



2009 WINTER forum: "Drugs & Addiction"

Description and evaluation of this on-line forum

The **Network for Peace through Dialogue** has been engaged in an online dialogue since the autumn of 2006. The winter 2008 dialogue was the 5th since the inception of the "Shaping Our Future" program, which is an attempt to broaden the conversations that occur through the Network for Peace through Dialogue's in-person "Living Room Dialogues." Participation is open to anyone who is interested and recruitment has traditionally taken place in the weeks leading up to a new dialogue session to get new individuals involved. Shaping Our Future uses GoogleGroups, a free online message board, as the platform for communication. Most participants receive emails through the website and respond via email; occasionally messages are posted directly on the website.

The initial online dialogue in the fall of 2006 took place over three months. At the end of this first session, it was determined that two months was a better timeframe for the dialogue sessions and that future sessions would take place over an 8-week period. However, the actual length of the dialogue has varied with each session, depending on interest in the topic and external factors (such as holidays, etc.) affecting participation. This dialogue session began in mid-November 2008 and ended in mid-February 2009. However, the full three months included two sets of major holiday periods, leading to diminished participation over Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. Shaping Our Future changed its format considerably before engaging in this dialogue. Rather than program staff choosing a topic, we asked existing members of the group, as well as individuals expressing interest in joining as a result of our outreach efforts, to suggest possible topics of relevance to them and their home community. Our request for topics was met with lukewarm enthusiasm: we were able to solicit approximately 10 topics from dialogue participants. A topic from a new member was chosen as the focus of this session's dialogue - What are the root causes of drug addiction in our communities and how are these causes related to the legal consequences of addiction?

The format of Shaping Our Future also changed somewhat this session. We began the session with a round of introductions, due to the fact that several new participants joined the group immediately prior to the start of this session. Following introductions, the member suggesting this session's dialogue topic presented her initial question to the group. Furthermore, Shaping Our

Future staff, previously an integral part of our dialogues, has now taken a “back seat” to the discussions. The Shaping Our Future Coordinator acts as moderator and helps present topics during the dialogues; however, neither the coordinator nor other Network for Peace through Dialogue staff directly affiliated with Shaping Our Future participate substantively in the sessions.

Participants and Participation

Before beginning this dialogue session, Shaping Our Future staff undertook extensive recruitment of new participants. Invitations to join the dialogue were posted to a number of relevant list-servs, including: the Peace & Justice Association (PJSA), idealist.org, the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD), the Peace & Collaborative Development Network, and the New York Dispute Resolution list-serv. Over 25 individuals expressed interest in the dialogue; of those, eight individuals expressed their commitment to participating according to Shaping Our Future guidelines (2 messages per month, basing dialogue on elements of High Quality Dialogue). These eight individuals were added to our roster for the session. Several of these participants participated in the dialogue regularly; a few did not participate at all. This raises a continuing question for Shaping Our Future, specifically, how to ensure engagement of group members. Over the course of the session, participation occurred in spurts – something that seems to be the trend for Shaping Our Future. Specifically, main bouts of dialogue occurred during the last few days of November, in the period between December 10-20, between January 29th-31st, and on February 9-10th. These periods of participation saw a flurry of messages from Shaping Our Future members. The extent of participation can be seen below:

Engagement in High Quality Dialogue

One of the tenets of Shaping Our Future is our commitment to High Quality Dialogue as defined by Network for Peace through Dialogue Executive Director Virginia Dorgan. High Quality Dialogue requires active participation (our request to participants was that they would commit to two contributions per month) and includes the following components:

- I. Responses which show an honest expression of one’s own opinion
 - 1A. Participants express their own opinion rather than talking about “them” or in universal truths.
 - 1B. Participants relate a similar feeling or story to what has been said.
 - 1C. Participants state different opinions in a non- threatening way.
- II. Responses which show empathetic and attentive listening
 - II A. Participants paraphrase the others point of view.
 - II B. Participants ask clarifying questions
 - II C. Participants make statements recognizing the feelings of the other.
- III. Responses which show an effort to understand the other
 - III A. Participants respond to others insights with questions, agreements or respectful

disagreement.

III B. Participants do not try to convince others to change their point of view.

IV. Responses which show willingness to be transformed by the experience

IV A. Participants state what they have learned from others.

IV B. Participants acknowledge changes in their points of view.

IV C. Participants search for and acknowledge their own hidden assumptions

This dialogue highlighted the elements of High Quality Dialogue in truly exemplary ways. As noted above, this session marked a shift in how Shaping Our Future initiates dialogue topics: the topic discussed, focusing on the topic of drugs, health care, and incarceration, came directly from the experiences of one of our dialogue members and many of the insights grew out of discussions surrounding her personal circumstances. Responses also reflected personal experiences (Element I of High Quality Dialogue).

This dialogue was also notable in expressions of active and empathetic listening by group members (Element II of High Quality Dialogue). Again, perhaps this is because of the nature of the issue discussed, and the many personal experiences brought to bear on the topic. Evidence of active and empathetic listening can be seen below:

Perhaps the most insightful comments, however, reflected Elements III and IV of High Quality Dialogue – specifically, responses demonstrating an attempt to understand one another and be transformed by this experience. It should be noted that at the end of this session, for the first time, participants were explicitly asked to reflect upon what they learned as a result of this dialogue. Presenting this question in explicit terms elicited responses that reflected Element IV.

Final comments

This dialogue session was the first one using the new conceptual approach to Shaping Our Future. On the whole, the shift to a more participant-centered experience, particularly in topic selection, is a very positive one. Additionally, Shaping Our Future's wider outreach for new dialogue participants seems to have been successful. Over time, outreach over a wide variety of fora should result in a "rotating critical mass" of dialogue participants that will make Shaping Our Future into a dynamic platform for engaging individuals from around the world on immediately relevant topics.

Two points in particular regarding the substance of this dialogue should be noted. First, part of the conceptual shift in Shaping Our Future entailed a desire to include an orientation to action as part of each session, or, in other words, a concerted attempt to discuss how this topic can be addressed through methods other than just dialogue. This arose rather organically as part of our discussion of drugs and incarceration; specifically, as a discussion about possibilities for including this as part of the new administration's focus on health care reform. It is not possible to say whether the discussion about potential action steps resulted directly from a focus on a topic of

personal relevance to a group member, but it can be surmised that there is a link between the imminent need for issues to be addressed and the potential for brainstorming potential ways of doing so. Thus, the shift to participant-centered topic selection again stands out as a positive change in Shaping Our Future.

Second, the empathy expressed in this dialogue session is difficult to put into words. Short of quoting the entire session in this report, it is not possible to describe the extent to which dialogue members provided reassurance, insight, and potential avenues for helping one another over the course of three months. This is particularly important given the fact that for the most part, dialogue members have never met or seen one another, and are connected purely by the exchange of emails. Ultimately, this lends legitimacy to Shaping Our Future, as well as online dialogue in general.