

CS2: HMP WHITEMOOR DIALOGUES VP

by Peter Garrett

Context

The first Dialogue Group to be started in a prison was on 7th Sept '93 on the main wings (C & D) at HMP Whitemoor, a high and maximum security prison in Cambridgeshire, England. The group proved extremely popular and ran weekly for the next 7 years. Based on its success, 18 months later, Prison Dialogue (PD) was invited to start a group for those on the Vulnerable Prisoner (VP) A & B wings. VPs include sex offenders and those vulnerable to harm from other prisoners. There was significant animosity between those in the main part of the prison and the VP prisoners and PD was advised that if a group was started for the VPs it would lead to main wing prisoners withdrawing from the original Dialogue Group (on C & D wings). It is a tribute to the skills and standing of the young PD organisation that this did not happen and the two Dialogue Groups ran concurrently on Tuesdays (one in the morning and the other in the afternoon) for over 5 years. (The two prisoner groups were later brought together in a conference – see HMP Whitemoor Dispersal Prisons Conference (see CS3).

Aims and Objectives

As with the Dialogue Group on the main wings, this VP Dialogue Group was an experiment using Dialogue as a means of social integration by including a representation of all who lived and worked in the prison (prisoners, uniformed staff, management and others) into a single ongoing conversation. This was a new prison (opened 3 years previously) and the prison culture was fragmented and dehumanised. Violation and violence, between prisoners and between prisoners and staff, was not uncommon and this was seen as an opportunity to break down the barriers, improve relationships across all who lived and worked in the prison, and to humanise the organisation. VP prisoners were serving long sentences (typically from 8 years to natural life), were housed in single cells and the segregation block was generally fully occupied. The prison at that time was struggling to keep good order and discipline, and suffered staff and prisoner assaults, hostage takings, murders, minor rioting and an escape. A VP sex offender prisoner had been murdered shortly before the Dialogue Group started on the VP wings and the Dialogue Group was seen as

an attempt to intervene in the situation and to contribute to establishing a different culture in the prison.

Method: Activity, Participants and Duration

The success of the original Dialogue Group meant that little advertising was needed to start the second group. Probation invited prisoners, the prison detailed security staff to each session and PD invited volunteers and provided facilitation. The VP prisoners were very responsive, and there were 26 of them there for the first session, in a tightly packed room with over 30 participants. Over the years the group averaged 18 prisoners plus 5 others. Although various grades of Governors, Probation, Psychology, Chaplaincy and the Board of Visitors (now IMB) all joined the group at some point, it was noticeable that they came to the VP Dialogue more reluctantly than to the Main Dialogue. There was more repugnance and disgust concerning the crimes. At that time sex offenders were called 'nonses' (because their crime was a 'nonsense'). PD took the view that it is quite possible to engage with prisoners (and anyone else) with respect without in any way condoning their behaviour.

The group met weekly for 2 hrs on Tuesday afternoons for 45 weeks of the year (three terms of 15 weeks each year), convened by Probation and facilitated by a PD Facilitator. There was no agenda or pre-set theme to sessions, and people talked about whatever mattered to them. It started with a check-in and then went wherever people were interested to go. The facilitation was to encourage an enquiry into what had been said, rather than an argument, and to help the participants to express their genuine views. The mantra 'everybody learns but nobody teaches' was used often. No subject was prohibited, but the putting down of individuals not present in the room was not allowed. Attendance was voluntary (except for the security staff, who were detailed to be there) and there tended to be a mixture of regulars and new-comers at each session. It was not an advocacy group, but one where issues were explored in depth and hence indirectly contributed to things being resolved. It established a way of working which participants explained to new-comers at the outset, followed by a check-in, then the Dialogue for most of the meeting, closing with a short check-out. (The check-in and check-out was a round of comments from each participant at the start and close of the session).

The vulnerable prisoners behaved very differently from the main prisoners. There was a higher level of shame, less confidence and more covert behaviour.

It required patience to establish a clear way of working as a large group. There was more clique behaviour, and less sense of interest and opportunity to explore issues of the larger world outside the prison. Over time participants did expand their scope of attention although this was not helped by a newspaper contributor PD invited to the group who posted a despicable description (in a national UK newspaper, The Guardian) of male VP prisoners in the Dialogue Group as seen through her own judgemental disgust.

During the first year of the group a change was made in the prison's kitchens. Food had been prepared by main prisoners but because of a series of misdemeanours (taking yeast to brew 'hooch' and so on) they were removed and VPs were instead brought into the kitchens to help prepare the food for the whole prison. During the following week a condom was found in a serving of custard. It was not clear whether this originated from a VP or was planted by a main prisoner, but there were consequences. All the main prisoners refused to eat food prepared in the kitchen. The prison had to purchase pies and other foods in sealed containers prepared off the premises in order to prevent hunger strikes. This kind of internal topic demanded hours of consideration in the Dialogue Groups. Other issues were more external, including politics, religion, legislation and so on.

Participants signed an attendance register, detailed records were kept of every session by the facilitator, and a 4-page typed report was written after every 15 week term, agreed by the group and distributed around the prison. The aim was to encourage the prison to think about the issues being discussed without naming individual participants or making them vulnerable by quoting them.

Outcomes

Prisoners learnt skills of social engagement which for most had been poorly developed. Many of them became capable of leading a conversation and line of enquiry, which gave them increased confidence. Inevitably there were occasions when prisoners would find themselves talking about their offences. This is a necessary part of the Sex Offender Treatment Programme (attended by many of the participants) which teaches offenders how to recognise the signs and successfully interrupt their inclination to offend. The facilitator regularly laid clear ground rules about security and incrimination information, which would be reported to prison Security or the Police, and therefore the facilitator intervened to check that the speaker wanted to proceed if this

appeared likely. The focus of the Dialogue Groups, however, was different from the other treatment programmes because nobody was teaching. Almost to a man, the VPs had never been asked why they had committed the offences that they had, and because there was neither a carrot nor a stick in the way the Dialogue Groups ran, there was an opportunity for real enquiry. People started to reflect on their lives, and generally speaking they had suffered abuse at a young age and began to recognise repressed emotions. Becoming conscious of this was important. A few showed evidence of moving from a state of shadow victim-retaliation to being accountable for their behaviour.

The challenge for staff and volunteers was to overcome their repugnance of the crimes committed by the VPs. At a commemoration service for a serial rapist/murderer who was himself murdered in the prison, one of the chaplaincy staff said privately that 'God must be obscene to love a person like that.' The offering of respect (not condoning the crime) is the only door through to the person, and the group enabled many to meet the person rather than the rapist or paedophile. As this occurred they could hear the stories told and witness the broken lives of these man.

The prison appreciated the purposeful engagement of so many of their VPs on a regular basis. The Dialogue Group was seen as a key contribution to the through-care process in the prison, and PD played an active role in the work of the prison's Through-care Committee.

Learning

The big learning was about repression and crime. It is trauma that cannot be talked about in a person's life that continues to create the pressure to offend, and listening to the personal stories non-judgementally was perhaps the greatest contribution to changing offenders' lives.

Secondly there was learning about facilitation. There are times when facilitation cannot be provided by the facilitator, and he needs to ask the group to take over the role. An example was a situation where a serial paedophile was loudly and repeatedly abusive towards other participants. We had established freedom of movement (voluntary attendance) and freedom of speech (with the limitation of not putting down anyone outside the room) and now both principles could not co-exist. The facilitator said what he saw: "You are here on a voluntary basis and I will not tell you to leave, but if you stay and act as you do the group cannot continue." This 'bystanding' allowed the group

to intervene. They turned challenged and supported his behaviour in a way that turned it into participation. He came back for many more sessions, whilst the group continued with a new appreciation of how dialogue works.

WORK IN PROGRESS