DIALOGUE HOME GROUPS: OPTIMIZING TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER FOR SOCIAL PROGRAMMING

GRUPOS DE DIÁLOGO EN CASA: OPTIMIZACIÓN DE LA TRANSFERENCIA DE TECNOLOGÍA PARA LA PROGRAMACIÓN SOCIAL

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Resumen

Para los profesionales del servicio social y trabajadores sociales relacionados, viajar internacionalmente para asistir a congresos profesionales se convierte en un a oportunidad excelente para aprender a cerca del desarrollo social y programas sociales de otras regiones del mundo. Las conferencias multinacionales, al propiciar el encuentro de participantes de diversos países, ofrecen una gran oportunidad para animar a los participantes a pensar más allá de sus propios límites contextuales y culturales. Para los autores de este ensayo, el uso del acercamiento del "grupo de diálogo en casa" es una estrategia que intenta dar respuesta a esta necesidad de optimizar el aprendizaje. Los autores definirán este acercamiento grupal, identificarán los pasos para establecer este tipo de grupos y proporcionarán una estrategia para evaluar su efectividad, tocando aspectos relacionados con retos culturales y linguísticos. Se usarán varios ejemplos de diáologo grupal en casa para ilustrar cómo se afrontaron tales retos para optimizar el aprendizaje y la estructura de redes.

Abstract

For social service professionals and related human services workers, traveling internationally to professional conferences becomes an exciting opportunity to learn about social development and social programming in other regions of the world. Multinational conferences, which bring conferees together from a host of countries, offer a great opportunity to push participants to think beyond their own contextual and cultural frames. For the authors of this paper, the use of the "dialogue home group" approach is a strategy that attempts to respond to this need for learning optimization. The authors will define this group approach, identify steps in establishing these types of groups, and provide a strategy to evaluate its effectiveness, addressing issues of cultural and linguistic challenges. Several home group

dialogue examples will be used to illustrate how these challenges were addressed in order to optimize learning and networking.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Grupos de diálogo, Profesionales de los servicios sociales, Conferencias internacionales, Aprendizaje, Transferencia de tecnología.

KEYWORDS: Dialogue groups, Social service professionals/social workers, International conferences, Learning, Technology transfer.

INTRODUCTION

The world becomes smaller, maybe even friendlier, as we travel beyond our national borders and across seas. We find learning about cultures exciting. Every "dip" into a new culture affords the opportunity to learn about "others" as well as ourselves. For social service professionals and related human services workers, traveling internationally to professional conferences becomes an exciting opportunity to learn about social development and social programming in other regions of the world. Multinational conferences, which bring conferees together from a host of countries, may offer the greatest opportunity to push participants to think beyond their own contextual frames. In most cases, the diversity available at multinational conferences gives each participant important glimpses toward what is truly "similar" about our work with people and communities and what is really "different." At the same time, attempting to synthesize information and ideas at multinational conferences is daunting. Building ways to optimize the learning for each conference participant is vital. For the authors of this paper, the use of the dialogue home group approach is one strategy that attempts to respond to the need for learning optimization. The authors will define this group approach, identify the steps in establishing these types of groups and provide a strategy to evaluate the effectiveness of this type of group experience addressing issues of cultural and linguistic challenges. Several home group dialogue examples will be used to illustrate how these challenges were minimized.

THE ROLE OF PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION CONFERENCES

Much can be learned as social service professionals and related human services workers listen and share professional experiences in the conference milieu. Our formal presentations, workshops, panel presentations and even roundtable groups, offer formats to educate us on the many trials faced in responding to the challenges for individuals and families with whom we work each day. Equally true, much can be learned as we listen and share our stories of success and failures in responding to the needs of communities, families, and individuals. Yet, most conferences offer many more topics than can be captured and crammed into 12 to 15 hours of content per day. Being weary often accompanies our conference saga, but our enthusiasm for new ideas and, new ways to engage in our work sustain our interest.

This article provides an opportunity to learn about how those who cross oceans and borders to attend multinational professional conferences develop new potential for professional growth. These conferences can be the venue for important "technology transfer." Knowledge, values, skills, and intervention strategies that foster social development become potential technologies that can be transferred or imported into different regions of the world, into our organizations and communities. The process of organizing multinational

educational social work/social services conferences is vital for social service professionals and related human services workers who wish to foster global connections and successful technology transfer.

Though technology transfer is not a term frequently used in social work, the phrase is known among those who step into the global arena and work in social development programming (For example, See Martinez-Brawley & Delevan, 1993). Technology transfer is a process of introducing a "technology" (e.g., conceptual framework, theory, perspective, intervention approach, methodology, behavioral prescription) into a new environment. Social work and social service providers, typically transfer intervention approaches as technology though a wide range of policy platforms have been transferred widely throughout the globe. Though examples exist over many decades, in the last two decades we have seen the transfer of narrative therapy (White and Epston, 1990) from Australia to many other regions of the globe. Another example is the use of family conferencing that originated among indigenous Maori peoples of New Zealand and has been adopted by many countries. The description provided in this paper serves to illustrate how technology transfer, for a profession such as social work, is difficult at best and in some instances, impeded because of language and cultural differences. This paper will describe how using "dialogue home groups" at recent multinational educational conferences helped conferees from many different countries, with many different "first" languages, gain better understanding of material presented and consider whether such material might be transferable to their own regions and/or communities.

The educational laboratory

The range of social work theories and knowledge bases are intertwined with the art of our practice (Morales & Sheafor, 2003). Our educational laboratories must bring that mix of knowledge and creative practice to any successful educational experience, particularly when we are working across multinational, multicultural groups. The educational laboratory from which the ideas are gleaned came out of a series of large group family intervention conference programs co-organized with colleagues from the U.S. and the emerging democracies of the former Soviet Union (i.e., Russia and others from the Newly Independent States and Central Independent States). The series of conferences, using the dialogue home groups, included participants from at least eight NIS/CIS countries (i.e., Belarus, the Ukraine, Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, Azerbaijan, Moldavia, Serbia) who joined participants from a range of westernized countries including the United States, Great Britain, Australia, Ireland, and Germany. The alliance that supported these conferences was initiated in the 1980s by Virginia Satir, a pioneer in family therapy and family intervention theory. Ms. Satir was speaking and presenting family "camp" workshops in Russia and other parts of the Soviet Union prior to her death in 1988. After her death, her students and colleagues (e.g., Brothers, 1993; Dodson, 1991) formed the Institute for International Connections (IIC) which continues to bring family training to those countries that were new to the experience of providing community services to families. IIC is a U. S.-based international membership organization dedicated to furthering the groundbreaking approach to working with families developed by Virginia Satir.

THE TIMING AND CONTEXT

These multinational conferences began just before the fall of the Soviet Union and continued after the many satellite nations of the Soviet Union became 22 self-governing and sovereign countries. Because these countries had all been Russian-speaking countries, Russian and English were the languages used by translators in the large group presentations. Speakers who were presenting content could select the language they wanted to use, and the interpreters would move from one to the other very efficiently. Translation that is not simultaneous, as was the case in these conferences, actually was quite beneficial. The speaker had the time to consider what he or she had said, while the translation was being provided. And, for those conference participants who wanted to work on their bilingual abilities, the translation process gave them the opportunity to listen to both versions of the presentation. Though conferences have to plan on spending double the amount of time when using non-simultaneous translation, there is a pace and flow that unfolds, which is not viewed as problematic by conference participants.

These bilingual conferences offered a wide range of educational experiences, transferring technologies that addressed macro level actions and micro level family and individual interventions. A large part of the programs presented tools and techniques to utilize family intervention and family counseling in a host of varied institutional and community settings. Over the course of these multinational conferences, a mix of small and large group processes created ways for participants to process through ideas transmitted. In having space available in the conference planning that fostered reflection on content presented, the conference participants were able to reach toward transferring the information or technology being shared.

DEFINING DIALOGUE

Dialogue is a group experience designed by Bohm (1996), a quantum physicist and social philosopher. Seeking ways of understanding complex realities, dialogue groups bring about a process of group discussion that holds great promise (Senge, 2004). Dialogue looks beyond conversational parlance and exchange. It is a process that explores any range of human experiences, our values, our view of the world, the way we think and how our ideas and views shape our sense of "truth."

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE DIALOGUE APPROACH AND PROCESS

Dialogue as a process for groups consists of four main building blocks (HRI Inc., 1999 as cited in Schatz, Furman, & Jenkins, 2003) identified as 1) suspension of judgment (listening without forming personal objections and/or opinions), 2) assumption identification (deconstruction of personal assumptions), 3) listening, and 4) inquiry and reflection. Dialogue, in seeking common ground, is particularly open in design and process, usually without an agenda or any expected outcomes. As presented in Figure 1, five key expectations frame the work of dialogue as follows: 1) authenticity as a person in the process of the dialogue group, 2) respectfulness, listening fully and completely as each group member speaks, 3) thoughtfulness, being one's self, not the labels, degrees, etc., being "there, in the moment" and genuine, 4) inclusiveness, fostering opportunities and invitations for everyone to voice their thoughts, ideas, and insights, and 5) suspending judgment of ideas and thoughts presented, being totally open and accepting of the whole experience, being willing to suspend the more combative conversational debate model,

thus recognizing that closure is not needed or required in the process of finding common ground. Hsai (2005), in her work with Asian "foreign brides," locates this common ground among women of varied nationalities who all come to the recognition that they share the label and accompanying trials and challenges as "foreign brides" in Taiwan.

FIGURE 1: EXPECTATIONS FOR GROUP MEMBERS IN A DIALOGUE GROUP*
AUTHENTICITY: Bringing one's authentic self to the process, which involves letting go of a kind of auto-tronic civil nature. Our authenticity promotes real inquiry, rather than rebuttal and quizzing.
RESPECT: Respect is displayed through group norms such as not interrupting others and avoiding intrusive probing, advice-giving, or attempting to get others to come to the same "side."
THOUGHTFULNESS: Dialogue begins with suspension of thoughts, impulses, judgments, and related interpersonal behaviors. Suspension involves attention, looking and being. Thoughtfulness asks that people speak only when they are moved to share something. Reflection is viewed as contributing to a deeper level of thoughtfulness; thus, silence is expected and honored throughout dialogue.
INCLUSIVENESS: Everyone is invited into the discussion, given the opportunity to contribute and share his or her ideas, insights, reflections, and opinions. Time and silence are honored as aspects that foster inclusiveness.
Suspension of judgment: Judgment is suspended. Closure is not needed or required.

*Adapted from Institute for International Connections, 1998.

In the dialogue process, group members are encouraged to ask questions in the spirit of gaining additional insight and perspective (Bohm, 1996). Questions are not asked to ascertain the correctness of ideas, but instead, questions are offered in order to draw out connections and provide additional understanding.

Among the important benefits of the dialogic approach, the process allows participants to express themselves authentically, without fear of judgment. Bohm and Edwards (1992) formulated dialogue groups as a means of recreating communal experiences. They suggest that people have become more competitive and less cooperative in their communication. On a global scale this competitive process contributes to many present-day social problems (Bohm & Peat, 2000). The process of dialogue groups moves members from competitive ways of being in social interactions towards egalitarian and caring relationships.

Dialogue is a synergistic experience. Group members share their ideas, concerns, hopes, and even dreams about how they see their life unfolding and transforming (Schatz, Furman, & Jenkins, 2003, p. 491). As illustrated in the work of Schatz, Furman, and Jenkins, the creative dialogic group process opens group communication, so that with this process one can begin to free her or himself of the oppressor within (Freire, 1970), and, at the same time, discover the supportive "glue" of community, seeing possibilities to move into stronger alliances that foster peace and justice-making. Participants contribute their authentic ideas, feelings, experiences, and responses, building on one another's thoughts, forming an experience of collective engagement.

THE DIALOGUE HOME GROUP

Building upon the description of the dialogue group as described above, the use of a dialogue approach for participants at a multinational conference is a natural extension for this group approach. Conventional conferences often provide presenters in 1-, 2-, or 3- hour blocks. Audience participants are passive learners. The outcome of that experience is often very marginal. Participants leave the conference and may or may not digest and reflect upon the value of what they heard. By building in a process where conference participants have a time period each day where they can "safely" meet with other conference members and reflect upon what they heard in various sessions can foster a very different learning experience. This was the underlying idea for the managers and organizers of the IIC multinational conferences.

Home base groups were organized at each conference so that smaller groups of people divided into groups across nationalities. Generally, groups of 8 to 12 were given 60 to 90 minutes at the end of each day's series of presentations. In the dialogue home groups, participants could reflect on ideas presented and intervention approaches demonstrated or decide to talk about other things such as their current work settings, families, or views on current events. Each dialogue home group has an assigned facilitator, and the opening day at each multinational conference included an introduction to the dialogue home group process. Facilitators welcomed everyone to the group each day and offered some support and even direction. "[A facilitator's] role should be to occasionally point out situations that might be presenting sticking points for the group...but these interventions should never be manipulative nor obtrusive" (Bohm as quoted in Smith, 2001, p. 6). Facilitators can share as equal group members because everyone's voice is vital to the experience. In addition, the home dialogue group facilitators met each day to connect and address ideas or concerns that bubbled up across the groups.

RELEVANT EXAMPLES OF DIALOGUE HOME GROUPS

A few examples will give insight into how dialogue home groups contributed to the learning experiences at IIC multinational conferences. These examples are brief descriptions and the authors are collapsing group experiences that transpired among dialogue groups meeting for 5 to 10 days.

Dialogue in a family training program in the Ukraine

Six UNESCO Family Programs were the focus of an IIC multinational conference. These UNESCO programs provide services to families and communities affected by the Chernobyl reactor spill. Using a combination of educational learning approaches including home dialogue groups, the conference leadership created the following goals: (1) to create a healthy, competent multicultural, bilingual community, (2) to translate the basic concepts and tools of family systems therapy using Satir's work, (3) to provide opportunities for participants to experience the impact of these techniques, and (4) to create and enjoy the interpersonal experiences of learning with new colleagues.

Dialogue home groups provided opportunities to practice some of the technology being introduced such as family assessment strategies and family problem solving strategies. Because the dialogue groups are led by the participants' wants and needs, the group

might also choose to talk about more personal, even difficult issues addressing family challenges, grief, loss, and community despair.

The technology transfer process of the conference's curriculum was working reasonably well despite trans-cultural issues that had arisen. In the first days of the conference, many participants were connecting primarily within their own ethnic groups. Conversations were more professionally centered with limited exchanges about personal implications of the professional materials being discussed or technologies to be transferred.

Loss focuses multinational conference

One of the dialogue home groups had moved to their own new areas of content, which becomes vital for dialogue process. This group had come together over the issue of near death experiences. The shift to near death experiences was made without the support of one of the group's facilitators and was the start of a significant cultural shift—a shift joining the members who were from varied countries with varied first languages and national identities. Later that same day, the conference participants experienced a sad loss. One of the teenagers, who came with his parents, drowned in a lake where the children had been enjoying the summer weather. It did not come as a surprise that the tragic loss of this teenager joined to the very conversations of the dialogue home group. These group members, having begun a discussion around death experiences, had opened a door that helped as the conference members had to change their focus from one of attending a conference with a pre-planned agenda, to a process of helping a conference community attend to the needs of the whole community including the need to grieve this special loss. The focus was on doing what was needed to be done. Taking initiative to do the right thing—without first seeking approval from the group's leadership—was quite significant.

This second example perhaps even more dramatically demonstrates the trans-cultural transfer of information at an even more action-producing level. The first major decision the group faced after the loss of this teenager was the question of whether to end the conference in respect to the family. The new levels of cohesion were created in working to support the rescue efforts and in identifying ways to help all the conference members cope with the tragedy.

There was, however, a gift given with this loss, in fact, the opportunity for each dialogue home group to spend time talking, crying, doing whatever was needed to find the words that came from their hearts. A new spirit of coming together created a new space for profound learning. Healthy differences of opinion were evident but were not focused around protecting cultural perspectives and/or recalling past differences amongst various cultural groups around previous Soviet or American politics. This new atmosphere led to more intimate communications at all levels of the conference, allowing all participants to more quickly apply the information learned to their own personal, cultural and professional lives. It was this more rapid application of the lesson to the culture that created another event in one of the author's groups, which would dramatically demonstrate the inculcation of the lessons learned and create a change that would affect the lives of all at our conference.

Several days after the death of this teen, a member of the author's group posed the question, "Wasn't there anything we could do to warn people of the dangers at this lake?" The small dialogue group asked around and learned that there were no warning signs at

the lake. The group also learned that on average three to five people lost their lives each year just as this teenager had. It took just a few moments for our group to apply some of the skills we had learned at the conference and share others we had learned elsewhere and come up with some creative solutions. As so many of us were drinking bottled water, we had many potential buoys that could be strung up around the dangerous drop-off that seemed to be the cause of young person's drowning. We decided we could buy some water proof cord, paint and wood for signs. This would allow us make a difference and make this part of the world just a little safer.

At that moment some of the Eastern Europeans questioned whether we would be permitted to do any of these changes, one of the American's in the group made a comment that initially stunned us with its simplicity and seeming naïveté. Most matter-of-factly she said, "Well, of course we can do this; the Ukraine is a free country! Isn't it?" The initial silence was deafening and her comment a little shocking to the group as a whole. After a moment or two, the Eastern Europeans began to shake their heads in assent: "Of course this is a free country!" Heads nodded and folks agreed that after all, we were only interested in making things better for the community—save future lives, spare families some profound grief. There could be no reason we couldn't do this. The technology transfer was indeed working. The discussion moved quickly into the practical realm. How would we actually do this? What would we need to do to make it happen? We made a list and followed through.

Addressing civil conflict and war in Azerbaijan

A third example comes from a multinational conference held in Azerbaijan organized to address families impacted by civil conflict and wars. Fourteen countries were represented, and again, dialogue home groups were organized with facilitators. No interpreters were available for the small groups but every group seemed to work more than adequately. People shared their hopes and dreams for their communities, their families and themselves. One dialogue group also surfaced to talk about peace. This dialogue group surfaced because there was no conference focus on the topic and one of the conference organizers believed that there should be an opportunity to share and consider this along with the impacts of civil conflict and war. The group met for most of one afternoon and the group members then added another time to meet since this dialogue had the potential to offer a new path, a new view of what had to be considered in this conference focus. Interestingly, all the conference members identified how their own country was struggling to address the aftermath of violence and loss.

Building dialogue groups from participant requests

Another experience with dialogue groups that emerged from this larger conference being offered was the request for groups that were gender specific. The men's and women's groups followed the dialogue tenets addressed earlier, and added to the process the hope that they would find common ground, even support for issues and ideas that related to their gender identity and the positions that their cultures defined because of gender. Cultural discussions were honest, often bringing much humor, and offered a bonding, an opportunity to share important content about personal and cultural meaning. Even when language may have been a potential stumbling block, the process always supported reaching

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shared understanding. For example, group members would ask if everyone understood the points that were just made or the group would wait while one member provided some translation or further explanation for another group member. Dialogue groups, needing a different meeting time from the other late afternoon groups, met after the evening meal and went on for several hours with no complaints about the late hour!

Dialogue home groups lessons implications and assessment

Lessons that should encourage future uses for dialogue home groups at multinational conferences may be gleaned from the previous examples. In the Ukraine conference, dialogue home groups, with their strong levels of trust, allowed grieving participants to communicate on a deeper level. In the small dialogue experience, group members were willing to offer the expression Chernobyl-impacted attendees were "living their own deaths." The intimacy of the group fostered a deeper honesty, even when the content elicited profound sadness. In another dialogue home group, group members planned and carried out a social action designed to increase the safety of the swimming area and thus reduce the potential for other drownings. Within the group, the participants were almost in shock when an American stated that the Ukraine was a free country. At this conference, the dialogue home groups enhanced communication, encouraged grieving within the community, led to social action, and influenced the technology transfer to communities to which the participants returned. In the second example, an additional dialogue group emerged to address peace in the conference on civil conflict and wars. This led to a new view of the conference focus, one that otherwise may not have been more than an individual thought of scattered participants. In both examples, the dialogue home groups optimized learning and networking toward common ground, moving away from differences towards mutual respect, action, and affirmation.

Dialogue groups can allow participants to reach into experiences that are very personal, that reach into the inner regions of one's consciousness. Where war, trauma, cultural prescriptions make an impact on how people navigate their world, these messages can be strong content for dialogue home groups , such as described in the men's and women's groups. Dialogue can offer opportunities for sharing without expected outcomes, freeing space for an existential "being."

Implications for social services professionals and social services related practice include acting on the fundamental tenets the authors perceive for the use of dialogue home groups in multinational conferences. These values include freer dialogue, opportunities for testing ideas, deeper relationships, ability to learn about differences among various group members, issues of public discussions versus more cloistered conversations, a shared discussion experience that allows all voices time to be heard, equality within difference, and the opportunity to hear voices often muted among women and those more vulnerable and marginalized (Schatz, Tracy, & Tracy, 2007).

Conference planners can learn about dialogue through a range of sources both published and on the Internet. Planners can then consider how to incorporate dialogue group experiences, particularly, smaller group experiences – what is termed here the dialogue home group. Using dialogue home groups that meet daily can allow for diversity of culture and language (usually with no more than two participants from the same area), and scheduling daily facilitator gatherings will foster greater learning among group members

and potentially bring higher levels of technology transfer to any multinational gathering. Considerations in the planning cycle include the length of time for each day's meeting and how many days the groups will meet. While in the authors' experience, a workable size for the groups was about 8 to 12 participants, Bohm organized groups ranging in size from 15 to 40 (Nichol, 1996, p. xvii).

ASSESSING THE DIALOGUE GROUP

The dialogue experience has been assessed as very positive for participants (O'hara & Varga, 1996). Qualitative evaluation instruments document that the dialogue process (a) promotes feelings of trust among group participants that contribute to the success of the group experience and (b) fosters greater cultural and personal understanding. "Among the most important reasons why dialogue groups work is that people's basic needs for human connection and belonging are provided for in the process, simply by its design" (Schatz, Furman, & Jenkins, 2003, p. 489).

Assessing the learning process, particularly the dialogue home group, will strengthen one's resolve for this approach. One approach to the evaluation and assessment can be done by using written surveys, follow-up phone contact, and/or Internet follow-up strategies. Language competence can be managed by offering different modes to respond. If dialogue home groups were to be evaluated by an observation process, participant observers could examine both behaviors by group members and dialogue content. Evaluation can be developed around the following areas:

1. How did home dialogue group members address cultural differences?
2. How did the home dialogue group address language issues? Were all group members able to gain access to the conversation either through translation or other delivery mechanism?
3. What was the group's capacity for sharing ideas?
4. What was the group's capacity for listening to others?
5. How did group members demonstrate inclusion of other members?
6. How did the dialogue group members give space for personal disclosure and respond to personal content?
7. How safe was the environment?
8. Evaluate the group's cohesion and its manifestations (physical closeness, participation of members, breakthroughs to another level, partnering)

With increased use and further evaluation of home dialogue groups, the potential for greater communication, optimized learning, and technology transfer among social service professionals and related human services workers arises for conferees.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Recognizing that multinational conferences have many inherent hurdles due to the diversity of the participant audience, the discussion presented described the dialogue as a small group process and suggested how the dialogue home group can positively influence the potential outcomes for any multinational professional conference. Building international learning opportunities that transform people's lives is not what we anticipate at professional conferences, yet even the brief descriptions here give a hint into the "gift" that is available without adding cost to the conference attendee. Our international work must

include our willingness to build deeply meaningful relationships, professional and even personal, with those we meet through the venue of a professional conference. Dialogue home groups are a viable tool toward that aim.

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