

Hosting collaboration

through conversation and inquiry in local communities

By Linda Joy Mitchell

Conversation is not just about conveying information or sharing emotions, nor a way of putting ideas into peoples heads... conversation is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet they don't just exchange facts: they transform them, reshape them, draw different implications from them; engage in new trains of thought. Good conversation doesn't just reshuffle the cards: It creates a new deck. Theodore Zeldin

Much like the communities we work in, one characteristic of the 'social justice field' is the fragmentation of the many groups and organisations that bring people together for conversation and dialogue. The competitive process of applying for funding can force local groups apart rather than together. However, as public sector funding shrinks, the critical yeast of relationship and the ease with which groups are able to collaborate with and learn from each other might make all the difference.

The reality, of course, is that it is a very diverse field. People describe the work they do in a wide variety of ways, from racial justice to community cohesion, conflict resolution, bridge building and community development. There are many different views about how to progress this work, some in direct opposition to each other. Many political points of view abound about the kind of solutions we need. So how might you bring together a wide range of groups and organisations in order to connect and illuminate the work that is going on, foster shared understanding and potentially build greater collaboration?

Listening 'on the ground'

Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust based in York in the United Kingdom (JRCT) has a long tradition of funding and supporting initiatives through its three main grants programmes, Racial Justice, Peace, and Power and Responsibility. The trustees of JRCT had been sensing a growing awareness of emerging issues, such as the growth of the far right, the pressure on resources from new arriving communities, and the increased tension enhanced by the media and by government policies. Not being content with what the media and other people were telling them, JRCT was keen to explore what was actually happening locally and wanted to listen to people 'on the ground'.

One way to do this would have been to commission some research, culminating in a report with recommendations. Instead the trustees decided to convene a hosted day of collaborative inquiry. They invited the many people, groups and organisations from across Yorkshire and East Lancashire who are working in this field to meet together and inquire into what was working well, what was happening out there locally in communities, and also what was happening between ourselves.

In order to better understand the issues and the field, the trustees had decided to immerse themselves in this day and engage directly in the conversations. So we decided to create an intentional space to hold people over a length of time in order to be present to one another and really engage in conversation, without any specific outcome in mind, open to what might emerge.

Convening conversation is an important leadership action and lever for discovering and executing new possibility. Good leaders nowadays are those who are willing to say to people, "I do not know the answer but together we will figure it out." This type of leadership is

especially important in our increasingly complex world where we are being called to fundamentally reframe our leadership, governance and actions in order to create positive results.

Setting out our purpose

The day's aim was to illuminate what was working well and to make connections among the great work that was going on out there. Rather than taking a 'problem/solution' approach, this was a more strength based or appreciative approach, inquiring together into what was happening locally. The Trust was interested to see what connections might arise. What ripples might spread out from being together as a whole group in a day of conversation about the many contexts we worked in, the 'sameness and differences' amongst us, and the potential for greater collaboration? The intention was to offer a hospitable and hosted space where it was all right not to know the answers, but where we could make sense together about what really mattered.

Design and Invitation

An invitation was carefully designed and sent out to people living in neighbourhoods and to the many groups in Yorkshire and East Lancashire working to build understanding between different groups of people - those working with themes of identity, belonging, dialogue, difference and inequality.

The day was designed around the pattern and practice of the Art of Hosting - www.artofhosting.ning.com - based on an assumption that when we come together for the common good, we simply need to bring people together in good self-organising conversation. Core to hosting is the whole design process, the invitation, the intentional hosting of the space, the process, and the harvesting (i.e. the sense-making of the results and any follow up).

Processes such as world cafés, mind mapping and open space invite people to generatively question the context they are in so that they may engage and choose again a new way of thinking and acting. As complexity increases, 'wicked' issues require even more interconnected solutions. We need the diverse knowledge and perspectives held by the whole group to come together in order to create new collective intelligence that may take us to other solutions or down other paths.

Hosting in this sense, then, is a series of practices focused on convening people and designing generative participative processes where people can exchange, inquire, and explore together so that new systemic solutions can be discovered and true collaboration can be supported and engendered.

This is how we designed and hosted the day. The full record of the day can be viewed or downloaded from <http://www.lanyrd.com/2011/jrct-equality-justice-and-peace/write-ups>

Flow of the day

About 80 people turned up in all, from community groups, universities, church groups, local authorities, both local and national charities. Following a welcome and a framing of the context from JRCT, we started off with everyone 'checking in', introducing themselves and saying a little about why they had turned up today. We were seated at small tables of four, far more conducive to good conversation than those huge round tables.

World Café

People then shared their stories in two rounds of conversation on the question 'what do you know about what works really well at a local level for local people?' In the mini feedback session, we heard some of their stories of great projects or good work.

One group had set up a swimming project so people in different communities would get to know each other; "informal conversation in the changing room and swimming together meant that people kept returning week after week". Another spoke of a post 9/11 project in the East Midlands, which used sharing food and eating together to tell stories across the table. A third

spoke of 48 different communities in Hull who came together to play a football world cup, which ended up with the sharing of stories and experiences.

In order to identify the conditions that created great results, participants were asked to harvest onto coloured paper three conditions per group that seemed to be the foundations of good work. These were then clustered into groups and by playing bingo, 20 clear winners emerged.

Mind mapping

Following a coffee break, we moved onto a mind map and a whole group conversation that invited people to identify the key opportunities and challenges facing us today in our work. The aim of a mind map is to see the bigger picture and the complexity of the whole system - your piece of the jigsaw and the whole jigsaw. It's a process that can capture a lot of complexity from a large group in a very short piece of time, and is an invaluable planning and scanning tool.

The rules of mind mapping are that all ideas are valid and are not evaluated or discarded; they go up on the map even if they are contradictory because they are both present in the room. It's also helpful if the person who speaks the theme says where it goes and gives concrete examples. If it's a big group, it helps if people have 'post it' notes to write their names on; they then pass these forward to the host who puts it into a stacking system much like the deli counter at the supermarket.

When their name is called out, they speak their issue. These issues are mapped one by one on the whole map by a couple of scribes. Each major theme has a new colour and can be added to. New themes can be added, each one radiating out from the central question in the middle. It's usually an illuminating exercise and what emerged this time was that this group was very keen to capture the interconnectivity between themes.

The topic that claimed much airspace was the time we are currently living in. There was a feeling that as old structures are being dismantled, we need to define new economic models and find new ways of working together, working collectively and creatively to engage more people in new ways of thinking and acting. Along with a distinct lack of trust in government policy and 'the expert culture', there was a desire to engage and a clamor for more participation.

Open Space

After lunch, the whole afternoon session was handed over to the participants with an invitation to explore their own agenda, interests and passions. Inviting people to deepen their understanding of key themes and maybe offer some practical proposals, we opened the space by explaining the process and the principles of Open Space. Whoever comes are the right people, whatever happens is the only thing that could, when it starts it starts and when it's over, it's over. The law of two feet invites people to move around in different groups to find the right place to engage their passion or where they can make their best contribution. Or people can 'bumblebee', taking ideas from group to group, or simply stand aside like a butterfly and while resting, connect with others as they pass by.

Interestingly, this open space took a long time to get going. We seemed to sit for a very long time before people began to post topics. Unlike previous spaces where the clamour to call a topic can be frantic, this space opened slowly and very tentatively. On reflection, we wondered if it was something to do with the space being opened so widely, or with the purpose of the day and people being tentative with each other, maybe because of a lack of trust between the groups. However, as all good open spacers do, we got out of the way, and slowly 10 powerful sessions emerged.

Each group met for 45 minutes and each harvested a convergence sheet showing what they had talked about, summarising three 'make or break' things it was important to pay attention to. At the end of the open space session, these sheets were displayed around the room so people could read the varied conversations and their results. Some of the feedback I received said that although only a small number of topics had been called, the conversations and level

of sharing in each had been very powerful and intentional.

Closing Circle

As a close to the day, we met in circle to reflect on our learning. What were people taking away from the whole experience and what still needed more attention? The microphone was passed round the whole circle, inviting everyone to speak if they wished to, and the comments can be read in the event record.

Many spoke of enjoying the challenging ideas that had arisen in the conversations, the new perspectives and ways of working that had been shared, the 'questions rather than answers' approach, and the reminder of the importance of relationship. Many also spoke of still feeling unsure how to put this into practice 'out there', even if their courage and motivation had been fortified.

We gained a much greater understanding of what seemed to be working well across the region and also some of the big challenges. Maybe we also shifted views slightly on the potential for these diverse groups to come together more often; we seemed to have engendered at least a feeling that greater collaboration was possible. But it takes time and constant weaving of the many people who are looking to work together more collaboratively. Like Rome, it isn't built in a day.

I personally was struck by the fact that even though there is a lot of collaboration going on, we really don't still know how to do this. It's so difficult to get beyond representing an organisation to truly participating as ourselves. But in order to create the level of change needed to address the massive issues we're facing, we need to start really working together, across boundaries and sectors and all those divisions we create so that we can label, order and delineate our world.

This day and this process seemed to offer a good start in that direction. We are up for the rest of the ride!

***Linda Joy Mitchell** has 25 years of experience of working in the UK Civil Society and Public Sector and eight years as an independent consultant and dialogue host. Linda designs, hosts and advises on strategic process and participative citizen consultation. Her hosting and facilitation practice supports partnerships, teams, forums and communities to come together, inquire into what matters most and build strong collaborative relationships that can go to work on what needs to be done. Currently hosting two large scale multi stakeholder projects innovating new ideas in the UK food and finance system, Linda has a particular interest in social innovation and systemic transformation. Linda, who is based in Leeds, works in partnership with Valérie Ménélec. For this event, they were joined on the hosting team by Niamh Carey who did the graphic facilitation.*

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