

CS1: HMP WHITEMOOR DIALOGUES MAIN

by Peter Garrett

Context

The first Dialogue Group started in a prison began on 7th Sept '93 on the main wings (C & D) at HMP Whitemoor, a high and maximum security prison in Cambridgeshire, England. Dave Parsons, a Probation Officer working in the prison, conceived of the group and based his proposal to Prison Management on the paper 'Dialogue – A Proposal' (co-authored by David Bohm, Peter Garrett and Don Factor). The idea was to bring together a group of prisoners with a few prison officers, other prison staff and volunteers on a weekly basis for open dialogue. Peter Garrett was a volunteer from the first session, and when Dave Parsons left the prison 9 months later, he continued to run the group as an external volunteer. The Dialogue Group proved extremely popular and ran weekly for the next 7 years. Detailed notes were kept of every session, and it formed the basis of all future Dialogue work in prisons, leading to the formation of Prison Dialogue (PD) as a not-for profit charity in 1996.

Aims and Objectives

Dave Parsons and Peter Garrett were both intrigued by the potential of Dialogue as a means of social integration. The prison culture was fragmented and dehumanised, commonly resulting in violation and violence. This Dialogue Group was seen as an opportunity to break down the barriers and humanise the relationships between different prisoner groupings, and between prisoners and staff. Prisoners were on long sentences (typically from 12 years to natural life), in single cells and the segregation block was full. 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. They accepted Probation's proposal to attempt to intervene in the situation without much understanding what was being proposed.

Method: Activity, Participants and Duration

To start the group a poster was designed with the slogan 'When you fight with monsters, take care you don't become a monster yourself'. This was intended to refer to the aggressive stand-off between different groups of prisoners, and

between prisoners and staff. It attracted a starting group of around 12 prisoners, which quickly increased to an average of 17 prisoners plus 6 others (limited by the capacity of the meeting room) of whom two were the security staff detailed to attend each group. Other prison staff involved over the years included all grades including Governors, Probation, Psychology, Chaplaincy and the Board of Visitors (now IMB). Visitors included staff from Prison Service HQ and both the Cambridge and Texas Institutes of Criminology. From the first session Volunteers (interested in learning about Dialogue) were invited from outside the prison. The intention was to include a cross-section of participants based on the notion that 'everybody learns but nobody teaches' (which later developed into a microcosm/macrocosm organisational change theory).

The group met weekly for at least 2 hours on Tuesday mornings 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 wherever it started and the facilitation was to encourage an enquiry into what had been said, rather than an argument. No subject was prohibited, but the putting down of individuals not present was not allowed. Attendance was voluntary 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 contributed more indirectly to their being resolved because people thought differently about those issues. It established a way of working which participants explained to new-comers at the outset, and eventually included a check-in and check-out (a round of comments at the start and close of each session).

Sometimes it was very personal (about individual's life experiences), sometimes political (eg with IRA Catholics, Protestants and British army participants engaging one another), sometimes organisational (eg about the impact of drug sniffer dogs on visitors), sometimes tragic (eg acknowledging the suicide of a participant), sometimes victorious (eg a participant finally winning his appeal after 18 years in prison), sometimes humorous (eg competing joke sessions) and sometimes spiritual (eg about the experience of different qualities of love).

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 then 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

The prisoners, who had generally received a limited education, showed a very significant increase in their vocabulary, their ability to reason and reflect, and their skills of social engagement. They not only supported and challenged each other but proved more than equal to taking on visiting Professors of Criminology about the validity of their research. They also began to view their own lives as a journey or story that they could author rather than suffer. This led strongly resistant offenders to participate in rather than reject what was on offer in the prison, including therapeutic treatment courses and education. Prisoners and staff were surprised to find each other to be intelligent and compassionate. "That is the first time in my life I ever heard that prisoner say something intelligent!" was a typical quote from a new security officer after first attending a Dialogue Group. The prison benefitted from a forum for social interaction. Even after minor rioting, when the entire prison was locked down, the Dialogue Group still ran. There are too many changing factors involved in policy, practice and resourcing to find a statistical correlation, but incidents did dip markedly on Tuesdays and reduced during the life of the Dialogue Group. PD gained experience and reputation, and had a regular setting for the development of dialogic facilitators.

Learning

PD empirically realised a set of Dialogic Practices (Voice, Listening, Respect and Suspension) without which good quality conversation is not possible. In a setting where violation and violence are commonplace, respect is fundamental to people listening to each other, speaking genuinely and loosening their certainty that they are right and others are wrong. This formed the basis of the dialogic facilitation. Secondly it learnt how to convey the facilitation skills to others and thereby move towards becoming redundant. This involved a deliberate transparency whereby the facilitator explains why and how they are facilitating in a given way. Over time many of the prisoners, some officers and some volunteers gained good facilitative skills. Thirdly the Dialogue Group provided an excellent research forum and work by the Cambridge Institute of

Criminology (Alison Liebling and David Price) was significantly aided by the group giving access to thinking that is not normally accessible. This opened the door to Dialogue as a research methodology.

WORK IN PROGRESS