

MAPPING THE RESTORATIVE UNIVERSE: A PLENARY PROCESS TO PROMOTE A GLOBAL ALLIANCE

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THE CONFERENCE EXPERIENCE

Professional conferences are a fact of modern life. We travel to hotels in other cities, or even in foreign countries, to spend three or four days with a diverse group of professional colleagues, to advance our understanding of the field we work in, to catch the latest developments and to have professional exchanges with our peers. We attend presentations and workshops; we try to network with lots of people, catching up with those we’ve known before, meeting new people.

There is often a frenetic energy present at conferences. People are stimulated by a wealth of new information and interactions with a large number of other individuals. For some, this produces a real sense of excitement and motivation; for others, it can be an overwhelming experience.

Sometimes people come with specific expectations and desires, and are able to fulfill those. Others just enjoy a general excitement prompted by such a concentrated encounter with so many colleagues working in related fields. Still others are frustrated by the plethora of session choices and the necessity to choose among them with only limited information about the presenters and the real content of the sessions. They may find interactions too short, with not enough time in sessions to ask critical questions. Too often, the conference is over before they can really get a chance to explore the issues that are central to their work.

In our experience, many people are hungry for more dialogue—the deep, shared exploration of experience and ideas. Conferences seem like promising places to promote such dialogue, because they bring together the right people for these deep exchanges—those who share both professional experience and passion. But these events

often fail to fulfill this potential for dialogue, not only because there is too much to do in too short a time, but because of a lack of social structures to pursue these dialogues.

There is another way in which conferences are both promising and frustrating. Many who attend are seeking an overview of their field. They want to understand the larger picture, to have some sense about how the many practices, programs and research activities fit together. They want to have a better sense of their own place in this “universe.” This is especially true in a young and dynamic field like restorative practices, which hasn’t fallen into the high degree of specialization that typically characterizes more traditional disciplines and professions. People in this field are still excited to know how what they are thinking and doing as individuals, in their own local work, fits into this larger picture. In this regard, the conference seems to offer exciting possibilities, because it is a vibrant marketplace in which this universe of activities is on display. But at the same time, it is often frustrating, because there is too much information and too many choices, but very little overall conceptual structure to help us make sense of the larger picture.

It was our emerging awareness of these two central needs—the need for dialogue and the need to grasp the larger picture—that prompted us last year (2003) to design a workshop session called “Mapping the Restorative Universe” for the first IIRP conference on “Building a Global Alliance,” in Veldhoven, Netherlands. This year, at the invitation of Ted Wachtel, we have redesigned the workshop as a full plenary session for the second IIRP “Global Alliance” conference in Vancouver, Canada.

It is our belief that when any of us encourage people to engage in dialogue and to enhance their shared understanding of the big picture, we thereby support the emergence of our restorative community’s “collective intelligence.” We first heard this term from Tom Atlee at a conference on organizational transformation in the Napa Valley of California, in about 1994. Tom has been a leading exponent of the idea of collective intelligence for many years, and we were inspired by his vision. He subsequently founded an organization, the Co-Intelligence Institute, whose website is the best source for ideas, literature and links on collective intelligence (which Tom calls co-intelligence). The home page introduces the concept:

Healthy communities, institutions and societies—perhaps even our collective survival—depend on our ability to organize our collective affairs more wisely, in tune with each other and nature.

This ability to wisely organize our lives together—all of us being wiser together than any of us could be alone—we call co-intelligence [see <http://www.co-intelligence.org/co-intelligence-1.html>].

Co-intelligence is emerging through new developments in democracy, organizational development, collaborative processes, the Internet and systems sciences like ecology and complexity. Today millions of people are involved in co-creating co-intelligence. Our diverse efforts grow more effective as we discover we are part of a larger transformational enterprise, and as we learn together and from each other.

(Atlee, 2003)

As organizational development consultants, we have been especially interested in how the concept of collective intelligence can help us design large-group events like professional conferences. In the restorative community, we believe that working more consciously with this concept is key to realizing the vision of these IIRP conferences—building a global alliance.

LARGE-GROUP PROCESS MODELS THAT ENGAGE WHOLE SYSTEMS AND COMMUNITIES

While conference breaks and meals do provide an informal framework, the idea of having formal structured time creates the possibility for a whole community to engage in a more intentional utilization of our collective intelligence. Both of us have been deeply interested in participative methods that enable whole communities, institutions and organizations to come together to establish common ground and work collectively toward a shared issue or desired future. In integrating this notion of collective intelligence with restorative justice, one of us (Thom Allena) has pushed the restorative conferencing paradigm by using facilitation models that have involved up to 60 people over the course of several days.

One of our seminal influences in applying this concept of collective intelligence to large-group process has been the philosophy and practices of Open Space Technology as developed by Harrison Owen (Owen, 1992). Open Space, which is built upon Owen's experiences with a West African village, is predicated on the idea that, similar to many restorative practices, the circle is the fundamental geometry of open human communication. At the heart of Open Space is a core belief that people have the innate ability to self-organize, and, as with any restorative practice, the process allows for diverse groups of people to come together, listen deeply to one another and co-create shared outcomes.

A second model that informs our thinking about convening large groups of diverse people is known as a “search conference” or “future search conference” (Emery & Purser, 1996; Weisbord & Janoff, 1995). These are participative design methods that operate with the assumption that people do not need experts or designated leaders to develop and implement action plans to solve problems for them. Instead, it is assumed that they have the ability to make sense of the world around them and can create their own future. Thus, search conference processes set up a highly democratic, self-managing community that transcends bureaucratic structures in favor of cross-functional (or transnational) relationships.

It should be noted that our design for this plenary session draws on experience with these and other large-group process models, but it does not replicate any of them. Like the field of restorative practices itself, the field of large-group process design and

facilitation is a new and rapidly evolving one, and practitioners are constantly adapting methods to improve the way people meet, share information and feelings, and make decisions. (For a comprehensive overview of these many process models, see Holman & Devane, 1999). Our design has its own special emphasis, the “mapping” concept. In a previous career, one of us (Mark Seidler) was a graphic artist, and in our group work, we are increasingly recognizing the value of visual devices, like maps and diagrams, to supplement the spoken and written word.

THE IDEA OF MAPPING

Mapping has both a literal and a metaphorical meaning here. We want people to think of our collective wealth of experience and ideas as a “universe” of sorts, analogous to a physical universe that can be more easily navigated by future explorers if we put our minds to creating more accurate and extensive maps. This mapping concept is particularly important when we are trying to create a shared sense of understanding, a “big picture,” in a complex and expanding field with so much information and activity. Even as we work to promote participation and dialogue, we also seek better ways to allow participants to integrate the information, ideas and experience that are being shared. There is so much going on that people at times feel intimidated by the amount of information and by the diversity of programs, practices and research that are on display.

While some respond to this array of possibilities by simply choosing a very narrow focus of topics and presenters closely related to their own work, many (we believe) still hold a desire to understand this larger universe of possibilities and interrelationships. Taking the idea of mapping in the more literal sense, we can use visual devices to give us another channel by which we can take in data. As human beings, we are visual as well as verbal processors of data, and maps lend themselves well to helping us organize vast amounts of data into general categories, and, when we have generated these initial maps, to navigate more quickly through this broad universe, to recognize where our interests fit into this larger picture, and to find unexpected connections with others operating under different labels.

We believe that all fields of human endeavor where knowledge and experience are expanding exponentially can benefit from these kinds of participatory and integrative processes, ranging across the social, scientific, psychological, educational and organizational disciplines. The field of restorative justice and restorative practices seems to be an especially good place to make this kind of exploration, because it is relatively new, with a corresponding lack of a hardened professional culture, because it draws on expertise from a wide range of more traditional professions, and also because there is a wealth of enthusiasm on the part of so many practitioners who are truly excited about what they are doing and feel it holds potential for real change in the world.

RETHINKING THE CONFERENCE EXPERIENCE

Most conferences are still fundamentally structured on an “expert” model. That is, most of the conference time is taken up with sessions in which there are presenters who are in some sense understood to be experts in their field of activity. There is and will continue to be an important place for this display of expertise. We love the opportunity to hear from and ask face-to-face questions of those who have done groundbreaking conceptual or programmatic work, or who can offer specific methods or recipes for addressing challenges that we ourselves are facing, such as how we set up circles for violent crimes, or how we can better sell restorative approaches to politicians or to the public at large. We learn from those who have gone before us.

But as we come to see more clearly how much our lives and our work are embedded in complex, interdependent systems, we realize that hearing from experts, while useful, is only part of our development. There is evidence that our best learning happens in communities of practice, which are informal networks of conversations among practitioners in particular organizations, professions or fields of endeavor. There is growing evidence that such communities of practice are more important than formal training in learning how to do our jobs and in advancing our professional development (Brown & Duguid, 1991). While the original idea referred to colleagues within an organization, we can easily see that the concept applies as well to people coming together at professional conferences.

This concept of a community of practice has been of great interest to us because it resonates with our own experience that we, like many others, often learn best within the framework or context of a community. This may also provide some understanding as to why many of us choose the restorative justice community as a place of affiliation, connection and practice. Just as the origins of restorative justice are grounded in tribal roots, so too are our own inner needs for a community or “tribe” with whom we can practice rituals that embody our deepest sense of shared meaning.

The concept also illuminates our thinking about the social mechanisms that might promote our collective intelligence. Our plenary design can thus be seen as a way to facilitate at a conference what people in workplaces do naturally when they have the opportunity and the encouragement—that is, engage in informal conversations with their peers to enhance their own learning, in ways that fill in gaps left by more formal training and presentation events.

MAPPING THE RESTORATIVE UNIVERSE: A PREVIEW OF THE PROCESS

Step One: Configuring A Common Map for the Global Dialogue

Our process is intended to give all conference participants a way to more easily find others with different backgrounds but similar interests, and then to move into small-group

dialogues. To do this, we began with an overall framework, or “map,” of the kinds of issues that might be of interest to restorative practitioners. Prior to the conference, we began by generating a broad list of some possible topics for small-group dialogue. This list came originally out of our own work experience and was then expanded based on our conversations with other participants at last year’s IIRP conference, as well as by reviewing the range of session offerings at both years’ conferences. The list was then grouped into broad categories, and these categories became the basis for the map, which allows us to see at a glance where all the various possible topics fit. (See Figure 1. Also, see the Appendix for a full list of “discussion and decision points.”)

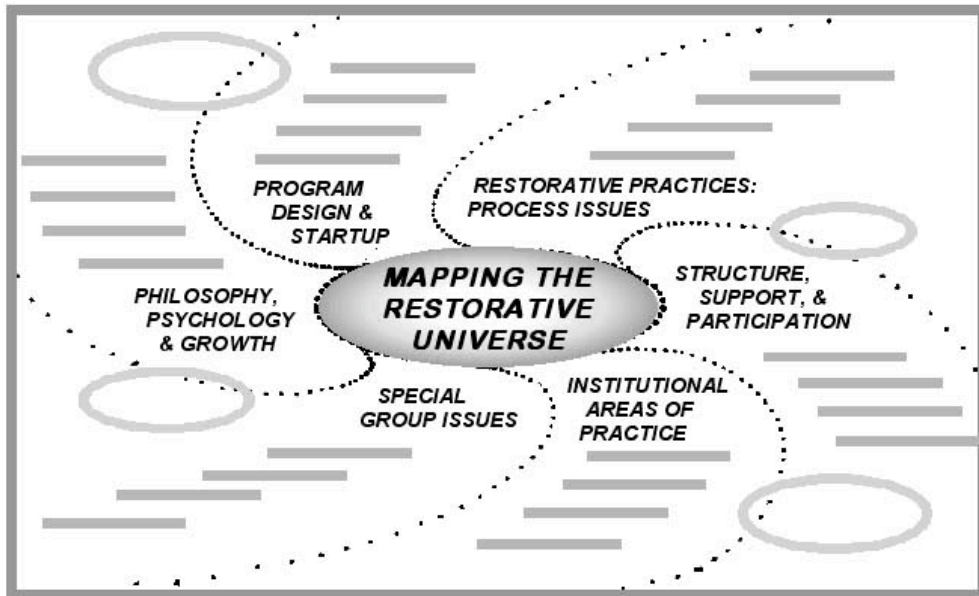


Figure 1. Preliminary Conceptual Map of the Restorative Universe

Our topical categories are not intended to be a definitive description of the restorative universe. Rather, this first map is a structural starting place for people to identify their interests and group themselves. We expect that people will modify or add to these topic categories. Our initial map is not to be considered a comprehensive map, but rather a facilitative device to start the process. Between us, we have had a substantial amount of experience in the restorative practices field, but there is no way that we, as presenters, can anticipate all the issues and subjects for dialogue that will be of special interest to this large, diverse group of participants.

Step Two: Moving into Small Group Dialogue

The map provides the starting place, a visual organizer, for people to choose which small group they wish to participate in. When they have selected their group, we offer some simple guidelines to encourage an effective small-group process. We might ask

people to structure their conversation by having everyone respond to a few basic questions, such as:

- a. Multiple Perspectives: What is your experience around this group's topic?
- b. What successes have you had, and what have you learned from doing your work?
- c. What questions do you have, or what challenges do you face, around this topic?

This framework is intended to give people the maximum freedom to dialogue with each other, within a structure that relies on some basic restorative values, which might be stated as:

- a. Encouraging all voices to be heard, respectfully
- b. Inviting everyone to share what gifts s/he brings to the process
- c. Inquiring what each one needs, or wants to take away from this event.

In other words, our structure is intended to insure an effective group process, drawing out “the wisdom of the circle,” while leaving the specific content as open as possible to individual group needs.

Unlike a pure Open Space process, in which the participants themselves invent the topics for small-group dialogue, we begin with a map that includes our best guess on the range of topics of interest. (We do this partly because of time limitations, and partly because we have found that many people prefer to be offered some structure at the beginning of a group process.) But we retain some of the spirit of the Open Space process in two ways. First, we make it clear that participants can change or add to our initial map offering; if a topic as described by us on the initial map isn't quite what people want to talk about, they are free to change it to meet their needs. Second, we remind them of the “law of two feet,” which encourages participants to take responsibility for their own learning. The “law of two feet” boldly recommends that when we find ourselves in a situation where we are neither learning nor contributing to the conversation, that we should get up and move to a place that works for us. This radical sense of permission allows those who don't like to be forced into a choice to sample different group dialogues, while those who want deepen their dialogue in one area can do so. Such freedom unlocks many a creative door.

Step Three: Mapping the Global Dialogue

In addition to promoting high-quality small-group dialogues, we want to add another component that we believe is part of the larger mission of activating our collective intelligence. We want a way for people to share with others what happened in their small groups. Of course the full richness of any small-group dialogue cannot be fully conveyed to anyone who was not present, but we want to find a way to offer everyone at the conference an opportunity to have at least some sense of what happened in other groups.

To do this, we return to the mapping concept. Just as we used a simple process structure to help people share in each small group, we use a corresponding structure to assist people in each small group to create a large paper graphic which captures some of the highlights of their dialogues. Direct verbal interactions are supplemented with the creation of these graphic maps. These maps are each constructed using roughly the same conceptual framework across small groups. At the end of the plenary session, they will be posted on public walls at the conference center and will be available for participants to peruse at leisure during their remaining time at the conference.

Because many people are unfamiliar with the idea of conceptual maps, we provide a template that small groups can use if they wish, with the understanding that they are free to do it differently. Our template map might include these elements: the topic name written large, a summary map of the group’s answers to several major questions (e.g., experiences and perspectives, successes and learnings, and questions and challenges), and the names and contact information for all the participants in that small group. We also encourage participants to be creative in designing their maps, making use of colors, diagrams and even images to add appeal, and to capture and express additional dimensions of their group experience in non-verbal ways.

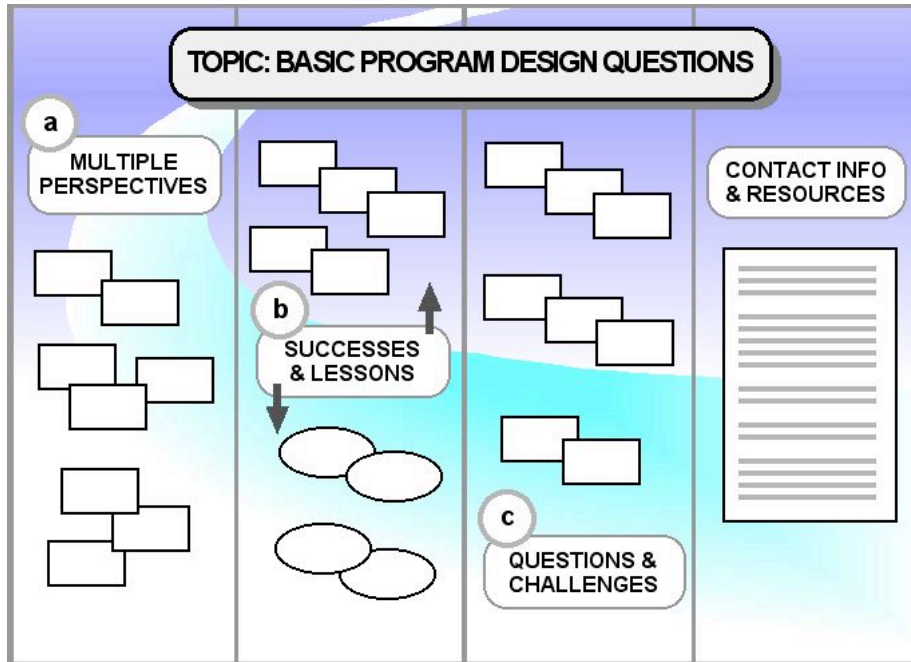


Figure 2. Preliminary Conceptual Map of the Restorative Universe

We recognize that in selecting a particular small group for dialogue, participants face the same dilemma that they have in choosing among multiple simultaneous presentations offered during the traditional part of the conference. While we haven’t figured out a way to change the physical law that allows us to be in only one place at one time, by

providing more transparency for what happens in each small group, we hope to relieve some of the pressure that people experience in having to select one among multiple topics of great interest.

Step Four: Accessing The Global Restorative Marketplace

Our intention is that the process that we will co-create will not be limited by the boundaries of the plenary time and space. We will keep our shared-work product exhibited for the balance of the conference in our plenary room as a “global restorative marketplace” of sorts. We will encourage participants to revisit the “marketplace” during the balance of the conference and access ideas, interests, inspiration, resources and potential partners for learning and implementation beyond the conference. Our hope is that the ideas, inquiries and relationships fostered by this process will transcend the plenary, the conference and global boundaries. And for our next conference, for our next exercise in collective intelligence, our original conceptual map of the restorative universe will be enlarged and enriched to incorporate the insights that have been generated by this group of people. Building a global alliance of restorative practices, in our view, is an ongoing conversation that never ends.

LITERATURE

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APPENDIX

MAPPING THE RESTORATIVE UNIVERSE:
DISCUSSION AND DECISION POINTS

RESTORATIVE PROGRAMS: DESIGN AND STARTUP

1. Basic program design questions: mission, case focus, primary clients
2. Funding: How do we financially support our work with restorative practices?
3. Ownership and structure of restorative programs: Where are they housed and how are they managed?
4. Institutional startups: How do we go about starting a restorative program within a criminal justice institution or public agency?
5. Community startups: How do we go about starting a restorative program in a local community or neighborhood?
6. School startups: How do we go about starting a restorative program within a school or university?

RESTORATIVE PRACTICES: PROCESS ISSUES

7. Overview of practices: comparing the various restorative practices as to methods, expected results, and suitability to different environments and different kinds of offenses and conflicts
8. Improving our practice by refining process awareness: participation criteria, conference preparation, choice of scripts and protocols
9. Restorative practice follow-up: How do we monitor and evaluate the outcomes of our restorative practices?
10. Role of the facilitator: skills, training, latitude

STRUCTURE, SUPPORT AND PARTICIPATION

11. Legal context: How do restorative programs interact with existing criminal justice or social welfare systems?
12. Policy context: How can legislatures and other policy-making institutions be encouraged to support restorative practices?
13. Public awareness: How do we educate and build support for restorative practices among the public?
14. Stakeholder participation: How do we motivate people to participate in restorative practices, at all levels?

INSTITUTIONAL AREAS OF PRACTICE

How are or can restorative practices be applied to the following?

15. Police and law enforcement
16. Courts
17. Diversion
18. Child and family welfare
19. Prisons
20. Parole/re-entry
21. Schools
22. Community

SPECIAL GROUP ISSUES

23. Victim awareness
24. Homeless people and restorative practices
25. Gender issues related to restorative practices
26. Restorative practices in dealing with severe offenses
27. Cross-cultural differences in restorative practices

PHILOSOPHY, PSYCHOLOGY AND GROWTH

28. Restorative philosophy: How do we better articulate the spirit of the restorative justice and restorative practices movement?
29. Emotional dynamics: What do we need to understand about human emotions in order to have effective restorative practices?
30. Practitioner care: What are the personal issues for facilitators, coordinators, administrators and others in the restorative practices field?
31. Expanding the restorative field: How can we apply the restorative philosophy and spirit in new arenas, such as ethnic conflict, international relations and organizational well-being?
32. Exploring the boundaries: How does our work relate to that of practitioners in allied fields, such as peace and conflict resolution, community organizing and psychotherapy?