POSSIBILITIES FOR TRANSFORMATIONAL CONFERENCES

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§1–INTRODUCTION

This paper grows out of the experience of my former facilitators' collective, a group called Sunrise. One of the first projects we did when the group started back in 2000 was to attempt what i thought of as "dialogue interventions" at a major conference that happened each year at the university near us. This conference would pull together a few thousand of the most amazing environmental activists each year, only to spend whole days and evenings talking *at* them, instead of with them. It was continually frustrating. Conversations were pushed literally into the margins of space and time—that is, the narrow, crowded hallways of the building, and the late-night parties where i imagine the real work of the movement got done.

Our group started organizing wisdom councils, world cafés, and other participatory events within the conference, and volunteering to serve as panel moderators (and trainers of panel moderators), in an effort to shift the culture. However, the conference had new organizers each year, with a strongly established mode based on their experience as law students, and ultimately we did not press the cause with sufficient effort, length, and strategy to succeed in changing the ongoing nature of the event. Nonetheless, we hosted some excellent group conversations for a few years that hopefully made a difference on the issues at the time, and perhaps left participants with new ideas. And further, we found and developed tools for participatory events that we were able to apply more fully at other happenings, such as the "Metamedia Cooperation" (see http://www.imaginify.org/post/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=88 and http://www.imaginify.org/post/index.php?name=News&file=article&sid=118).

What is proposed here arises out of that experience and more. We long-time conference attendees have time and time again arrived at events with high hopes, only to come away disappointed. In particular, we've been frustrated when we attend conferences on "new paradigm" topics (such as sustainability, group process, open source software, social justice, and so on) that take place in rigid, old paradigm formats. We want to spread tools to help bring the new paradigm to life.

With that experience in mind, i pose the following questions:

Question #1: What is the goal(s) of your conference?

Question #2: How are you going to reach that goal?

For example, goals of your conference might include:

- Education: Experts educate those who know less
- Skill-Share: People who are coming educate and share information with each other
- Networking: New social connections for future joint projects

- Strategize: Generate solutions to dilemmas held by multiple attendees
- Scenario Planning: Envisioning possible futures and how to respond
- Communication: Craft common language and terminology
- Outreach: Spread important ideas to new listeners
- Cross-pollination: People involved in one part of a movement find out what is happening elsewhere
- Human Connection: Develop lasting relationships
- Commitment: Create will for action
- And more . . .

Do you want breakthroughs? Do you want skill-building? Do you want personal growth and development? If you want to get somewhere with the people attending your event, there are a range of possibilities in how you—the conference convenor—lead them there. This paper is designed to help you think through some of those options, so that you can plan activities and events that actually take you and your attendees where you want to go.

Let's assume that you are going to succeed at attracting 50-1000+ motivated, smart people from around the region or country to attend your conference, ok? As the convenor, you now have an amazing opportunity to engage and influence a large number of active and talented folks about an issue that is important to you. Inspiring speeches can energize attendees and spark new ideas, but that alone is not enough. There is nothing like active participation to prepare people to take what they have learned out into the world. We recommend starting from your goal(s) and then thinking through, step by step, how each goal will actually be accomplished.

Let's focus for a moment on the role of experts. If you are working on something big and important in the world, what are the chances that one or two or three people, or even a few dozen, actually have, by themselves, the solution to that issue? The typical, old paradigm conference focuses overly on the dissemination of expert knowledge to the spectating masses, who are expected to passively soak up that information, and whose own explorations and new ideas are squeezed into a few minutes of Q & A at the end of a lecture by 1-4 presenters. (Note the power dynamic of this, how listeners are instructed to offer questions, rather than comments themselves—and watch how people "cheat" by standing at the microphone commenting anyway, in spite of the instructions!) We're not saying it's not appropriate and useful to occasionally ask the wise ones among us to share with the whole, but it is important to ask: (a) What portion of time is allotted to that, and (b) What happens next?

I'm going to practice one of the principles of this paper, and ask you to reflect for a moment on your own experience. What is the best event that you ever attended? The one you found most transformative, or most inspiring? Let's pause here, so you can remember it. . . . OK, what did you say? Perhaps a party your best friend threw during school? Or maybe a bigger, more public gathering, like Burning Man or a Rainbow Gathering or Michigan Womyn's Music Festival? A personal growth workshop of some kind? Chances are you did not say, "So and so's lecture at the university," "the political rally held at the state capital last year," or a large sporting event. This is because the latter are typically mainly one-way events, and genuine shift almost always arises out of two-way experience between oneself and the world.

§2—CORE GUIDELINES

Expert Time vs. Participatory Time

I'm not the czar of your event, but as someone who has run more than a few events in my time and attended lots of others, here are some guidelines for a ratio that will leave participants feeling connected with each other, excited about the issue, and raving to others about how wonderful your event was:

#1. *Lectures by one person:* One hour or less per day. Definitely no more than 90 minutes.
#2. *Panels (2-4 people):* 3 hours or less per day.
#3. *Full participatory methods* (such as, but certainly not limited to, the ones outlined in the following sections of this paper): At least half of your total time together.

An opening presentation can inspire and get everyone on track. Beyond that, it is people's heartfelt, engaged participation that is going to make the difference to the success of the issue you care about as convenor. I've seen wonderful creative innovations, such as the use of a Playback Theater troupe doing improv on stage based on what participants are saying to the full group, right in the moment as it's being said. Graphic Recording—large murals drawn in the moment by an experienced visual synthesizer—can add pizzazz and understanding to almost any large gathering. And hasn't the open, unformatted coffee hour been the best part of many an event you've attended? The possibilities are vast. To draw on those possibilities, to realize them, requires a shift in perspective and an honoring of the wisdom that your participants are bringing to the event. And for goodness' sake, give the group 1-2 hours for lunch!

§3—PARTICIPATORY FORMATS TO PUT AT THE MIDDLE OR END OF AN INFORMATIONAL PRESENTATION

PAUSE FOR PAIRS

Have participants turn to each other in pairs, and share for a few minutes each what their feelings and thoughts are in response to what's been presented so far.

SMALL GROUP SHARING

After an informational presentation, instruct the attendees to break into groups of 3-5 people. (More than 5 is not a small group.) Ask them to discuss one or more questions, such as:

- How has this issue touched your life?
- In your wildest dreams, how can you solve this problem?
- What would it take to fully transform this issue?
- What can you do as an individual or in your community about this issue?
- What is one concrete, specific, do-able next step that you could take on this after the conference?
- If this issue were resolved, what would the world look like?

Leave time at the end for people to share their favorite ideas with the whole group.

ATTENDEES INTERVIEW EACH OTHER

Ask attendees to pair up. One person will speak while the other person listens and asks questions. Present an initial question that will allow each person to probe their feelings or deeply held values about an issue, such as:

- What's important to you about this issue?
- What do you think is at the heart of the matter?
- What do you think needs to change here?

Then invite the listening partner to ask follow-up questions. Signal at the halfway point so that people can switch roles and share the airtime. Emphasize that the role of listeners is to witness and reflect, not to analyze or judge. This is great for allowing people to tune in with their feelings around the issue or bring to life creative ideas they may have brewing.

PRESENTERS LEARN FROM PARTICIPANTS

What is the problem that most challenges your presenters? What is the greatest barrier to their work? Present that challenge to the attendees and encourage them to come up with solutions, perhaps in small groups. Allow adequate time for conversation and for sharing conclusions in the large group.

FISHBOWL

In this format, a small group of people speak together while others listen and witness.

Panelist Fishbowl: Give panelists an opportunity to talk with each other, in front of the whole group, about their responses to each other's presentations. They may be bubbling over with things to say, or the moderator can ask them a few questions to get started. I've also seen this conducted as a question circle, where one panelist starts with a question, which the next person answers, then person #2 asks a question to person #3, and so on.

Participant Fishbowl: Invite a small group of attendees to discuss what they just heard, and then ask panelists to respond. This allows panelists an interesting window into the thoughts of their potential allies.

INTERVIEW THE PANELISTS

As the moderator, you interview panelists with the intention of allowing them time to go in depth on an issue. Questions can come from the interviewer or from the attendees. As contrasted with your typical Q & A session where the intention is to get through as many questions as possible, take the time to probe panelists for deeper answers if the question inspires. This could even turn into a facilitated conversation among panelists. Follow the energy as the conversation evolves.

PANELIST CIRCLES

After the initial presentations, have panelists go out into the audience and form circles of 5-15 people with whoever wants to talk more with that particular panelist. Let this run for 10-30 minutes depending on the energy, then reconvene to share insights in the big group. Some attendees may form their own smaller circles without panelists, and that's fine. This format requires having the right number of people in the room to get a good ratio between panelists and attendees.

OTHER FORMATS

What else can you come up with? There are infinite possibilities! Just remember to think over how the format you are considering fits with your goals, in addition to having fun experimenting.

§4—PARTICIPATORY FORMATS TO SUPPLEMENT OR REPLACE ONE-WAY PRESENTATIONS

The following formats can be used at times when a large group is gathered in one space. In addition, of course, there are all the interactive methods available at workshop breakouts, such as roleplays, practice sessions, extended question and answer periods, discussion, etc.

STORYTELLING

I once attended a lengthy workshop where the highlight, for me, was hearing (from 15 people each on four evenings) a story of up to five minutes on "A moment that changed your life." The stories varied wildly: from love stories, to political awakenings, to family changes, to ethical lessons and beyond. I spent most waking hours for a month with those 60 people, and of all that time, the storytelling evenings are some of my best memories.

Stories connect us across barriers and differences, making us human to each other. There's a famous Native American proverb about how we shouldn't judge another person until we've walked a mile in their shoes; well, stories are a vehicle for making that journey. Here are some ideas for storytelling seed questions:

- What led you to decide to come here today? What hopes do you have for this event?
- What early experiences helped shape the values you hold now?
- Please share something about your life experience that you think shaped your perspective on, or commitment to, . . . (insert theme of event here).
- Many people have, within their general approach to an issue, some dilemmas, mixed feelings, uncertainties, or gray areas. Are there any dilemmas, value conflicts, or gray areas that you have on this issue that you'd be willing to share?
- What is the most effective action you ever witnessed regarding (issue)? What do you think made it work so well? How did it inspire you?

A few of the questions above are drawn from an excellent resource for dialogue, the Public Conversations Project. Their guide book is available for free online; see www.publicconversations.org.

WORLD CAFÉ

Rotating small group discussions. Typically 2-3 rounds of 20-35 min. each. In between rounds, one person stays at the same location to be "table host" and welcome travellers, while the rest of the group breaks up and travels to form new groups at other tables. Table hosts are *not* experts nor facilitators, simply volunteers in the moment. Facilitator may ask for highlights to share with the whole group between rounds, or wait until after several rounds. May change focus question on each round, or stay with the same question and go deeper. See www.theworldcafe.com for more info.

REPRESENTATIVE FISHBOWLS

This can be a really interesting way to explore a controversial issue on the table. As mentioned above, a fishbowl consists of a subgroup discussing an issue in the center, while the rest of the full group sits in an outer circle offering silent witness and support. Sometimes the outer group is invited to share their impressions at the end. Many variations are possible.

Heterogeneous Fishbowl: One representative from each main viewpoint is invited to sit in the center group. For example, at the Nexus for Change conference held in 2007 in Ohio, the represented groups were: Scholar; Activist; Practitioner; Leader; and Wild Card, for the voiceless or anyone else who didn't fit (such as other species, or future generations). When someone new wanted to occupy the chair for a particular role, they sat behind the person currently in that role, who would then rise and vacate the chair as soon as they were done.

Homogeneous Fishbowl: People in a particular category (such as "working class") sit in the middle and talk about their experience; then people in the next category (e.g. "middle class" or "owning class") go into the middle while the previous group sits out. Having two or more rounds for each group allows for a lot more depth and responsiveness, which is especially important if you have picked a hot topic to explore.

KINETIC SPECTRUM

For issues that have a natural continuum of opinion. Lay out a spectrum line in the room, e.g. "How many years do you think we have to make major lifestyle and systemic changes before climate change forces massive migrations and deaths?" Ask people to stand at one end if their answer is "it's already too late," and the other end if their answer is "50 years or longer," and so on through the middle. Everyone places themselves along the line, providing an immediate visual snapshot of the group's opinion on the subject. You can then ask a different line-up question, or invite a few people from different places on the line to say more about their opinion.

A further fun variation is to fold the line at the halfway point, pairing up the two people at the extreme ends and so on down the line (until the middle people are paired with each other), and then ask the partners to have a short conversation about why they feel the way they do. You can even fold the line around a second time after that (so that the middle-most pair is then put into a group of four with the pair that was formed from the initial extremists, and so on). When i do this i typically invite the groups of four to start out by introducing one's partner, saying, "Something i just learned from my partner is. . . ."

SPEED DATING

Have everyone stand in two concentric circles: one facing inward and one facing outward. Get the same number of people in each circle so that everyone is paired up. Give people 30 seconds to 2 minutes to exchange information, such as:

- Who are you?
- What called you to be at this event?
- What are you passionate about?
- What really matters to you about this issue?
- Whatever other question seems appropriate . . .

At the time limit, ring a bell and tell a circle to rotate one person to the left, so that everyone has a new partner, then do it again. You can use the same question a few times, then shift to a new one.

PROJECT GALLERY (aka Speed Geeking)

Spread a bunch of presenters around the edge of the room, could be each one at a table or end of a table. Split the audience into small groups, one group to each presentation. You play "referee" and start a clock that goes for, say, four minutes. Then everyone rotates and you do it again. In one hour each audience member will have seen a dozen projects and the presenters will have presented a dozen times. This process supports seeing a range of projects in a small group setting, while supporting those sharing their work to improve their pitch.

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY

Typically carried out via paired interviews but also occasionally in small groups, Appreciative Inquiry is a method that focuses on what's going well in order to create more of that. It has a track record of theory, research, and practice in a wide variety of settings, and can be applied in partnerships of two or movements of thousands. The classic series of A.I. questions goes something like this:

#1. What is the best experience you've ever had with . . . ? What made it so wonderful? Describe the event in detail.

#2. Without being humble, can you please tell me what you value most deeply about your contribution to this group? What do you personally bring to this work?

#3. What is the core factor that gives life and vitality to this organization—the one thing without which it just wouldn't be the same?

#4. If you had 3 wishes for this group, what would they be?

After the questions are answered by each person, there is a collection process for harvesting highlights and grouping common themes. See http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu for more info.

OPEN SPACE

Organize all or part of your conference using Open Space Technology. Open Space is a method of organizing, in a relatively short amount of time, as many sessions as participants want to convene, on whatever topics they feel passionate about. (One hour is sufficient for hundreds of people to set up a full day's worth of sessions.) It is a structured but self-organizing process, and has been used successfully in settings across all sectors: business, community, political activism, etc. The core guideline is: "Take responsibility for what you love." Participants are encouraged to move on to a new group any time they are not teaching, learning, or otherwise adding or receiving value. See www.openspaceworld.org for more info.

§5—IN CONCLUSION: MAKING IT WORK IN PRACTICE & FURTHER RESOURCES

Do Your Prep

For the benefit of your event, think through the logistics of any method you are considering before you use it. Try doing a dry run with friends, or practicing your introduction out loud. While this stuff isn't that hard to do, methodologies like World Café and Open Space do have background and specifications that make them run smoothly and be more fulfilling for participants. Look up the websites listed, and/or contact the authors of this paper for tips or help with your event design. For large-scale interactive sessions, you may want to consider bringing in a facilitator who is experienced at the format you want to use.

Further Resources

The following websites offer ideas for other potentially transformational processes:

Art of Hosting: http://www.artofhosting.org/theart/

Co-Intelligence Institute: www.co-intelligence.org/CI-Practices.html.

National Coalition on Dialogue and Deliberation: www.thataway.org.

Tools for Change has instructions for many group exercises: http://trainingforchange.org/content/section/4/39/.

Kavana Tree Bressen's website www.effectivecollective.net. Particularly see "Formats" and "Exercises" topics.

Unconferences: See Wikipedia, or http://scripting.wordpress.com/2006/03/05/what-is-an-unconference/. ***ALSO: http://www.greenchameleon.com/gc/blog_detail/what_km_conferences_can_be/ FOR ONE EXAMPLE.***

Who Are We?

From her home in Oregon, **Kavana Tree Bressen** consults with a wide variety of organizations on how to have meetings that are lively, productive, and connecting. She supports groups in putting their ideals into action, and is available for visioning, retreat facilitation, strategic planning, and conflict resolution, as well as event planning. Kavana teaches highly interactive workshops on consensus decision-making, meeting facilitation, and related subjects. She worked for years on a gift economy basis, and her website **www.effectivecollective.net** offers extensive free articles and resources. (In her writing, she deliberately uses a lower-case "i" as an expression of egalitarian values.) Contact: kavana@effectivecollective.net; 541-343-3855.

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Sunrise Facilitation was a collective that met regularly in Eugene, Oregon from 2000-2006. While the group is no longer active, the ideas and connections from it generated this paper shortly after.

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