

Mapping Dialogue

A research project profiling dialogue tools and processes
for social change

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ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

This publication is the product of a collaboration between the German Technical Co-Operation (GTZ) and Pioneers of Change. As it is our intention to disseminate it as widely as possible, it can be downloaded on www.pioneersofchange.net.

We are very interested in receiving feedback on this toolkit and its usefulness. If you are a dialogue practitioner and you have feedback or additional tools or resources, we would greatly appreciate hearing from you. Any reading materials, contacts, books or articles, or reflections and input to the content of this report from your experience will be greatly appreciated. Please contact dialogue@pioneersofchange.net.

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INTRODUCTION

“An answer is always the part of the road that is behind you. Only questions point to the future.” - Jostein Gaarder

The modern world loves answers. We like to solve problems quickly. We like to know what to do. We don't want to “reinvent the wheel”. We don't want to “waste our time”. And when we have the answers or have a wheel invented we like to pass on the information to others. We do this through the media, through training programmes where teachers pass on answers to students, or through conferences where experts speak on panels while hundreds listen (or pretend to listen) in the audience. This approach may be useful for some situations, but is problematic for a number of reasons, particularly when working on social and human challenges in the 21st century.

Firstly, we live in a world of increasing complexity, where answers have a short life-span. Adam Kahane in his recent book “Solving Tough Problems” (2004) points out that tough problems are characterised by three types of complexity. *Dynamic* complexity means that cause and effect are distant in space and time. To address this type of complexity you need a *systemic* approach to the problem and the solution. *Social* complexity means that there are many different and usually conflicting points of view and assumptions about the issue, and the problem isn't owned by a single entity. This demands a *participative* approach. Finally, *generative* complexity means that the old solutions are no longer working, and the problem is constantly changing and unpredictable, which requires a *creative* approach. Not all problems are dynamically, socially, and generatively complex, but most if not all of the major social issues South Africa as a country is currently trying to work through are. Hiv/AIDS, black economic empowerment, democratic transition, globalisation, unemployment, and crime are all perfect examples.

Secondly, it seems to us that people have an inherent desire to want to solve their *own* problems. When universal, formulaic responses are imported or imposed from the outside, they meet resistance and often fail. This is partly because they are not exactly appropriate in the given context, but just as much because there is a lack of ownership from people who haven't participated or been consulted in the decision-making. Human beings have a living, deep impetus for freedom and self-determination, and given appropriate circumstances, people are usually more resourceful than expected in terms of finding their own answers. They buy in to, and own, solutions they have been a part of creating. The success of implementing interventions on social issues often depends more on ownership and motivation of those involved than on the cleverness of the idea.

Even if only for these two reasons, we need to be adept at asking questions, and at talking and listening to each other. These are age-old competencies. For millennia, people in villages across Africa have worked through collective challenges, creating solutions through conversation. But it is not only when the group is faced with problems that dialogue comes in. Life in an African community is an ongoing conversation.

Why is this art of talking declining? Many of us seem to have forgotten how to engage in, and be present to, such conversations. In these times of busy-ness, information overload, electronic communications, scientific rationality, and organisational complexity, we are forgetting how to talk to each other. Fortunately, as a response to this trend, a number of methods for facilitating dialogue have been emerging globally, in particular over the past 20 years.

This collection profiles 10 such methods in depth and a number of others more briefly. The approaches are diverse in many ways. Some are designed for small groups of 20 people, some can accommodate up to 1200 or even 5000 in dialogue at the same time. Some focus on exploring and resolving conflict and differences, while others emphasise looking first to

what is working and agreed upon. Some are explicitly dialogues between groups while others require each participant to be there only as themselves and individuals.

Yet across all these dialogue methods are some clear common patterns. They focus on enabling open communication, honest speaking, and genuine listening. They allow people to take responsibility for their own learning and ideas. They create a safe space or container for people to surface their assumptions, to question their previous judgments and worldviews, and to change the way they think. They generate new ideas or solutions that are beyond what anyone had thought of before. They create a different level of understanding of people and problems. They allow for more contextual and holistic ways of seeing. They lead to “a-ha” experiences.

Each of the profiled approaches has a life story behind it. Many of these stories begin with a person who posed a question. *“How do the questions we ask shape our reality?” “Given that the coffee breaks seem to be the most useful part of the conference anyway, what if the whole conference was designed similar to a coffee break?” “What is being lost when we just take majority decisions and don’t hear what the minority has to say?” “How do we create a networked conversation, modeled on how people naturally communicate?” “Why are we re-creating the same conference rituals when they are passifying us and limiting our creativity?” “Why are we not managing to bring in the collective intelligence of hundreds of people but rather choosing over and over to just listen to a few expert voices?”*

These inquisitive characters proceeded to experiment with new ways of organising conversations. They drew inspiration from indigenous cultures, lively cafés, international peace processes, and personal experiences of trial and error. The result is the potpourri of possibilities described in the following pages.

As we were reading about dialogue in doing the research for this project, we were struck by how often South Africa is mentioned again and again as an inspiration to these originators of dialogue methods internationally. South Africa’s peaceful transition to democracy is hailed as an example of dialogue. Concepts of Ubuntu, and the indigenous African processes which are as much from South Africa as from the rest of the continent, are also looked to for wisdom. To the rest of the world, this country is a living testimony to the power of conversation. But as we spoke to South Africans currently trying to promote dialogue, there was a sense of sadness that something is being lost. There is a question as to whether South Africa is still managing to cultivate internally what it is so well-known for externally. Or are we overlooking this gift, and “moving on” to the modernity where quick fixes and answers are more important?

Our assignment

This research project was commissioned by the German Technical Co-operation (GTZ). It is part of their supporting the Nelson Mandela Foundation (NMF) to explore ways in which dialogue can be used to address social challenges in South Africa. During and since South Africa’s transition to democracy, Nelson Mandela has exhibited a formidable ability to forgive and suspend judgment, along with an awareness of the importance of listening to all sides. We were asked in this context to map out a variety of approaches, and to provide an overview, case examples and our own subjective commentary on each. We are hoping that this material will be useful not only to NMF but to anyone who shares our questions and our desire to improve the quality of human conversations.

In navigating the field of dialogue, it became apparent to us that the term is very broad. In one of our interviews, it was pointed out to us that dialogue includes dialogue with oneself, dialogue with nature, dialogue with the past and future, and online dialogue. For the scope of this project, we would like to be explicit that we have been asked to focus on dialogue methods applicable to *face-to-face* gatherings of *groups* of people meeting to address collective *social challenges*. We have also for now not broached the topic of what a “Nelson Mandela dialogue method” would look like, but have rather been asked to map the main

approaches available globally. We have, however, included a brief section on indigenous African approaches to conversation.

How to use this document

This report, or toolkit, is divided into three parts. **Part I is called “Foundations”**. It offers a brief “Dialogue Dictionary” to help distinguish the term dialogue from other concepts such as discussion, debate, and negotiation. It then goes deeper into what some of the generic foundations are for a good dialogue process. These are aspects that are more overarching and fundamental than the choice of method, and which can help guide that choice. Finally, Part I includes a brief introduction to the African tradition of conversation, honoring the deep roots of these processes on this continent.

Part II is the actual toolkit. This is where you will find the in-depth explanation of 10 methods as well as shorter descriptions of an additional 14. Each of the 10 methods contains an overview, a review of applications, a case example, and our subjective commentary. The methods have simply been ordered alphabetically, as we found other types of categorisation too constraining. This means, of course, that the order in which you read them is completely up to you as well.

Part III offers initial guidelines on how to assess which method to use in a given situation. We have outlined a series of different purposes a dialogue may have as well as a series of contextual factors, and we give some pointers as to which tools are most suited to different aims and situations. We also look at different types of facilitation, offering points to consider in choosing a facilitator for a dialogue. As you read, you may want to flick the pages back and forth between sections II and III.

A note on “tools”

We will emphasise multiple times through this report that we don't see these methods as recipes that should be applied universally, and we are not prescribing specific tools. The ideal is to understand deeply the purpose, context, and participants of a given dialogue and design the process accordingly. We encourage you to read each of our descriptions and to look for the context, story and impetus behind how these processes were developed. A deeper understanding of how processes are designed would help you in turn to design the appropriate process for your own situation. We find it useful to continually pose the question of how these different tools and processes can also be combined in new ways. If dialogue itself is about exploration, so should our process be about exploration.

There is an obvious paradox in this whole assignment. All of these approaches have evolved as a way of bringing people together to understand problems in context, challenging and moving beyond universal answers and prescriptions. And yet they are themselves tools which in some cases claim to have universal applicability across cultures, group sizes, and situations. Are they somehow above the trend they are criticising because they are focused on dialogue, and so in a different dimension? Yes and no.

We do believe that there are underlying archetypal patterns that recur, that conversation is a universal need, and that some of the principles in these methods are deeply human. But it is also important to be aware that we are at risk of falling into the very same trap of thinking our favorite tool is what will save the world. Tools have an interesting effect on us – they provide safety and comfort, and we become attached to them because they help us to function in a complex world. A tool can become like a lens that affects how we see our surroundings, and if we wear only one lens all the time, our perception of the very thing we are trying to change may become distorted.

The challenge is for us to use these tools wisely to be effective, while being able to hold them lightly and to let them go when they are not serving us any longer. As you read this, we invite

you to try with us to find that balance between honouring the energy, and the power of these tools, while holding their answers lightly.

About the authors

The three of us have been working in a variety of situations as facilitators over the past 10 years. In 1999, we co-founded an international learning network called Pioneers of Change and through that, experimented with new ways of organising and hosting meetings. We have used many of the approaches profiled here personally, and have met and become friends with several of the originators. We are currently working in different contexts. Mille works as a facilitator of dialogic change processes in her capacity as associate of Generon Consulting and Pioneers of Change. Marianne has founded and co-leads a learning village in Zimbabwe called Kufunda Village, primarily focused on building self-reliance in rural communities. Colleen manages the Gordon Institute of Business Science's "Dialogue Circle".

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