

December, 2003

Dear Colleague,

Below you will find some resource material that might be useful to those interested in conducting dialogues in university and community settings. What is this about; how did it come to pass; and why is it being sent to me? A brief explanation follows:

Recently, several of us in the Psychology Department at the University of Massachusetts Lowell have become interested in dialogue as an instructional tool. “Dialogue” for us here means more than informal conversations or classroom questions-and-answers, but rather a somewhat more structured approach, nonpolitical and nonideological in nature, for dealing with significant local or national issues – issues where sharp differences of opinion are strongly expressed and strongly felt.

In such situations – on campus, in the community, and elsewhere – well-planned and well-structured dialogues can help in clarifying positions, maintaining respect, increasing mutual understanding, identifying common ground, and fostering potential solutions. These goals of course are important, and they reflect our disciplinary values as psychologists; but reaching them often takes skill. Yet conducting such dialogues, like so much else in life, is a skill that can be developed.

So we began to research resource materials for conducting these dialogues, with an eye toward sharing the materials among ourselves and possibly with others. We soon learned, to seriously understate the case, that dialogue resources are plentiful. A **very** selective listing is attached (note the boldface), together with brief annotations. Our intent here is to be nonpartisan. Most of the resources are Web-based, since those are probably more easily accessible to a majority of potential users; however, some books are also highlighted, as well as descriptions of selected new dialogue techniques.

We in our Department are pleased to share these materials with you. How might you use them? If dialogue interests you, we encourage you to explore them, to share them with others, to adapt them as you see fit, and especially to try them out in your own classroom or community settings when you feel dialogue might be called for.

We would also be grateful to receive any feedback you may have on these materials, and on any related materials you would like to recommend. Please direct comments to Bill Berkowitz, at Bill_Berkowitz@uml.edu. If there is enough reader interest and feedback, we will try to generate a Second Edition of this listing. Thanks!

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CONDUCTING DIALOGUES: A SELECTED LISTING OF RESOURCES

WEB SITES

(Starred [*] sites are especially recommended)

America Speaks: Engaging Citizens in Governance

www.americaspeaks.org

Founded “to explore and develop new and innovative mechanisms to link citizen voices to national governance.” Does research on deliberative democracy. Hosts electronic town meetings using interactive technology, including polling keypads, to support forums of up to 5000 people at a time. Concept papers online include “Taking Democracy to Scale,” “The America Speaks Model,” and the “21st Century Town Meeting.”

The Coalition for Healthier Cities and Communities

www.healthycommunities.org

Publishes a Dialogue Guide, intended to help bring citizens together to discuss and plan for building local community and creating local health, broadly defined. The Guide offers step-by-step instructions for planning, conducting, and following up upon community dialogue, plus guidelines for the dialogue facilitator and sample dialogue questions.

The Community Tool Box

ctb.ku.edu

Contains over 250 separate online sections on community development and health promotion. Intended to provide practical guidelines for community workers. Among relevant sections are “Leading a Community Dialogue on Building a Healthy Community” (Chapter 3, Section 17), and “Developing Facilitation Skills” (Chapter 16, Section 2). Most sections contain summary checklists; many have downloadable overheads.

Dialogue

www.co-intelligence.org

Defines and describes different forms of dialogue, with an emphasis on “open dialogue.” Supplies guidelines and also tools for open dialogue, including techniques such as “popcorn,” chime and stone,” and “a penny for your thoughts.”

*** The Dialogue to Action Initiative**

www.thataway.org

A very extensive site, including short commentaries on the nature of dialogue and deliberation, but also (and more uniquely) funding opportunities, news, resources, and a regularly-updated community calendar of dialogue-related events. Also contains a reference listing of about 40 web sites addressing community dialogue in one form or another; for more sources, this would be a good place to start.

*** Innovations in Democracy**

www.democracyinnovations.org

Not a site on dialogue itself, but a compilation of over 100 Web sites on “innovative practices, ideas, experiments, organizations and references useful for building wiser democracies that work for all.” Well worth exploring for further sources, as many of these are dialogue-related. (A similar listing of nearly 50 print and on-line sources can be located on-line at www.futurenet.org/24democracy/resourcesdemocracy.html, and also in print in the Fall, 2002 issue of YES magazine.)

Kettering Foundation

www.kettering.org

Does research on the question “What does it take to make democracy work as it should?” Among the research programs described are “Citizens and Public Choice,” which involves deliberative forums, and which is also linked to the National Issues Forums noted directly below.

National Issues Forums

www.nifi.org

“A network of organizations joined together by a common desire to discuss critical issues.” Publishes nonpartisan Issue Books, and also longer reports on various national topics. Supports Local Issue Forums to discuss these issues in various locations around the country, through its community-based Public Policy Institutes.

The People Speak

www.jointhedebate.org

“A public education effort to stimulate a national dialogue about the future of U.S. foreign policy.” Multiple sponsors include the United Nations Foundation, the League of Women Voters, the Jesse Helms Center, and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. Approximately 1000 debates were scheduled to be held across the country in October, 2003 on America’s role in the world. Detailed debate kits are among the downloadable materials offered on the site.

*** Public Conversations Project**

www.publicconversations.org

“Promotes constructive conversations and relationships among people who have differing values, world views, and perspectives about divisive public issues.” Noted for its early work on dialogues between those with different positions on abortion.

The Project has recently published two extensive dialogue guides on “Constructive Conversations about Challenging Times”; the first is subtitled “A Guide to Community Dialogue,” and the second “A Guide to Family Dialogue.” The former guide, which was precipitated by September 11, also has nonpartisan dialogue questions regarding the war in Iraq. Both guides contain detailed step-by-step instructions for facilitators; both are downloadable on computers with Adobe Acrobat. (The compiler has used this guide in a graduate class to bring out points about dialogue and conflict resolution; the format was well received by students.)

The Public Conversations Project has also created a Dialogue Tool Box, with about a dozen brief tip sheets on dialogue-related topics. Some materials are available in Spanish. Workshops and trainings on these topics are also available from this Cambridge-based organization.

Search for Common Ground

www.searchforcommonground.org

Plans and hosts “facilitated discussions . . . to reflect on conflicts and disagreements in our lives.” As an example, a series of discussions called “A Conversation about Conflict” was held in Washington and New York in the late summer of 2003. Hosts a web-based Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum. Has an on-line newsletter, and also a media fellows program that provides small stipends for recipients.

*** Study Circles Resource Center**

www.studycircles.org

Promotes and provides varied resources for group dialogues (study circles) on various local and national topics. Conducts workshops and trainings. Publishes general how-to guides (e.g., the downloadable “Organizing Community-wide Dialogue for Action and Change”), as well as more specific guides on how to engage in community discussions on topics such as racism, violence, foreign policy, neighborhood life, and schooling. SCRC’s detailed discussion guide on Iraq, “U.S. Policy on Iraq: What Should We Do?”, is comparable in scope to that of the Public Conversations Project noted above. Also publishes a print and electronic newsletter, videos, success stories, and compilations of articles about study circles.

Teledemocracy Action News + Network frontpage.auburn.edu/tann/tann2/index.htm

“The web site of the Global Democracy Movement.” Global in focus. Has special interests in computer-assisted democracy, on-line polling, and electronic town meetings. Includes a directory of projects and organizations belonging to the network, as well as book reviews, an article archive, a video clip store, and an on-line chat room.

BOOKS

As with Web sites, books on dialogue are plentiful. Rather than even attempt a beginning bibliography here, two books of particular relevance to university and community contexts are highlighted. These are:

David Schoem and Sylvia Hurtado (Eds.), Intergroup Dialogue: Deliberative Democracy in School, College, Community, and Workplace. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2001. Contains multiple case studies on intergroup dialogue in the above settings, plus seven chapters on “critical issues in intergroup dialogue,” and a directory of intergroup dialogue programs and organizations.

Jane Vella, Training through Dialogue: Promoting Effective Learning and Change with Adults. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995. This book, which contains practical guidelines for dialogue work with adult learners, is based on the popular education model developed by Paulo Freire.

For additional book and other print sources, see many of the Web sites listed above.

SPECIFIC DIALOGUE TECHNIQUES

The dialogue literature also contains reference to many specific dialogue techniques. And while in many ways it is difficult to improve on those used by Socrates, there is no shortage of new dialogue ideas that can be directly employed in or adapted to college and community settings. Among them:

Appreciative inquiry. From a list-serv on community organization ([colist@comm-org.utoledo.edu](mailto:colist@comm-<u>org.utoledo.edu</u>)), July 3, 2003: “We have used appreciative inquiry to build community among African American residents and white residents of a predominantly Polish American neighborhood. . . . Diverse residents share stories in 1 on 1 interviews and then share selected stories with the larger group assembled. The stories transform the views of people and create close bonds for revitalizing this disadvantaged neighborhood.” Further information: Mark Chupp, at chupp@urban.csuohio.edu.

“Chicago Dinner.” This dialogue technique also focuses on racial issues. From a recent description: “The Chicago Dinners project is inspired by the belief that conversations among small groups of diverse community leaders are a vital step in the bridging of the divides of race, ethnicity, class, culture, and religion. It is also inspired by the reality that in most communities, the opportunities to bridge these divides are rare. . . . During the past eight years, over 11,000 people have been engaged in this important dialogue process in metropolitan Chicago and other cities throughout the nation.” Chicago Dinners typically begin with discussion of a recent article or news event; the conversation then develops and branches from there. (The compiler has attended such a dinner, and was impressed with the speed at which passionate yet productive conversation developed.) Further information: Terri Johnson, at tjohnson@hullhouse.org.

Open space technology. While hard to describe in a few words, open space technology presents any group with opportunities to divide into smaller groups (or not), with the group divisions, compositions, and numbers always open to change; that is, participants can – and do – move from group to group, and create new groups, as they choose. For Web sources, see www.openspaceworld.org, and the briefer but instructive listing under www.co-intelligence.org.

The World Café. In a nutshell: “People sit four to a table and have a series of conversational rounds lasting from 20 to 45 minutes about a question that is personally meaningful to them. At the end of one round, one person remains as the host and each of the other three travel to separate tables.” This basic précis comes from the World Café listing at www.co-intelligence.org. For more detailed information, visit the links there, or www.theworldcafe.org.

“What happens when you put chairs in the street?” Finally, a more informal, bold, and engaging dialogue technique. Two intrepid investigators wanted to find out what would happen if they set up folding chairs on New York City streets and invited passersby to sit down and talk with them about anything they wanted. The intriguing and mostly-heartening results were reported in a National Public Radio story broadcast on August 8, 2003 (John Kalish, Producer). Are you ready to try this where you live?