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**"From Reflection to Rejuvenation"**

**Dialogue for action: supporting community decision-making through computer-assisted dialogue**

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**Biography:**

Serge Loode (LL.M) is a researcher and lecturer at the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies (ACPACS). Originally from Germany, Serge worked as a lawyer before concentrating on mediation and conflict resolution in his postgraduate studies and practice. Serge lectures in Negotiation, Mediation and Multi-party Conflict Resolution, and is also an experienced conflict resolution trainer, assessor and facilitator. He designs and conducts workshops in intercultural awareness and conflict resolution and facilitates Creative Dialogue and Design sessions for groups and organisations. His PhD research focuses on the role of dialogue for systemic changes in culturally diverse communities.

**Abstract:**

This paper examines the role that Creative Dialogue & Design (CDD) can play for problem-solving and decision-making in small groups. CDD is a computer-assisted group dialogue and design process which supports groups, communities and organisations to engage in dialogue and to design ways to deal with complex and conflictual situations. It is helpful for community peacebuilding work and for finding collaborative ways to address intergroup conflict.

The facilitation team guides participants through a dialogue and design process which is flexible and is based on three distinctive stages. Stage 1 concentrates on developing greater understanding of the problems. Stage 2 assists in formulating a group vision by articulating goals the group members want to reach. Stage 3 allows for prioritisation of projects to ensure that resources are expended where they can have the greatest effect.

CDD bridges the gap between dialogue and decision-making that is so important for the work with culturally diverse communities and organisations. It provides an innovative way to bridge cultural difference by encouraging participants to develop a greater understanding of each others' worldviews before they make decisions about how to deal with the problems at hand.

**Keywords:**

Intercultural, dialogue, group facilitation, decision-making, action planning.

### ***Common barriers to effective decision-making in culturally and linguistically diverse groups:***

In 2007 my colleague and I were asked to assist with the design of a community peacebuilding project for a culturally and linguistically diverse community in Queensland.<sup>1</sup> The question that the project team was dealing with, was: how can we assist the community members to talk constructively without getting bogged down in culturally related miscommunication and past grievances? The community groups involved had a history of miscommunication and of feelings of being offended by the other community groups. In addition the project team wanted to establish a community reference group which could make meaningful decisions to design and implement projects. We chose a facilitation methodology called Interactive Management (IM), which we later renamed Creative Dialogue & Design (CDD). CDD combines the opportunity for sustained meaningful dialogue with a group decision-making and consensus-building process.

To begin with I am going to briefly point out some of the difficulties for dialogue and decision-making in culturally and linguistically diverse groups. Benjamin Broome and Luann Fulbright (1995) identified the following barriers to effective group work :

- methodological differences (such as a lack of procedural guidelines),
- cultural diversity issues (including differences in worldview and existence of biases and prejudices),
- planning shortfalls (e.g. failure to define the focus of the group and inadequate preparation),
- resource constraints (in particular unsuitable physical settings),
- group composition (e.g. failure to have decision-makers at the table or failure to include key actors),
- organisational culture barriers (e.g. the organisational culture does not encourage change),
- communication barriers (such as the inability to find a common language and to listen effectively),
- climate concerns (lack of support for open expression of opinions and lack of group identity),
- attitude problems (unrealistic expectations and resistance to the process),
- and process failures (such as inability to reach consensus and lack of group participation).

Particularly the inability to listen and cultural diversity issues were highlighted in the study as being the most common barriers. While it is recognised that cultural

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diversity within a group can increase creativity, resilience and group effectiveness, cultural diversity can also have negative impacts on group cohesion and conflict resolution if cultural diversity is not addressed appropriately. Arai proposes that culture and conflict are inextricably intertwined. Because culture influences innermost beliefs, worldviews and values it also provides people with narratives on how they should manage interpersonal and intergroup conflict and therefore influences their behaviour. At the same time conflict, understood as diametrically opposed needs, interests and/or ideologies, tends to sharpen perceptions of cultural difference and creates conceptions of in-groups and out-groups which can run along ethnic, religious, generational and other lines (Arai, 2006).

Group decision-making processes need to pay close attention to these dynamics of culture and conflict and there needs to be space in the problem-solving and decision-making process to help participants to develop a 'spirit of inquiry' about others which leads to situations of shared learning and collective inquiry in which worldviews can be revealed, explored and conflict can be used as a catalyst for collective problem-solving (LeBaron, 2003). These collective learning situations are also often described as dialogue.

#### *Intergroup dialogue processes:*

According to Jenlink and Banathy, dialogue is a "culturally and historically specific way of social discourse accomplished through the use of language and verbal transactions." It includes notions of community, mutuality and authenticity and aims to establish an egalitarian relationship (Banathy and Jenlink, 2005). It is collective communication that allows for the sharing of thought, can transform existing beliefs and create new innovations and cultural artifacts. Dialogue also allows participants to examine and share preconceptions, prejudices and the characteristic patterns that lie behind their thoughts, opinions, beliefs and feelings and roles (Bohm et al., 1991). The basic idea is to suspend opinions as well as judgment of what others share and to try to gain understanding of their starting points.

Dialogue gives participants from different cultural backgrounds an opportunity to understand the influence of existing cultures and the differences that distinguish them without letting a particular culture or cultures dominate the discourse (Banathy and Jenlink, 2005). Because it lets participants experience each other in context and provides insight into values, logic and stories of the people involved, it can bridge intercultural conflicts and help conflicting parties improve their knowledge and understanding to transform the relationship (LeBaron and Pillay, 2006).

The theory and practice of dialogue were deeply influenced by the writings of Martin Buber (1970; 1985) and David Bohm (2004; 1991). Bohm's idea of dialogue revolves around recurring meetings of the 'dialogue group' which slowly assist participants to uncover hidden preconceptions and to reflect on their individual worldviews in context with those of other people. These dialogues may be facilitated in the beginning but slowly the group moves away from facilitated discussion to an ongoing sustainable joint discourse. While valuable, here lies also the major criticism of dialogue as a conflict resolution and peacebuilding tool. It is hard to operationalise and may not yield any results that deal with concrete and proximate causes of conflict and issues that the people involved are grappling with. While it may cause a positive transformation of relationships, it is rarely useful to initiate concrete action (Coleman, 2004). What is needed is a dialogue process which also includes decision-making and translates the dialogue outcomes into concrete action plans. Creative Dialogue & Design (CDD) is such a process.

### ***Dialogue facilitation with Creative Dialogue & Design:***

Creative Dialogue & Design is a computer-assisted group facilitation and design process which relies on the principles that dealing with complex and stressful situations in groups and communities requires the exploration of the group members' knowledge and the establishment of sustainable relationships between group members.

CDD is based on the *Interactive Management (IM)* process developed by Prof. John N. Warfield at George Mason University and is a well-documented and researched facilitation process (Warfield, 1976; Warfield and Cardenas, 1993, 2002; Broome, 1997; 1995; 2006; Broome and Christakis, 1988; Broome and Jakobsson Hatay, 2006).

The facilitation team guides 10-20 participants through a dialogue and design process that is flexible and is based on three distinctive stages:

1. Problem-mapping: concentrates on developing greater understanding of the problems as perceived by the group's members.
2. Vision-mapping: assists in formulating a group vision by articulating goals the group members want to reach.
3. Action planning: allows for prioritisation of projects to ensure that resources are expended where they can have the greatest effect.

The use of IM in peacebuilding and conflict transformation was pioneered by Prof. Benjamin Broome from Arizona State University, who documented the successful use of IM with Greek-Cypriot and Turkish-Cypriot citizen groups as part of civil society peacebuilding interventions in Cyprus (Broome, 1997). He also suggested that IM holds the potential for creating respectful intercultural dialogue and design processes which not only support participants in the planning of peacebuilding actions but serve as a first step for relationship building and community participation (Broome and Christakis, 1988).

CDD addresses many of the barriers to group problem-solving identified above. In CDD the first step is to brainstorm ideas that answer a problem- or vision-question which the group wants to resolve. After all the ideas have been entered into the ISM computer software and have been posted on A4 paper on the wall of the facilitation space, a long round of clarification occurs. We allow each participant to explain her or his ideas to the group and encourage attentive listening. Other group members can ask clarifying questions, but have agreed not to criticise or reject an idea. If they have strongly dissenting opinions, they can simply propose another idea which expresses their concern. This brainstorming and clarification is also known as Nominal Group Technique (NGT) (Delbecq et al., 1975). One of the participants in a past facilitation pointed out that CDD is more than just option generation: "We do brainstorming all the time, but we never actually sit down and compare each other's understanding of the ideas that are brainstormed." Voices and ideas are constantly added to the joint mindspace and are being clarified to form a common language and understanding.

Clarification also allows for storytelling – it gives each individual group member an opportunity to share the images, stories and experiences behind the idea with the group and provides for a deep and meaningful learning experience. I consider this generation of shared meaning one of the most important functions of the process. It is here that group members spontaneously say things like "I did not know that you saw it differently. I think I need to change my definition." The process and the computer recording allows for ideas and clarifications to be changed and amended at all times. We use a data projector to display what is entered into the computer on the screen. This focuses the group's attention and

allows the participants to confirm that their stories are entered correctly and also provides instant acknowledgment of their contributions.

### ***From dialogue to decision-making:***

After the clarification we enter the next stage of the CDD process. Participants vote for the 5 most important elements. Within seconds the computer produces an absolute or weighted ranking of their votes and thereby reduces the total number of ideas that the group needs to work with. This greatly reduces the complexity of complex problems which can have hundreds of different ideas that contribute to the problem. Depending on the group's preference and cultural appropriateness the voting process can be either open or secret. This can help to deal with power imbalances within the group.

We have now entered the decision-making phase of the process. Apart from the ranking of ideas, this phase also involves Interpretive Structure Modeling (ISM), a process by which the computer poses influence questions to the group. For example: Does problem A strongly exacerbate problem B? The group is given further opportunity for dialogue and the sharing of views, but they have to answer the question either with a yes or a no. In most situations this decision is made as a group consensus-decision. If the group is given enough time to discuss their views I have only rarely found it necessary to use a majority vote. The most interesting situations arise when a strong majority of the group immediately thinks they have the right answer, but one or two people disagree. We actively encourage the group to explore the different opinions and ask members of both factions to explain why they say yes or no. We have experienced on numerous occasions, that what were minority voices at the start of a discussion, were able to swing the whole group's opinion by explaining their views and providing examples why certain ideas influence each other or not.

The ISM software uses a sophisticated algorithm to reduce the number of questions necessary to develop an influence matrix of the ideas. This allows for the construction of a visual influence map (similar to a flowchart) which is then created by the facilitator and participants using paper and tape arrows on the wall of the facilitation space. The group then reflects on the structure and amends it if necessary.

On the basis of the map (or maps if the group has gone through both the problem- and the vision-mapping stages) we then use a simple action planning outline (asking what/who/when/where/how) to come up with ideas for different projects to address the problems or realise the goals. Often group members immediately identify exciting and creative projects that no individual member of the group had envisioned before when they look at the map. The participants also often feel a strong sense of ownership of the projects since they have been part of the planning process right from the start and the projects are based on their shared understanding and consensus. Words like "challenging" and "confronting" vanish from the group's discourse and are replaced with words like "work together" or "realise projects". The group's communication practices can change significantly throughout the process and because of the in-depth clarification phase group members can find a common language which they can use to realise the projects.

### ***Using CDD with culturally and linguistically diverse groups***

While CDD allows for people from different cultural backgrounds to explore each other's worldviews and to create a shared language, it also places certain restrictions on who can participate. The first restriction is numbers. Because the dialogue and clarification part needs to provide enough time for each group member to share their thoughts on all their ideas, this process is time-intensive.

If language barriers exist this is even more difficult. To ensure that each member of the group stays engaged, listens to others, and also has their input heard, makes it difficult to run a process with more than 20 people. Larger groups therefore need to be split up and separate processes need to be run, which also increases the time necessary. The process takes ca. 2 days per stage with a group of between 10-20 people.

Because the participants' statements and stories are entered into the computer and displayed on the screen, literacy of group members is of importance. Although CDD processes were run in which ideas were represented by pictograms or pictures, it generally helps focus group members when they read their stories and views off the screen as they are entered. Facilitators need to be aware that this limitation has an impact on who is empowered to participate when dealing with culturally and linguistically diverse communities. It is not necessary, though, that the group speaks English, as long as the facilitators can use the software (which is only available in English) and the ideas and statements can be entered using a computer keyboard using a language that all group members understand.

Cultural difference involves more than just speaking different languages. The ISM software which guides the CDD process provides a framework which is based on certain cultural assumptions. Overall the process is linear, from entering the ideas to structuring and constructing the map on the wall. The advantage is, that it is possible to go back to any step in the process to discuss and change the meaning of statements. Because everything is recorded, this is much easier than with facilitation processes that just rely on flipcharts or other paper-based recording processes and may appeal to group members that do not think in a linear fashion. It may however be culturally inappropriate for people who are more polychronic or diffuse thinkers (LeBaron and Pillay, 2006).

Ultimately the human facilitators guide the discussion, encourage certain communication structures (such as circle processes, small group discussion or vigorous debate). Here, the personal qualities and cultural fluency of individual facilitators are very important. We have found it valuable to train local co-facilitators in the process and then to facilitate a CDD session together. This helps to bridge misunderstanding between facilitators and participants related to cultural difference and builds capacity within the groups and communities which can use the process after the external facilitator has left.

In conclusion, CDD provides an innovative way to deal with the real-world problems of group facilitation and action planning in culturally diverse communities and organisations.

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