

Inter-community Dialogue: An Appreciative Inquiry Application

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Abstract

'Dialogue' has become a new goal in developing public policy. In the face of widespread cynicism about consultation and with some key issues for public policy seeming to be stalemated between groupings with entrenched positions, new approaches to dialogue are being trialed throughout New Zealand with assistance of government research funding. Appreciative Inquiry is an approach to organisational development that focuses on what is valued and is working, possibilities, constructive experience and a constructionist understanding of narrative. This paper will review an example of using Appreciative Inquiry as one methodology used in a MORST funded research project on dialogue around biotechnology. A particular implementation of Appreciative Inquiry was developed by the authors and trialed in two groups (Auckland and Christchurch). The groups comprised both scientists engaged in and/or advocating forms of genetic engineering, and people known for their questioning or rejection of such technology.

The paper will describe how Appreciative Inquiry was used and assess its potential for enhancing dialogue based on this trial and Appreciative Inquiry literature.

Introduction

We are witnessing a rise of interest in and developing applications of 'dialogue' processes in the service of a participatory but pluralist society.

Indications of the current tide of hope being invested in dialogue processes include, the granting of significant research money by the Foundation for Research Science and Technology (FRST) and the Ministry of Research Science and Technology (MoRST) to teams trialing and developing dialogue approaches, the initiative by the NZ Social and Civic Policy Institute and the Institute of Policy Studies at Victoria University of Wellington to develop a programme of 'sustained dialogue' in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation and Institute for Sustained Dialogue (USA), and the initiative by the New Zealand Bioethics Council to commission a programme of dialogue as part of its responsibility to "promote and participate in public dialogue on cultural, ethical and spiritual aspects of biotechnology, and enable public participation in the Council' s activities."

Other significant thinking within government circles on ways of engaging with the public include the work of Will Allen, Margaret Kilvington and Chrys Horn for the Ministry for the Environment (2002), and the work of the Ministry for Social Development on relationship with the voluntary and community sector.

The present paper arises from our being sub-contracted by a MoRST funded¹ research team led by Karen Cronin of Victoria University. “Hands Across the Water” is a project testing three modalities of community dialogue around the issue of genetic modification. The three modalities being evaluated are Issues Mapping, Civic Conversations and Appreciative Inquiry. We were contracted to design and facilitate the Appreciative Inquiry process. The whole project will be evaluated and written up by the research team next year.

This paper will explore a little of the special character and role of dialogue in relation to policy development, describe how Appreciative Inquiry may be an appropriate tool for enabling dialogue, how Appreciative Inquiry was used in the trial and assess its potential for enhancing dialogue.

The Challenge of Participatory Democracy and the Hopes for Dialogue

One of the greatest challenges of government in such an openly pluralistic society is to maintain the credibility of policy and governmental process to diverse communities each with their own values and interests. Post-modernism at least means this, no one set of norms, values or assumptions about reality will be allowed to prevail unchallenged.

In a society that no longer has either respect for any ‘universal’ values, nor tolerance for any one set of assumptions being dominant, new ways must be found to ensure some sense of civic cohesion and widespread ‘ownership’ of the process of government.

Dialogue appears to have found favour in recent time. It does hold out some hope of being a new way of enabling individuals and communities to participate together in a shared economy, be that a business, an institution or a nation.

On its website (<http://www.bioethics.org.nz/dialogue/processes.html>), the Bioethics Council explains under three headings its commitment to dialogue:

Rapidly Emerging Technologies Challenge Societies

The rapid emergence of new technologies, especially biotechnologies, challenge the ways in which people and societies think about:

- * Their existence.
- * Their relationships to self and others.
- * Their environment.
- * Their future.

Citizens Have A Role In Decision-Making

Governments, academics and other commentators in New Zealand and internationally have recognised that a country’s citizens have a role to play in decision-making about whether to implement certain technologies. Such decisions cannot just be left to governments, business, scientists and technologists alone.

¹ For details of the four dialogue projects funded by MoRST, see:
<http://www.morst.govt.nz/?CHANNEL=DIALOGUE+FUND&PAGE=Dialogue+Fund>

Governments Need To Know Communities' Views

Over the years governments have increasingly used various methods of consultation to seek the views of communities on important issues. However, consultation may be perceived as a means whereby those doing the consulting set the agenda, frame the questions and narrow the possible responses to suit their own purposes. True or not, consultation does have real limitations. For communities to actively engage on the important issues, other ways of constructing conversations are needed.

It has been practically mandatory and largely unquestioned during the last decade or so that good policy development includes consultation. Consultation documents, surveys and focus groups have abounded. However, it appears now that both the public and certain arms of government are tired of consultation. In practice consultation has given rise to cynicism on the part of both those consulting and those being consulted.

Dialogue offers a different approach.

Where consultation speaks of opportunity for one party to *respond* to another party, dialogue speaks of open engagement between two or more parties. The focus is on relationship rather than on positions-held. Rather than the goal being to elicit a response to a proposal, the goal is to discover or create something new which is the genuine product of engagement.

One of the foundational thinkers in the modern understanding of dialogue as a public process is David Bohm. Bohm (1996:6,7) explores the roots of the word dialogue and then suggests a way of understanding something of its creative potential.

“Dialogue” comes from the Greek word *dialogos*. *Logos* means “the word,” or in our case we would think of the “meaning of the word.” And *dia* means “through” – it doesn’t mean “two.” The picture or image that this derivation suggests is of a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us. This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which may emerge some new understanding. It is something new, which may not have been in the starting point at all. It’s something creative.

In dialogue ... nobody is trying to win. Everybody wins if anybody wins. There is no attempt to gain points, or to make your particular view prevail. We are not playing a game against each other, but with each other. In a dialogue, everybody wins.

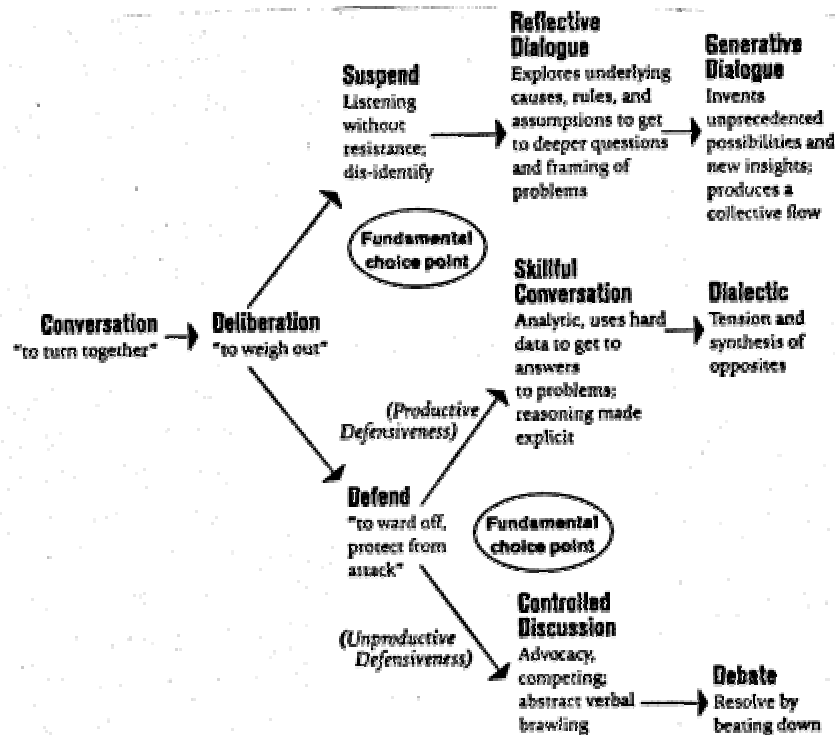
William Isaacs (1999:19) builds on the work of Bohm.

Dialogue, as I define it, is a conversation with a center, not sides. It is a way of taking the energy of our differences and channelling it toward something that has never been created before. It lifts us out of polarization and into a greater common sense, and is thereby a means for accessing the intelligence and coordinated power of groups of people.

... dialogue is a conversation in which people think together in relationship. Thinking together implies that you no longer take your own position as final. You relax your grip on certainty and listen to the possibilities that result

simply from being in a relationship with others – possibilities that might not otherwise have occurred.

Isaacs (1999: 41) uses a diagram to describe the character of different types of deliberation:



Appreciative Inquiry

Appreciative Inquiry emerged at Case Western University in Cleveland, Ohio, as an evolution of an action research approach to change management. It is a research (enquiry based) process of change.

Appreciative Inquiry is the art of discovering and valuing those factors that give life to an organisation, community or group. In its most practical construction, Appreciative Inquiry is a form of organisational study that selectively seeks to locate, highlight and illuminate the life-giving forces of the organisation. When we enquire into the things in an organisation that are life-giving, we can choose to focus on those qualities. Through involving others in our enquiry, we can have a considerable impact on the image of the organisation and, ultimately, on the way it functions.

In contrast to some other approaches, Appreciative Inquiry is rooted in a constructionist understanding. Its fundamental tenets are that what is attended to becomes determinative, that there is no distinction between research/enquiry and intervention, and that the genesis of the future is to be found in the themes, values and images embedded in the narratives we tell of our past. This is quite distinct from problem centred approaches.

Human systems are adapted to be creative and innovative, and so organisations, in the view of Appreciative Inquiry, are full of solutions rather than problems. It is the organisation's diversity, multiplicity and forward movement that need to be highlighted and built upon.

Appreciative Inquiry Approaches to Societal Dialogue

The use of Appreciative Inquiry at a societal level may be an extension from its roots in organisational change, but is neither novel nor misplaced. One celebrated application of Appreciative Inquiry is referred to in an article by the ‘father’ of AI, David L. Cooperrider (1996). It was called ‘Imagine Chicago’ and involved cascading appreciative interviews throughout the city of Chicago.

The appropriateness of AI as an approach to dialogue and change at societal level can be seen in recognising that, when it comes to developing policy and direction for a society, a city or a nation can be validly seen in organisational terms. Each is an amalgam of individual or sub-community values and interests, with common or shared values and interests; and each has some form of leadership or governance structure with responsibility for providing credible and productive policy.

AI brings to this its ability to move people beyond stated positions and enable the focus to shift onto shared values, common humanity and enabling experiences. Thus AI offers a process of ‘positive dislodgement of certainty,’ creating the setting for new insight. This serves Bohm and Isaac’s understanding of dialogue well.

In line with the work of Argyris and Schön, AI helps make explicit embedded values and assumptions and makes them available for both constructive relationship-building through dialogue, and future action.

Design and Implementation of an Appreciative Inquiry Application Around Genetic Modification

The ‘Hands Across the Water’ research involved working with invited groups of people half of whom were scientists working in the field of genetic modification, and the other half of whom were ‘community’ people who, in general, aligned themselves with opposition to genetic modification. The Appreciative Inquiry workshops each had ten participants. We held two workshops, one in Auckland and one in Christchurch.

True to the nature of AI, the design included careful attention to every detail of contact with the participants. Even the first invitation was seen as an intervention shaping subsequent outcomes.

Participants were invited to participate. They were interviewed by the researchers by phone in an open ended way that attempted to not frame any key issues or risk consolidating positions held.

Attention was given to the choice of venue for the facilitated process and the setting of the room. The physical space and the ambience of the room and facilitation are significant aspects of intervention, creating a quality of environment that can be determinative. In practice, some aspects of the Auckland setting were not ideal due to issues beyond the facilitator’s control.

In one instance the initial setting of the room had people sitting in a horse shoe without tables, in the other instance the initial setting was café style with three or four people sitting around a table with orange juice, mints and chocolates.

The facilitation sessions went from 4.30pm till 9.15pm and included a 45 minute meal break with a catered, shared meal.

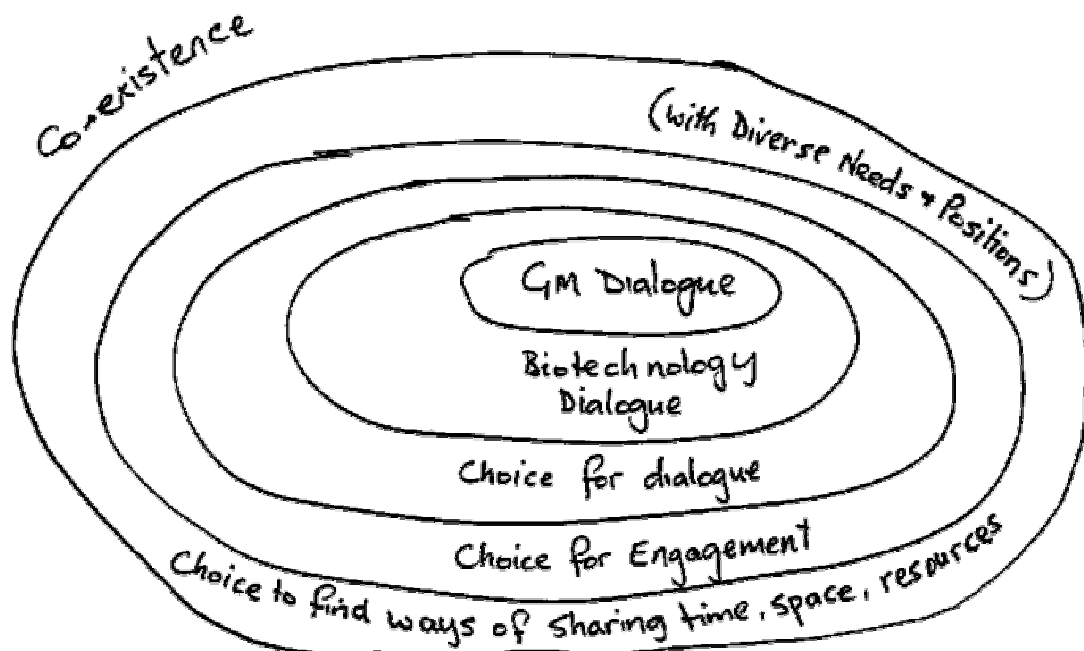
The purpose of the event was clearly stated in the material that had been sent to participants and was displayed prominently in the room when they entered: 'Developing Dialogue Around Biotechnology.'

Participants wrote their own name tags, informally introduced themselves to others as the group gathered, and then were asked to introduce themselves to the whole group with their name and where they are from. They were also asked, 'Each of you decided to come today. What is one thing you value about yourself that contributed to you making that decision?'

It will be seen that this is already an appreciative inquiry. The focus is on the fact that a positive choice to attend had been made and that that decision already indicated something worth valuing about each person which would stand them in good stead for engaging in dialogue.

At first thought it might be assumed that we had a room of people consisting of two groups strongly opposed to each other who would find it hard to discover any common ground let alone be able to enter into creative dialogue together. However, this proved to be quite wrong. In each session real engagement happened and even some sense of shared community was expressed.

By focusing right at the beginning on the positive choice each had made to be part of the process, we were already constructing common ground and highlighting evidence of capacity that could be then utilised constructively. One way of visualising this is in the following diagram. Each enclosed space represents a 'sub-set' of the options available. Each individual in the group could be thought to have chosen to cross the lines from the outside of the diagram to the centre. Each line crossed representing a positive choice.



The groups were then given a brief prepared introduction to Appreciative Inquiry and the particular process to be used in this session. Participants were told that they were going to interview and be interviewed by person from the other 'group' (scientist with community person) about their own best experiences of dialogue and key

experiences that have formed or shaped their thinking in relation to genetic modification.

“You will be asked about experiences that have provided new insights and have been satisfying.”

Each person was given a full copy of the process notes, the instructions and an interview guide. The interview guide included a quote on dialogue from David Bohm and the statement:

Respectful curiosity is the attitude to adopt when conducting an appreciative interview.

Each interview took about 40 minutes and followed a structured series of seven questions. The interviewer was asked to take notes of headings, topics, themes insights, ideas and questions, arising from the person being interviewed. The record was then given to the interviewee.

Interview questions focused on best personal experience of dialogue on any topic, best experience of dialogue on GM, what made such experiences work so well, and any key experience that has helped shape their approach to GM (genetic modification).

Each interviewee was also asked to come up with three wishes for the future of dialogue around GM.

Every participant had the experience of being interviewed and being an interviewer.

The group then was led through a process of identifying themes or strands from the interviews and values that seem to under-gird satisfying experiences of conversation around GM.

The group was helped to reflect on what the process and the insights said about them as a group. They were invited to name what creative questions and insights had emerged for them during the workshop, what gives them hope as they think about public engagement on GM in the future, and how they might engage with others on the topic of GM differently as a result of this workshop.

Tentative Assessment of Outcomes and Issues Arising

Each of the two workshops using Appreciative Inquiry demonstrated a clear shift from beginning with two sub-groups mutually suspicious of each other to expressions of mutual understanding and respect. Some strong and clear statements of underlying values that enable dialogue emerged and were recorded, along with statements of key themes or strands from the interviewing.

In each session some frustration was expressed at the fact that the setting and process had conspired to focus on the positive and on common humanity, and had appeared to avoid the divisiveness of the ‘issue’, genetic modification. In the light of this experience in the first workshop some small changes were made for the second. This included acknowledging to the group that the focus was intentional, and that we were working on two levels throughout; focusing on experience of dialogue, and recognising the strong and different views held on GM. For most people in the groups, it seemed convincing to them that by taking the structured approach we had they had been able to discover new things about each other and about the way in which the more usual conversations around GM are constructed.

Expressions of key values included ‘respect,’ ‘honest, from the heart,’ ‘listening and desire to understand.’

Themes that emerged from the groups included,

- ways in which the GM conversation is distorted by the media and politics,
- the importance of breaking the GM debate down to particular topic areas,
- that both scientists and community people care about the environment,
- the significance of commercial imperatives around GM,
- the significance for constructive dialogue of the setting/space/process.

When asked what the feedback from the interviews said about them as a group, the following were strong statements made:

- We are a microcosm of NZ
- We have a sense of outside forces (media, politics, commerce) distorting the conversation
- We are all seeking to contribute to the common good
- The setting, environment, questions posed, forum, matters
- We have more in common than we thought.

Participants reported the following insights and sources of hope from the process:

- The focus on dialogue provided a window for understanding
- The common perception of distortion of the conversation is a source of hope
- Scientists are human too; citizens may be well informed too
- Both ‘sides’ have a genuine concern for the common good
- It is a source of hope that science is in the news and public
- It is a source of hope that science funding is a shared concern

Given the topic and the composition of the group, these outcomes are full of hope and possibility. Indeed, most observers would find them astounding. Participants expressed surprise.

Within the workshops there was, however, an indication in some questions and comments to the facilitators of an inherent issue in evaluating the process. The challenge was something like, ‘But this has focused on dialogue more than on GM and we haven’t had a chance to really discuss our views on GM. We haven’t solved the GM problem.’

This is a real issue for evaluating dialogue initiatives in general and Appreciative Inquiry in particular. Appreciative Inquiry has within its own theoretical frame an important way of responding to the challenge. AI seeks to enhance the capacity of individuals, groups and organisations to act in new ways. In this instance, the goal was to enhance capacity to have constructive conversations across a major polarised division. The evaluation question then, is not did anyone’s views on genetic

modification get changed, nor whether some perceived problem had been solved; the question is rather, were the participant in a substantially different relationship with those they opposed, in ways that might lead to constructive engagement and better public policy.

Our early opinion is that the answer to this last question is clearly, yes.

The researchers and we as facilitators are very conscious that the workshops we designed and led were very much an attenuated sample of Appreciative Inquiry practice. The nature of the research protocol limited the time available for working with the groups and required some engagement with the participants before and after that had more to do with the researchers' needs than AI best practice.

The major short-coming of the workshops was that they did not provide opportunity for the participants to build on the relationship and insights gained and to go on to scenario building and action commitments. Some participants sensed this themselves and expressed frustration that there was no obvious follow-up.

Another artificial aspect of these workshops was the need to standardise and script the process and keep it orthodox as Appreciative Inquiry. This was necessary for the research purpose. Outside the constraints of the research requirements, each of us would exercise more artistry and freedom in drawing on AI thinking and practice along with insights from other methodologies.

There were some learnings for the facilitators from this experience. We recognised the importance of giving participants some insight into the Appreciative Inquiry approach and thinking. This aspect was enhanced in the second workshop after reflection and feedback from the first. Doing this helps contain some of the anxieties and confusions that come from working in an unfamiliar process that does not fit their expectations.

Another learning was to value the non-verbal/language aspects of the process. AI has focused largely on verbal enquiry and reflection on narrative as its tools of construction. It was clear from this project that every aspect of the invitation, contact with the research team, physical setting and process helped construct a reality that was enabling and creative.

Conclusion

As institutions and aspects of government seek to move beyond consultation to encourage creative dialogue on issues of common concern, new methods need to be developed. Appreciative Inquiry is well aligned with the aspirations of dialogue, and has proved in this brief trial to be full of potential as a modality for working with groups that include quite disparate views.

AI combines a very structured approach with the openness and homeliness of stories and experience. The structure enables different and more enabling material to come to the foreground and so allow for perceptions and opportunities otherwise obscured by well worn rhetorical positions and ruts. The focus on narrative respects participants' lived experience, allows a focus on common humanity, and sources the future in capacities that are latent in the group, rather than in wishful thinking or ideological positions.

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