fortunately, a vast and rapidly increasing number of dialogue tools, handbooks and case studies are available to practitioners seeking to increase their emphasis on dialogue in capacity development. This chapter gives just a taste of these approaches. Each one has its own set of guidelines and underlying principles and specific types of situations in which it is most helpful. Regardless of the specific choice of tools or methods in a given situation, though, there are certain critical ingredients to the success of any dialogue intervention. These include:

• clarity of purpose;
• alignment of purpose, people, and process;
• good questions;
• safe space;
• competent, helpful and empowering facilitation.

Clarity of purpose

In designing and facilitating a dialogue intervention, it is important to be clear, thoughtful and transparent about the intention: the answer to the question 'why are we here?' This answer helps to identify the appropriate methods to apply and process to follow, and it helps participants to feel safe to open up to one another and move into uncharted territory.

Alignment of purpose, people, and process

The three core design questions to answer are the why, who and how of the process. It is important that these three are aligned; they are based on the questions of purpose, who needs to participate, and what process we should follow. For the intervention to be effective these three questions need to be answered together, so we do not end up with a beautiful purpose and process but the 'wrong people' in the room. Once the people are in the room, it makes sense to adjust purpose and process if necessary to fit the people we have to work with. This may seem obvious, but it is a common limiting factor to success.

Good questions

Strong questions provide fuel to a dialogue process. They need to be questions that are relevant to those involved, that cannot be answered by one expert and therefore

require collective attention, and that are formulated in such a way that they ener-gize the participants, encourage their curiosity and open up their thinking.

Safe space

In order for participants to engage in a truly creative conversation, they will need to acknowledge what they don't know, which in many cases makes people feel vulnerable. The safe space that allows people to be vulnerable and engage with not-knowing depends on clear communication about the purpose and principles of the process, on the 'groundedness' of the facilitator, and on the culture the group is able to create together. In most cases, it's useful for the group to create 'ground rules' or principles together, so they can voice what they need in order to feel safe.

Competent, helpful and empowering facilitation

Given that dialogue is generally not the normal way of working for most groups, the role of the facilitator becomes extremely important in holding the space and the process that allows people to shift into a more collaborative and creative way of operating. The facilitator affects the group in many visible and invisible ways. Important qualities of the facilitator include: strong listening skills, a sense of service, flexibility and responsiveness without losing track of the purpose, self-awareness and authenticity, asking good questions, and the ability to empower the group.

A brief menu of dialogic tools and approaches

The variety of tools, methods and approaches to assist in creating successful dialogue interventions has proliferated over the past 20 years or so. What most if not all the creators of these approaches have in common is an awareness that traditional models of training and of hosting conferences and meetings have not managed to generate systemic changes where needed. All of these approaches help groups to solve their problems and develop more from within, in ways that make sense to the people participating, build bridges among diverse players, and build capacity of the systems involved. Here is a taste of some of these approaches.

Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry is a methodology and process that focuses on identifying the best of what is already there in a system, and finding ways to grow and support that, thus engaging 'possibility thinking' instead of 'deficit thinking'. The Appreciative Inquiry work can be used in shorter- or longer-term interventions. It includes specific methods for stakeholder interviewing, conference designs and community organizing. It is particularly powerful in situations where people are focusing too much on deficiencies and need to wake up to their strengths and potential (http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu).

Change Lab

The Change Lab is a holistic approach to working with multi-stakeholder (usually cross-sector) groups to create transformation in a given system. In the change lab, participants gain a whole-system perspective, clarify their roles and commitments to addressing systemic challenges, build new partnerships, and design and incubate creative solutions. Through the process, the Change Lab builds leadership, relationships and capacities. One of its strengths is that it follows through to the action stage, rather than finishing at the point of ideas. The Change Lab approach is specifically designed to address complex, social challenges that no one actor can resolve on her or his own and usually runs over several months or years (www.reospartners.com).

Circle

There are many variations on Circle dialogue practices, but generally they are based on a recognition that sitting in a dialogue circle helps to level power structures, distribute leadership and responsibility, and support listening, questioning and sharing. Sometimes a talking piece is used – an object passed around the circle or back and forth between participants to help with the flow of meaning, which can be very helpful especially to invite more silent voices to speak. The Circle is rooted in ancient practices, and is particularly useful when a group needs to slow down to really listen and think together, develop shared vision, and in situations where a few voices otherwise become dominant (www.peerspirit.com).

Deep Democracy

Deep Democracy is rooted in process-orientated psychology, and is based on the idea that a system is unhealthy if roles are 'stuck', and if minority voices are not being expressed. If a few people are holding on to certain positions, opinions or emotions on behalf of the whole group, or if conflicts are being suppressed under the surface, it is difficult for the system to grow. The role of the facilitator is to help make roles in the system more fluid, and to help the system become more aware of itself and its wisdom. Because this role is very challenging, it is generally important to have a trained Deep Democracy facilitator. Deep Democracy includes methods for decision-making, awareness-raising and conflict resolution. It can help release energy in situations where difficult things are going unspoken and blocking a system from moving forward (www.deep-democracy.net).

Dialogue Interviewing

The dialogue interview is a form of stakeholder interviewing that is not based on a set of fixed questions but rather takes the form of a dialogue in the sense that the interviewer's questions follow the energy and content of the interviewee's story. The dialogue interview is not purely about data collection, but also about building a relationship between the interviewer (the intervener) and the interviewee, and about generating motivation and insight for a collective project. It is particularly useful at the beginning of an intervention as a way of designing in a context-

sensitive and flexible way and as a way of building energy and finding allies for the process (www.presencing.com/tools).

Dynamic Facilitation

Dynamic Facilitation is a facilitation technique whereby the facilitator follows the natural dynamic flow of the conversation, rather than trying to direct it. It is aimed at facilitating a co-creative process by inviting in the group energy and allowing it to flow. A key feature of the approach is the use of four flipcharts – for problems, solutions, concerns and data. The facilitator uses these four areas to guide the group in creating a common picture of their situation and their proposals for change. This is a highly creative process that requires an active facilitator and a pre-existing group energy (www.tobe.net).

Future Search

A Future Search is a structured process designed to work with stakeholders on a given theme to look at the past and the present, and to design the future. It works on the principle of getting the 'whole system' represented in the room. The process moves from story-telling about the past through mapping current trends, stakeholder groups owning their actions, developing ideal future scenarios, identifying common ground and planning actions. The historic perspective, the emphasis on stories, and the use of visuals in Future Search are particularly helpful in working with local communities that have a common history and need to move towards a common future (www.futuresearch.net).

Open Space

Open Space is a simple and easy to apply process that allows a group to create its own agenda and enables participants to self-organize around the topics they are passionate about and willing to take responsibility for. It helps a group move forward quickly when passion and engagement are present. While it doesn't necessarily guarantee dialogue, it does tend to lead to highly creative conversations because of the emphasis on people taking responsibility for their own learning and ideas (www.openspaceworld.org).

Scenario Development

Scenario Development processes enable groups of people to create possible pictures of their shared future. The scenarios enable participants to think deeply about their context and to challenge their assumptions and mental models about the world. Scenario processes always create multiple pictures of the future, and as such help to create choices that make sense within multiple possibilities and so create more resilient systems. It is very useful in situations of high complexity, where a longer-term perspective is required, and where there is uncertainty about how the context will affect the system. (See for example, www.gbn.com/about/scenario_planning.php.)

Story Dialogue

Story-telling is an under-utilized but powerful tool in encouraging dialogue. Story Dialogue uses stories as a way to bridge theory and reality and to recognize the expertise that is present in people's lived experience. In this approach, participants are invited to tell their stories around a particular theme, and then to identify connections and differences across their stories. The ensuing dialogue is based on the questions:

- 'what?' (what was the story?);
- 'why?' (why did events in the story happen as they did?);
- 'now what?' (what are our insights?); and
- 'so what?' (what are we going to do about it?).

This approach is powerful for creating shared understanding, relationships and a sense of grounding for change initiatives (www.evaluationtrust.org/tools).

World Café

The World Café is a methodology that allows even large groups of people to have in-depth dialogues about certain questions, and to network the emerging ideas. The room is set up like a café with small tables, each for four participants. After a first round of dialogue on a certain topic, participants are asked to move to new tables and make linkages between the conversations, while one table host stays behind at each table to represent the previous conversation. The World Café is designed to bring out the collective wisdom of the group. Its success depends on the facilitators designing strong questions and a safe and hospitable space, and supporting mutual listening and a spirit of inquiry. It is a strong dialogue tool especially helpful to engage large groups of people, open up possibilities, equalize power structures, and identify emerging patterns among ideas (www.theworldcafe.org).

Several handbooks are available and referenced in the key references section of this chapter which give much more detailed suggestions on the strengths and limitations of each of the tools mentioned here as well as many others.

Choosing dialogue methods

If there are so many diverse methods and approaches available, how does one go about deciding which one to apply in a given situation? None of these methods are recipes that should be applied universally. As stated earlier, dialogue is both process and substance in this field, and so it is helpful to use a creative and dialogue-based approach to designing the dialogue intervention itself. Any longer-term intervention for capacity development will most likely combine several different dialogue methods at different stages.

The ability to assess the relevance of different methods for different situations depends primarily on an understanding of several factors. First, what is the purpose of the intervention? Is it primarily to share knowledge and build relationships, is it to

create shared vision, develop strategies, and take decisions, or is it to resolve conflicts and solve problems? Second, what is the context of the intervention? Is it dealing with a highly complex problem, with severe power imbalances, with high diversity or with high levels of conflict? Third, who are the people and/or the stakeholders that need to be involved in order to meet the purpose? And finally, what is our capacity as facilitators? What do we have the competencies and resources to do?

One practice that can be extremely helpful in this upfront reflection on choice of approaches is to engage in dialogue interviews with participants. This serves multiple purposes. It helps the facilitators or interveners to deepen their answers to the above questions, but it also develops allies and creates an early sense for participants that this process will be different and that they will be listened to, which means they take part in the dialogues with a more open approach.

To give an example, in the capacity-building programme mentioned earlier in Alexandra, we applied a number of these methods over the course of the intervention. We drew much inspiration from the Change Lab process in designing the overall flow. We used Appreciative Inquiry early on in the process to uncover the community's assets, as the group was too focused on deficiencies and not on their own strengths. We facilitated a process whereby participants did Dialogue Interviews with each other to create understanding and build relationships around their visions. We drew on a scenario project that had been done previously for the HIV/AIDS situation in South Africa as well as some creative visioning exercises to develop a long-term perspective, nurture a sense of unity, and make apparent the importance of choices made today. We frequently sat in Circle Dialogue to check-in with the group and get every voice into the room, as it was a group with an unbalanced power structure. We used the World Café at different stages when we needed to create shared meaning while ensuring everyone was participating. And in the final workshop, when it turned out that a underlying conflict was preventing the group from really getting to action, we facilitated a Deep Democracy conflict, in which group members got so engaged until 10.00pm that they forfeited watching South Africa win the World Cup in rugby! The next day one of the participants said, 'I thought conflict was about fighting, now I know it's a way to cross the bridge'.

The capacities developed in this intervention were not possible to predict exactly from the outset. Through a process of dialogue and collaboration over four months, we uncovered the capacities being developed. At several checkpoints, we asked the group to talk in small groups and name what capacities they felt they were developing, and at times we were surprised by the answers.

When choosing to engage with dialogue methods, it's important to realize that everyone changes through these processes, including the facilitators, donors and organizers. It's a different type of posture from much of traditional development work, which focuses on the problems outside us. Sometimes it's difficult and requires courage to hear what people truly have to say, and sometimes it requires acknowledging that we ourselves are a part of what needs to change. With these more emergent approaches it becomes harder to predict results, and at the same time we are consistently surprised by the unplanned positive outcomes. We need to be open, agile and willing to change our plans, allowing the collective process to unfold together with the participants.

Figures 10.1 and 10.2 *Dialogue processes in Alexandra township*

I once read in a recipe book a quote by one of France's most famous pastry chefs, who said if he could trade everything he knows about pastries for everything he does not, he would do so in an instant. My sense of the development field is similar – that what we do not know dwarfs what we do know. I think this is a healthy attitude with which to enter any dialogue-based capacity-building intervention: with a respect for, and an artist's approach to, the methods we bring in our backpack combined with an infinite curiosity about what we are about to learn.

References

Bojer, M.M., Roehl, H., Knuth, M. and Magner, C. (2008) *Mapping Dialogue*, Taos Institute Publications, Chagrin Falls, OH

Brown, J. and Isaacs, D. (2005) *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures through Conversations that Matter,* Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco

Cooperrider, D., Whitney, D. and Stavros, J. (2007) *Appreciative Inquiry Handbook*, Lakeshore Communications

Holman, P., Devane, T. and Cady, S. (eds) (2007) *The Change Handbook: The Definitive Resource on Today's Best Methods for Engaging Whole Systems,* Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco

Owen, H. (1997) *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide*, Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco

Weisbord, M. and Janoff, S. (1995, 2000) *Future Search: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations and Communities,* Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco

Recommended readings

Many chapters in this volume touch on issues and situations that call for more or better quality dialogue. Readers are invited to look particularly at Chapters 2 and 6, which identify different actors and stakeholders with competing or conflicting interests that need to be aligned in capacity development processes. Dialogue has much to offer in these situations. Another topic of interest is found in Chapter 7 where the question of values and how this may play out in CD practice is explored. All chapters in Part III have important dialogue components. Finally Chapter 22, in taking stock of the whole volume, looks at the implications of the topics treated here, for practitioner capabilities and competencies. For further readings on topics related to dialogue as method, the following may be helpful.

Peggy Holman, Tom Devane and Steven Cady (2007) *The Change Handbook: The Definitive Resource to Today's Best Methods for Engaging Whole Systems*, Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco

A wonderful resource for practitioners who want to increase their repertoire of methods and ways of engaging large groups. It provides a background to the different approaches and for each one, practitioners are guided through how to prepare and adapt to suit the situation they are faced with.

Adam Kahane (2004) *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening and Creating New Realities*, Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco

This is a lively and readable account of rich experiences from all over the globe, through which Kahane invites readers to reflect on how seemingly intractable and complicated problems may be resolved thorough more or better quality dialogue.

The Barefoot Guide to Working with Organisations and Social Change, www.barefootguide.org

Here is a down-to-earth introduction to working with organizations and groups with dialogue and engagement built in at all stages. It is targeted at development practitioners so the language is accessible, but what makes it unique is that it is illustrated with evocative drawings and cartoons that use humour to make quite serious points and to illustrate some of the issues that practitioners confront on a daily basis. It also provides many guidelines and tips.

Table of Contents 'Capacity Development in Practice'

For downloads of the digital versions of the full publication or separate chapters, please visit http://www.snvworld.org/en/Pages/CapacityDevelopment.aspx or www.capacity.org