

Documenting Community Dialogue's Practice and Projected Outcomes

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Dialogue has become an accepted local peace and community building strategy. It has an academically accepted theoretical basis and a practical track record, having been applied in many conflict and post-violent conflict environments around the world. Given its appeal and application in a very wide variety of settings, dialogue could be the subject of more systematic empirical study. While descriptions of specific dialogues exist, analytical questions remain about the delivery and effectiveness of dialogue. What are the actual practices used in various cultural environments to create constructive interaction among people in deeply conflicted societies? How effective are these practices?

Since 1997 Community Dialogue (CD) has facilitated interactions crossing social boundaries in Northern Ireland. The organization has adopted an approach to dialogue forged during its early years and formalized in its written materials and trainings. The organization's dialogue process has benefitted from many internal consultations and several external reviews. This report is the final stage of a research project designed to document CD's practice of dialogue through the perspective of its facilitators, including the role of empathetic understanding in the process.

Evidence in this report can have a secondary purpose by contributing to the body of research on the impact of dialogue as a peace and community building strategy.

Project Description

The information presented in this report is derived from a structured content analysis of in-depth interviews conducted by Drs. Anna Leon-Guerrero (Sociology), Ann Kelleher (Political Science), and Patricia Killen (Religion).

A call for study volunteers was sent to a list of 31 past and current CD facilitators. Nineteen facilitators responded (61% of the identified sample) and were interviewed by the research team over a two-week period in January 2019.

The sample of interviewed practitioners can be best described as representative and diverse. They live and work in a wide variety of local organizations throughout Northern Ireland and facilitate for CD as specific projects are funded. All but seven of the interviewees had

facilitated for CD within the last three years, and all have been part of CD organizationally within that period of time.

We documented additional demographic characteristics of the facilitators/subjects.

- Gender: six men and thirteen women.
- Age: from 33 to 76 years, average 57 years.
- Facilitation experience: from 2 to 30 years, average 20 years.
- Formal education: from college to Masters' degree with a majority having earned a university degree.
- Background (derived from subject comments): six from a PUL community, five from CNR, four undetermined, two from the Republic, one with CNR and PUL parents, one from an immigrant community.

Each interview began with general questions about the definition of dialogue, moving on to questions about the individual's facilitator training, then best practices, and ending with examples of successful and challenging facilitations. Interview subjects did not know the questions in advance.

Throughout this report interview subjects are not identified by their real names. We also chose not to note their ages or other identifiers because doing so could reveal the identity of the specific facilitator. Throughout the report subjects are referred to as interviewees, practitioners or facilitators.

Data Analysis

1. Definition of Dialogue

All but one of our subjects described dialogue as "an unfolding process of transforming and deepening understanding of others and ourselves through listening, sharing and questioning," language consistent with the definition in CD's *A Practical Guide to Dialogue* published in August 2004.¹ Their descriptions also mirrored the comments made by David Holloway (CD Director) and Jim O'Neill (CD Program Director) during pre-research consultations as they elaborated on the CD definition.

¹ As stated in *A Practical Guide to Dialogue*, "Dialogue deepens understanding of our own and each other's position often leading to shared understanding. It does this by shifting the focus from the stated positions that we so often argue over to the needs (often shared), which underlie them. In our dialogues we ask people to, 1. Question their own positions and look at the needs underlying them, 2. Question the positions of others and look at the needs underlying them, and 3. Explore how to meet those sometimes shared and sometimes conflicting underlying needs." This definition is directly informed by the work of David Bohm, a prominent theorist in the academic study of Dialogue. His book *On Dialogue* (1996) elaborates on several pivotal concepts represented in Community Dialogue's definition, such as "shared meaning," and "self-awareness of thought." In the case of "stream of meaning" CD uses Bohm's exact phraseology.

Facilitators characterized dialogue as a challenge (“we will challenge you and we will get our learning through that”), a journey (“people move, weave through a journey”), or a collaborative space (“is there a willingness to listen either to what is being asked or, if there is another point of view”). Whatever the characterization, there was agreement among our subjects that “the onus is on the people in the room to share their knowledge” or their stories.

There is a clear consensus within our sample about the definition of dialogue. This holds for their engagement with CD and their facilitation in other professional engagements. This shared understanding constitutes a vital resource for current and future facilitators advancing peace and reconciliation across venues in Northern Ireland.

Holloway and O’Neill, on behalf of CD, identify empathetic connection as the bedrock concept of dialogue’s substance and subtlety. All facilitators conveyed the importance of empathy and its applicability to dialogue in practice. Six referred to empathetic connection as “hugely,” “absolutely,” “colossally,” or “totally” significant, while others made comments reflecting their appreciation of its pivotal importance. One facilitator defined empathy with a comment from her/his experience: “I don’t like what you are saying, but my heart bleeds and breaks for you because what you are going through is very traumatic.” One practitioner differentiated empathy from understanding, when the latter is thought of in purely cognitive terms. He/she explained, “Dialogues can make huge progress if they get to a stage where a participant in effect says, ‘You know what; if I were in your shoes in similar circumstances, I could see myself doing that.’” Whatever their precise wording, all facilitators conveyed their understanding that effective dialogue involves the emotive level of human connection, and further, that this emotive connection is integral to a participant’s ability to imagine someone else’s life circumstances.

Other facilitators did not use the word “empathy” but employed complementary terms: compassion, relationship building, friendship, humanity, and reconciliation.

2. Becoming a Facilitator

As interviews with the nineteen practitioners progressed, the research team began to realize the many paths they had taken to arrive at their shared understanding of dialogue.

Subjects cited multiple sources of their own development as facilitators including but not limited to specific master’s degree programs, Women’s Resource and Development Agency, Quaker Peace Education Project, Towards Understanding and Healing, Peace and Reconciliation Group, Music Without Borders, TIDES, International School for Peace Studies, Roger Fisher’s book *Getting to Yes*, John Paul Lederach, Community Dialogue, Paulo Freire, labor relations on both the corporate and union sides, international development work, prison work, Corrymeela, Glenree, and experiential learning (especially before dialogue as theory and practice became an established field of inquiry). This lengthy list also incorporates mediation and negotiation work.

It should be noted that most of the facilitators interviewed have worked together over CD's many years of funded dialogue projects. They have engaged in what could be termed mutual coaching as they conferred in preparation for their work and co-facilitated dialogues. Twelve of the interviewees have facilitated with Community Dialogue within the last three years. Five have been co-facilitators with CD's Program Director at some time in their careers. Through its participation in past cross-organizational gatherings of facilitators and its continuing engagement of facilitators for its own funded projects, CD has and continues to serve as a node or point of connection and mutual interaction among this community of skilled facilitators in Northern Ireland.

In responding to the question about why they have continued in their commitment to dialogue - a field requiring a high level of skill, personal maturity, emotional intelligence and experience - the facilitators gave a variety of responses. We have grouped their responses in the following categories. (Many of the facilitators offered more than one explanation so the numbers for each source of ongoing commitment add up to more than nineteen.)

- Personal reward - "Dialogue switches on the light for many people," "I love facilitating. It is addictive," "People move from fixed positions to becoming open to doubting and diversity," "I get a bolt out of it," "I enjoy the storytelling." - 8 responses.
- Women's voices must be heard - "Those who have suffered deserve so much better," "They deserve people to listen to them." "Why do I single out patriarchy? The levels of domestic violence in society is appalling." - 7 responses.
- More work is needed - "To bring about change," "To provide information," "Things have to get better," - 6 responses.
- Early personal life experiences - Interviewees told their stories. - 5 responses.
- Love working with people - 4 responses.
- Faith tradition - 3 responses.
- Do something and not just criticize - 1 response.
- All the motives apply - 1 response.

Deeply embedded in these responses is a vision of a possible better future for Northern Ireland and a conviction that, through dialogue, community members can take steps toward making that vision a reality.

3. Best Practices

All subjects specified several activities and strategies when responding to questions about their practice. They provided nuanced descriptions of dialogues they had facilitated. The stories tacitly demonstrated facilitators' experience and expertise as well as their seriousness of purpose. The interviewees themselves expressed appreciation for dialogue participants who showed a capacity to interact with subtlety, sophistication and humanity.

The dialogue process is never simple and straightforward, as the interviewees made clear when describing dialogue's complex social environments. Facilitators emphasized the following characteristics as essential dialogue practices. (The numbers after each dialogue characteristic indicate the solid support for each listed attribute.)

- Active, deep, respectful listening. Eight interviewees explained this as a central element of dialogue. One signaled the importance of this kind of listening by noting that participants were “paid attention to and not just heard.”
- Participant-led, free flowing agendas. Ten subjects commented on the importance of participant ownership of the creative and flexible process of dialogue, using phrases such as “go with the flow.” Throughout our interviews, the facilitators credited participants generally with a subtlety and sensitivity required to handle emotionally fraught topics.
- Safe space. Several mentioned the need to encourage participants to speak freely and openly while engaging with each other. Four facilitators elaborated at length on how this can be achieved, starting with the arrangement of the physical environment and on-boarding activities designed specifically to create emotionally safe spaces. The facilitators do not equate “emotionally safe” with “conflict free.” When the participants share their narratives, conflicting assumptions and perspectives on contested issues emerge.
- Advance preparation. Seven interviewees emphasized the need for participants in a dialogue to know what to expect beforehand. Some of the facilitators stressed the importance of participants being told in general who would be in the room and why. The facilitators also carefully prepare for dialogues. Several described the careful and extensive consultation required to design the dialogue's specific activities, questions and physical environment. Consultation among the facilitators continues as needed during ongoing sessions.
- Humor. Seven practitioners identified humor as a significant element in building group awareness and cohesiveness. They discriminated, however, between humor that builds the group and humor used for self-protection.
- Agreed upon ground rules. Four interviewees noted the need for participants “to create their own rules,” as one put it. The facilitators work with each dialogue group to do this. They encourage open and respectful interaction and confidentiality for consideration in the course of the group developing the rules. Several practitioners mentioned that having the participants create the rules is one of the strategies that helps participants claim ownership of and take responsibility for their dialogues. Participants must come to listen as well as to speak, and so this list comes full circle, back to active listening at the beginning of the list.

Most facilitators described beginning activities, also referred to as ice breakers, that they use to put people at ease as they begin to know each other. Even the one interviewee who stated that he/she didn't like games used an initial activity as standard practice. A few facilitators ask each participant to bring an object that holds meaning for them, perhaps symbolizing an important event in their lives. Participants place the objects in the middle of the circle and the dialogue starts from there. One facilitator said he/she is the one who first

chooses one of the artifacts from the middle of the circle and asks whose it is and why he/she brought it. With this activity the facilitator initiates relatively low-stakes sharing that allows participant to decide how much to reveal. One practitioner described an ice-breaker in which participants were asked to go around the circle in turn, stating their names and telling a story about why they have that name. Usually this activity produces points of shared interest or some humor and gives participants an opportunity to learn more about each other.

The practitioners come from diverse backgrounds and a range of facilitator training experiences. In describing actual facilitations, they offered an extensive repertoire of actual practices that they employ to advance dialogue in a group. These include poetry, participant writings, music of many kinds, theater performances written and performed by participants, the classic hopes and fears list, a selection of photographs, introductory talk by an invited presenter, and more. The interviewees described actual facilitations with considerable enthusiasm. Their descriptions made clear that they not only are knowledgeable about facilitation, they are reflective about their practice and about how specific strategies contribute to a good dialogue session as described above.

Four practitioners made an observation about the role of silence. It must be noted here that silence has two opposite functions when applied to dialogue practice, and the four facilitators discussed both. The first function was explained by the phrase of one facilitator as “sitting with the silence.” Silence serves as a useful strategy for encouraging participation because it allows space for people reticent to speak. The facilitators who explained the contributions silence can make distinguished it from the very negative function of silence in Northern Ireland society. A “whatever you say, say nothing” admonition was noted by two interviewees as a tacit, culturally enforceable behavior that shuts down talking about what really matters to people. This second kind of silence defeats the purpose of dialogue.

All the practitioners prioritized the process of dialogue over the specific topics being considered. Nearly all of the interviewees had facilitated dialogues on many issues in many contexts. Following and facilitating the flow of the group around what the participants want to talk about is pivotal to the dialogue process. The phrase “the process is the point” is a mantra of some dialogue theorists for good reason. Yet, on some occasions during a dialogue, as a facilitator pointed out, key questions have to be asked. For instance, this was the case for a group of women in a rural area who had known each other from baking Victorian sponges together for about twenty years and yet had never talked about their differing historical identities. When the facilitator prompted them to have a community relations conversation some of participants found out information about each other that reversed long standing perceptions. Dialogue can be constructive because of the process. Its power is magnified when it is used to unpack sensitive topics, whatever they may be.

The point about sensitive topics leads the authors of this report to comment on what one interviewee referred to as the proverbial elephant in the room – sectarianism. This assessment research is, after all, based in Northern Ireland and takes place at a time of political polarization on a world-wide scale. The practitioners brought up the subject of sectarianism in

various ways and at different points during the interviews. They used a wide range of terminology, such as “orange and green,” “legacy stuff,” “the sovereignty issue,” and the updated, politically charged “Brexit.” There was a decidedly deep difference of opinion among the facilitators about whether sectarianism was, in fact, so dominant anymore. Eleven strongly asserted that they found themselves “stuck in the history and politics” because “it never went away,” “paramilitarism was alive and well,” other issues “have been sectarianized.”

Three other facilitators were equally adamant in their conclusion that the issues they are tackling through dialogue have changed; a “changing scene” as they put it. As one explained, “Ten years ago I would have focused on issues of identity and how unsafe it is for anybody to move out of their little tribe. On account of the work of dialogue that has been going on, and the interactions, I think there is less attachment to the tribal identities.” A second practitioner pointed out that when he/she brought up the sectarian issue with a college group, “One of the girls said, ‘That is our moms’ and dads’ nonsense. We do not want to know about that.’ So, I asked them, ‘What are your issues?’”

The final subject in this section of the report presents how facilitators described important elements in an effective dialogue’s organizational structure. All of the facilitators were sensitive to these elements and aware that their absence contributed to a dialogue being less effective. They focused on three areas.

- Group size. Several facilitators responded with “it depends” at first. Then as they engaged with the topic, they directed comments to a consideration of the size that best invites everyone who so chooses to participate. All spoke of having a group of a size that increased odds for participation. All put the optimal size range at from 8 to 20 or so, with 12 to 16 recommended by the majority.
- Number of dialogue sessions. As with group size, at first several practitioners generally agreed that it would depend on several factors and some offered stories to explain. However, when interviewees thought through their many examples of success, they showed a noticeable lack of enthusiasm for one-off events. They held out the potential for such sessions to have positive outcomes for some people, but when factoring in their understanding of dialogue’s full meaning, concluded that it rarely, if ever, reaches its full potential in one-off dialogues. A few facilitators thought such events could open a participant’s mind which “can happen anytime,” as one said.

Interviewees who emphasized the need for multiple sessions saw this structural factor as important to a group’s achieving the trust required for commonalities to emerge among participants and for further thinking to develop about whatever contentious issues are being addressed. As one interviewee noted, “Dialogue is a process of discovery that is, by its nature, fluid and has to be allowed to develop.”

- Co-facilitation. Six interviewees strongly advised co-facilitation as a factor that increased the odds for effective dialogue. Having a co-facilitator makes it easier to create and sustain a steady environment for the group as they engage with highly charged issues. Having a

partner allowed practitioners to share the work of facilitation, with the one not leading at the moment being able to observe. Then the co-facilitators could confer and revise their strategies based on a shared assessment of how the dialogue was going.

4. Consequences

This last assessment interview category was designed to elicit explanations for what facilitators consider to be effects of dialogue. Overall the facilitators provided a positive appraisal of dialogue's capacity to make a positive difference in the lives of the participants. The effects can be visible and invisible, immediate and longer-term, and can lead to something new as the result of the process generating human connections where they had not existed before. People who have been seen and heard, who have listened and spoken, and who have reflected and revised their ideas gain a range of freedom they did not have before.

Three examples from the facilitator interviews serve to illustrate how dialogue works and the varying impact it can have.

In the first, a group of CNR women in a County Derry village had been going for about twenty years. At a dialogue a facilitator made a suggestion that the group consider doing some cross-community work. "They were determined after that dialogue to do it and they did. It changed the whole dynamic of the group for the better, and they got some absolutely brilliant women in who really brought an awful lot to the table and they were just good for the group. It was nearly like a shot in the arm. The group had been going for about twenty years doing the same thing, and for them to take that different kind of [step], it wasn't a change in direction or anything like that, but that they opened it [the group] up was particularly important for the village. The women's group led the way in that. There wasn't any real cross community stuff going on there. That was a really big achievement, I think."

The second illustration comes from Belfast, where there was a very contentious issue around a St. Patrick's Day parade. "Through the dialogues we were having it was one of the topics that came up. The man organizing that year said they were trying to make it inclusive." A member of the PUL community who was participating in the dialogue pointed out that the woman on the radio announcing the parade had a southern accent which was not welcoming. That sensitivity to the other's perceptions "was taken on board" and in later years the parade has become more accepted by the PUL community. The point was made that "It is not about what you want but what is going to be acceptable for another community to take part."

The last illustration begins with a nine-week series of dialogues that occurred in a prison. To initiate the series, one facilitator met with republican prisoners and the other with loyalist prisoners. Then they brought the two groups together once a week. At one session, a family member of someone killed during the Troubles came in to tell her story. Years later one of the participants from the prison group recognized one of the facilitators at a large professional gathering. "He said, 'You have no idea what an effect those dialogues had on me.' All those years later he said, 'It really made me think.' But it is the fact that he said – and he

knew me straight away – he said they were terrific sessions. That is how you know. He had never been involved in dialogues like that before. He had never had an opportunity to meet with people. . . . he said how that has helped him to this day in developing an understanding of the other side.”

These three illustrations exemplify key elements of the definition of dialogue and its effects, including participants genuinely listening and hearing the needs of others and choosing to act in ways that take account of the perspectives and needs of others.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The research team has distilled three general conclusions and recommendations from our work on this project.

First, referring to the project’s central task, a core dialogue facilitator community exists in Northern Ireland with Community Dialogue as one organization in its midst. The community has a shared understanding of dialogue and the significance of empathetic understanding within it. The facilitator community is a valuable resource in a post-violent-conflict society.

Second, policy makers often overlook dialogue as a strategy for creating a healthy society at least in part because, by definition, it employs smaller-scale, face-to-face community and peace building. As one facilitator said, dialogue’s “impact is in small subtle things. Loads of difference happens from small things.” Another put it this way, “Dialogue won’t necessarily change things, but I think without dialogue we don’t have the basis for the types of change that we need.” Several facilitators made the point that substantive, long-term consequences cannot be measured adequately by collecting short-term data, which are called outcomes or results by funders and usually are determined by counting the number of participants, among other deliverables. It is the interviewees’ contention as well as ours that assessing the more substantial impact of dialogue requires innovative evaluative studies that would need to include dialogue participants and longitudinal data.

Additionally, five facilitators spoke ardently of the need for follow-up activities to dialogue, one by saying “We are good at opening the boxes, but we don’t do anything with them.” Some of the facilitators pointed out that one “next step” would be to offer dialogue participants support for fostering the interpersonal connections developed during the dialogue and for identifying and carrying out local projects designed to reduce conflict and violence and promote human thriving in their communities. Those facilitators who spoke to this recognized that such a next step would require funding.

Third, judging by practitioner comments, it seems diminishing resources are being committed to dialogue. The lack of financial support for a demonstrably effective strategy, albeit one with a generational timeline, is discouraging. The deeply destructive and ingrained

cultural practice of “silencing” has a monumental head start in the perpetuation of existing polarizing stereotypes and social stagnation.

Dialogue by the very nature of the process surfaces deeply divisive issues, issues often passed over or intentionally avoided in the regular course of human interaction. Northern Ireland needs the work of dialogue to continue. We noted earlier that Community Dialogue has functioned as a node among others for the development and mutual coaching of a solid network of dialogue facilitation specialists. Public policy needs to recognize the value of this network and the extent and impact of its work. The wisdom, knowledge and skill of this community of practitioners needs to be passed on systematically to the next generation of facilitators. (Thirteen of the nineteen facilitators interviewed were over 50 years of age.) For the work of dialogue, as in so many dimensions of institutional and public life today, the task of knowledge transmission in the face of massive demographic shifts is urgent.