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The SoL Journal  
on Knowledge, Learning, and Change



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# The Generative Change Community: Cases About the Meaning of “Generative Dialogic Change Processes”

Bettye Pruitt

RESEARCH  
UPDATE



Bettye Pruitt

The Generative Change Community (GCC) is a global community of practice that nurtures and promotes generative dialogic change processes for an equitable and sustainable world. The community seeks to integrate individual, organizational, and societal transformation through dialogic processes and initiatives.

The community is comprised of advanced practitioners of peace building, negotiation, mediation, participatory action research, and multi-stakeholder dialogue in various fields of endeavor, such as global network building, inter-sectoral collaboration, conflict prevention, and democracy building. The Generative Change Community originated in October 2003 as the Generative Dialogue Project. In May 2007 it took its present name to better reflect the diversity of the work of its member practitioners.

Besides SoL, its organizational sponsors include: the Asian Institute of Management-Mirant Center for Bridging Societal Divides, the Fetzer Institute, GAN-Net, Generon Consulting, the Metanoia Fund, the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD, REDEH, the Network for Human Development in Brazil, the Swedish Foreign Ministry, Synergos Institute, the Third Millennium Foundation, the UNDP, and Wageningen International – Programme for Capacity Development and Institutional Change.

The GC Community is moving from its formative stage into a stage of pursuing activities together, including core research, action research, generative change agent development, and continued community building. Becoming aligned about the meaning of “generative dialogic change processes” has been crucial to forming a foundation for collective action.

## How do we define generative dialogic change processes?

In order to move forward together, the GC Community Core Group recognized, it was necessary to develop a common understanding of what we mean by “generative dialogic change processes.” We launched a series of teleconferences to pursue that question by looking at specific cases. In the first half of 2006, we had four conversations on three cases:

- A multi-stakeholder dialogue to develop an irrigation project in Nepal, shared by Jim Woodhill of Wageningen International
- A “shuttle dialogue” in Northern Ireland shared by Sue Williams, a veteran of peace work there and elsewhere in the world and a colleague of GC Community member Mari Fitzduff
- An ongoing dialogue initiative in Sulu, Philippines, “Bridging Sulu Divides,” shared by Ernie Garilao of the Mirant Center for Bridging Societal Divides at the Asian Institute of Management

In each of the conversations, we focused our attention primarily on the question, “what was generative in this process?” With remarkable consistency, our observations pointed toward a fairly simple definition:

Dialogic change processes are generative when participants experience a shift in awareness regarding their relationship to others and to the issues at hand, and this change enables them to co-create positive outcomes for themselves and the people they represent.

This definition aligns with the well-known observation of Einstein that problems cannot be solved at the same level of consciousness that created them. Each of the three quite different cases offered insights on what this means in concrete terms. Write-ups of the cases and the four teleconferences held so far are available at [www.generative dialogue.org](http://www.generative dialogue.org).

**Shifts in awareness regarding relationship to others.** Change in the way participants related to others in the process was an important feature of each case. In the Nepal irrigation project dialogue, for example, the shift manifested as an emergence of trust in a group representing great disparities in socio-economic status and positional power, such that “everyone felt what they had to say was legitimate.” Jim Woodhill noted that he gauged the extent to which this shift occurred by observing a high level of engagement by everyone in the group, with irrigation experts teaming up with illiterate farmers and translating for them between Nepali and English, so that everyone could understand and participate fully.

In the case of “shuttle dialogue” in Northern Ireland, Sue Williams emphasized that the changes that occurred were small shifts, not “breakthrough transformations.” Indeed, this was an instance in which the participants never got to the point of talking directly to each other but communicated exclusively with and through the arbitrators, who shuttled back and forth among them. Nevertheless, people who had never experienced communicating with those who don’t agree with them became more aware of how their strongly worded messages might be perceived by others. “You try to help them avoid offending the other side without intending to,” said Sue. Sue and Mari Fitzduff noted that this basic recognition of “the other side” as fellow human beings who might legitimately take offense at harsh language is the kind of change that must occur before people in situations of violent conflict can begin to participate in “real dialogues.”

Finally, Ernie Garilao provided a powerful example from the Bridging Sulu Divides workshop he led earlier this year of the kind of change we are talking about. The workshop started with an exercise of personal reflection and sharing in mixed groups of people representing different sides in the Sulu conflict:

“We were prepared for animosities [and] ‘venting.’ Mari advised to get that out right away. But, when they were doing their leadership stories – creating a personal leadership life story line (what did I learn from it, who influenced me, etc.) then sharing that in small groups – they were really listening to each other. Then when they were asked to see what came out of the groups, they recognized how similar they were in their hopes and dreams. They recognized their common humanity. That broke down the barriers. [In the dialogue that followed,] I was surprised that the civil society leaders didn’t come forward with their view of the military as occupiers . . . it came up in the dialogue but in ways that people could hear and discuss.”



**Shifts in awareness regarding relationship to the issues.** At the heart of this change is recognition of the nature of one's personal connection to the issue and, in the best case, acceptance of one's responsibility for helping to achieve a positive outcome. The Bridging Leadership framework for the dialogue process in Sulu is explicit about the need to bring about this change. Getting people to take ownership of their role in both the problems and their resolution is central to the Bridging Leadership training that a number of key military participants had completed a couple of years prior to the Sulu dialogue workshop. In addition, Ernie indicated that differentiating between individual and shared response to the issue was a key part of the design of the dialogue itself:

“In the plenary you can see the whole, so people can see their individual responses in that larger perspective, see their responsibility; envision new realities. This sets up the dialogue in a positive way: what can I contribute to success? What issues with other sectors do I need to work on to achieve the shared vision?”

The remarkable outcomes of the Sulu dialogue depended on both these developments: the creation of a shared vision by the group; and the acceptance of personal responsibility for change by key members. The shifts and the outcomes in the shuttle dialogue case were less dramatic, yet still significant. In particular, Sue emphasized the importance of people getting in touch with their own needs and beginning to frame the conflict in their community more in terms of those needs, rather than simply in terms of their opposition to the other side. The process was transformative for them, whereas there was no change among the political and paramilitary leaders who continued to relate to the conflict strictly as a political issue. This was especially true of the parents on both sides, whose recognition of their need to protect their children emboldened them to challenge the leadership and insist on a resolution. “I was really struck by the willingness of the parents to assert themselves and take control,” said Sue.

The example of this kind of shift in relationship to the problem in the Nepal irrigation project dialogue focuses on the irrigation experts in the dialogue group. As in the Sulu case, these key actors came into the group with some openness to change, because they had already had to confront the shortcomings of previous irrigation project designs. Nevertheless, they were initially uncomfortable and skeptical of the more participatory approach to design the workshop represented. “Experts are used to standing up and telling people how it is,” Jim noted. Yet they were able to set that expert role aside, embrace the process, and contribute to a “fundamentally different” irrigation project design based on a more systemic understanding of the context and challenges.

**Co-creation of positive outcomes.** All of these dialogue initiatives produced outcomes that their organizers and participants considered significant. The Asian Development Bank, which sponsored the Nepal irrigation project workshop, was pleased enough with the outcome to take the position that all project design processes should be more participatory and interactive in future. In the shuttle dialogue case, community members created a positive outcome by accepting the reality that people on both sides of the dispute had legitimate needs, especially for security. The precipitating dispute faded away, and people have co-existed with fewer disturbances than before. The Bridging Sulu Divides workshop produced a widely accepted Sulu Roadmap for Peace and some surprising and significant partnerships joining the army, police, rebel groups, and civil society organizations in efforts to reduce violent crime in the area, monitor police action against rebel groups, and ensure transparent and equitable distribution of resources for human development efforts.

In the Sulu case, Ernie described the most powerful episodes of co-creation in vivid terms: the group was in a “flow” state, with such mutual acceptance and understanding that they could complete each other’s sentences; and they had tapped into “the field” – the collective consciousness that everyone in the group could sense intuitively. Jim observed moments of this kind of energetic co-creativity in the Nepal irrigation project workshop as well. These states of collective flow, or connecting to the field, seem to define most concretely what generative dialogue is, and what it looks like.

**To summarize, generative shifts move people . . .**

<b>From</b>	<b>To</b>
Seeing others as separate and different, defined by their roles, their positions on the issues, or their place in a hierarchy	Seeing others as fellow human beings; “we’re in this together;” and all have something important to contribute
Seeing oneself as separate from the problem situation, looking for others to change in order to resolve it	Seeing oneself as part of the system that sustains the situation, accepting responsibility for changing oneself
Disconnected relationships within stuck problem systems	Creative relationships energized by mutually owned ideas for addressing problems
Acceptance of dysfunctional societal structures and systems	Commitment to promoting change toward healthy societal structures and systems

## What are our guiding questions?

Of course, these cases and others to be shared within the GC Community raise many more questions than the one addressed here. For the community, answering the key definitional question is just the first step toward building a deep and robust understanding of how generative dialogic change processes can contribute to societal change on a global scale – “for an equitable and sustainable world,” as our mission statement says.

Cutting across all of the community’s activities and providing a framework for the rigorous action learning and peer-to-peer sharing and support that are central to our strategy are our core learning agenda and our commitment to rigorous inquiry through the use of the *GCC Process Inquiry Protocol*.

The GC Community Core learning agenda has a dual focus on:

- The connections among individual-, group-, and societal-level change
- The potential for generative dialogic change processes to produce deep change globally

The GCC Process Inquiry Protocol is a framework for collective inquiry adapted from a process tool developed by others for uncovering and articulating theories of change.<sup>1</sup> “Theory of change” is a conceptual tool used in various fields to support a rigorous approach to planning, executing, evaluating, and learning from experience in change initiatives. The overarching goal of the GC Community in using this framework is to create a solid platform for collective learning that is sufficiently broad (crossing the boundaries of specific approaches, disciplines, and fields), sufficiently deep (at a level of detail that enables meaningful analysis), and sufficiently rigorous to make a significant advance in our understanding of generative dialogic change processes and how they can contribute to change at a global level.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Bettye Pruitt** is a social historian dedicated to developing practices and tools for collective learning. In addition to her work as community coordinator for the Generative Change Community, she has been part of the UNDP Democratic Dialogue Project, and is a co-author of *Democratic Dialogue—A Handbook for Practitioners* (2007) published jointly by International IDEA, UNDP, OAS, and CIDA and available for free download at <http://www.democraticdialoguenetwork.org/index.pl>. Bettye has a Ph.D. in history from Boston University and is a research member of SoL. She recently stepped down as co-chair of the SoL Council.

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### Endnote

- 1 International Network on Strategic Philanthropy, “Theory of Change Tool Manual” (May, 2005), p. 10, available at [www.insp.efc.be](http://www.insp.efc.be).

# Reflections

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