

Sparking Cultural Transformation Through Dialogue

by

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the transformational potential of dialogue to spark cultural change. Our society faces critical environmental challenges, and numerous studies demonstrate the power of dialogue to engage individuals in environmental issues. This qualitative study further investigates that potential, based on interviews with nine experts in leading and facilitating dialogue. The interviewees shared their insights on how dialogue can help individuals reimagine opportunities for action and change and expand their awareness of possible paths toward a more sustainable society. The findings led to a vision of dialogue as a powerful process for: expanding participants' understanding of the complexity of an issue being discussed; facilitating opportunities for participants to uncover shared values, so they are more open to each other's perspectives; increasing participants' capacity to validate multiple perspectives; and creating a space for participants to work together collaboratively, to allow new solutions to emerge.

*Keywords:* dialogue; environmental issues; sustainability; Coordinated Management of Meaning; Art of Hosting Meaningful Conversations; transformative learning theory; Theory U; presence; presencing; integrative values

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### **Chapter 1: Focus and Framing**

In the Spring of 2008, I saw a conference presentation that changed my life. It was a keynote address at the Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism Conference in Vancouver.

Renowned anthropologist Dr. Wade Davis spoke passionately and eloquently about how ancient cultures around the world are disappearing at an alarming rate, and what this loss means for the human race. Throughout his 45-minute talk, Dr. Davis revealed how these cultures represent a collective source of knowledge and wisdom that is crucial to our human experience—an archive of expertise that can help us navigate the environmental challenges that lay ahead of us. While he spoke, a slideshow played behind him flashing image after image of peoples from the Amazon Rainforest, the forests of Borneo, the mountains of Nepal. The whole room was transfixed.

That experience profoundly influenced my journey through the Master of Environmental Education and Communication (MAECC) program at Royal Roads University. It made me realize how most of us take for granted that our own worldview is the de facto correct one. It is easy to carry on our day-to-day lives never thinking about the fact that we share a planet with thousands of different peoples and cultures with unique worldviews that are completely different from ours. Many of these cultures are based on a rich and complex relationship with the environment that could teach us a great deal about living more sustainably—how nature enriches our lives, and how crucial it is to our quality of life.

In fact, that conference was where I first heard of Royal Roads' MAECC program. While browsing the exhibit area, I came across the Royal Roads booth and was immediately intrigued to find a graduate program that would provide me with the training to combine two of my professional passions: communication and sustainability.

I finally entered the MAEEC program nine years later. My aim was to explore how environmental communications can help shape people's understanding of the sustainability challenges our society faces and build people's awareness of our collective relationship with nature. Ultimately, I wanted to learn how to inspire people to take action, big or small, and to work together to find solutions.

In the early stages of my journey through the MAECC program, I believed that efforts to engage the public in environmental issues should be focused on bridging the gap in values between those who support environmental action, and those who do not (Brulle, 2010; Corner, Markowitz, & Pidgeon, 2014). I was convinced we needed to develop alternative communication approaches to shift people's beliefs and values in a way that supports the cultural transformation our society so urgently needs. After all, as Donella Meadows (2008) points out, our society is based on paradigms that are "shared social agreements about the nature of reality" (p. 163). These paradigms are the foundations upon which we, as a society, base our decisions and actions, and are therefore massively consequential leverage points for change.

Bunnell and Sonntag (2000) ascribe our current circumstances to cultural beliefs that "equate consumption with wealth and well-being" (p. 66). They suggest our institutions need to operate with "an emotional orientation that includes an openness in vision, social self-respect, and an ethical concern" (p. 70) if they are to have a positive impact on the sustainability of our economic, social and ecological systems. They suggest this emotional orientation cannot be forced, but it can be encouraged and invited through conversation.

Numerous studies point to the potential effectiveness of small group dialogue as a communication tool for enacting social change (DeTurk, 2006; Gastil, Black, & Moscovitz,

2008) and for increasing people's engagement in environmental issues (Dietz, 2013; Phear, 2014). This study further explores that potential through a series of nine interviews with dialogue practitioners and facilitators with extensive experience in conducting and facilitating dialogue sessions. The goal of my thesis has been to contribute to existing research on the transformational power of dialogue by exploring its potential use as an environmental communication tool to spark cultural change, and to expand individuals' awareness of possible paths toward a more sustainable society. However, as I explain below, the spirit and intent of that goal evolved significantly throughout the course of my research.

### **Research Questions and Objectives**

Using a basic qualitative methodology informed by developmental phenomenography, I set out to investigate the following questions:

1. How can small group dialogue be used as a communication tool to increase individuals' awareness of and engagement in environmental issues, and help shift perspectives?
  - a. What are some effective dialogue approaches and facilitation techniques for achieving these goals?

Yet, as I continued to expand my literature review, and moreover, as I began conducting my interviews, my own views about the purpose of dialogue began to shift. In my very first interview, Jan Elliott—an expert who has been leading and facilitating dialogue for decades—challenged the premise of my research question by asking: “do you really want to shift the person's perspective on an issue? Or do you want genuine dialogue?”

This question made me realize I had not properly defined what I meant by dialogue. In his book, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*, William Isaacs (1999) defines dialogue as “a conversation with a center, not sides... a means for accessing the intelligent and coordinated power of groups of people” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 19). He notes that the aim of dialogue goes beyond just reaching agreement among people who differ—that is negotiation. Rather, the intent of dialogue is to “reach new understanding and...form a totally new basis from which to think and act” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 19). He goes on to write that dialogue

asks us to listen for an already existing wholeness, and to create a new kind of association in which we listen deeply to all the views that people may express. It asks that we create a quality of listening and attention that can include—but is larger than—any single view (Isaacs, 1999, p. 20).

Reading Isaacs’ definition of dialogue was an “a-ha” moment for me. I realized my research goals were tied to an assumption that people needed to be brought around to my way of thinking about environmental issues. However, we are all interconnected, and we all have our own worldviews based on our unique life experiences. Who am I to impose my way of thinking on other people? And, like Dr. Davis described in his conference presentation, our planet is comprised of many cultures—and a multitude of worldviews—many of which have much to teach us about how to live more sustainably. Bunnell and Sonntag (2000) argue there is not just one pathway to sustainability, there are many pathways. For them, defining those pathways is about vision—the “ability to see from outside the conventions of our culture, to see clearly the circumstances in which we find ourselves” (Bunnell & Sonntag, 2000, p. 66)—in other words,

understanding the cultural paradigms that Donella Meadows describes as leverage points for change.

I was further influenced by William Isaacs' (1999) ideas around how dialogue can create conditions in which new solutions can emerge (p 33). He writes that when people are confronted with a view that is different from their own, they often believe they only have two options: defend their position or say nothing. But Isaacs believes there is a third option: to suspend one's view. Doing so meaningfully requires a mindset of inquiry—of presenting one's view as one of many views, and then inquiring about others' views—rather than defensiveness. This act has the power to shift a conversation in a way that allows the “collective voice of judgement to abate” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 33) and a new possibilities to arise.

In the following chapters, I describe my evolving perspective of the role and purpose of dialogue in addressing environmental issues, and how my shift in perspective impacted my research. Chapter Two explores the literature that provided a context and theoretical framework for my thesis topic. Chapter Three provides details about my research methodology, the study's limitations and the potential biases I brought to my research. Chapter Four presents an overview of my nine interview participants, and the findings from my rich conversations with each of them. In Chapter Five, I discuss my analysis of my findings in the context of my research question and present the conclusions of my study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

In recent years, many academics have written about the deep cultural changes in Western society that are needed to effectively address our most critical environmental challenges. These cultural changes involve a widespread shift away from “values that drive environmentally unsustainable and economically and socially unjust trends to a new set of values supporting the emergence of true ecological, economic and social sustainability” (Berzonsky & Moser, 2017, p. 15). The following literature review explores the nature of this potential shift in values, and the role of dialogue in this transformation.

Proctor et al. (2018) call for “engagement as a framework for action in these times” (p. 362). They point out that “environmental activism may feel good but alienate those we need to bring on board” (Proctor et al., 2018, p. 362), accomplishing the opposite of what environmental advocates are intending to achieve. If we do not approach the hard work of addressing environmental issues with a “spirit of engagement,” we are in danger of feeding “the flames of resentment burning all around us... Action with engagement is action with others in mind, not just those with whom we agree” (Proctor et al., 2018, p. 362). They write that others who think differently than us may also be “as confused and angry as we are” about climate change, and that by engaging across differences, we have the opportunity to “envision a scope of action that includes, not excludes, them. (Proctor et al., 2018, p. 362).

In fact, a new study by the University of Ottawa’s Positive Energy program (Frank, 2022a) suggests that many Canadians may have a distorted perspective of the views on climate action held by others with opposing political views. This creates a negative feedback loop, in which people become angry and alienated, based on what they believe their political opponents

think. The study refers to this as “false polarization”—a mistaken belief in how polarized Canadians are on this issue. In an opinion piece in the *National Observer*, the study’s author called for “more dialogue, more nuance, more honest brokering, less pre-emptive judgement, more collaboration across party lines, less categorical thinking and less oversimplification of opponents’ viewpoints” (Frank, 2022b, para. 7) to counteract this harmful dynamic.

This chapter explores the types of values and leadership skills that can foster a spirit of engagement, to counteract polarization, create bridges between people with different viewpoints, and support collaborative action on critical environmental issues. I also present studies that demonstrate the power of dialogue to address societal challenges and discuss three communication theories that provide frameworks for the transformation that can be achieved through the dialogue process.

### **Calls for Integrative Values and Adaptive Leadership**

Annick de Witt (2015) posits that clashing worldviews lie at the heart of disagreements around climate action. She defines worldviews as “philosophies of life” that encompass a person’s ontological, epistemological, axiological (i.e. what is of value), anthropological, and societal values. De Witt categorizes Western society’s worldviews into four categories: traditional, modern, postmodern and integrative, and notes that her past research demonstrates the relationship between each of these worldview categories and individuals’ perspectives on climate change.

A postmodern worldview is aligned with “green” values, a connection to nature, and environmental advocacy; however, those with this worldview tend to want to “fight the system”

and end up fostering opposition in their advocacy work, which undermines efforts to build alliances and cooperate with other interest groups. On the other hand, those with an integrative worldview strive to “synthesize rationality and spirituality, economy and ecology, humanity and nature” (de Witt, 2015, p. 915), and tend to focus on the inner changes required to respond to climate change effectively, not just the external changes. This worldview is also associated with a “profound connection to nature” (de Witt, 2015, p. 916) and “an understanding of earthly life itself as imbued with a larger consciousness or ‘Spirit’ ” (de Witt, 2015, p. 916). She argues that individuals with integrative worldviews “may be better able to bring together polarized perspectives and support the conditions for finding common ground and synergy” (de Witt, 2015, p. 916).

Fritjof Capra (1996) discussed a similar worldview concept in his book, *The Web of Life*. He wrote that Western society is undergoing a paradigm shift in which a new, more holistic worldview is emerging—a growing awareness of “the world as an integrative whole rather than a dissociated collection of parts” (Capra, 1996, p. 6). He described this worldview as a

deep ecological awareness [that] recognizes the fundamental interdependence of all phenomena and the fact that, as individuals and societies, we are all embedded in (and ultimately dependent on) the cyclical processes of nature...It recognizes the intrinsic value of all living beings and views humans as just one particular strand in the web of life (Capra, 1996, pp. 6–7).

He noted this sense of interconnectedness is “spiritual in its deepest sense” (Capra, 1996, p. 7).

According to Capra (1996), an integrative worldview is associated with values of conservation, cooperation, quality and partnership, and a way of thinking that is intuitive, synthetic, holistic, and nonlinear. In contrast, Western- industrial society is aligned with “self-assertive” values of expansion, competition, quantity, and domination, with ways of thinking that are rational, analytic, reductionist, and linear. He notes these two sets of values and ways of thinking are neither intrinsically good or bad, as both are essential to healthy living systems; however, our society must shift to a more balanced value system.

Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer (2013) write that “today’s economic reality is embedded in a global eco-system of environmental, social, political, and cultural contexts that are highly intertwined and that evolve in uncertain, complex and volatile ways” (p. 11). They explain that societal reality—which they call *eco-system reality*—has been decoupled from *ego-system awareness*, or economic thought. They believe these conditions require leadership that is “more open, attentive, adaptive, and tuned in to emerging changes” (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013, p. 11). They note that

bridging the gap between eco-system reality and ego-system awareness is the main challenge of leadership today. Decision-makers across the institutions of a system have to go on a joint journey from seeing only their own viewpoint (ego-awareness) to experiencing the system from the perspective of the other players, particularly those who are most marginalized. The goal must be to co-sense, co-inspire, and co-create an emerging future for their system that values the well-being of all rather than just a few (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013, p. 12).

They say that the process for bridging this gap—moving from “me” to “we”—has three dimensions:

1. better relating to others
2. better relating to the whole system
3. better relating to oneself

In David Snowden’s Cynefin model, systems—and systemic problems—can be separated into four domains (Corrigan, 2020; Snowden, 2002):

- 1) known, where the relationship between cause and effect is obvious
- 2) knowable, where the relationship between cause and effect is complicated, but able to be mapped with enough time and resources
- 3) complex, where cause and effect are intertwined, and their relationship is unknowable, because components of the system continue to change and evolve—this is the category in which Scharmer and Kaufer’s definition of the global eco-system would fit
- 4) chaos, where there is no discernable relationship between cause and effect, because system connections have broken down

According to Snowden (2002), responding to problems in complex systems requires the ability to recognize patterns, so that we can disrupt the patterns we do not want, while stabilizing the patterns we want to conserve. This can be achieved by “increasing information flow, variety, and connectiveness” (Snowden, 2002, p. 16). This type of responsive decision-making requires *adaptive leadership skills*, which include “improvisation, collaborative learning, resilience, resourcefulness, and humility” (Harvest Moon Consultants Ltd., n.d., p. 22).

The Art of Hosting Meaningful Conversations dialogue practice also promotes *participatory leadership* for addressing complex problems, by leading conversations that let “the emergent properties of complex systems bring us new ideas, insight[s] and innovation” (Harvest Moon Consultants Ltd., n.d., p. 83). This is important, because “leadership can come from anywhere, so ensuring that diversity, multiplicity of voices and collaborative decision-making takes place is essential to making good strategic choices” (Harvest Moon Consultants Ltd., n.d., p. 22).

These adaptive leadership skills are echoed by Humberto Maturana’s concept of intelligence, which he defines as the “plasticity for participation in changing behaviour and changing relations” (Maturana & Bunnell, 1999, p. 60) that allows a person to respond with flexibility, rather than rigidity in a situation. Maturana asserts that most problems encountered in an organizational context can be resolved by viewing others as “a legitimate other in coexistence with oneself” (Maturana & Bunnell, 1999, p. 59) and with intelligent behaviour, both of which provide the freedom for creativity, autonomy and responsibility.

Nancy Southern (2020) discusses six capabilities that leaders—be they a CEO, a public servant, or an environmental activist—need to develop in order to work effectively within complex systems and create conditions for systems change. They include:

1. Seeing the system and its interconnections: leaders need to recognize the relationship between a system’s structure and behaviour, and identify the leverage points that will lead to the greatest change.
2. Thriving in a state of inquiry: spending more time asking questions, rather than answering them.

3. Considering perspectives other than one's own: this involves "suspending assumptions, cultural humility, and embracing disagreement" (Southern, 2020, p. 543). Rather than avoiding conflict, leaders should embrace it as a natural part of systems inquiry. Disagreement opens the door for exploration, questioning assumptions, and developing shared understanding.

4. Creating conditions for collective creativity and collaborative action: this requires leaders to shift their role from "hero, problem-solver, and decision-maker, to a leader who is a catalyst and enabler" (Southern, 2020, p. 547)—an idea that aligns with Art of Hosting's concept of participatory leadership.

5. Fostering reflective learning, dialogue, and generative conversation: this requires people to

listen to the whole, to participate with respect for all people and perspectives, to suspend assumptions [in order to] to open space for new thinking, and to speak with care for the whole in a way that supports the generative movement of the dialogue (Southern, 2020, p. 548).

6. Shifting the nature of problem solving from reactive to co-creative: addressing systemic problems requires "many people with different knowledge and different perspectives working together with a shared purpose and a willingness to share leadership" (Southern, 2020, p. 549). A leader's role is to create conditions that will engage stakeholders in ways that allow this to happen.

Southern (2020) also discusses the role of dialogue in shifting patterns of communication to create conditions for conversations that support collective creativity and collaborative action.

She says that generative dialogue—where participants let go of the desire to know, and “embrace inquiry to generate new thinking, new ideas, and new energy” (Southern, 2020, p. 548)—invites alternative perspectives, new metaphors, images and language... that can lead to new thought and collective meaning making. In a generative dialogue, one can feel the creative energy building as people see things differently, share their thinking and learning, and spark new thinking in others (Southern, 2020, p. 549).

### **The Transformational Power of Dialogue**

A number of studies demonstrate the transformational power of dialogue in engaging people in critical societal issues and creating conditions for collaborative action. Brulle (2010) conducted an extensive literature review about social change and mobilization, and based on his findings, argues that social change is most effectively accomplished through “civic engagement and public dialogue” (p. 82). He recommends a model called Analytic Deliberation, a process which integrates scientific analysis and community dialogue to build civic engagement in environmental decision-making.

Studies also show that scientific facts alone are not enough to affect individuals’ attitudes and opinions about environmental issues (Brulle, 2010; Dietz, 2013; Westwood, 2015). An extensive review of social psychology literature by Westwood (2015) revealed that when individuals receive new information, they can process it by using heuristic judgements, which takes little effort, or systematically, where it receives greater consideration. New information is much more likely to be processed systematically if one views it as salient. Direct dialogue between individuals increases the likelihood that information will be perceived as salient.

A phenomenological study by DeTurk (2006) demonstrated the power of dialogue in helping to build sociocultural understanding among the diverse residents of a community. The dialogue program increased participants' capacity for complex thinking on the topic, reduced stereotypes and prejudice, and expanded their understanding of others' perspectives. DeTurk noted the findings were specific to her program; however, she provided a robust literature review to support her view that the findings were applicable to other situations where face-to-face dialogue could be used to bridge differences. DeTurk also pointed out that existing research on the benefits of dialogue had mainly been conducted by education scholars, with a focus on learning outcomes, and suggested the field would benefit from contributions by communication scholars who could present their own perspectives.

### **Theoretical Frameworks for Transformation Through Dialogue**

Many education and communication theories offer frameworks for the transformation that can be achieved through the process of dialogue, but there are three in particular I explored in my research: Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory, Coordinated Management of Meaning, and Theory U.

**Transformative Learning Theory.** According to Jack Mezirow's (1997) Transformative Learning Theory, transformative learning happens when an individual's "frame of reference" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5) or worldview changes through critical reflection of the assumptions that provide the foundation for that worldview. Mezirow believes this change can happen through communicative learning, where two or more people aim to achieve common understanding through dialogue, because achieving this goal requires participants to critically assess alternative

viewpoints. Communicative learning is a concept developed by Jurgen Habermas (1984) as part of his Theory of Communicative Action.

**Coordinated Management of Meaning.** W. Barnett Pearce and Vernon Cronen developed the theory of Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM) to offer insights into the process of communication, and provide tools for identifying and changing communication patterns (Griffin et al., 2015). CMM is based on the idea that people co-construct their social worlds—comprised of themselves, their relationships, organizations, communities and cultures—through conversation, and “are simultaneously shaped by the worlds they create” (Griffin et al., 2015, p. 67).

At the same time, our social worlds are so complex, the stories we tell in a conversation implicitly hold information that is untold, unknown, unheard and/or untellable, along with the information that is shared. In this respect, there is almost always a tension between the stories we live—i.e., what we actually said or did—and the stories we tell (Griffin et al., 2015).

The “coordination” aspect of CMM is the process people use to intentionally mesh the stories they live through conversation in a way that attempts to “bring into being their vision of what is necessary, noble, and good, and to preclude the enactment of what they fear, hate or despise” (Barnett Pearce, cited by Griffin, Ledbetter & Sparks, p. 71). And, people can decide to do this even if they do not share a common perspective of an interaction or event. They can synchronize their action without sharing the same motives for that action. This coordination allows people to recognize and honour their own perspective, while openly entertaining alternative perspectives (Creede et al., 2012).

The goal of CMM is to create better social worlds that are “replete with caring, compassion, love and grace... a way of being with others that makes space for something new to emerge” (Griffin et al., 2015, p. 75). This requires the capacity for mindfulness, defined as “the presence or awareness of what participants are making in the midst of their own conversation” (Griffin et al., 2015, p. 75). A mindful participant in a conversation pays less attention to what is being said, and focuses on what participants are doing, so they can “step back and look for places in the conversational flow where they can say or do something that will make the situation better for everyone involved” (Griffin et al., 2015, p. 75).

**Theory U.** Scharmer and Kaufer write that if we want to transform the behaviour of a system, we need to transform the “quality of attention that people apply to their actions within those systems, both individually and collectively” (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013, p. 19). The success of actions taken to transform a system depends not on how or what we do, but rather “on the inner place from which we operate” (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013, p. 18). They say that most learning methodologies rely on learning from the past; however, successfully addressing real leadership challenges requires one to let go of the past, and to “to connect with and learn from emerging future possibilities” (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013, p. 19). This type of learning—which involves connecting with a “deep source of knowing” (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013, p. 19)—is called *presencing*, a term they coined that combines the words “*sensing* (feeling the future possibility) and *presence* (the state of being in the present moment). It means sensing and actualizing one’s highest future possibility—acting from the presence of what is wanting to emerge” (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013, p. 19).

The concept of presencing is the foundation of Otto Scharmer's Theory U, named for the U-shaped illustration Scharmer uses to depict the journey a person takes when presencing. To get to the deepest level of transformation (represented by the bottom of the U) one must first go down the left-hand side of the U by observing and opening one's heart, mind and will. The bottom of the U is where one retreats and reflects, and "allow[s] the inner knowing to emerge" (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013, p. 21). The journey back up the right side of the U includes crystallizing one's intention and prototyping a new idea or concept, followed by the evolution and iteration of that idea based on feedback from stakeholders. Scharmer and Kaufer describe presencing as the deepest level of listening, in which

the circle of attention widens and a new reality enters the horizon and comes into being.

In this state, listening originates outside the world of our preconceived notions. We feel as if we are connected to and operating from a widening surrounding sphere... The experience of the self morphs from a single point (ego) into a heightened presence and stronger connection to the surrounding sphere" (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013, p. 20).

This type of shift happens when a sports team is playing "in the zone" or a jazz ensemble "finds its groove" (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013, p. 20). The process of presencing can also transform the quality of a conversation, shifting it from "debate to dialogue and collective creativity" (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013, p. 23).

All three theoretical frameworks work together to provide a foundation for the transformation that can occur through dialogue, to encourage a more integrative view of the environmental challenges that we face and support a shared process of generating new ideas. These frameworks provided the context in which I analyzed my interview data and generated the

discussion and conclusions for my study. The next chapter provides an overview of the methods and methodology I used to design and conduct my research, and to analyze the findings.

### Chapter 3: Methods and Methodology

I designed my research as a basic qualitative study to explore a range of dialogue approaches, and their success in broadening individuals' awareness of issues so they are more open to other perspectives. My research design was informed by developmental phenomenography, which guided my choice of data gathering methods.

I interviewed nine dialogue practitioners who represent a range of dialogue approaches, to explore their experiences with engaging individuals in complex issues and broadening perspectives through small group dialogue. Although my research questions were focused on environmental issues, I included dialogue practitioners working in other fields in order to consider dialogue approaches that may not yet have been applied in an environmental context.

A basic qualitative approach—also sometimes referred to as a generic qualitative or interpretive approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)—worked well for this study, as it is a social constructivist, theoretically interpretive approach, which “seeks to understand how people interpret, construct, or make meaning from their world and their experiences”(Kahlke, 2014, pp. 39–40). It allows researchers a degree of flexibility in their research design, as it does not adhere to an “established set of philosophic assumptions” (Kahlke, 2014, p. 13).

My research design was influenced by phenomenography, and its focus on investigating the “variety of ways in which different individuals experience some aspect of the world around them” (Maber, 2018, p. 32). In particular, *developmental phenomenography* aims to apply the research outcomes towards addressing the issue being studied, and use the outcomes “to affect the world [we] live and work in” (Green & Bowden, 2009, p. 53). In contrast to “pure” phenomenography, developmental phenomenographic research outcomes are meant to be applied

practically in a way that address the original issue that instigated the study (Green & Bowden, 2009). In the context of my study, this meant applying my findings to the practical question of how dialogue could contribute to a more collaborative approach to addressing environmental issues.

In order to align my research with phenomenography's aim of investigating the range of ways a group of people view a particular phenomenon, I chose a data collection method that reflects my interviewees' "way of seeing" (Green & Bowden, 2009, p. 54). This is typically done through interviews with neutral questions that ask interviewees to "elaborate their own way of seeing the phenomenon" (Green & Bowden, 2009), with minimal commentary from the interviewer. My data analysis was also guided by developmental phenomenography's approach of developing categories of findings, which lead to study outcomes that can be practically applied to the issue being addressed in the research question (Green & Bowden, 2009). This method of analysis diverges from "pure" phenomenography, which aims to analyze data in a way that reveals that diversity of perspectives among a group of interviewees (Larsson et al., 2003). It should be noted that my choice of categories was inevitably influenced by my own personal biases regarding the saliency of certain points made by interviewees.

### **Data Gathering Methods**

Data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews with nine selected participants, using a combination of direct and open-ended questions. Interviews were conducted virtually, recorded using the Zoom video-conferencing platform and then transcribed for analysis.

In advance of each interview, I provided each participant with an interview protocol that presented 10 questions I intended to ask each participant (see Appendix C). However, the interview was not strictly scripted. In the spirit of the dialogic approach of my study, it was conducted in a conversational mode, and the actual questions posed to each participant varied according to the context and flow of conversation (Yin, 2016). My objective for each interview was to gain an “understanding [of] the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2013, p. 9).

### **Participant Recruitment and Selection**

I used purposeful sampling with a maximum variation strategy to select interview participants, each with extensive experience in a different small-group dialogue approach, which helped me cover a wide range of perspectives (Green & Bowden, 2009). I also aimed for diversity in gender and cultural identity so that my research outcomes might include diverse epistemological perspectives.

Each interview participant was someone recognized by his/her/their peers as an expert in leading and facilitating dialogue, with significant depth of experience. I developed my list of participants by consulting with dialogue experts, my own thesis committee, and interview participants to obtain recommendations for suitable interview candidates.

### **Data Analysis Strategy**

I used transcription software to generate a transcription of my interview recordings. All interview data was compiled and analyzed using an open coding process to analyze the categories and themes that emerged in the data. My first step in this process was to read the

interview transcripts, to begin understanding how each interviewee's insights about their own dialogue work contributed to a larger understanding of my research question.

The next step was to review the data a second time to begin identifying common themes. Once I identified a series of themes, I used those themes as the basis for developing categories that, as described above, would lead to research outcomes that could be practically applied to the issue at the root of my research question. The results of the analysis were then interpreted and summarized to present insights into how participants' experiences contributed to answering my research question.

### **Limitations and Delimitations of the Study**

Although I believe a basic qualitative approach worked well for this study, some may view it as a less-rigorous methodology, as it does not adhere to traditional research theory or philosophy, and the evaluation standards for this research approach are not necessarily clearly defined (Savin-Baden & Howell Major, 2013).

In addition, the findings of this study are specific to the perspectives and experiences of the individuals interviewed. There are a vast number of dialogue approaches, frameworks, and facilitation techniques, but due to the constraints of my scope of research, I was only able to cover a fraction of them, depending on the range of expertise of the interview participants. For example, many interviewees were influenced by the theory of Coordinated Management of Meaning, which in turn, heavily influenced my research findings (a full summary of the interviewees and their dialogue approaches can be found in the introduction to Chapter 4:

Research Findings). Similar studies conducted by other researchers may yield different findings, depending on the dialogue approaches covered in their participant pools.

Moreover, as Maber (2018) notes, an inherent limitation of a phenomenographic research approach is its reliance on the “memory, recall, and self-reporting of study participants, which is readily subject to the effects of the passage of time and distance from the events and experience (phenomena) of interest” (p.140). This limitation is further complicated by researchers’ biases as they interpret the interview data.

### **Validity and Rigour of the Study**

Green and Bowden (2009) suggest that when conducting a developmental phenomenographic study, “multiple perspectives throughout the analytical process give rise to a more robust set of categories of description than would be derived from the efforts of a solo researcher” (p. 61-62). For this reason, I invited several academic peers to act as an informal Inquiry Team for my study, to provide multiple perspectives on my research process—in particular, to review my research approach and to provide feedback on my participant pool and interview questions.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommend “member checks” (p. 246) as another strategy for ensuring the validity of a study, in which a researcher asks interview participants for their feedback on the initial findings. I conducted member checks by asking participants to review the summary of my research findings, paying particular attention to any quotes I attributed to them to confirm their accuracy. I also invited all participants to provide their thoughts and comments on the research findings and offer additional insights if they chose to do so.

I believe my chosen methodology was a good fit for my research questions, and I tied my research design to existing literature on basic qualitative approaches and dialogue frameworks. As noted above, I chose a research approach that aligns with my own epistemological assumptions. Moreover, as recommended by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), I have been thoroughly and scrupulously transparent in the description of my methodology and research process, to clearly demonstrate how I reached my study conclusions.

### **Potential Biases**

Yin (2016) recommends researchers describe their research lens in their research report, and identify the features of their research lens that could influence their study findings, as a way of explicitly acknowledging personal bias. I began this study believing that dialogue offered significant potential as a method for broadening perspectives and contributing to the cultural transformation we need as a society, based on the literature review I presented in Chapter 2. In this respect, I was biased regarding the research findings I wished to see.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommend researchers periodically check in on their biases when analyzing the research data, asking themselves how their own beliefs, life experiences, and social location may be affecting how they view the data. In Chapters 1, 4 and 5, I describe how my own views on dialogue were impacted by my research and the analysis of my findings.

In addition, participants would have had their own personal biases that influenced the information they chose to share with me in the interviews, based on their own life experiences as well as the theoretical frameworks that have guided their own dialogue work.

**Ethical Considerations**

I communicated the details of the study fully and clearly to all participants and obtained their informed consent to participate in advance of the interviews. The “informed consent” letter stated they were free to opt out of the study at any time before the final report was completed, and if they decided to withdraw, I would delete their interview data from the larger data set. I asked participants to confirm explicitly whether or not I could use their full names in my final thesis report. All participants gave their explicit permission to have their names included. If they had chosen to remain anonymous, I would have taken steps to protect their anonymity by excluding their names from any research data shared with others, and by using pseudonyms in this report.

### Chapter 4: Research Findings

This chapter presents the findings from the interviews I conducted to answer my main research questions:

- How can small group dialogue be used as a communication tool to increase individuals' awareness of and engagement in environmental issues, and help shift perspectives?
- And, what are some effective dialogue approaches and facilitation techniques for achieving these goals?

I interviewed nine experts in the field of dialogue and facilitation, many of whom did not have extensive experience working in the field of environmental sustainability. I recruited individuals whose dialogue work extended beyond environmental issues, so that I could explore a wider range of dialogue approaches.

Table 1 presents my interview participants, including their background in dialogue work, as well as their approach to leading and facilitating dialogue sessions. All interviewees gave me permission to use their names in my research findings and thesis report. The interview participants are listed in alphabetical order.

Table 1 <i>List of Interview Participants</i>		
<i>Name</i>	<i>Dialogue Background</i>	<i>Dialogue Approach</i>
Jan Elliott, PhD	Jan has extensive experience in community engagement, public policy, and facilitating dialogue among deeply divided stakeholders. She is co-founder of Fielding Graduate University's international Dialogue, Deliberation and Public	Jan describes her dialogue approach as a blend of theoretical and practical methods, strongly influenced by Barnett Pearce and Vern Cronen's theory and practice of

	<p>Engagement graduate certification program, a program aimed at discerning what approach to dialogue and engagement is appropriate for the context.</p> <p>Biography:  <a href="https://theharwoodinstitute.org/jan-elliott">https://theharwoodinstitute.org/jan-elliott</a></p>	<p>Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM). Her current interest is working with communities and leaders through dialogue and collaborative learning, to guide community members towards collective action that reflects what the community wants.</p>
Maggie Herzig	<p>Now retired, Maggie was a Founding Associate of the Public Conversations Project (which has since rebranded as Essential Partners), a U.S.-based organization that helps people work together more effectively through inclusive dialogue. Essential Partners was founded by a group of researchers—most of whom had a background in family therapy—who were interested in applying the concepts and methods of family therapy to dialogue on divisive public issues.</p> <p>Maggie co-wrote Essential Partners’ foundational guide: <i>Fostering Dialogue Across Divides</i>, and has facilitated dialogue on topics ranging from forest management, abortion, and reproductive rights, to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.</p>	<p>Maggie co-developed Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD), which is Essential Partners’ framework for designing and facilitating dialogue.</p> <p>The RSD approach is concerned about systems, and the self-perpetuating communication patterns that undermine relationships and people’s ability to work collaboratively. RSD aims to build awareness of these negative patterns and bridge people’s differences.</p>
David Isaacs	<p>David co-founded The World Café with his partner, Juanita Brown, in 1995.</p> <p>David is also President of Clearing Communications, an organizational leadership and strategy consultancy, and has taught at numerous U.S. educational institutions.</p>	<p>David’s philosophy is that we do not create knowledge; we tap into a collective, collaborative wisdom. He views dialogue as a method for awakening that collaborative wisdom among participants, and recommends applying the seven principles of the World Café dialogue approach as a method for achieving that.</p>
Kazuma Matoba, PhD	<p>Born in Kobe, Japan, Kazuma is Apl.-Professor of Intercultural Education and Communication at Witten/Herdecke University in Germany, and co-founder of</p>	<p>Kazuma’s dialogue approach has been mainly influenced by David Bohm, and Otto Scharmer’s Theory U. “Global</p>

	<p>the Institute for Global Integral Competence. He has facilitated many dialogue processes in Germany, Japan, China, Switzerland and the United States.</p> <p>Biography:  <a href="https://www.globalsocialwitnessing.org/kazuma-matoba/">https://www.globalsocialwitnessing.org/kazuma-matoba/</a></p>	<p>social witnessing” has been a life-long research interest of his—this is the ability to view and address global issues with mindful and compassionate awareness, to promote a greater sense of conscious interconnectedness. He is interested in developing the capacity for “witnessing” through the dialogue process.</p>
Anita Perez Ferguson, PhD	<p>Anita is a consultant, multicultural educator and speaker in the areas of strategic program management, project evaluation, and the development of leadership and advocacy skills. She has designed and facilitated many dialogue processes, most notably serving as Site Moderator for AmericaSpeaks: Our Budget, Our Economy, a national initiative to obtain input from 3,500 Americans in 2010 on the U.S.’s fiscal challenges. She also served in the Clinton administration as White House Liaison to the U.S. Department of Transportation, and was Chair of the Inter-American Foundation. She is also a past-President of the National Women’s Political Caucus.</p>	<p>Anita followed the dialogue and engagement model developed by the America Speaks organization, which is based on a public deliberation framework.</p> <p>In more recent consulting work related to organizational change, Anita’s approach has evolved to focus on methods for ensuring inclusivity in dialogue processes, to ensure all voices have the opportunity to be heard.</p>
Bob Stains	<p>Similar to Maggie Herzig, Bob spent the early part of his career as a marriage and family therapist, before joining the Public Conversations Project (now Essential Partners) and becoming a dialogue practitioner in 1994. He has an extensive background in consulting, coaching, training, facilitation, and mediation. Bob has trained over 30,000 people in dialogue, conflict resolution, and communication skills.</p> <p>Biography:  <a href="http://bobstainsconflicttransformation.com/about/">http://bobstainsconflicttransformation.com/about/</a></p>	<p>Bob uses Essential Partners’ RSD approach in his dialogue work. Bob noted that RSD is heavily influenced by: Martin Buber’s philosophy on dialogue; Narrative Family Therapy; Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM); and Harlene Anderson’s work with Collaborative Language Systems.</p>

David Stevenson	David has spent his career working in the areas of social, cultural and organizational healing, wellness and reconciliation. He is currently chair of the advisory committee for the Royal Roads University School of Leadership Studies. He is also CEO of the Moose Hide Campaign, an Indigenous initiative to end domestic and gender-based violence in Canada.	David is a practitioner of the Art of Hosting Meaningful Conversations/Art of Participatory Leadership dialogue approaches.
Sergej van Middendorp, PhD	Sergej is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Social Innovation at Fielding Graduate University. He is also an Action Researcher and Developer for Miles Ahead Business Jazz, a consultancy based in the Netherlands. The consultancy is currently using dialogue to facilitate collaboration among the organizations involved in integrating the digitization of the Dutch healthcare system.	Sergej’s dialogue approach is heavily influenced by CMM, and the use of metaphors and improvisation to help broaden perspectives on an issue. He has explored the metaphor of jazz in dialogue by having a live jazz band play in his dialogue sessions.
Nancy White	Nancy has been a facilitation, collaboration, and communications consultant since 1997. She has extensive international experience in online and face-to-face group facilitation, and describes her work as “helping people get things done.”  Biography: <a href="https://fullcirc.com/about/about-nancy-white/">https://fullcirc.com/about/about-nancy-white/</a>	Nancy does not view herself as a dialogue practitioner, nor does she subscribe to a particular dialogue approach, although she views most of her work as having a dialogic component. She often uses Liberating Structures frameworks in her facilitation work.

I interviewed each participant once, virtually, using the Zoom platform, and each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. I presented each participant with my interview questions in advance of our interviews, to give them all time to think about their responses before our discussion.

When I began conducting the interviews, it quickly became clear to me that the aim of my research study—to determine how dialogue can be used as a communication tool to shift perspectives among dialogue participants—did not resonate with my interviewees. Rather than

leading dialogue participants towards a specific outcome, most of them felt the purpose of good dialogue work was to:

- Expand participants' understanding of the complexity of the issue(s) being discussed
- Facilitate opportunities for participants to relate to each other, and to uncover shared values among participants, so they are more open to each other's perspectives
- Increase participants' capacity to validate multiple perspectives, not just their own
- Create a space for participants to work together collaboratively, to allow new solutions to emerge

In my discussions with each of the interview participants, a series of themes emerged that represent key elements of an effective dialogue process. Figure 1 presents these themes and illustrates how these components work together to create a dialogue experience for participants that fulfills the purpose of good dialogue work, as described above.

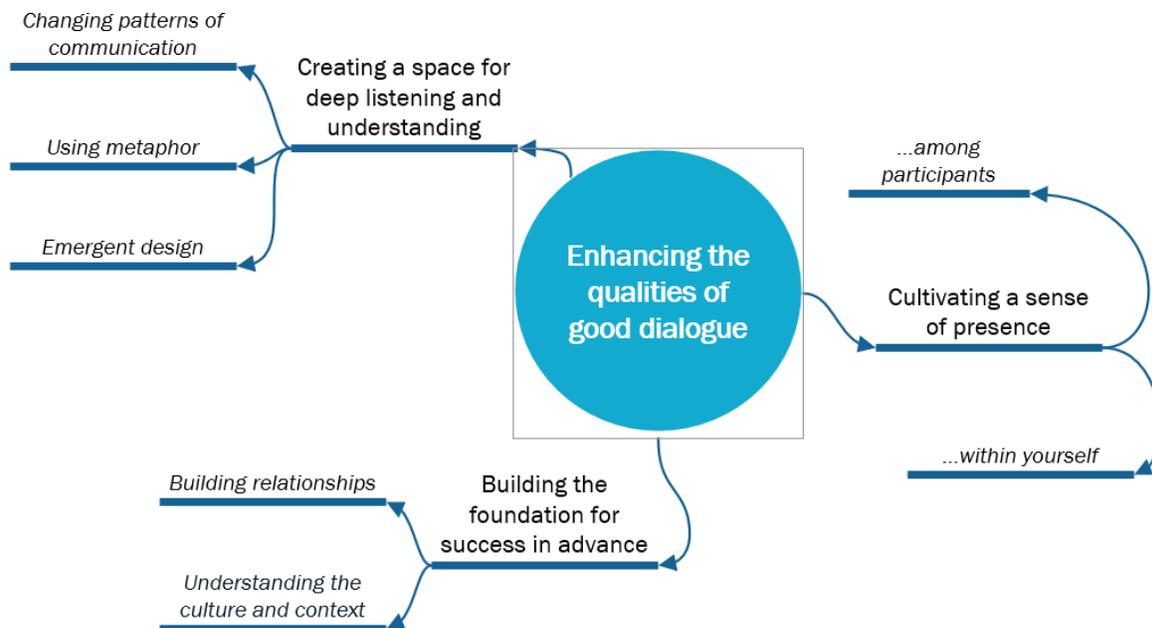


Figure 1: Fulfilling the purpose of good dialogue work - main discussion themes.

### Creating a Space for Deep Learning and Understanding

*Do you want to shift a person's perspective on an issue? Or do you want genuine dialogue (Jan Elliott)?*

My research findings revealed that a cornerstone of effective dialogue is to create a space for deep learning and understanding. Many interview participants spoke to the potential for dialogue to build capacity for critical thinking skills, and to navigate the complexity of wicked problems more effectively—skills needed for stakeholders to be able to work together more effectively, and to generate solutions for the issues being discussed.

Being able to deal better with complexity or complex issues is critical... there are very good ideas for more nuanced policies, but they're not politically feasible. How could this [dialogue] practice contribute to people being able to hold more complexity in a moment, make more nuanced decisions together, based on the shared understanding they can generate from dialogue? I think it's critical. (Sergej van Middendorp)

For Jan Elliott, the potential impact of dialogue is about much more than just shifting perspectives or broadening understanding of an issue. It is about empowering participants to contribute meaningfully to the conversation:

In deliberative dialogue... you want to try at a minimum to create a deeper understanding of an issue. And... you want to be able to uncover shared values. So, yes, you can work towards shifting a person's perspective, but you have to really take care. Do you really want to shift the person's perspective on an issue? Or do you want genuine dialogue? ...I think for me, dialogue in this work goes way beyond shifting perspectives and leading to a broader understanding. It has so much more power and potential. I think its power and potential is in working with people in a way they can see themselves, that they can see that their voice matters. And not only that, that they can see that they can make some kind of a difference. (Jan Elliott)

For Bob Stains, dialogue is not about changing perspectives, it is about changing relationships, and bringing attention to participants' shared values:

I don't think I've ever seen somebody change their perspective [in a dialogue session], which is okay... What happens in the process of dialogue, often, is that people discover that they share values they didn't imagine they shared... What changes is the

relationships, and how people imagine engaging someone who really differs from them... That transformation starts to change the way people hold a perspective that's different from theirs. And the people that hold that perspective. That's the work that I'm about... I mean, I certainly have my personal wishes. I wish everybody thought like me. But I don't have a desire in terms of convening and facilitating to see that happen... There are more transcendent values at play... (Bob Stains)

Bob Stains noted that implying there is a right perspective and a wrong perspective will only entrench people's positions, creating conditions that are "toxic, and so counterproductive."

In fact, for many interviewees, one of the more potentially powerful outcomes of dialogue is its impact on reducing the level of polarization among participants. When Maggie Herzig worked with a group of stakeholders on a divisive environmental issue, she developed a way to visualize the dynamic of polarization that can emerge between groups with opposing views. (See Figure 2).

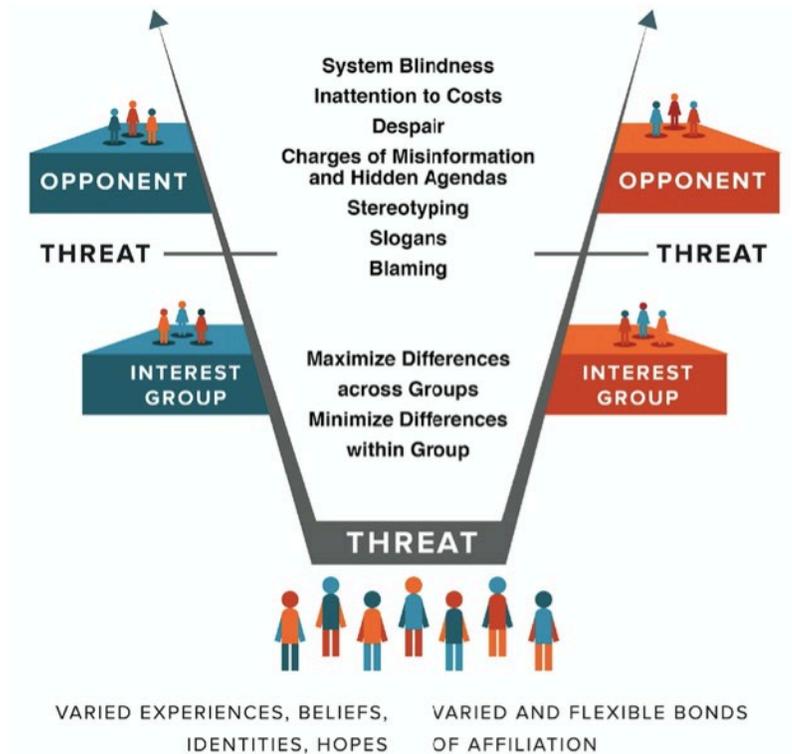


Figure 2: Polarization: a self-perpetuating system (used with permission from Maggie Herzig)

The bottom of the figure represents a community that is operating in a functional way. There is no major issue dividing people, and individuals are free to hold different beliefs and identities. In these conditions, there is room for community members to have “varied and flexible bonds of affiliation,” i.e. they can have differences of opinion on certain issues, but still recognize the values they have in common.

But when a community is faced with a threat, community members begin to form interest groups in reaction to that threat. Maggie points out this is not necessarily a bad thing, as it is natural for people to become passionate about an issue and want their opinion on the matter to be

heard. If there is an opportunity for healthy debate and resolution, conflicts can be resolved before they escalate too far. This process is a normal part of democracy.

However, there are situations where there is no clear path to a resolution; for example, in the conflict between the anti-abortion and pro-choice movements:

What can happen is these groupings can get stuck... the discourse minimizes the differences within the groups and maximizes the differences across groups...[and] you get stuck in the 'good guys/bad guys' mentality. And out of that can come stereotyping, slogans, blaming, etc... Then, what gets injected into this dynamic is more fear. So, it becomes a self-perpetuating escalation... A kind of systems blindness takes over...

You're not seeing the patterns, you're just seeing that the world would be a better place if these other people would just disappear. (Maggie Herzig)

A way to counteract this dynamic—to shift the relationship among dialogue participants to a more positive level, build trust and to encourage them to create “varied and flexible bonds of affiliation,”—is to rehumanize the people who sit on the opposite side of the issue. For David Stevenson, this is a core aim of dialogue:

What would be one of the more fundamental desired end states of good dialogue work, it would be a sense of common humanity. We might have completely different ideas about what that means; like, in practice, you might be a Republican, a Democrat, somebody else, whatever, right? But at least we've agreed that we have some common things that transcend that. (David Stevenson)

Several participants referenced Martin Buber as an inspiration for their approach for facilitating relationships among participants. Buber was a Jewish philosopher whose most well-

known book, *I and Thou*, discusses how humans relate to each other and to their world. Relationships can be characterized as either “I-It,” in which the other is objectified, or “I-Thou,” in which the other is truly seen and loved for who they are. Buber believed that true dialogue could only happen in I-Thou relationships, which are firmly grounded in the present. True connection exists in that sacred space between people who are in an I-Thou relationship. (Buber, 1937)

Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher, who wrote a book called *I and Thou*. He talked about being profoundly open to the other while standing your own ground. And that is, I think, one of the keys to doing good dialogue work. (Jan Elliott)

Bob Stains explained that Martin Buber had strongly influenced Essential Partners’ dialogue model:

We’ve all been deeply influenced by Martin Buber. And his notion of the difference of, and the importance of, the “between”. That there’s more here than just the parties, so to speak. And that is the space we can create, where that “between” will yield the most fruit. (Bob Stains)

For Bob, that concept of “between” is a sacred space has religious meaning, which connects to his Judeo-Christian religious beliefs around the idea of a transcendent Spirit:

My belief is that you radiate the Spirit that is in between us, and that through the work that I do, I create a thinner place where we can see that in each other, and experience that and each other, as well as experience more of that spirit that surrounds us... When people are touched by that in a session, when people are aware of this, and they come away and say ‘we feel like we’re part of a different tribe. We feel like we cannot go and do

business as usual, because we have been so touched by one another.’ And, they may never name it. (Bob Stains)

David Stevenson compared this sacred space to the story of Brigadoon, a musical from 1947. In that story, Brigadoon is an enchanted village hidden away in the Scottish Highlands, only visible for one day every one hundred years. On this day, outsiders are allowed to visit, and spend one magical day with the villagers in joy and celebration:

It’s the idea of this magical place where we actually come together, almost a point outside of time to go for a bit, and say ‘yeah, this is more important... what’s the real common, deeper purpose of our work together?’ (David Stevenson)

David Stevenson also referenced the Rumi poem, *Out Beyond Ideas*, as an inspiration for this dialogue principle:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,  
there is a field. I’ll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass,  
the world is too full to talk about.  
Ideas, language, even the phrase ‘each other’  
doesn’t make any sense.

Sergej van Middendorp mused that the notion of “I-thou” could also inform humans’ relationships with nature, helping us reframe our views of the more-than-human world:

So how do we dialogue with nature? I started wondering about this a while ago, and then I read Martin Buber. He uses the example of relating with a tree to explain how the I-

Thou relationship is different from the I-It relationship. I think somewhere in his book he argues that you can have an I-Thou relationship with a tree. It doesn't matter whether it's an I-It or an I-Thou, in terms of human or nature, it is the way in which we relate that makes a difference in the experience. So that's intriguing to me. (Sergej van Middendorp)

### **Changing patterns of communication.**

For several participants, the key to changing the way dialogue participants relate to each other, is to become aware of, and change, existing patterns of communication. For Bob Stains, his background in family therapy gives him a unique perspective on the impact this can have on relationships, especially in relationships that are characterized by conflict:

Conflicts are perpetuated by patterns of conversation. As family therapists, many of us who were trained long ago found that many modes don't work very well. What really works is focusing on conversation. If you can change conversation, you can shift relationships. You can help people relate to one another in a better way, and it also carries out into the rest of their lives and their worlds.

This is a core tenet of the Coordinated Management of Meaning dialogue approach, discussed in my literature review, which was developed with the aim of creating better social worlds. Bob Stains spoke specifically about how the orientation of improving social worlds could benefit environmental organizations that are working with stakeholders on contentious issues:

I think that advocates usually look at the institutional layer of issues and concerns and neglect the intrapersonal and the internal layers. My hope is that people pay more

attention to how intervening at the interpersonal level—at how people engage each other—changes the inner state of people toward one another, and then ultimately affects how people behave when they're together at the institutional level. So, that's my sage advice from this old warrior of dialogue, to pay more attention to that, and I think that folks will be much more successful. (Bob Stains)

Jan Elliott made a very similar comment about advocating for environmental issues: Advocates sometimes really struggle with being open, because they are right. And, of course, they are right, but so is the other person. (Jan Elliott)

David Isaacs referenced Humberto Maturana's ideas around language creating reality. For David, it is crucial to pay attention to the types of words we use in dialogue, and the ways in which concepts are framed, in order to cultivate a positive, solutions-focused orientation among participants:

Words [are] very important, because—are you familiar with the work of Maturana?—language generates reality. The languaging we use generates the reality that we grow. And if we're talking about 'leverage' and 'catalysts' and 'mechanisms,' we're in industrial-age languaging. If we're talking about living systems principles, of growth, of generativity, of aliveness, of enthusiasm, of connection, of relationship, of heart... Often, this type of work is approached from the perspective of 'we have a problem we need to fix.' And that puts you on such a different playing field. I've structured my consultations as an Appreciative Inquiry for that very reason—because I don't want people focusing on what the problems are. I want people focusing on what they do like. And what are the things they think are going well? And how can we make them even better? Because I

want people in these meetings to hear others coming up with best practices, and then really harnessing all that collective wisdom to come up with even better ways of approaching it. (David Isaacs)

**Using metaphor to expand understanding and engage participants emotionally.**

The use of metaphor in dialogue was another theme that emerged in my interviews.

Several participants discussed using metaphors as a tool to help to expand dialogue participants' understanding of the issue being discussed, and to engage participants at an emotional level.

For example, Sergej van Middendorp uses jazz music in his dialogue work as a metaphor for the improvisational qualities of dialogue, as well as the dynamic that emerges when dialogue facilitators and participants are working together effectively and collaboratively:

In the process of dialogue... this quality of being together shifts towards what jazz musicians would call a groove... I discovered metaphor, and specifically jazz as an improvisation, as a metaphor for engaging with participants... Before that, I was pretty abstract and unidirectional in my communication, and often not understanding why people weren't as engaged with the matter as I was myself. And then using metaphor, understanding others' metaphors and perspectives, and trying to attune to what they might find meaningful was another step. And then, finding improvisation as a metaphor. And... bringing together a jazz band [to play in the dialogue session] to experience metaphor. So, shifting from a pure rational or cognitive frame, I would say, to a more embodied and experiential frame, muscle change. (Sergej van Middendorp)

Sergej described a time when he included a live jazz band in a dialogue session he was leading, which allowed participants to experience a concept in a way that bypassed their verbal

reasoning. The organization he was working with was experiencing intense turmoil, because it was being broken up as part of an acquisition process, and the employees were experiencing that process as a crisis. He described how he used jazz music to engage their understanding of the situation at a deeper, more emotional level:

...and [the band starts] playing a song. I think it was a blues, where very slowly the bass player and the drummer start drifting away from each other in their timing. The bass player playing his notes just before the beat—increasingly before the beat—and the drummer playing just after the beat, and increasingly after the beat, microseconds, in each bar. But very quickly, the music becomes very difficult to listen to, and almost breaks, musically, so that it isn't music anymore. The tension is increasing [as] they're drifting apart from each other.

I was observing the participants, and they had a visceral reaction to this, holding their hands on their stomachs, responding physically to the music. And then at some point, when it was almost unbearable, [the band resolves] this tension and wraps up the song in a more harmonious way. And you could literally see everybody relieved now, the tension flowing away, of being able to breathe again.

When that was done, there was this strange atmosphere in the room. I asked, okay, does this come close to what you meant? And almost everyone responded, 'yes, this is exactly what it feels like to be working here. This is it. This is what it feels like to be here today in this situation, in our company.' (Sergej van Middendorp)

Bob Stains created a metaphor he offers to dialogue participants when they encounter someone they are having a difficult time relating to or connecting with. He suggests envisioning

the other person's life as a river, and stepping into that river to try to understand the broader context of that person's perspective:

I came up with this metaphor for people to carry when they encounter somebody really different from them. Let's say I'm talking with a Trump supporter, who is very different from me. I want to imagine that I'm in a river with them, I'm in their river. And I want to inquire what their river is like. What's the water like there? What are the currents? What is the place that they're standing in? What's the energy of that? And what are the things that are important to them? Their values? Et cetera. The kind of stuff that we would normally ask, but it's a bit of a different take on it. And then looking upstream, where did that river get started? What are the tributaries? What are the sources? Who are the influential people? What are the influential experiences? How did those values get formed and transformed over the years? How relationships figured into that... And then downstream? Where do they hope this river will lead? In what ways do they believe that this river will give life downstream? (Bob Stains)

Anita Perez Ferguson told a story of working with a group of community members in a discussion about their local school. She used the metaphor of a puzzle to help community members visualize the crucial role they all played in the successful operation of the school—how every puzzle piece came together to make a whole picture. The session organizers created a puzzle out of a wall-sized photograph, and then put a piece of the puzzle in each participants' registration packet. The participants reconstructed the puzzle during the dialogue session:

We built the puzzle as we spoke... 'oh, look, we're missing something. Who's got this piece that will fit?' And people pull [their puzzle piece] out, and they go, 'what is this

that I have? Oh, I have it, that will fit.’ So that's how we began to engage people... The whole idea was about working together in the community and how that school needed everybody working to make a complete picture. Nobody knew what the picture was gonna end up being, but it was [a picture of] their children [on the playground]. What parent doesn't remember the picture of their kids in front of this group? It physically engaged the group. Sure, you've got your conversation. Sure, you've got your talking. Sure, you've got your shared points of information, or high hopes and reflections, and whatnot. But when somebody has to go forward in front of the group with their piece, and see how they fit in, and that nothing can proceed until their piece is there, it reinforces that. It had a very, very high impact.

I'm all for visual impact whenever it's possible, because I think that in our western tradition, we are so verbal—over the top verbal. Almost every other group [not a part of Western culture] is visual and tactile. And unless we really engage our discussions with visual, tactile components, we won't have totally engaged that audience.

**Emergent design: responding flexibly to what is needed in the moment.**

Another aspect of dialogue work that a number of interviewees brought up is the concept of emergent design. This is the ability of the dialogue facilitator to recognize what is needed in the moment if the dialogue process is not proceeding as smoothly as the facilitator would like, and being flexible enough to change the process in a way that will resonate more strongly with participants.

Sergej van Middendorp pointed out that the context of dialogue is often complex, and so a facilitator needs to be “explorative,” “emergent,” and “improvisational” in their approach. In the situation described above, when Sergej used disharmonious jazz music to illustrate a concept to participants, Sergej was responding to strong resistance among some of the participants to the dialogue technique he had planned to use in that moment. Sergej had invited participants to go into breakout groups, but participants refused to follow along, because they felt that would be like “playing the nice organization,” when most participants were feeling overwhelmed by the crisis they were in. Sergej had to improvise a change in the process on the spot:

It's not my full-time occupation to do these types of workshops with organizations. I'm not an OD [organizational development] type of person. So, I was challenged in that moment. But I responded and said, ‘well, in the initial design [we planned] with your team, we thought that was a good idea.’

[And she said] ‘well, it's a very bad idea.’

So, I think the next thing I said was, ‘okay, who else thinks this is not a good idea?’

So many hands went up, like, ‘Yeah, this is a bad idea.’

‘Okay. Are there any of you who think it's a good idea to break up in small groups?’

Some hands went up, but hardly anyone dared, I think, to put up their hands.

And then I was lucky enough, I think, to say, ‘okay, so what would you like to do?’

She thought for a while, and then she said, ‘why don't we continue with what you were doing, playing music, giving examples, going back and forth, exploring what the band has to offer? That was nice. We'd rather sit here and do this. And oh, can you guys play a bank that has been broken into pieces?’

I heard this, and I said, ‘yeah, we can.’

Then I turned around and looked at the band, who were looking at me, like, ‘what can we do?’ And then, one minute of interaction between us, like, ‘okay, we could try this, we could try this.’ And then the bass player said, ‘okay, I have an idea.’

...that idea was to play a blues song disharmoniously, as described in Sergej’s previous example.

According to Coordinated Management of Meaning theory, Sergej’s situation was a “bifurcation point,” that is, “a critical point in a conversation where what one says next will affect the unfolding pattern of interaction and potentially take it in a different direction” (Griffin et al., 2015, p. 74). Jan Elliott discussed how being prepared for these bifurcation points, and being able to respond in the moment in a “grounded,” calm way, is critical to the success of dialogue work, particularly when working in contexts where there is conflict among stakeholders:

You need to be able to work with what emerges in the actual dialogue. You structure these things in a way that invites the kind of conversation that you think needs to be had. And then there will always be surprises. (Jan Elliott)

Jan went on to describe how one stakeholder stood up in the middle of a session and accused another stakeholder of corruption:

This, in CMM language, is a bifurcation point, where everyone in the room kind of holds their breath... And they wait to see how those leading the dialogue process are going to react. Being really grounded and having practice [handling] confrontation and conflict, and how to work with people in firm yet compassionate ways. Because you have to be

careful not to shut someone down. Hence, knowing yourself is so important. Because this is ultimately about inviting voices in a way that shifts and transforms something. This is not about techniques. There are certainly models to follow and practices and so on. But, this is ultimately about the spirit of the work that you're doing. (Jan Elliott)

Sergej van Middendorp brought up the connection to this aspect of CMM when he continued his story about the banking group's organizational crisis. He provided a detailed explanation of how he worked through that particular bifurcation point, linking his actions to the principles of improvisational theatre:

[This is] what CMM would say [is] the critical moment, where someone says, 'no, wait a minute, I don't want to do this.' Right. So that's unplanned, but it's what happens. And there is emotion involved, there is an urgency. Something in that moment presents itself as something that cannot be ignored, it must be dealt with... I think for me, in that moment, I could frame my response as open in terms of truly being curious what was happening there.

It was very easy, of course, initially, to feel 'whoa, this is not what's supposed to happen,' but really wanting to know. So, exploring that moment further or slowing down the time, saying, 'okay, so what is happening here?' And not seeing it as a one-on-one conversation, but also broaden[ing] the conversation to the group, saying, 'okay, who else thinks this as well?' But, also exploring further, 'who thinks differently?'

And then not trying to solve a problem for someone. But saying... 'okay, if you don't want this, [then] what?' Shifting from what you don't want to what you would want, right? And, giving a turn to the other... letting others direct, at least for a moment. Then,

the band's like, 'yeah, we can do that.' I didn't know if we could do that. But I know one rule of improvisation: if I say we do that, the band will say we will do that. I also trusted the band, based on our earlier work, that they could do this.

This is a principle of improvisation, "provocative competence," knowing where the other can go and actually pushing them there [this is a concept developed by Frank Barrett].

And even though that may be outside the comfort zone, trusting that they will play along.

And then engaging with the band to think about how we could solve this. If you take one step back from that and generalize it, it would be trusting that the competence is in the group to solve whatever issue comes from the critical moment, or whatever question arises from this critical moment. (Sergej van Middendorp)

Maggie Herzig talked about how in situations where she was leading a two-day dialogue process, she would typically build in space for emergent design on the second day, to allow her and her fellow facilitators to take the dialogue in a direction that would work best for participants:

I think one of the most powerful things we did for participants owning the process was that we built in a lot of time, especially the second day, for what we call emergent design. That is, we didn't fill up the agenda. We built in opportunities for the group itself to say what they most wanted to do, because after the first day, who knows what people are going to be interested in? You don't want to say, 'okay, well, last month, we decided what you're going to be interested in.' (Maggie Herzig)

For Nancy White, good dialogue work hinges on asking well-crafted questions that will resonate with participants, which cannot always be determined in advance. She talked about the

need to be flexible enough to shift gears during a dialogue process, to undertake an iterative process to identify the questions that will spark the discussion needed in the moment:

The questions we use—the prompts we use to engage people in conversational exchanges—have to be well crafted. Or, we have to have tolerance to iterate towards the well-crafted question. For example, sometimes we don't know what questions we're supposed to ask. So, we start somewhere. And we say 'this isn't a question, but we need to ask it in order to understand how we get to the question.' So, we build in an expectation and build a muscle for tolerance, for ambiguity. Because conversational to me is: you're either going to approximate towards shared understanding, or you're going to approximate towards, 'oh, we don't understand each other, or we see things differently.' And both of those are acceptable. (Nancy White)

David Stevenson talked about the importance of inviting dialogue participants to adopt a mindset of play, as a way of fostering cognitive flexibility when discussing an issue. He referenced Stuart Brown, a researcher and psychiatrist who has a popular Ted Talk on the connection between play and human wellness (TED, n.d.):

Stuart Brown has this great line I always like to say: 'the opposite of play isn't work, the opposite of play is depression.' We're designed to play as kids, but as adults, not as much. To play is to be nimble, testing environments, and trying different things. And in a solution-free, exploration space. One of the things that's really important, I think, for good dialogue processes, is to be solution-free as best as you can. Don't [aim to] come up with a good solution, especially not right away... Playing allows us to move with some level of freedom and license in socially complex environments, trying different things,

playing with them, laughing, not taking it too seriously, not trying to drive things too much in a certain direction... It's a really good way to explore boundaries. And then you build relationships and trust in bonds, right?

Moving into a place where we get to know each other and ourselves in that space creates a lot of safety, and more openness, and cognitive flexibility, and resiliency. Friendships and good relationships have way more accountability and way more resiliency...

Accountability is an internal sense of our collective goodness and efforts to move forward. (David Stevenson)

Anita Perez Ferguson often uses a technique where she aims to identify and use cultural touchpoints that will engage dialogue participants at an emotional level, so that the discussion topic resonates with them more deeply. She told a story about leading a dialogue session with members of a school district, and the topic reminded her of a traditional Spanish ballad she used to sing with her father. She then invited participants to sing it, which forged a much more meaningful connection between them and the issues being discussed:

There is a Spanish ballad that's about life being worthless, essentially, a real downer, but it's a very popular cultural ballad. My dad and I used to sing the song... I asked at one point, does anybody know this song? Because, as we're talking about these [issues], I'm thinking about this song my dad used to sing. We're talking about self-esteem, we're talking all sorts of issues. Well, the song is totally contrary to that. And so, as I start to hum it, sure enough, some father in the group, or some teacher's aide stands up, and they're singing it. And I said, can you come up here with me. Before you know it, I've got

a half dozen people who haven't said a peep during the whole meeting—but have given their life to this school, working for it—they're up there singing at the top of their lungs, this song about low self-esteem.

Then I say, let me explain this to everybody in the room, because the teachers and the principal in the school district had no idea what's going on. I'm linking popular cultural touch points to the topic that we're talking about, about increasing the teamwork and self-esteem of the group. So, when they leave, they're going to remember the song, they're going to remember the fact that we have a different type of message that we're working with... That's one way I tried to have them carry the message out of the room, to tie it to something. I know that song gets repeated and repeated and repeated, but no one in that room is ever going to sing it again without thinking about its implications, and what the goals are of this school. (Anita Perez Ferguson)

### **Building the Foundation for Success in Advance**

Another theme that emerged in the interviews was the importance of dedicating ample time and resources to planning a dialogue process. All interviewees discussed the necessity of preparing dialogue participants for the discussion before it begins, as a solid foundation for a successful dialogue process. Important components of the planning stage include building relationships with participants—particularly the group leaders with whom facilitators are working—as well as taking the time to understand the culture and context in which the dialogue process is happening.

For Maggie Herzig, the transformative potential of dialogue is strengthened by the planning work that happens in advance of the process:

We spend a lot of time before people are together. So, the transformative elements, in a way, might even be before the people are together. What the pre-work does is enhance participant ownership of the quality of the conversation. (Maggie Herzig)

Bob Stains echoed this sentiment when telling a story about the effort he took to prepare participants for a dialogue session to discuss policies around a particularly divisive topic: the use of restraints and seclusion on patients in mental health facilities in Massachusetts. He worked with each stakeholder group separately for seven months to prepare them for a four-hour dialogue session:

...and it was totally transformative, powerful, because people were so prepared for the engagement, they went on to work together. They wrote policy which reduced the use of seclusion and restraint in Massachusetts by 85 per cent. They were so excited about dialogue in their work that they advocated to have dialogue in all mental hospitals... So, powerful stuff, very powerful stuff. And in that case, I think it was the preparatory work that was the key to making that happen.

Bob went on to describe why this preparatory step is so helpful for the dialogue process:

There are many instances where groups are not ready to meet together. There needs to be advance work done with them separately. And in that case, finding out, ‘what is it that triggers you? What are the patterns you see? What triggers you as a group? People on the other side—how do you contribute to that, inadvertently, maybe keeping that going? How could you change the way you speak and respond, so that pattern might be interrupted?’

Doing that on both sides, and then doing role plays with people, role play the negative responses that they get from the other, and just workshop with them how they might respond differently when people come into a room. Sometimes it has to go on for quite some time before the time is right for people to come together. (Bob Stains)

**A key priority: building relationships in advance.**

All participants spoke of the need to build relationships with dialogue participants in advance, to cultivate a sense of trust and ownership of the dialogue process among participants. For Anita Perez Ferguson it is a key part of ensuring all participants feel comfortable contributing to the conversation, so that all voices can be heard:

What I have found over the years, is that, number one, take early individual time with the participants to lower the thresholds of their hesitancy to speak in a new group, to create more trust with the discussion, with the moderator, to hear their tone when they're talking one-on-one. To me, that has made a huge difference in being able to move a group forward and to hear voices that would otherwise either be very, very quiet, or very limited on the input that they gave... If there are one or two or three conveners in that room, and the participants have had a little quiet one-on-one time with them, it really opens up the discussion tremendously. It's setting the table for a much better conversation. (Anita Perez Ferguson)

Maggie Herzig described how she navigates relationships with stakeholders who are approaching an issue from different sides. Instead of maintaining a position of neutrality, which she views as being too detached, she wants stakeholders to know that she cares about

understanding all perspectives being brought to the table. She noted this approach puts the dialogue facilitator in a position of accountability to all stakeholders:

Being able to communicate trust and care to people. So, in pre-meeting calls, we're not just gathering information, we're developing a relationship that shows we really care what people's experience is going to be like. Building that trust forces us to be as trustworthy a person as we can be. And to listen very carefully. Be empathetic without seeming to side. That's one of the hardest things.

A way to communicate that interest in multiple perspectives is just directly asking, 'Can you think of somebody I should talk to who might describe that differently? I really want the full picture.' We call that multi-directed partiality. It comes from family therapy.

Multi-directional partiality is: I'm going to care about you, I'm going to care about you, and I'm going to care about you [*note: Maggie gestured as if pointing to different people*]. It's all going to be part of my experience of this group, that I have cared about and learned from every one of you. So that I can serve you as a group. (Maggie Herzig)

### **Understanding the culture and context in which the dialogue is happening.**

Building relationships with dialogue participants in advance of dialogue sessions also helps facilitators develop a more comprehensive understanding of the culture and context in which they are working—another key component of good dialogue work. It helps ensure the dialogue approach is culturally relatable to participants, that the right questions are being asked, and that the facilitator's dialogue approach provides an opportunity for all participants to contribute to the discussion.

It's so much about the environment and context that you are stepping into. And the system always requires a lot of attention. And the context requires a lot of attention. So, how you actually discover that context and the relationships and the people in it, to the greatest extent possible, given time constraints and all sorts of things is a really important piece.

Every organization, every community, every province, state, country has a culture in and of itself--all of which influence. Another piece is cultivating trust and commitment on the part of those who need to work with the dialogue. And in some cases, that's everybody in the dialogue. And it often is sponsored by or paid for by someone else. So, it's finding doorways into building the trust and getting the commitment to how you are going to be in both the dialog and in the consequences, or the results of it. (Jan Elliott)

For Anita Perez Ferguson, using a dialogue approach that is culturally relatable is essential to her work, as illustrated by the example above when she invited dialogue participants to sing a popular Spanish ballad. Understanding the culture and context in which she is working has always been a priority:

I used to do a lot of public presentations, keynotes and whatnot. I'm not embarrassed to say that I would hang out in the ladies' room a lot, because I wanted to listen to what people were already talking about among themselves. What are the hot conversations? What's the level of exchange that's going on, to hear the tone of what these participants would talk about if the conveners were not there. Now, that's when I do public presentations.

In these dialogues, I will just hang out at the coffee [table]. A lot of times, in the settings that I'm in, there's a lot of outdoor ambience as well as indoor. There's a lot of standing in the garden chatting—about the children who have come with the participants, going off to a children's activity—'how old is so and so, and what are they doing?' A lot of neighborly chat is probably a good way to describe it. I want to not only engage at that level, but also here, and see the participants engaging with one another, and see how they are engaging. Because, unless I see them warm and engaging like that inside, in our discussion, I know we're not really talking. (Anita Perez Ferguson)

Bob Stains uses Appreciative Inquiry with dialogue participants to help him understand the culture and context of the groups he works with. Not only does this help him gain a broader and deeper understanding of a group or organization's situation, it also helps encourage participants towards a more constructive attitude:

Appreciative Inquiry has been really important for us, particularly in terms of how we structure a preparatory interview. I'm interested in someone's understanding of their situation in their context. But I'm also interested in what has been storied in the conflict. This is also bringing in Narrative Therapy. What is usually storied—the story created in the story told—is the conflict narrative: the evil other, and the virtuous self. Or, our organization is awful, yada, yada.

But there's a story—or multiple stories—that have been pushed off to the side, and they're all dusty. About resource, about capacity, about engagement, about times when people were able to engage about conflicts, which they were able to work through.

Attention gives life. The more I ask about that—I'm inviting people to make more space in their brain for that part of the story, or that separate story, as well as the conflict narrative, which they're just recycling over and over again.

And then, when I bring back to them what I've learned, I can lift that up and say: you know, there's also this other series of stories about you and your organization that are really interesting. You have some wisdom here for moving forward, which you can draw on in your own group. To help shine a light on what's maybe fallen into shadow. (Bob Stains)

Some interviewees touched on the idea that dialogue models centred in western-based culture may not align with other cultural groups they are working with.

I [have become] very aware—particularly in the last 12 to 18 months, between the resurgence of Black Lives Matters and the pandemic—of how exclusionary I've used processes, because they came from my white dominant culture as an American. I know that this is an issue in different ways in Canada. But the processes work for me for a reason, because they're grounded in my white culture, or they're grounded in my female culture, they're grounded in my 'I like to do things fast' culture. And that takes voice away from people.

So that kind of turns your whole methodological approach, your whole design approach, on its head, when you think about: how do I view design of dialogic methods, but with a real equity lens? And how do I vary that, and think about different ways that's expressed, based on who is at the table? (Nancy White)

Nancy described a situation when she was working with multiple stakeholders on a floodplains restoration project in the United States, including a Native American tribe whose approach was to deal with government leaders directly, in a position of sovereignty, rather than sitting at a table with all stakeholders to hammer out a project plan. The Native American tribal leaders expected to hear the input from others, discuss the input internally, and then respond with their own input directly to the government leaders.

So, all this mythology we have about coalitions and networks, and everybody does a little part, and we get a greater whole—all these metaphors do not hold for a tribal relationship, because there's absolutely no basis [for them] to believe and trust it. In fact, there's evidence against. So, you have to rethink your process entirely, right? I can't just say, 'oh, you know, let's sit down and we'll do a World Cafe.'

[Their response would be], 'well, that's fine. I'm not going to say anything. No, I'm not going to make any decisions. I'm not going to put any positions on the table. And I might go back and see all those white people talking about all their ideas again, because that's all you do, right? And then you tell us what you want.'

So, it really does upset the applecart of all these processes that I think a lot of us from the dialogic school have valued, and realize they're not equitable in all situations. (Nancy White)

Maggie Herzig noted that our western-based cultural ideas around efficiency can work against efforts to ensure a dialogue process is given the time and resources for her team to do all the planning work that is necessary to build a solid foundation for good dialogue work:

Efficiency is very culturally valued. These time-consuming calls to everybody, and all the careful planning, it's tough funding the work. If you're doing customized work in high stakes situations, it's not cheap, if you want people who are professionals, not just diving in green. That's one thing that was hard about being in this work.

And, I think the way it's been handled over time, is that more and more people come up with replicable models, right? Okay, we've got this model, these people, you know, need something like this--we use this model. And that can be fine. You know, here's this workshop thing that we do, does this match your needs? And you can still be attentive to... is this a good match? And not just parachute in, not know[ing] anything about what the heck you're getting into.

But for high-stakes situations that are complicated, you need all this—you need all those pre-meeting phone calls and carefully put-together planning groups. And one of the things we would say at Public Conversations Project is, 'first, do no harm,' like the doctors. You can do a crummy job. And then next time somebody comes along and says, 'do you want to do some dialog thing?' They'll say, 'no, that didn't work. We didn't like it.' So, you can ask actually do harm if you do a really bad job. (Maggie Herzig)

In fact, most interviewees noted that a critical part of planning a dialogue process is working with group leaders to ensure they are fully committed to the process. This is a priority, both to ensure the group leaders support the dialogue approach, but also because other participants will take cues from their leaders. If their leaders are not fully engaged, it's likely other participants will follow their lead and not fully engage in the process, either.

And as you know, from your sociological studies, there's always a leader of the pack on each side, right? Somebody everybody will follow. (Anita Perez Ferguson)

David Stevenson told a story about working with a group of First Nations communities to collaboratively create an Indigenous child welfare system. In one session that involved about 40 participants—ten of whom were community Elders—the organizers had planned to start with a sharing circle. However, organizers were concerned that with so many participants, the sharing circle would take up the entire session. David's challenge was to provide a space that welcomed the full participation of Elders to tell their stories, while keeping the sharing circle within a manageable time frame. David approached one of the Elders, Alberta, to explain the situation and ask for her help:

And I just said, here's our situation, we're trying to get through this... and then asked her to help facilitate it with me. I asked her to go first so she could set an example of what it would look like. [I said] our goal here is inviting people to listen with intent and speak a few words about who you are, where you come from, and why you're called to be in this group today. And Alberta spoke very directly to all the Elders and said, 'everybody, you've got two or three minutes. It's not a dissertation here.'... So, it was a way to use the power in the system. (David Stevenson)

When I asked Nancy White to describe a time when a dialogue process did not go as planned, she responded:

They're all in the context of larger, bureaucratic organizations, where the leaders want to have an engaging process where everybody's involved. And then, they really don't want to listen to what was said. Or, they want to interrupt it, or they want to challenge it. Most

of the failures have come from when the leaders said they really wanted this, and then they pull back and change course, midway through.

Jan Elliott told a similar story of a time that a dialogue process did not go as planned, because of a lack of commitment and support from the leaders involved. Jan described how in retrospect, she believes that setting up an accountability structure for the leaders could have helped keep the dialogue process on track:

[In] one recent example... I didn't do enough of all the upfront work required to get the understanding and commitment of leadership that was required. And in this kind of work, if you're working on cultural community, or transformation of any kind, commitment of leadership and an alignment of purpose is really, really important. And, to the extent possible, understanding what it's likely to take to get there.

Sometimes that understanding can only come through the work itself, because people think that they understand, and they don't, necessarily, because they've never been through it before.

Not doing enough work upfront with a particular leader—that affected the process, the transformation. It ultimately did not have the kind of impact it could have had. And work was done at levels and pockets within that organization that produced some reasonable results. But the leader probably did more damage than not, because he was unable or unwilling to actually live into a model that he wanted.

We look to our leaders for what is he or she really going to do. He talks or she talks a very good story. But look what he didn't do here. Look what she has been avoiding here.

And if you are truly interested in culture change and transformation, community change, you've [the leader] got to go through some tough stuff yourself.

I asked Jan what she would do if she could return to the situation and do things differently. She responded:

I would have spent more time up front and would have built in a different kind of accountability structure. I didn't have complete control over all this. We never do. And that accountability structure would have included a commitment to regular check ins. Specifically, I would make sure there was a clear alignment and commitment to including the time required.

And it turns out this leader was fearful of making hard decisions. I didn't see that at first. Asking the many leaders who reported to him—asking his leaders to actually step up and do some tough things was not part of his repertoire. And to some extent, that was cultural.

So that comes back to the challenge of building trust in both the organizational culture, and the broader culture that you are not a part of [as the facilitator]. Yeah, the upfront work is so important.

### **Cultivating a Sense of Presence**

A theme that was prevalent for me in the interview data—but perhaps less explicitly than the other components the interviewees discussed—is the role of “presence” in creating conditions for good dialogue work. This includes cultivating a sense of presence among dialogue participants, so they are fully present, engaged and open to the process. It also includes

facilitators maintaining a sense of presence as they lead the dialogue, so they stay grounded, calm, and open to what emerges, without letting their egos interfere in the process or its outcomes. Cultivating a sense of presence is vital to creating a space for participants to work together collaboratively on an issue and allowing new solutions to emerge.

### **Cultivating a sense of presence among participants.**

Many interviewees talked about aspects of their dialogue work that were centred on cultivating a sense of presence among participants, although they might talk about it in different ways. For example, Bob Stains and Maggie Herzig both talked about building in opportunities for reflection in their dialogue process, to reduce the impulse for reactivity among participants, and to bring their attention to the present moment. Maggie talked about “offering times for reflection, rather than just speaking without having time to think,” as a core aspect of her dialogue approach. Bob explained this idea further, saying:

One of the dynamics of repeated conflictual conversations is speed and reactivity. So, we deliberately incorporate reflection before, during and after a dialogue as a core component of the work. Something as simple as what I call the ‘think, write, speak’ sequence. I’m going to read a question, I’m going to ask you to think about how you’d like to respond, write down some key words. And then we’ll go around the circle and everybody will have a turn to speak. That built in reflection time really shifts how people come to have an open conversation about a really difficult issue. (Bob Stains)

For Kazuma Matoba, it is about cultivating a practice of deep listening among participants, in which they become aware of the interconnectedness that exists among all of us.

He called this practice “witnessing,” and talked about how he uses this practice to help transform his students’ views about refugees coming into Europe:

Witnessing is much more than listening. Witnessing is a very active action, using our body—witnessing is much more than empathy... in empathy, you can still distinguish between I and you, as a subject and object. With empathy, you have observer and observed. The witness is much more spiritual. When you are witness, and when you witness somebody as witnessed, then there is not any more witness and witnessed, so you can be one with the witness. And this is a much more deeper meaning of listening, in the sense of David Bohm, I think. How can I realize this? Or how can I develop this witnessing competence in the dialogue process, especially in the university for the students, then how we can apply this witnessing competence in the dialogue process. For social transformation, for example.

I'm now researching, and [conducting] some seminars about refugees, because Europe is now faced with a refugee problem. And how we can not only listen to the refugee voices, but how can we witness refugee people. And then I invite my students to the dialogue process by witnessing each other. And by witnessing, we feel—see, maybe, on the social media—and this is what I'm now doing—developing a kind of new concept of dialogue for social transformation. (Kazuma Matoba)

This practice of witnessing is not unlike Bob Stains’ concept of bringing dialogue participants’ awareness to the “Spirit” that exists between all people, and the transformational impact of that practice. Bob further described this practice later in our interview, in terms that were more explicitly religious:

The metaphor that I use when I teach in the religious world and Judeo-Christian world is in the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Ezekiel [Ezekiel 36:26]. God says to the to the Israelites, “I will take from you your hearts of stone, and give you hearts of flesh.”

I think that a lot of what we do in dialogue work, is we bring people together who have hardened their hearts for protective reasons toward each other. And we create an environment where that stony exterior can be eroded and the flesh can show through, and they can touch each other at a heart level.

### **Maintaining a sense of presence as a facilitator.**

Nearly all of the interviewees discussed how important it is for facilitators to maintain a sense of presence when leading a dialogue session, although again, they may view it and express that idea in different ways.

For example, David Stevenson talked about this concept in the context of his Art of Hosting Meaningful Conversations dialogue practice. One of the principles of that practice is “Being Present - Host Yourself,” i.e. being present while leading a conversation, and “undistracted, prepared, clear about the need, and what your personal contribution can be” (Harvest Moon Consultants Ltd., n.d., p. 18). In the Art of Hosting practice, “presence means making space to devote a dedicated time to working with others” (Harvest Moon Consultants Ltd., n.d., p. 18).

David described how he approaches his dialogue work with openness and a firm sense of purpose, while staying aware of his own beliefs and assumptions, as part of his self-hosting practice:

One of the things I try to do in my dialogue approach is to challenge myself to be really explicit about why I'm there and what I want, getting really clear on my personal purpose, and holding it out in the light, because often it's like, well, the real reason I'm here is because I want to get people on board with what I'm doing. And then I'm essentially stuck with a set of tools that are basically some version of: I'm going to try and drag people along some way. I'm not in a dialogue with them so much as a tug of war. One way or the other.

And so opening up mutual exploration, and being as open as I can about things, and even to say, 'hey, look, I really believe in this issue, and I believe that it's important—like, I have a goal of trying to get you on board for how I see things... Then, we can start from there... Part of my self-hosting practice is to be both, you know, questioning my beliefs and my assumptions and my goals, as well as being explicit about them (David Stevenson).

As noted earlier in this chapter, Jan Elliott believes it is crucial for facilitators to be “really grounded” and to be able to handle confrontation and conflict in “firm yet compassionate ways.” She believes it is very important for facilitators to know themselves, because dialogue work is about “inviting voices in a way that shifts and transforms something,” and so facilitators need to be grounded “in the spirit of the work that [they’re] doing.”

In fact, Sergej van Middendorp discussed how conflict is an inherent part of dialogue work, and suggested that is an aspect of dialogue facilitators should embrace:

In our projects, we're trying to change things. And I read just recently from someone that change without conflict is not change. So, there is conflict inherent in change... So, if

only we would also say, ‘okay, we’ll get a conflict, because that’s meant to be.’ And we can appreciate that. And then we try to do it in the most beautiful way possible, that will change something.

Ideally, I would like all dialogues to be in a groove and achieve a beautiful outcome. But that’s just not realistic. And the reality of change is probably that conflict is inherent and that this tension—but, then, one way to better appreciate that, and enjoy that, might be to actually understand that and share that also as a meta practice.

Bob Stains talked extensively about the challenges he has faced in dealing with difficult people over his career as a dialogue practitioner. He believes that it is crucial for facilitators to be “equally loving to all the people in the room,” even those with whom you violently disagree. He explained:

Most of the time—I would say, 95 per cent of the time, I do very well. Parker Palmer, the wonderful author, says, ‘When the going gets rough turn to wonder.’ And that’s what I tell facilitators to do when they feel on the spot and have their ears pinned back, is to sincerely inquire what’s happening for that person. And to listen, and to provide a witness to where they’re coming from.

Most of the time, I think I do really well with that. But there are times when I get triggered, and I get defensive. I want to defend myself and I feel that I am not being seen. And you know, it’s not their job to see me, right? I’m getting paid to do a job. But there are times when I feel that I’m not seen, where I do get triggered. And I feel defensive, and then I’ll try to explain myself, or I’ll try to explain something. And it’s always a mistake, almost always a mistake. Because then it becomes about me.

Everything you do, as a facilitator, will invite people to pay attention to one another, or to you. And you want to be doing the former, not the latter. As soon as I get defensive, and I start to explain, the attention comes to me, then it becomes about me, and then I've blown it.

Sergej van Middendorp described how his personal meditation and mindfulness practice contributes to his ability to bring a sense of presence to his dialogue work:

In my experience, and with some of the people I've had the joy of working with, I see [mindfulness] as core to the way they work with dialogue. They have awareness-based practices, meditation-based practices, they would use sometimes half an hour, or an hour before starting a conference day, for example. And since 2007, I've had a personal meditation practice, which has varied over many different types of meditation.

And also, working with my own emotions. How am I present to my own emotions, as they arise in interaction, and to what extent are they helpful for what we are trying to achieve, as they may come into that, and as I am human? And to what extent may they inhibit what we are trying to achieve? And can I work with them before they do their inhibiting work?

Also, being mindful of self-empathy. You can't always prevent this, right? We are emotional beings, we have histories. Our micro-traumas get triggered by others, even though they don't mean to, or can't help it. I think understanding that and also practicing that certainly helps me be my best. If a good dialogue happens, this is part of it for me.

## **Conclusion**

My findings suggest that there is a higher purpose for dialogue that is much different than the assumptions I brought to my research. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the aim of my research was to understand how dialogue could be used as a communication tool to shift the perspectives of dialogue participants towards a certain outcome. However, the input I received from the nine dialogue experts I interviewed painted a much different picture for me of what true dialogue is meant to achieve. The transformative power of dialogue lies not in its potential for changing participants' views on a specific issue, but rather in transforming how people with different, and even conflicting views, can view each other. By creating a space where people can relate to each other and create a personal connection, we can provide the best possible conditions for people to work collaboratively to address or resolve an issue.

In Chapter 5, I explore these ideas further, and discuss four aspects of dialogue work that can enhance its transformational qualities. These four aspects represent areas facilitators can focus on to enhance their capacity for leading dialogue that leads to collaborative action. I also define the role of dialogue in working with stakeholders to address environmental challenges.

## Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions

### My Thesis Journey

When I embarked on this journey to write my Masters' thesis, I set out to demonstrate how dialogue could be used as a tool to shift perspectives in a way that would help environmental organizations bring people over to their way of thinking. After my initial literature review, I was convinced I could build a compelling case for using small group dialogue to shift people's values to be more pro-environmental.

And then I started my field research. By the time I had concluded all nine interviews, my perspective on my research goals had shifted dramatically. I no longer view stakeholder engagement work the way I once did—an approach that I now view as transactional. By approaching dialogue with the assumption that my own perspective is the correct one, and furthermore, with the intention of convincing other participants of that perspective, I am taking an authoritative position on an issue that precludes the consideration of any other perspectives.

Mikhail Bakhtin articulated this difference as the contrast between monologic and dialogic discourse. Monologic discourse “privileges a single perspective, reduces complexity, and fails to recognize or openly suppresses” (Hamilton & Wills-Toker, 2006, p. 759) others' perspectives. In contrast, “dialogic discourse is one in which multiple perspectives interact as participants recognize and respond to the viewpoints of others and develop an understanding of how they relate” (Hamilton & Wills-Toker, 2006, p. 759). One could argue that when someone enters a conversation with the aim of persuading the other of your own perspective, that conversation is monologic rather than dialogic in nature.

Bakhtin suggested that dialogic discourse invites participants to generate new meaning, rather than impose meaning, through the “intermingling and struggle among discourses” (Hamilton & Wills-Toker, 2006, p. 761). Bakhtin referred to this type of discourse as “internally persuasive” (Hamilton & Wills-Toker, 2006, p. 761), where participants are in constant interaction with others and themselves—interactions that invite response, provide opportunities for agreement or disagreement, and invite reflection and questioning (Hamilton & Wills-Toker, 2006).

In this respect, my perspective on the purpose of dialogue has evolved, based on more recent literature I have read, and more importantly, my conversations with my interview participants. In the following sections I discuss my research findings in the context of my literature review, and based on those findings, define the role of dialogue in working with stakeholders to address environmental challenges. I also present four areas that facilitators can focus on to enhance their capacity for leading dialogue processes that will help spark creative energy and collaborative action.

### **The Role of Dialogue for Addressing Environmental Issues**

My original research question asked how small group dialogue can be used as a communication tool to increase individuals’ awareness of and engagement in environmental issues, and to help shift perspectives. While the wording of my research question still applies, the spirit in which I answer that question below has evolved significantly since the start of my study. Ironically, it is I who has experienced a broadening of awareness and a shift in perspectives on

the role of dialogue in addressing the environmental challenges of our day—particularly wicked problems such as climate change.

Nearly 50 years ago, Horst W.J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber (1973) coined the term *wicked problem* to define public policy planning issues that are rooted in societal challenges, and which have no single solution. They are caused by innumerable factors, are ill-defined, and have no right or wrong answers. Assessments of solutions differ widely, according to an individual's or a group's interests, values and ideological predilections. They noted that an “analyst's ‘world view’ is the strongest determining factor in explaining a discrepancy and, therefore, in resolving a wicked problem” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 166). Even back then, they asked:

In a setting in which a plurality of publics is politically pursuing a diversity of goals, how is the larger society to deal with its wicked problems in a planful way? How are goals to be set, when the valiative biases are so diverse? (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 168)

Conventional problem-solving processes are insufficient for tackling wicked problems, and may, in fact, make problems worse by generating results that generate undesirable consequences (Camillus, 2008). I would argue that the proposed use of solar radiation management techniques to manipulate our global climate by reflecting solar radiation away from our atmosphere could be one example of this.

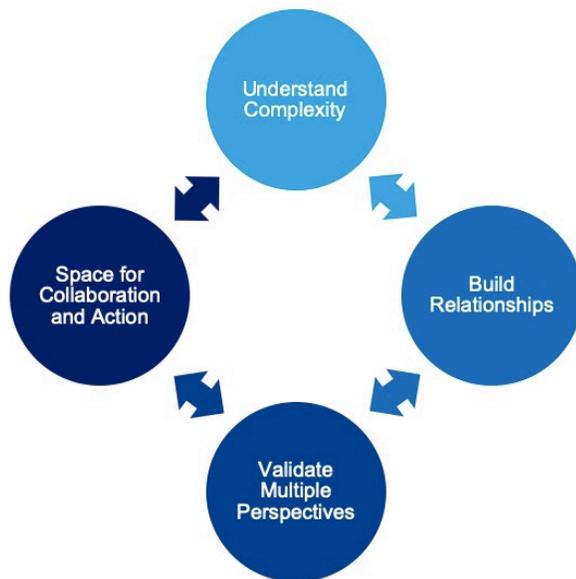
As discussed in my literature review, addressing problems within a complex system—the Cynefin framework domain in which a wicked problem would fall—requires adaptive and participatory leadership that embraces diversity, seeks input from a multiplicity of voices and pursues collaborative decision-making to generate “new ideas, insights and innovations” (Harvest Moon Consultants Ltd., n.d., p. 83). It requires leaders who can engage in reflective

learning, and act as catalysts and enablers for “collective creativity and collaborative action” (Southern, 2020, p. 545) so that all stakeholders can “take responsibility for learning, problem-solving and decision making as appropriate” (Southern, 2020, p. 547).

As Nancy Southern (2020) writes, advocacy can be a part of dialogue, but it must be balanced with reflection and inquiry, where participants share their thinking behind their position, including the beliefs and assumptions at the heart of their thinking. However, generative dialogue, which embraces inquiry, is what sparks new ideas and new ways of thinking.

One of the key findings from my interviews was a definition of the purpose of good dialogue work. Based on this definition, and the goal of achieving a generative quality of dialogue, I suggest the role of dialogue in working with stakeholders to address environmental challenges is to:

- Expand participants’ understanding of the complexity of the issue(s) being discussed
- Facilitate opportunities for stakeholders in environmental issues to relate to each other, and to uncover shared values, so they are more open to each other’s perspectives
- Increase stakeholders’ capacity to validate multiple perspectives, not just their own
- Create a space for stakeholders to work together on issues collaboratively, to allow new solutions to emerge



*Figure 3: The role of dialogue in addressing environmental issues.*

### **Enhancing the Capacity for Good Dialogue Work**

In the second part of my research question, I ask: *what are some effective dialogue approaches and facilitation techniques for achieving these goals* [of engagement]? In the following four sections, I answer that question—but not in terms of which techniques are best for shifting stakeholders’ perspectives on a particular issue. Rather, I describe how dialogue leaders and facilitators can enhance their capacity for good dialogue work that will foster “collective creativity and collaborative action” (Southern, 2020, p. 545) and achieve dialogue’s higher purpose. Based on my findings, a facilitator’s ability to achieve the purpose of good dialogue work can be greatly enhanced by focusing on these four areas:

- Cultivating the conditions for transformative learning
- Paying more attention to relationships than to issues or concepts

- Understanding how presence creates a foundation for good dialogue work
- Knowing yourself

### **Cultivating the conditions for transformative learning.**

According to Jack Mezirow, transformative learning occurs when there is a change in a person's frame of reference; that is, the "the structures of assumptions through which we understand our experiences" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5). He notes that our frames of reference are composed of "habits of mind and a point of view" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5), and asserts that "we transform our frames of reference through critical reflection on the assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs and habits of mind or points of view are based" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7).

Facilitating this process involves helping people "become aware and critical of their own and others' assumptions" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 10) and to recognize frames of reference, as well as "using their imaginations to redefine problems from a different perspective" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 10). He notes that discourse is "necessary to validate what and how one understands, or to arrive at a best judgement regarding a belief" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 10) and is central to meaning making.

In the Art of Hosting Meaningful Conversations practice, this kind of transformation occurs in the "Diamond of Participation" (ref AoH manual pdf pg 40), a dialogue process that takes participants through three phases of a multi-stakeholder inquiry or conversation:

1. divergence, in which participants brainstorm new ideas, generate alternatives, and gather diverse points of view

2. emergence, also known as the “groan zone,” the messy phase where participants integrate their ideas and needs; it requires participants to stretch their understanding, and to hold and consider multiple points of view
3. convergence, where alternatives are evaluated, categorized and summarized in order to arrive at general conclusions and decision-making

This approach, of inviting input from all stakeholders and then leading them through the process of assessment and collaborative decision-making, requires dialogue facilitators to practice emergent design, and to respond flexibly to what is needed in the moment. As noted in my findings chapter, Sergej van Middendorp pointed out that the context of a dialogue process is often complex, requiring a facilitator to be improvisational, and explorative.

In the Coordinated Management of Meaning dialogue approach, being improvisational and explorative are key aspects of responding to bifurcation points in dialogue—those critical moments that require a facilitator to respond in a way that will keep a dialogue on a positive track, or shift it back to a positive track if the conversation is taking a negative turn. For example, if the communication patterns within a dialogue are deteriorating, Barnett Pearce recommended responding with curiosity, asking questions such as, “tell me more about that. What else was going on at the time? What experiences have led you to that position? Why don’t people understand?” (Griffin et al., 2015, p. 76).

This orientation also involves consciously not resisting what is happening in the current moment, similar to the concept of “yes, and...” in the world of improvisational theatre. Tina Fey discusses this first rule of improvisation in her book, *Bossypants* (2011):

The first rule of improvisation is AGREE. Always agree and SAY YES. When you're improvising, this means you're required to agree with whatever your partner has created. So if we're improvising and I say 'Freeze, I have a gun,' and you say, 'That's not a gun. It's your finger. You're pointing your finger at me,' our improvised scene has ground to a halt. But if I say 'Freeze, I have a gun,' and you say, 'The gun I gave you for Christmas. You bastard!' then we have started a scene, because we have AGREED that my finger is in fact a Christmas gun.

Now obviously in real life you're not always going to agree with everything everyone says. But the Rule of Agreement reminds you to respect what your partner has created and to at least start from an open-minded place. Start with a YES and see where it takes you (Fey, 2011, as cited by Griffin et al., 2015, p. 76).

In my findings, I mention how David Stevenson believes it is very important to cultivate a sense of play in dialogue, as a way to help build capacity for cognitive flexibility—a skill required for adaptive leadership. Similar to the Diamond of Participation dialogue process described above, David recommends not moving to the solution stage too quickly, and making room for “trying different things, laughing, not taking it too seriously, not trying to drive things too much in a certain direction.” David noted that play is a good way to explore boundaries while building relationships and trust among participants.

Several interviewees talked about this aspect of their dialogue practice, using creative approaches to move beyond verbal reasoning and explore issues at a deeper level. These include

using metaphors, such as Sergej van Middendorp's use of jazz music as a metaphor for dialogue and working together harmoniously, or Anita Perez Ferguson's use of a wall-sized puzzle activity to illustrate how participants each contribute a crucial piece to the running of a school district. It can also include cultural touchpoints, such as the example Anita gave of inviting participants to sing a traditional Spanish ballad, as a way of evoking deeper meaning-making in the issue being discussed.

Hamilton and Wills-Toker (2006) write that gaming exercises can also help dialogue participants explore a range of solutions. For example, a department in the Ohio state government used a Monopoly-like board game to assess solutions for cleaning nuclear and hazardous waste at a site.

Another example is a visualization exercise called situation mapping, developed by Gregg Walker and Steven Daniels as part of their collaborative learning approach (Hamilton & Wills-Toker, 2006). Situation mapping helps stakeholders make sense of the multiple worldviews that often arise in public policy decision-making about environmental issues. Participants co-create a visual representation of the stakeholders, issues and actions involved in a situation, with relationships between these elements depicted by labels, lines and arrows. This co-creation process allows participants to gain a new understanding of the multiple worldviews involved, and how they fit together within the overall situation, while encouraging stakeholders to retain a multiplicity of perspectives (Hamilton & Wills-Toker, 2006).

**Paying more attention to relationships than to issues or concepts.**

In our interview, Bob Stains remarked that advocates typically look at issues at an institutional level, while neglecting the intrapersonal and internal layers. He believes that if people paid more attention to the interpersonal level, at how people engage with each other, it would change how people view each other, and consequently, how they behave with each other at the institutional level.

He and other interviewees cited Martin Buber's (1937) philosophy of relationships as an inspiration for their dialogue work, in which relationships are characterized as either I-It or I-Thou. An I-It relationship is transactional and objectifying, while in an I-Thou relationship, people are truly seen and valued for who they are. The personal connection in an I-Thou relationship happens through dialogue, where two people meet in a "realm of the Between" (Griffin et al., 2015, p. 77) on a narrow ridge between relativism and absolutism—an idea that is not dissimilar from David's Stevenson's metaphor of creating a Brigadoon-like space for dialogue.

The founders of Coordinated Management of Meaning were influenced by Buber's idea that "dialogue is a joint achievement that cannot be produced on demand, but occurs among people who seek it and are prepared for it" (Griffin et al., 2015, p. 77). Indeed, nearly all of my interview participants discussed how crucial it is to build relationships and trust with dialogue participants and group leaders in advance of the dialogue process.

With Essential Partners' dialogue approach, the facilitators begin by meeting with potential participants and/or conveners to discuss their dialogue needs, and ensure their goals and

interests are aligned with Essential Partners' approach. Once they confirm alignment, the next step involves facilitators meeting with participants and others involved in the issue to

learn how the old, polarized conversation goes, and what participants are willing to do differently... We also inquire about times when something other than the old conversation happened, how they understand this exception, and what skills, resources, visions and values already exist in the community that might support future excursions out of the old and into the new" (Chasin & Herzig, 2014, p. 7).

Once the dialogue session (or sessions) has been scheduled and invitations sent out, the facilitators will telephone participants before the session to start building relationships with them. During the calls, the facilitators will delve into participants' hopes and concerns, ask what the participants would like the facilitators to know about them, and also offer to answer any questions they have about the dialogue session. They discuss the session format and ask participants how the facilitators can support them in the process (Chasin & Herzig, 2014).

Connecting with and building relationships with participants and conveners in advance of the dialogue process also helps facilitators understand the culture and context in which they are working. Jan Elliott noted in her interview that this also helps facilitators recognize and understand the system in which the conflict or issue exists.

Some interviewees discussed using an Appreciative Inquiry approach in their pre-session meetings with participants and group leaders. This helps them broaden and deepen their understanding of a group or organization's situation, while encouraging a positive and constructive attitude among participants. Bob Stains noted that there are often stories that have been "pushed off to the side," which tell of a time when the people involved in the conflict or

issue were able to work together to address a situation successfully—stories that shine a light on the group’s abilities and capacity for working collaboratively within the current context.

**Understand how presence creates a foundation for good dialogue work.**

Martin Buber believed that I-Thou relationships can only exist in the present, outside the constraints of time, while an I-It relationship is rooted in the past (Buber, 1937). In our interview, Kazuma Matoba discussed his practice of “witnessing” in his dialogue work, a way of cultivating an I-Thou relationship among participants through a form of deep listening that fosters an interconnectedness between the "witness" and the "witnessed." Kazuma talked about how he is applying the practice of witnessing in dialogue with his students, to transform the way they view refugees who are coming into Europe—a social issue that is rife with conflict among Europeans.

This made me think of an Amnesty International video called “Look Beyond Borders” (Amnesty International, 2016), which portrays an experiment in breaking down barriers between Europeans and refugees who had recently arrived to Europe. In the video, individual Europeans are paired with refugees from Syria and Somalia. Without having met before, each pair is asked to sit down across from each other, and look each other in the eye for four minutes, uninterrupted. The experiment is based on a psychological theory that intimacy can be forged through four minutes of uninterrupted eye contact. In the video, each of the pairs appear to make an intense, emotional connection, recognizing the humanity of the other at a deep level, with any preconceived notions or judgements of who the other person might be dissolving away.

As I discussed in my findings chapter, Kazuma’s practice of witnessing is similar to Bob Stains’ concept of recognizing the “Holy Spirit” that exists between all people, and the

transformational impact of that practice. Bob described dialogue work as bringing together people who have “hardened their hearts for protective reasons toward each other” and creating an environment where that hardening can be eroded, where they can connect “at a heart level.”

In our interview, Kazuma discussed how his dialogue practice is about creating opportunities for “awareness-based systems change,” based on Otto Scharmer’s Theory U. Kazuma believes that by “changing our awareness and consciousness, we can also transform our systems... My position is that in a dialogue process, our awareness can change, and our awareness and consciousness can be transformed to be more pro-social.”

In Theory U, the deepest level of listening is achieved through “presencing,” a concept I discuss in my literature review. The process of presencing involves opening up one’s heart, mind and will, reflecting on what one is seeing with fresh eyes, and then letting new ideas emerge. Scharmer and Kaufer write that presencing can transform the quality of a conversation “from debate to dialogue and collective creativity” (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013, p. 23).

Reflection is a core aspect of fostering a sense of presence and awareness, and some interviewees discussed how they build in opportunities for reflection into their dialogue process. Bob Stains noted how one of the dynamics of a repetitive conflictual conversation is speed and reactivity, so he deliberately incorporates opportunities for reflection into all stages of his dialogue work.

### **Knowing yourself.**

Many of my interviewees emphasized how important it is for facilitators to maintain a sense of presence themselves when leading a dialogue session, in addition to cultivating a sense of presence among participants. In the Art of Hosting Meaningful Conversations practice, this is

referred to as “hosting yourself.” It means being “willing to endure chaos...[and] stay[ing] in the fire of the present” (Harvest Moon Consultants Ltd., n.d., p. 18). It is also about being “undistracted, prepared, clear about the need, and what your contribution can be. It allows you to check in with yourself and develop the personal practice of curiosity about the outcomes of any gathering” (Harvest Moon Consultants Ltd., n.d., p. 18).

Sergej van Middendorp noted in his interview that he and many of his dialogue facilitation colleagues have a meditation and mindfulness component to their work. Some of these colleagues will set aside time to meditate before a dialogue session to help them lead the session more mindfully. Sergej talked about how his meditation practice helps him observe his own emotions while leading dialogue and allows him to reflect on how his emotions may be impacting his dialogue work. It also helps him practice self-empathy when his emotions are triggered by an interaction during a dialogue session.

In her interview, Jan Elliott talked about how important it is to stay “really grounded” while leading a dialogue session, to be ready to handle confrontation and conflict in “firm yet compassionate ways.” To be able to do this, facilitators need to know themselves, and be grounded in the spirit of the work they are doing, in order to be prepared to bring dialogue to a level where transformation can occur.

Sergej also talked about handling conflict as a dialogue facilitator. In his interview, he noted that “conflict is inherent in change,” suggesting that facilitators should accept it as a part of good dialogue work. This echoes the concept of “yes, and...” that I discuss above, and the idea that dialogue facilitators should accept and embrace whatever is happening in the present moment, so they can respond most effectively.

Bob Stains talked about how he believes facilitators must be “equally loving to all the people in the room,” even those with whom they violently disagree. When they are confronted with difficult people or situations, Bob coaches facilitators to “sincerely inquire what’s happening for that person. And to listen, and to provide a witness to where they’re coming from.” Bob quoted the author Parker Palmer, who wrote:

When the going gets rough, turn to wonder. Turn from reaction and judgment to wonder and compassionate inquiry. Ask yourself, ‘I wonder why they feel/think this way?’ or ‘I wonder what my reaction teaches me about myself?’ Set aside judgment to listen to others—and to yourself—more deeply (Palmer, n.d.).

This is the idea behind bifurcation points in CMM, which call on the facilitator to respond to critical moments in dialogue in way that will improve the quality of conversation. Creede et al. (2012) give an example of a bifurcation point, in a situation where someone has been in a minor car accident and is choosing how to respond in the moment:

When faced with any critical moment in an interaction—what CMM calls a bifurcation point...taking one path is just as possible as taking a different one. Jumping out of the car and screaming at the other person is just as possible (and ‘legitimate’ in our culture) as asking the other driver ‘are you OK?’ And depending on what we ate for breakfast, our other preoccupations, our previous experience with car accidents, our stories about how drivers approach this road, our physical condition—it may be harder at some moments to choose the more generative path. (In fact, in some moments, it may seem downright impossible.) (Creede et al., 2012, p. 4)

Barnett Pearce, one of the founders of CMM, hoped that every communications student would “become adept at spotting the bifurcation points in the midst of tough discussions and have the desire and skill to craft a response on the fly that would make better social worlds” (Griffin et al., 2015, p. 75). He imagined that if all those students developed that mindset and ability, what an incredibly positive effect it would have on our society.

## **Conclusion**

In the opening paragraphs of this chapter, I discussed how my perspective on my research goals and objectives shifted through my thesis journey. Yet, there are certain ideas that have remained steadfast for me. I still believe strongly that we, as a society, need to recognize our interconnectedness with nature, and understand the challenges we are facing with respect to global warming and biodiversity loss.

That will require a significant change in how our society approaches economic decision- and policymaking, requiring a more holistic view of our world as “an integrated whole rather than a dissociated collection of parts” (Capra, 1996, p. 6) and a deep awareness of how we are embedded in—and wholly dependent upon—the “cyclical processes of nature” (Capra, 1996, p. 6). I still want to inspire people to act, and to work together to find solutions to the environmental challenges we all face.

Ray Grigg (2019) writes that as our awareness expands, the nature of our thinking and our doing changes accordingly. We effortlessly rise to a level of understanding that is more sophisticated, comprehensive, and inclusive. For example,

learning that bees perform complex dances that direct other bees in the hive to distant nectar supplies changes our feelings and responses to bees. Discovering that trees broadcast complex chemical pheromones to inform neighbours of their health makes forests into living places teeming with a semblance of individual and communal intelligence. Knowing that orcas are bonded inseparably in matrilineal families, each with its own unique dialect, increases our respect and alters our behaviour regarding them” (Grigg, 2019, p. 19).

And in this respect, dialogue is a process through which we can not only improve how we relate to each other, it can also play a role in how we relate to nature. Grigg goes on to write that “the effect of awareness is to make everything seem more personal and intimate, thereby confirming the connection of each thing to every other thing in a vast network of interrelationship and mutual belonging” (Grigg, 2019, p. 20). The distinction between self and other—and between humans and the rest of nature—diminishes, and our compassion and empathy expand, ultimately leading to a more caring and civilized world (Grigg, 2019).

In the Art of Hosting Meaningful Conversations community, there is a concept known as the Fifth Paradigm, which describes the spontaneous and emergent process by which a conversation will expand from a core group of people out in a rippling pattern into those people’s surrounding networks, to achieve ever increasing levels of scale and action (Nagel, 2015). This can happen formally, such as when a group of stakeholders meet to reach a new understanding about an environmental issue and then shares that new understanding with their own organizations and groups. It can also happen informally, when those stakeholders talk about their new understanding with colleagues, family and friends. By thoughtfully engaging across our

networks, we all have the potential to lead and share a vision of a more sustainable society. This participatory leadership approach is at the core of how dialogue can spark cultural transformation.

SINGULARITY

by Marie Howe

(after Stephen Hawking)

Do you sometimes want to wake up to the singularity  
we once were?

so compact nobody  
needed a bed, or food or money —

nobody hiding in the school bathroom  
or home alone

pulling open the drawer  
where the pills are kept.

For every atom belonging to me as good  
Belongs to you. Remember?

There was no *Nature*. No

*them*. No tests

to determine if the elephant

grieves her calf or if

the coral reef feels pain. Trashed

oceans don't speak English or Farsi or French;

would that we could wake up to what we were

— when we were ocean and before that

to when sky was earth, and animal was energy, and rock was

liquid and stars were space and space was not

at all — nothing

before we came to believe humans were so important

before this awful loneliness.

Can molecules recall it?

what once was? before anything happened?

No I, no We, no one. No was

No verb no noun

only a tiny tiny dot brimming with

*is is is is is*

All everything home

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### Appendix A: Recruitment Email for Interview Participants

Hello \_\_\_\_\_ ,

I am reaching out to you to invite you to participate in a graduate degree thesis study that is exploring the transformational power of small-group dialogue, and how it can help expand awareness and shift perspectives in environmental issues.

This study is for the completion of my Master of Arts in Environmental Education and Communication degree at Royal Roads University in Victoria, BC.

I would like to interview you about your work as a dialogue practitioner, to hear your perceptions and experiences regarding the aspects of your dialogue approach that are most effective for expanding awareness and shifting perspectives about a given issue. Although my thesis is focused on environmental issues, I am also interested in hearing about dialogue approaches that have been applied in other contexts.

I hope this study will benefit the environmental community by offering insights into how individuals can be engaged in environmental issues more effectively.

Your participation would involve a single, one-on-one interview over Zoom, which would be recorded for transcription purposes. The interview would take approximately 60-90 minutes. I hope to conduct all interviews between January and March 2021.

I will also invite all participants to join an *optional* focus group session in April 2021 to review the initial study findings and provide additional comments and/or insights. The focus group will be approximately one hour in April 2021.

Your participation would make a valuable contribution to an exploration of how small group dialogue can act as a communication tool for expanding individuals' awareness of possible paths toward a more sustainable society. Participants might also expand their own understanding and/or appreciation of the transformational power of dialogue, and how it contributes to their own work.

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You are under no obligation to participate, and will have the right to withdraw at any time up until your interview data is incorporated into the larger data set in April 2021, by notifying me by email. If you decide to withdraw from the study, your interview data and any related documentation will be removed from the larger data set and destroyed without prejudice and I will email you to confirm that this has been done.

The privacy and confidentiality protocols, procedures and ethical requirements for this study have all been approved by Royal Roads University's Research Ethics Board, and will be monitored by my thesis supervisor, Dr. Alice MacGillivray, throughout the project.

If you are interested in participating, I will send you an Informed Consent Letter with further details about the study and the privacy and confidential procedures that will be followed. You will be asked to please sign the letter and return it to me by email. At that point, I will contact you to schedule an interview at a time that works for you.

In the meantime, please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions, or reach out to one of the Royal Roads University supervising faculty below.

Thank you for considering my invitation to participate in this study! I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Best regards,

Marta Bristow, MA Candidate  
Mobile: xxx-xxx-xxxx  
Email: xxx@xxx.ca

**Royal Roads University Contacts:**

**Thesis Supervisor:**

Dr. Alice MacGillivray  
Email: xxx@xxx.ca

**Program Head:**

Dr. Hilary Leighton  
Email: xxx@xxx.ca

### Appendix B: Letter of Free and Informed Consent

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for agreeing to be part of my thesis work. I greatly appreciate your time and your valuable contribution to this project.

Please read the following consent details for this research project. If, after reading this letter, you agree to participate, please sign the consent section at the end and return a signed copy to me by email. Once I receive the copy, I will contact you to schedule an interview.

**Study (Working Title):** Sparking Culture Transformation Through Small Group Dialogue

**Researcher and University Affiliation:** Marta Bristow, Master of Arts Candidate, Environmental Education and Communication, Royal Roads University, Victoria, BC.

**Thesis Supervisor:**

Dr. Alice MacGillivray  
Royal Roads University  
Email: xxxx@xxxx.ca

**University Contact:**

Dr. Hilary Leighton  
Program Head, MA Environmental Education and  
Communication  
Royal Roads University  
Email: xxxx@xxxx.ca

**Purpose:** This study will explore the *transformational power of small group dialogue* for engaging individuals in environmental issues, shifting perspectives, and reimagining opportunities for action and change.

**Participant Criteria:** Participants will be recognized experts in leading and/or facilitating small group dialogue. I will aim to interview ten practitioners, covering a wide range of dialogue approaches and frameworks.

**Participant's involvement:** Participants are asked to commit 2.5-3.5 hours of their time to this study for:

- A one-on-one interview (approximately 60-90 minutes), held over Zoom, to be scheduled at a time that works for you, plus an additional 30-60 minutes to review a summary of the

interview, and possibly provide additional comments or changes if you choose. I would like to conduct all interviews in January to April, 2021.

- *Optional* participation in a one-hour focus group session in April 2021 to review my initial research findings, and provide additional comments or insights. Participants will receive a summary of the content to be discussed prior to the focus group session.

Participation in the focus group session is completely optional; however, it will be an excellent opportunity to hear the initial results of the interviews, learn what insights your peers are contributing to the project, and provide additional comments.

**Recordings:** The interviews will be recorded via Zoom, and the files will be stored on my personal laptop, which is password-protected and only accessible to me. I will use the recording to transcribe the content of the interview. If a participant wishes to have the file destroyed, I can do so once the interview transcription is completed.

**Compensation:** Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**Protection of Anonymity and Confidentiality:** You are free to choose whether or not you consent to be identified in the research findings and final report, or if you prefer to remain anonymous. Please indicate your choice by checking one of the boxes in the “Free and Informed Consent” section at the end of this document. You can amend your decision at any time by notifying me in writing. Please be assured that if you choose to remain anonymous, I will take all necessary precautions to protect your anonymity: I will exclude your name from any research data shared with others, and use a pseudonym for you in the final report. Please note that your valuable ideas and opinions may appear in the report itself; however, no personal information such as your name or personally identifiable information will be used to attribute those comments to you.

The focus group involves a group discussion, so it would be impossible to provide complete confidentiality or anonymity for this session. But as mentioned above, participation in the focus group is optional.

**Benefits of Participation:** By participating in this project, you will be making a valuable contribution to an exploration of how small group dialogue can act as a communication tool for expanding individuals’ awareness of possible paths toward a more sustainable society. I hope this study will benefit the environmental community by offering insights into how individuals can be engaged in environmental issues more effectively. This experience may also help

participants expand their own understanding and/or appreciation of the transformational power of dialogue, and how it contributes to their own work.

**Potential Risks:** The risks of participation are considered to be minimal. During the interview, you may choose to disclose information that you consider to be personal or sensitive, but it is completely up to you whether you decide to share this information. If at any point during the interview you share names or information that could breach privacy rules, I will remove that information from the interview transcript.

Please note: the interviews will be conducted via Zoom and recorded, and the data from these recordings will be stored on Zoom's servers in the USA. Data stored on servers in the USA may be subject to examination by the US government under the USA Patriot Act. While this likelihood is small, I am required to let my participants know this possible risk.

**Withdrawal:** Participants are under no obligation to participate, and have the right to withdraw at any time up to and until the participant's interview data are incorporated into the larger data set (scheduled for April 1, 2021). You can withdraw by notifying me in writing. If you decide to withdraw from the study, your interview data and any related documentation will be removed from the larger data set and destroyed.

**Dissemination of Findings:** The findings of this research may be disseminated through a variety of publications and presentations, and the final thesis report will be publicly available on the ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database. Participants will be given copy of the final thesis report via email.

If you have any questions about this letter or my research project at any time during the study, please do not hesitate to contact me, or the supervising faculty listed on page 1 of this document.

If you would like more information about your rights as a research participant, please email the Royal Roads Office of Research Ethics at [ethicalreview@royalroads.ca](mailto:ethicalreview@royalroads.ca) or call 250-391-2600 ext. 4425.

Best regards,

Marta Bristow, MA Candidate

Mobile: xxx-xxx-xxxx

Email: xxxxxxxx@xxxxxx.ca

**Free and Informed Consent**

This document constitutes an agreement to participate in my research project.

By signing this letter, you give free and informed consent to participate in this project.

Name: (Please Print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Please check one of the following:

- I consent to having my name included in the research findings and final research report.
- I DO NOT consent to having my name appear in the research findings and final research report.

Please return a signed copy of this letter to me at (*insert email*)

I will contact you to schedule an interview at a time that works for you, once I receive the signed copy.

### Appendix C: Interview Protocol

#### Pre-interview:

- *Thank interviewee for participating*
- *Provide overview of my study and what I'm hoping to accomplish in the interview, how the interview will proceed*
- *Let them know the interview will be recorded, but only to assist me with the transcription—no one else will have access to the recording or transcription*

#### Interview:

<p><i>Main Questions:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tell me about your dialogue work. How would you describe the approach (or approaches) you currently use?</li> <li>2. Which aspects of leading and/or facilitating dialogue keep you most engaged in your work?</li> <li>3. What aspects of your dialogue work do you find most challenging</li> <li>4. How has your approach to leading and/or facilitating dialogue changed or evolved over the years?</li> <li>5. My study is focused on the transformational aspects of small-group dialogue, in particular in how the dialogue experience can shift a participant's perspectives on an issue, leading to a broader understanding of the issue being</li> </ol>	<p><i>Additional Prompts:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How long have you been leading and/or facilitating dialogue?</li> <li>• Is your approach affiliated with a particular organization or dialogue framework? Why?</li> <li>• What are the aspects of your dialogue work that are most important to you?</li> </ul>
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<p>discussed. What is your perspective on this aspect of dialogue? Is this important to you for your work?</p> <p>6. Can you tell me about a time when you have observed a significant shift in perspectives among participants during a dialogue session or event you have led or helped facilitate?</p> <p>7. Has there been a time when you hoped to achieve a shift in perspectives among participants in a dialogue session and were not successful? Why?</p> <p>8. Have any of these experiences led you to change your dialogue approach or techniques?</p> <p>9. What else do you think I should consider regarding the ways in which small-group dialogue can help increase engagement, shift perspectives and broaden awareness of some of the major challenges our society is facing, such as climate change?</p> <p>10. Do you have any favourite dialogue resources you could share with me?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• From your perspective, what aspect of this dialogue experience helped achieved this shift (<i>any specific dialogue techniques</i>)?</li> </ul> <p><i>(May also prompt for further examples)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What aspects of the dialogue did not work?</li> <li>• How did you change your approach?</li> <li>• What was the result?</li> </ul>
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**Wrap-Up:**

<p>1. Reflecting back on our interview, do you have any further thoughts on any of the topics we discussed?</p> <p>2. How has this interview experience been for you?</p> <p>3. Do you have any questions about the study?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are there any other comments or reflections you would like to share?</li> </ul>
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- *Thank interviewee for their time, and outline next steps in the study, invite them to participate in the focus group session once the initial research findings are ready.*