

Lessons from Online Dialogue: The Shaping Our Future Experience

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Abstract

This article examines *Shaping Our Future*, an online dialogue implemented by the Network for Peace through Dialogue. It offers examples of strategies used to ensure a high quality dialogue as well as challenges faced in the program's implementation. By drawing on lessons learned from *Shaping Our Future*, this article suggests initial best practices and recommendations for future online dialogue programs.

Introduction

Intergroup dialogue, in all forms, has a long history. As David Schoem (2003) points out, it is in many ways a modern version of nineteenth century town-hall meetings, and has been practiced for decades in communities, university settings, and among groups in protracted conflict (Abu-Nimer 1999; Chasin et al 1996; Dessel et al 2006; Khuri 2004). Intergroup dialogue is also the subject of much academic research (e.g. Bekerman 2009; Doob and Foltz 1974; Helman 2002; Maoz 2005; Salomon 2004).

In recent years dialogue has expanded to online forums, similar in goals but differing considerably from face-to-face interactions. While online dialogue continues to expand, little is known about it. Most research about online conversation focuses on issues other than dialogic processes, a gap that might be attributed to the fact that most online conversation is not explicitly framed as dialogue. Internet-based communication, in fact, rarely meets the characteristics of dialogue: as Lincoln Dahlberg (2001) points out, most online

communication occurs in groups of like-minded people whose perspectives are reinforced through conversation. In other words, Internet forums encouraging dialogue are the exception, not the rule.

When it does occur, online dialogue is a relatively unstudied phenomenon. We know little, for example, about what happens when individuals dialogue across time zones, sometimes not even seeing a picture of the person with whom they speak. Moreover, it is unclear what particular challenges online dialogue faces and how they can be addressed.

This paper makes an initial attempt to answer these questions, drawing on the experiences of the Network for Peace through Dialogue in developing and implementing an online dialogue program called *Shaping Our Future*. The paper focuses on *Shaping Our Future's* successes and challenges to provide guidance dialogue practitioners, and as a first step in considering online dialogue best practices.

Shaping Our Future

Shaping Our Future began in 2006 as a forum for online dialogue about peace and social justice issues. The program was organized asynchronously using Google Groups, meaning that discussions took place primarily through email messages rather than via video conferencing or another 'real time' medium. *Shaping Our Future* hosted eight separate dialogue sessions between 2006-2009, each of which occurred over the course of 2-3 months. The goals of *Shaping Our Future* were twofold: sustaining dialogue on important issues related to global peace, and fostering the development of dialogue skills. Through this program, the staff of *Shaping Our Future* encouraged participants to broaden discussions beyond the online forum and host face-to-face dialogues in their own communities, which could serve as a starting point for engaging in community-based social change.

Shaping Our Future staff devised an initial template for each dialogue session when the

program began. However, during the three-year period of the program's implementation, several changes occurred. For example, we changed the structure of the dialogue in order to encourage greater participant ownership of the process. While topics for each session were initially decided by Network for Peace through Dialogue staff, based in part on comments made by participants during previous sessions, in 2008 we began recruiting session topics from program participants. This decision was made with two interlinked objectives in mind: increasing the relevance of session topics for dialogue participants, and increasing participant activity during the dialogue sessions.

Using High Quality Dialogue

Over the 3 years of *Shaping Our Future's* implementation we also shifted to putting greater emphasis on using High Quality Dialogue, the principles of which include the following (Network for Peace 2009):

- ❖ *Expressing opinions honestly in response to what others have said:*
 - *Participants acknowledge that they are expressing their own opinion, rather than expressing an opinion that is true for everyone.*
 - *Participants are able to relate a feeling or story to what has been said.*
 - *Participants express their opinions in a positive and constructive way.*
- ❖ *Listening attentively to what others have said and responding empathetically:*
 - *Participants state in their own words the point of view of those who have a different opinion.*
 - *Participants ask questions to get clarity about another point of view.*
 - *Participants make statements that recognize how other people feel.*
- ❖ *Responding in ways that show an effort to understand others.*
 - *Participants respond to the insights of others with questions, agreements or respectful disagreement.*
 - *Participants do not try to convince others to change their point of view.*
 - *Responding in ways that show openness and a willingness to learn:*
- ❖ *Participants identify and recognize their own assumptions.*
 - *Participants acknowledge any changes in their own points of view.*
 - *Participants state what they have learned from others.*

High Quality Dialogue principles, developed by the organization's executive director, are posted on the Network for Peace through Dialogue website, and prior to the start of

each session participants were asked to read the principles and commit to adhering to them. Participants were also asked to commit to a minimum participation level of two postings a month using these principles, in addition to an introductory posting providing personal background.

The Shaping Our Future Experience

In this section, we reflect on the full *Shaping Our Future* experience, discussing both the strong points of the program and some of its limitations. First, however, we wish to emphasize the importance of internet-based dialogue generally. Online dialogue mirrors the objectives of its face-to-face counterpart, but enables individuals who might never physically meet to dialogue and learn from one another. *Shaping Our Future* sessions included participants from around the globe and from a variety of political, religious, and socio-economic communities. The potential for this group dialoging face-to-face was nearly impossible, but use of the internet enabled inclusion of a wide diversity of voices.

What worked:

The overall experience of *Shaping Our Future* was positive for a number of reasons. First, we found that members had **high levels of personal engagement with dialogue topics**, with contributions made during each dialogue session providing insights into the personal experiences of participants. We believe that this level of personal engagement partly results from actively recruiting session topic ideas from group members. This enabled us to build up a topics database containing ideas of personal interest to group members. *Shaping Our Future* staff also initiated a policy wherein the group member contributing the session topic was asked to co-facilitate the session along with organization staff. This co-facilitation took the form of coming up with an initial question to ask the group and following up with subsequent questions. Personal involvement in initiating and facilitating

the dialogue session, we believe, increased levels of personal engagement with dialogue topics. For example, one new member suggested dialoging about the intertwined issues of drugs and incarceration. The experiences of this member with both issues, and her questions during the session, drew many other individuals into this dialogue session, leading to an unprecedented level of involvement by group members as a whole.

Our participatory approach to *Shaping Our Future* fits with existing notions about the importance of community involvement in conflict resolution initiatives. For example, in discussing the success of their dialogues on divisive public issues (Chasin et al 1996), emphasize the “collaborative spirit” that characterizes their work and relationships with community members (329). The “Sustained Dialogue” approach developed by Harold Saunders (2003) also emphasizes the initiative taken by participants in mapping out problems and in deciding how to address them. These examples highlight the importance of participatory approaches, suggesting that group member involvement in the process is an important element of program success.

Two other components of *Shaping Our Future* were significant in its success, both of which are also important for face-to-face dialogue. First, despite the dialogue functioning asynchronously, the *Shaping Our Future* Program Coordinator **facilitated each dialogue** throughout the session, in ways that fit with central notions about the centrality of facilitation to dialogue processes (Dessel et al 2006; Khuri 2004). For example, facilitation was used to help focus the dialogue when conversation digressed. Also, during periods when conversation faltered, this facilitative role helped re-engage participants. In addition, the coordinating role played by the facilitator helped build institutional memory about the program and answered questions for new members.

Finally, the Network for Peace through Dialogue’s **High Quality Dialogue (HQD)**

principles played a key role in ensuring the success of *Shaping Our Future* sessions. As stated above, prior to the start of each dialogue session, participants were asked to review these principles and use them as the basis for conversation. In other words, the principles of *HQD* served as ground rules setting the foundation for dialogue. Following each session, these principles were also used to evaluate the quality of dialogue. Our suggestions showed that sessions were characterized by consistent and deep adherence to all of the principles.

Scholarship on dialogue, both face-to-face and online, suggests that the existence of ground rules plays an important role in ensuring that participants hear and are heard (Heierbacher 2009). Pyser and Figallo (2004) point out that the need for ground rules in an asynchronous, ongoing online dialogue is much greater than in a face-to-face setting, particularly given the lack of continued intensity found in a time-bound, face-to-face setting. They suggest that the use of an explicit social agreement improves the quality of online dialogue by increasing trust and developing synergy within the group. Similarly, we believe that *High Quality Dialogue* principles set the stage for a dialogue characterized by high levels of depth and trust, despite the ebb and flow of each session.

Challenges:

While the combination of adherence to HQD principles, personal engagement, and dialogue facilitation worked remarkably well, *Shaping Our Future* suffered from a number of shortcomings. First, using Google Groups as our hosting platform created difficulty in **maintaining confidentiality**, since it is set up such that discussion threads from all dialogue sessions were always accessible to group members. In other words, *Shaping Our Future* participants who accessed the Google Groups site could read messages posted during previous sessions. The issue of confidentiality *in practice* never became problematic, since almost all participants received and responded to messages via email. However, *in theory* the

possibility of reading others' messages was an issue, given the widespread belief that honest and open dialogue necessitates maintaining confidentiality within the group. In fact, according to some dialogue scholars, the *very definition* of dialogue necessitates confidentiality (Schoem 2003). Moreover, confidentiality is an issue that impacts the quality of dialogue, particularly in ongoing dialogues or dialogues about polarized issues (Chasin et al 1996). Although *Shaping Our Future* dialogue topics were not particularly divisive, we were considered about the consequences of not being able to ensure full confidentiality given that participants lived in communities spanning a spectrum of freedom of speech rights. While program staff continually discussed this issue, we were unable to find a way to resolve it during the program's implementation.

Shaping Our Future suffered from another confidentiality issue: once subscribed to the Google Groups site, individuals could read messages without contributing to the group discussion. This posed a challenge to ensuring that group members knew other participants and were comfortable sharing their thoughts. Program staff attempted to solve this problem by asking all members of each dialogue session to commit to a minimum number of postings per session. However, this solution only worked up to a point: not all individuals who made this commitment honored it, meaning that dialogue sessions were characterized by a degree of passive group membership.

Ally Ostrowski (2006) refers to the "presence of lurkers" as an inherent limitation of online dialogue that may prevent full disclosure on the part of dialogue participants. Although online dialogue can facilitate openness by creating a degree of anonymity, knowledge that others are present but silent may negate this advantage. This limitation clearly manifested itself in *Shaping Our Future* sessions, where **active and continuous participation** was a particular challenge. Every dialogue session included approximately 20

members. However, generally fewer than ten individuals were active throughout the session. We found that individuals were most active during sessions when the topic was one to which everyone personally related – for example, the session on incarceration and drug use was an especially active one. Yet, even during sessions on issues of personal interest, few participants contributed more than two or three messages to the dialogue. Rather, many individuals introduced themselves, but were silent during the substance of the discussion. Moreover, the most consistent participants were usually the initiators of the topic or individuals otherwise affiliated with the Network for Peace through Dialogue.

Lack of participation reflects one additional challenge in the *Shaping Our Future* program: **recruitment** of new and diverse participants. Initially, participants in *Shaping Our Future* were recruited through their affiliation with the Network for Peace through Dialogue. In order to increase diversity of participation, we began recruiting through a number of peace- and justice-related websites and list-servs. Despite our efforts, however, at no time did *Shaping Our Future* have more than approximately twenty individuals willing to commit to participating. Ultimately, the core participants in *Shaping Our Future* remained a small group.

Discussion

Our experience with *Shaping Our Future* suggests that online dialogue carries with it significant potential, particularly given the ever-increasing use of the internet around the world. As internet access becomes more widespread, dialogue can expand far beyond what is possible within the geographic and other constraints of face-to-face groups. Yet, our experience suggests that the online medium still suffers from a number of limitations. We therefore make a number of recommendations that we hope will be useful for other practitioners engaged in, or thinking about engaging in online dialogue.

First, we recommend using a hosting platform that enables discussion topics to be archived or hidden. Because of funding constraints, we used a free platform, Google Groups. While this platform served most of our purposes well, the inability to archive past session topics limited confidentiality and may have thus resulted in less open or honest participation by group members. The Google Groups platform also created problems from a privacy standpoint. Therefore, we strongly encourage organizations interested in implementing online dialogue to use platforms where this function is enabled.

We also recommend finding ways to create groups that share similar interests. While we used a participatory method to come up with dialogue topics, our approach centered on soliciting ideas from all group members and then deciding upon one. This meant that the topic chosen for each dialogue session was not necessarily of interest to all group members, perhaps limiting participation. Thus, one way of increasing participation may be to create groups organized around a topic of interest to all members, while maintaining a variety of perspectives on the topic. Participatory approaches can be used to focus the dialogue topic within a pre-defined area of interest.

Finally, we believe that both the number of participants in online dialogue and their level of participation can be increased. Unfortunately, the wide availability of online discussion groups, and the many commitments held by individuals interested in dialogue, make recruitment difficult. However, one possibility for broadening the base of dialogue participants might be expanding recruitment arenas. Although the peace and dialogue communities are important networks, we might have increased both the number and the diversity of our group members by reaching beyond this close-knit circle. With a larger and more diverse group it may also have been possible to sustain more active participation during each session.

Conclusions

Over the three years of *Shaping Our Future's* implementation, we learned a number of important lessons about the potentials and limitations of internet-based dialogue. Our experience suggests that online formats provide individuals with opportunities to learn from and interact with a wide spectrum of individuals; using High Quality Dialogue principles, moreover, ensures honesty and the asynchronous equivalent of active listening. Yet, online dialogue is not without its drawbacks, and although we made a number of changes during the course the program, it is clear that more can be done to create online forums supporting in-depth, transformative dialogue.

Ultimately, *Shaping Our Future* is only one of many attempts to harness Internet technology and provide opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue extending beyond the confines of a single physical space. We hope that, as more organizations are able to reflect on their experiences in the coming years, online dialogue blossoms in a way that truly enables individuals from around the globe to share their thoughts.

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