

PART III: ASSESSMENT

ASSESSMENT

Having explored through this diverse set of tools, you may be excited about some that you want to experiment with, perhaps nervous or apprehensive about others, or overwhelmed by the variety. How do you decide what method to use in a given situation? How do you perceive whether what is needed is a Future Search, Open Space, Deep Democracy, a Change Lab, or just a contemplative walk in the park?

The intention of this section is to give some pointers on how to navigate the variety of options offered in the preceding pages. We confess to a certain wariness in writing this piece. The reality is that there are no universal recipes, and there is an infinity of different contextual situations. While there are most certainly good and bad process choices for each case, there is never only one ideal method that will work.

Experienced facilitators and dialogue conveners will be able to ask explorative questions to understand the particularities of a situation, and work with the options posed by the different methods. Often, they will develop a customised process which is not fixed until it is past, because they will continually be responding to what is happening in the group. On the other hand, a facilitator with such a high level of experiential knowledge, skills, sensitivity and creativity is not always available. For these situations, World Café, Open Space, Circle, and Appreciative Inquiry in particular are a big gift. These processes are easily applied by less experienced facilitators and can still make a world of difference. In general, one of the most important things to consider is that the facilitator should be comfortable with the approach chosen. You are better off with a grounded and confident facilitator applying a simple methodology well, than with a sophisticated methodology applied poorly.

The variety of dialogue methods available to us today have emerged in different situations but in response to quite similar needs and discoveries. They are part of a wider shift that is happening as complexity and diversity increase and people become more aware of their interdependence, and hence their need to hear each other, to understand, and to collaborate. We noticed in our research that most of them in defining themselves contrast themselves to the mechanistic paradigm of organising – the boardroom, the classroom, the bureaucracy, the traditional conference model with speakers and audiences. They generally don't explain how they are better than or different from other genuinely dialogic methods. While bureaucracies and expert-driven conference models are surely alive and well, we find that there is broadly an increasing awareness of more participative forms. It is misleading to present the choice as being only between the "traditional" or "mechanistic" and one specific dialogic approach. Here, our intention then is rather to make some comparisons within the dialogic field.

Assessing the Methods

In comparing and assessing the methods, we've tried to break some of the different possible situations down into two matrices. The first matrix covers different possible broad **purposes** you are trying to achieve. The second covers the broader **context**, who the participants are, and whether the process requires a facilitator specifically trained for this approach. We have then listed the ten methods which have been profiled in depth here and put an "x" underneath each situational factor if we think it applies to the *pure form* of that method. We have for now not included the methods which are only briefly described in the "additional tools" section.

It's important to recognise that this matrix approach is a bit brutal and has clear limitations. This type of analysis isn't the way a facilitator would decide on what process to use in a given situation. That person would rather go to the "foundations for a successful dialogue process" – assessing what is the purpose and the need and who are the participants, and then designing content, process, and physical requirements based on that. However, this rough picture may still help someone who's trying to get an overview and to distinguish between the different applications at a more general level.

There's a story and a conversation behind every "x" we have placed in these matrices. This is subjective on our part, and in going through it, we became aware that the originators, practitioners, and advocates of some of these methods might well feel that theirs matches all of these purposes and situations. We've tried to be a bit more selective than that, but of course it always depends on how you are using the method to fit with a particular purpose. This is a level of detail which is beyond the scope of this assignment, and really where the facilitator's own tacit knowledge from experience and intuition comes in.

The matrix would obviously be useless if we put an x in every box, and so we have chosen not to do that. That doesn't mean it would be *wrong*. Each of the processes *can* basically be used in most if not all of these situations, but it would require a creative adaptation or sensitivity on the part of the facilitator, and most likely involve combinations with other methods. For example, a Change Lab as it is currently designed assumes implicitly that the participants are leaders from their fields meeting on an equal footing. When the Change Lab participants reflect serious power differentials or diversity of social class, they might need to draw on the principles or practices of Deep Democracy or the School for Peace in order to level the playing field, but they would still continue with the Change Lab as their overarching process.

The Purpose Matrix

As mentioned earlier, being clear on purpose is key to a successful dialogue. Here, we have outlined 11 different possible purposes a process can have:

- Generating awareness
- Problem-solving
- Building relationship
- Sharing knowledge and ideas
- Innovation
- Shared vision
- Capacity-building
- Personal/ leadership development
- Dealing with conflict
- Strategy/Action planning
- Decision-making

We have then tried to assess which tools work particularly well for each purpose. A process will usually have a combination of these purposes and be more specific, but some will be in focus. The large bold X's are the purpose for which we feel this process is best suited, while the smaller x's are additional strengths of the approach.

| | Generating awareness | Problem-solving | Building relationship | Sharing knowledge and ideas | Innovation | Shared vision | Capacity-building | Personal development/ leadership | Dealing with conflict | Strategy/ Action planning | Decision-making |
|----------------------|----------------------|-----------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|------------|---------------|-------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|
| APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY | | | X | X | X | X | | X | | X | X |
| CHANGE LAB | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X |
| CIRCLE | X | | X | X | | X | | X | | | |
| DEEP DEMOCRACY | X | | | | | X | X | X | X | | X |
| FUTURE SEARCH | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | X | | X | X |
| OPEN SPACE | | X | X | X | X | | X | X | | X | |
| SCENARIO PLANNING | X | X | | | | X | | | | X | X |
| SCHOOL FOR PEACE | X | | X | | | | | | X | | |
| SUSTAINED DIALOGUE | X | | X | X | | X | | X | X | | |
| WORLD CAFE | | | X | X | X | X | | X | | X | |

1. The Purpose Matrix

This matrix may be useful not only in assessing what methods work for a given purpose, but perhaps also to provide inspiration in *articulating* the intentions and objectives of a dialogue.

In looking at the purpose matrix, you will notice that the Change Lab for example has a large number of x's because it meets a large number of purposes, but it is also an intense and high-investment approach. If only some of these purposes are required, you may well be better off with a more simple approach. Similarly, Future Search has a large number of x's, but is a very structured approach, emphasising strategy planning. To understand these matrices, it is important to reflect back to the applications and commentary sections of the descriptions of the specific method.

The Context Matrix

In this table we considered a few of the situational factors that might vary across methods, including contextual factors, the nature of, and requirements for, participants, as well as the facilitator's level of training. The factors include:

High complexity <- -> Low complexity in the context

By complexity, we mean that cause and effect are far apart in space and time in relation to the issue being discussed, there are divergent opinions and interests related to the issue, the context is constantly changing, and old solutions no longer work (no simple recipes are available). It is worth noting that, as mentioned in the introduction, the overall emergence and evolution of these approaches is really in large part a response to increasing complexity, so in fact, all the approaches are intended and specifically designed to be applicable in situations of high complexity. You will notice in the matrix, that we see five of them as really *only* relevant in such situations, while the rest can also be useful in situations of lower complexity.

Conflictual <- -> Peaceful context

In defining conflict, we were looking at whether the issue or group was emotionally charged, and whether different, entrenched positions seem incompatible. Is it difficult for people to "agree to disagree"? Are there sub-groups who have conflicts with each other beyond a meeting of individuals, perhaps related to a larger societal conflict? This could include situations where aggression, anger, and attack are taking place, but it wouldn't have to be that explicit.

All the approaches may be found useful in conflictual situations if the focus is just on finding common ground despite the conflict, being able to move forward without getting drawn into negativity and stalemate. But if the intention is to go directly into the conflict and resolve it, to release underlying tensions and relationships, and to negotiate a way forward acknowledging the differences, there is a smaller set of approaches that are relevant. These are the ones we have chosen to "x". In the deeper version, where emotions need to be surfaced and the group is going into its more unconscious processes, we would limit this list even further to Circle, Deep Democracy, Sustained Dialogue and the School for Peace.

Small group <- -> Large group

We picked the number 30 as a useful breaking point between small and large groups. Our understanding is that this is where a critical mass of diversity exists, but where the whole group also starts to be constraining and the need emerges to alternate between small groups and the whole. For some of the processes, that number may not exactly be accurate. Scenario Planning for example could be done with a larger group than 30 though not too much larger. For more specific numbers, see each process description.

Microcosm/ Multi-stakeholder <- -> Peer-focused

Several of the processes are specifically designed to "get the whole system in the room", while others are less dependent on this, and can work within a more homogeneous group. Under "microcosm" we have ticked only the processes that explicitly are designed for a group that is seen as a reflection of the larger system, though other processes might also be useful for such groups.

Diversity of power and social class

Power dynamics may bring specific requirements in. Can this process work across levels of power and social class? Often participants will be very aware of other forms of diversity such as culture, gender, race, and age, but will not necessarily realise the diversity of power and how power dynamics and hierarchy affect the group. Some of the approaches are explicitly conscious of this impact and include ways of dealing with it.

Generational and cultural diversity

We have picked generational and cultural diversity, but this category could also include gender differences, sectoral differences, and other forms of diversity of thought. Generational and cultural diversity often overlap with diversity of power and social class but this isn't always the case. Note that for this category and also for the power category we have only ticked the processes that are particularly good for this kind of diversity. Dialogue is always about bridging differences.

Facilitator Training

This final column looks at whether a facilitator needs to be specifically trained for this process. Note that Circle, Open Space, World Café, and Appreciative Inquiry are the easiest for beginner facilitators to use. We have also not ticked Future Search because we felt a person with strong facilitation skills does not necessarily need a Future Search specific training, but they do need to be a strong facilitator.

| | CONTEXT | | | | PARTICIPANTS | | | | | | FACILITATOR |
|----------------------|-----------------|----------------|-------------|----------|-------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| | High complexity | Low complexity | Conflictual | Peaceful | Small group (<30) | Large group (60-70) | Microcosm/ multi-stakeholder | Peer group | Diversity of power and class | Cultural and generational diversity | Needs specific training |
| APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY | X | X | | X | X | X | | X | X | X | |
| CHANGE LAB | X | | X | | X | | X | | | X | X |
| CIRCLE | X | X | X | X | X | | | X | X | X | |
| DEEP DEMOCRACY | X | X | X | | X | | | | X | X | X |
| FUTURE SEARCH | X | | | X | | X (60-70) | X | | | X | |
| OPEN SPACE | X | X | | X | X | X | | X | | X | |
| SCENARIO PLANNING | X | | X | X | X | | X | X | | | X |
| SCHOOL FOR PEACE | X | | X | | X | | X | | X | X | X |
| SUSTAINED DIALOGUE | X | | X | | X | | | | X | X | X |
| WORLD CAFE | X | X | | X | X | X | | X | | X | |

2. The Context Matrix

Assessing a Facilitator

Choosing the right facilitator is as, or in some cases more, important than choosing the dialogue method. As with the methods, however, your choice of facilitator will depend on the situation. In thinking about this, we developed four spectrums, reflecting different types of facilitators:

“One method by the book” ←-----→ *“Mix-and-match”*

Some facilitators choose to become experts in a particular method and do it by the book, while others will never tire of discovering new methods and will draw on a broad repertoire in a “mix-and-match” type of approach. The benefit of a facilitator who is deeply experienced with one method is that you know what you get. If you know what you want is an Appreciative Inquiry conference, you are better off with someone who sees him/herself specifically as an AI facilitator. The “mix-and-match” type will likely not be able to stick with one approach because they will constantly see possibilities of combining. The benefit of the combining is that you may get a more customised process that fits your need and your group like a glove.

Two old adages are relevant here. When you meet a single method facilitator, remember that *“if the only tool you have is a hammer, the whole world looks like a nail”*. But maybe you are not a nail. The facilitator should be able to explain what the situations are in which their method doesn’t work. On the other hand, when you meet a mix and match facilitator, remember the saying, *“know the rules before you break them”*. A lot of these methods have an internal consistency and logic – there is a reason why they are designed as they are. A facilitator who enjoys combining needs to be very clear on why s/he is doing it rather than using the methods in their pure form, and should be able to develop a process with its own internal consistency, logic, rhythm and flow.

“Directive and structured” ←-----→ *“Going with the flow”*

Some facilitators will co-design an agenda, usually with the client or group coordinator, and then guide the participants through that process. A Future Search is an example of a process that is quite structured. The group moves from one phase and exercise to the next, and there is a time limit on each step. The facilitator needs to help the group move through this process in this order.

Other facilitators will literally go with the flow and allow the process to unfold. The idea here is that no one knows in advance what exactly needs to happen for a certain group, certainly not an external facilitator. Such a facilitator will come in and will respond to the group’s needs, offering methods and approaches as they go along that are relevant in the moment. An example in terms of the methods in this category would be Sustained Dialogue, where there is a natural direction groups tend to go in, but the facilitator is drawing on a variety of approaches and needs to help the group to uncover what it needs to uncover. Again, this approach may be the most appropriate because it is the most adapted to your specific needs, but it requires a high degree of trust in the facilitator, and a willingness on the part of participants to engage in an open-ended process.

“Knowledgeable on content” ←-----→ *“All that matters is process knowledge”*

A common debate among facilitators is around whether a facilitator needs to know anything about the content the group is discussing. For example, if a facilitator is hired to support a dialogue around hiv/AIDS, do they need to know anything about who the players are in this field, what the key inter-related issues are, what the politics around it are, and what the statistics are? Or is it enough that they know how to facilitate a process that enables the participants to process their own information and come to their own answers? Some facilitators like to know something about the content so that they can help the group find patterns and draw out conclusions, while others believe neutrality and objectivity on the part of the facilitator are fundamental and that deliberate lack of knowledge of the issue in fact

helps in this regard. Which type of facilitator you go for will depend on whether you feel your group needs help in processing information, or whether they have that covered and just need help with process, preferring for the facilitator not to get too involved in the content.

“Societal knowledge” ←-----→ *“Psychological knowledge”*

The issues at the center of a dialogue can be located at different levels. Some are deeply psychological issues. The relationships within a group may be related to participants past traumas or current insecurities. Sometimes a facilitator may find him/herself in a situation that borders on therapy. Some facilitators have a very clear boundary here emphasizing that facilitation is not counseling or therapy, and will take the conversation back to the core issues the group is dealing with. Others see these psychological factors as deeply intertwined with the group’s ability to solve everyday problems, and will go into them to try and resolve them.

These are two very different sets of skills. Often a facilitator with a deeper psychological knowledge may not be as well-versed with societal, political, economic issues and vice versa. What kind of facilitator you choose depends on whether you feel this group needs to go into its group unconscious or whether it needs to focus on more conscious, rational, or practical issues outside of themselves. If a facilitator with a deep understanding of psychology comes in, the group is likely to go into that space sometimes even if they don’t want to. If a facilitator without it comes, they will be restricted from going into it even if they do want to.

Because of the nature of dialogue, all the processes can lead to people going through a fundamental questioning of their core beliefs, which can be unsettling. Deep Democracy is the most psychologically oriented approach here, but the School for Peace approach also benefits from facilitators who have some psychological awareness. The Circle and Sustained Dialogue can also be processes where participants open up to a point of significant vulnerability, but in these and the other approaches, therapeutic skill is not necessarily required.

“Teamworker” ←-----→ *“Solo”*

Some facilitators prefer to work “Solo” because they will then have the freedom to improvise and follow their intuition without having to check first with partners, which they fear slows down the process. Solo facilitators sometimes describe their work as an artform, and focus on the interplay between them and the group as opposed to wanting to work with a facilitation team.

At the other end of this spectrum are facilitators who see they have some limitations, and prefer to build a team with other facilitators where they can complement each other. This teamwork approach can provide a balance between some of the other spectrums here – for example combining a facilitation team where one is more knowledgeable on process, the other on content, where one is more knowledgeable on societal issues and the other on psychological dynamics, or where one is good at seeing the overall flow of where things are going and the other brings in an expertise in a particular technique. Among Sustained Dialogue practitioners, the prevailing wisdom is that the best moderating teams are “insider/outsider” teams. The insider would be familiar with the content, culture, and personality dynamics of the group, while the outsider brings in process knowledge, and the ability to be objective and ask stupid questions or “play dumb”.¹

General qualities

We have outlined a number of common differences in facilitators, and pointed out that there is no one perfect facilitator for all situations. Still, there are a few general qualities that we think are important for every facilitator to have. These include:

¹ Thanks to Teddy Nemeroff for pointing this additional spectrum out to us in his feedback to Version 1.0.

Strong listening skills. All facilitators need to be able to listen. They need to listen to and hear the intention behind the dialogue in advance, and be able to listen to and hear participants during the process. This enables the facilitator to be flexible to design an appropriate process, and during the process to mirror back to participants what is going on and to help the group become more aware of itself. Strong listening skills depend partly on the facilitator's ability to let go of her own agenda.

Personal awareness. A really strong facilitator need to be able to understand what is going on within herself when she is with a group, as much as what is going on in the group. This is quite a profound meta-skill of facilitation, which is particularly important in less structured, more open-ended processes, and especially the more psychologically oriented processes. The facilitator is essentially holding the group, and needs to avoid projecting her own issues and insecurities onto the group. Personal awareness also relates to confidence, humility, the ability to be honest about one's own limitations (what one is and isn't capable of), and the willingness to not control or "over-facilitate", and to hand over a process to participants when they are ready.

Asking good questions. As mentioned earlier in this report, asking good questions is in our field an art form. The right questions will wake participants up, "light their matches", link in to what they care deeply about, and make visible their interdependence in finding the answers. They will surface new insights they hadn't thought of before in understanding the issue in focus. A simple phrasing of a question can determine whether people feel hopeless and despairing or curious, energised, strong and excited.

A holistic approach. Being able to assess which method to use in a given situation, or whether one's preferred method is applicable, requires a facilitator to understand the particular context. Taking a holistic approach is also about being able to see patterns and help the group make connections as they work, and recognising that multiple intelligences are at work. The more the whole person can be invited in to a dialogue the more successful it will be, and the more equitably people will be able to engage.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

We have greatly enjoyed this process, and are left deeply impressed with all the work we have found going on in this field. We look forward to continuing the journey, and to experimenting with the new knowledge we have gained.

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