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# USING DIALOGUE GROUPS

*This case study presentation was given at the 2008 LAP2 Symposium by David Speller, Context Pty Ltd.*

## Introduction

Dialogue groups are a process that allows interested community members to hold conversations with peers or other interested people to gather information as a component of a process of community engagement.

## Dialogue Group process

In general, dialogue groups are set up through the following process:

1. Identify potential facilitators (people with an interest in the subject of the consultation)
2. Provide them with a briefing, including instructions on how to set up and run their meeting, and set questions to guide their discussion
3. The facilitator invites people they feel need to be involved in the consultation to a meeting at a convenient time and location
4. At the meeting, a person is nominated as note-taker whose role is to keep a record of the meeting which will later be word-processed and submitted for inclusion in the consultation output
5. The dialogue group facilitator directs the group to discuss each of the set questions

## Benefits from Dialogue Groups

The use of dialogue groups provides a number of benefits to an overall process of consultation:

- Community members who may not want to attend a community meeting or other consultation process will often take part in a dialogue group. Factors that contribute to this are that:
  - Meeting times can be set to meet the needs of a small number of participants
  - The venue can be any space that the group will be comfortable in. Venues that have been used have included local club rooms, cafes, meeting rooms in workplaces, school classrooms, and homes. Many good dialogue groups have been convened over a home-cooked dinner.
  - The group often comprises people who know each other and who are comfortable talking together
- By tapping into local networks a larger number of people can be reached.
- Dialogue group facilitators who also participate in other processes such as community meetings bring an awareness of a broader range of responses than just their own - having run a small meeting they will bring an understanding of the needs and interests of others, and they will have given greater consideration to their own responses than would otherwise be the case

## Who can set up a dialogue group?

Any person who has an interest in the subject of the consultation can set up a dialogue group. A person who chooses to set up a dialogue group is called the *Dialogue group*

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*facilitator*. To take up this role they must commit to bringing together a group of people to discuss set questions that are the focus of the consultation.

### **Who can take part in a dialogue group?**

Anyone who is interested in the topic that is being discussed can take part.

Typically dialogue groups include:

- A group of friends
- A group of people who belong to a club or other organisation
- Other existing groups, such as a class at school, a committee
- Any people with an interest in the focus of the consultation
- A work group or work team

It is important that the group is able to meet together at an agreed time in an agreed place so that they can discuss the topic.

### **How big is a dialogue group?**

The ideal size for a dialogue group is a group of 2 to 15 people: The group must have enough people for there to be some discussion, but if it is too large it will be difficult to record the group's discussion.

## **Context's Experience**

Context has used Dialogue Groups on two occasions recently:

- Consultation with community to identify values and a vision for the Hume Green Wedge. This work was undertaken for the City of Hume for the first stage of developing their Green Wedge Management Plan
- Consultation with community members living and working in the City of Knox in relation to the development of the Knox Sustainable Environment Strategy. This work was undertaken for the Knox City Council

We have taken a different approach on each occasion which has allowed us to assess which method is best suited to setting up and using dialogue groups most effectively. Below is a summary of the approach we took in each of these two examples.

### **Hume dialogue groups**

For the City of Hume, we delivered a series of community workshops across the municipality. Each workshop was focused on working with community members to establish a vision for the municipality, and to identify features and values within the Green Wedge area.

At the end of each workshop we presented the process for setting up and facilitating dialogue groups, and provided each participant with an information kit about how to run a dialogue group.

It was our expectation that those with a strong interest in the consultation focus would go away, read the material and then decide to set up and run a dialogue group.

From this approach we had a very low level of participation with few successful dialogue groups being delivered.

## Knox Dialogue Groups

Learning from our previous experience we elected to take a different approach to setting up the dialogue groups with the City of Knox. For the Knox dialogue groups we:

- Invited targeted people to a briefing to discuss participation in dialogue groups. This meeting was separate to the general community consultation meetings which were to be held later. In sending out invitations to attend, we targeted groups whom we felt it was necessary to include and whom we did not expect to be well represented at the community workshops. The invitations targeted schools and tertiary education institutes, church groups, various local environment groups, Council advisory committees and staff within key Council departments
- At the dialogue group briefing, we presented information about the overall consultation process and about how dialogue groups would add value to the consultation and ensure that a wider range of community members would be reached. Information was then presented about how to set up and to run a dialogue group meeting. Participants were then given the opportunity to discuss who they felt could be engaged in consultation that may otherwise not be consulted, and to propose possible venues for their meetings. At the end of the meeting, participants were asked to indicate whether they would commit to running a meeting, and if so, who they would most likely invite. Participants were provided with a toolkit for their dialogue groups, including instructions on how to set up and run their group, and set questions that were to be discussed.

As a result of this focused process 20 dialogue groups were run, engaging 96 community members. Examples of dialogue groups that were run included:

- Council staff within specific areas of Council. Dialogue groups were run to include staff in Maternal and Child Health Care, Engineering & Infrastructure, City Development, and Community Services
- Council's Youth Advisory Committee and Internal Environment Committee
- Students at a local secondary college – the dialogue groups were run with two separate classes as a class activity
- Swinburne University of Technology students
- Several groups of friends
- One family group, where the discussion was held over dinner one evening
- A local church group

Each group was asked to submit their dialogue group notes, with contact details for all participants and contact details for the facilitator / note taker to allow us to follow up on any aspects of their reporting that was not clear.

## What we learned along the way

In comparing the two examples what is most clear to us is that, as with all consultation processes, great attention needs to be paid to how dialogue groups are set up. In part, the first example was less successful because in some ways the dialogue groups were introduced as an add-on at the end of the community workshops. In the second example, our approach was much more deliberate, with the establishment process focusing entirely on Dialogue Groups – the establishment was not an adjunct to another process.

Keeping the process of setting up dialogue groups separate from other processes provided us with a number of benefits:

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1. Focusing solely on the process of dialogue groups allowed time to clearly present information about their purpose and how to set them up
  2. Targeted invites were sent to people who were known to have connections to groups that we wanted to target (e.g. we targeted school teachers to provide access to the views of young community members)
  3. The quality of the results from dialogue groups at Knox was much higher (better and clearer reports) than from Hume. We believe this was due to the amount of time we were able to spend in clarifying how the groups was to work and how the results were to be used.

We sought feedback from some of the dialogue group facilitators and found that what they benefitted from most was:

1. Clear instructions on how to facilitate their meeting, including proposed text for opening the meeting. We included this as we recognised that most people who volunteered to run a meeting would probably have limited skills in facilitating a group discussion.  
The proposed text supported them to introduce the meeting and its purpose, and to set ground rules for the group's process, ensuring that all participants had clear information about the purpose of the meeting and how the information gathered would be used
2. Recommending a separate note-taker: As we all know from our own experience, this freed the facilitator up and allowed them to focus on the group process.
3. Advice that they could locate their meeting anywhere and at any time. Feedback was that this allowed them to set up their meeting in a way that ensured that their participants would feel comfortable and able to participate. Had we not provided this advice, they believed that they would have felt constrained if not able to provide a 'proper venue'.

Their feedback also showed that they felt that they had been able to play a stronger and more active role in the consultation than they had experienced in other consultation run by this Council.

## Contact Details

For more information about Context and about Dialogue Groups, contact Context:

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