

Open Space Concluding in a Crescendo

International Meeting on Global Action and Change

Conference report extracts, prepared by Diane Gibeault, OS conference facilitator, 2003

Last July 2002, 190 people from 31 countries, of all continents of the world gathered for five days in Guelph, Ontario around the theme [Participation for Global Action and Change](#). Organized by the Participatory Development Forum (PD-Forum) which is based in Canada, this event connected practitioners, communities, networks, organizations, grassroots activists, development professionals, donors, academics and youth to explore and share best practices and lessons learned in participatory development..

The Conference began with capacity and skills building workshops, presentations and panel discussions on best practices and lessons learned, then for the last two days moved into Open Space exploration and action planning.

Creative opening: The Conference officially started with a roar and a song from the popular theatre group Amani People's Theatre of Kenya and Ubuntu Afrika of Zambia. They then presented the play "When Lions Become Historians" which was a perfect segue into the central theme of the Conference. On the first night, participants shared some of the deep conversations sparked that day and were easily coaxed onto the dance floor with lively beats from World Music.

Open Space began on the third day. Led by volunteer facilitator, Diane Gibeault, it revolved around the theme: "How can we best strengthen participation for global action and change?" This provided participants with an opportunity to deepen their thinking on how to work together more effectively to shape international development agendas, and to support the principles and practices of PD at all levels and within all communities. There were thirty-eight Open Space discussions in total, ranging from one-day to one-hour long sessions.

Evening News

Some of the comments shared by the participants:

- Today I flew as a butterfly and a bumblebee and I now have a whole jar of honey.
- Students were asking me why I was coming to this conference, now I have a question for them: why didn't they come?
- I have heard amazing stories over the last few hours. I am thankful for the wonderful process that allows that to happen.
- I would like to extend thanks to everyone. The theatre group, all the people here are very diverse, but oriented towards one goal. It has been very nice to be with like-minded people.
- Thank you to the organisers. It is difficult to create a participatory process and not just a straight-forward one. It has succeeded.



A Participatory Music Session was led that evening by Luciano Porto-Goncalves, a professional drummer. Drums and other smaller instruments from all over the world were provided. Participants sat in a large circle and the instruments were placed in the middle for everyone to take. People were introduced to various playing techniques and exercises, but most importantly they had fun!

Action planning with high energy

This process was intended to provide a catalyst to local, regional and international collaboration and initiatives. Participants posted issues that they had passion for, similar ones were clustered and groups organized action planning discussions around them.

Presentations of action plans to the larger group were extremely dynamic and colourful. Here are some highlights:

- Creativity - Boombalaka boombalaka boombalaka boom, chingalaka chingalaka chingalaka ching! This was the chant that the creativity group used while throwing a large ball of yarn randomly to participants seated in the circle, which represented a web of connections linking people together. However, the moment someone lets go or loosens their hold of the yarn, the web of connections becomes slack and ineffectual.
- Organisational Change - A cloud of tiny mosquitoes continued to pester and sting a great, huge rhinoceros, until one day the rhinoceros changed its position.
- Various role plays, group presentations and signing were common forms of reporting on action plans.
- Spirituality and PD – A group handed out to every participant virtue bracelets. Each virtue bracelet celebrated a different virtue, e.g.: "*Nurturing* - Constantly supportive, I open up pathways by being sincere and always available;" or "*Humility* - I value other without seeking their attention. Self respect is my inner light." A few people volunteered to read aloud the virtue of their bracelet, and then all participants shared and discussed briefly with their neighbour, the virtue on their bracelet, then exchanged bracelets.

This practice was the perfect ending to the Action Planning process and the entire conference.

Organisers concluded: "The conference had a big impact on the PD Forum and has the potential to take us far. Overall, the conference structure and framework was very successful. The Open Space process proved to be a highlight of the conference. It was successful in creating energy, enthusiasm and potentially greater connections and commitment. This came across through participants' level of engagement in the Open Space discussions and the feedback people gave about Open Space and the conference."



Participants said:

- The Open Space approach creates such a feeling of non-threatening, welcoming modality for sharing & learning.
- Open Space provided an opportunity to find people interested in the same core issues that I was. Then it allowed follow-up and intensive dialogue & leaning on the topic. Very refreshing!
- The Open Space obliged active ownership of the agenda and created opportunities for active participation
- Participation beyond techniques/methods; organization beyond sectoral!
- Needed another day to experience more open space opportunities
- The open space sessions were much more energizing than the formal presentations. Dialogue is a better learning experience than being "talked at". It was a risk (open space) that really paid off. Neurons in my brain have been charging off ideas and connections ever since I got here. That doesn't often happen at conferences. You are usually bored stiff. Thank you very much!

Thank you to the PD-Forum for sharing this information on its event. For the detailed report of the conference see <http://www.pdforum.org>

For more information on Open Space:

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