

# From Dialogue to Action: Climate Dialogues and Climate Action Labs

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## Abstract

The Greater Seattle Climate Dialogues is a climate change education and advocacy project with its roots in dialogue and deliberation. Using an adapted study circles model, the purpose of its Climate Action Labs is to change grassroots politics in such a way that people can bridge the ubiquitous gap between dialogue and action. In overview form, this is the story of the project, intended to share the thinking that motivated it and the activities, design principles, and actual process designs that shaped its implementation and outcomes. The story is not complete without articulating lessons learned to date, and these are shared to benefit others, as is the major political challenge we believe we all face. For others' projects based in similar motivation, the design principles and lessons learned may be a useful, transportable resource.

**Keywords:** Action, climate action labs, climate change, deliberation, design principles, dialogue, education, lessons learned, politics, study circles

Practitioners of dialogue and deliberation (D&D) are keenly interested in two of the facets of public participation that remain underexplored: action and scale (Levine, Fung, & Gastil, 2005). We need action, especially in the many situations where our motivation for applying D&D techniques is to solve real world problems that require action outcomes, often political ones. Too often, however, in otherwise excellent deliberative processes, the links between talk and action are tenuous. Secondly, we need scale, because while most applications of D&D techniques have been on a local scale, it is clear that many larger, even global scale challenges could benefit from such approaches. Climate change is a perfect example.

Climate change—that is, the human-caused disruption of the Earth's climate system—is arguably the most pressing global challenge society faces (CNA, 2007; Stern, 2005). Yet despite a broad scientific consensus on the facts, the very existence of the problem remains bitterly contested in the public sphere. The use of obfuscation and uncertainty as a political tactic cries out to be addressed by

the wisdom inherent in D&D approaches.

Some attempts have been made to do so, as for example, the Empowerment Institute's Global Warming Cafe (World Cafe), the Northwest Earth Institute's Changing Course (discussion circle), the National Conversation on Climate Action (21st Century town hall), Deliberative Democracy and Climate Change (World Cafe, then next steps forthcoming), and the Greater Seattle Climate Dialogues and Action Labs (study circles/hybrid/experimental). The Climate Dialogues/Labs are the subject of this report.

The Greater Seattle Climate Dialogues is a climate change education and advocacy project with its roots in dialogue and deliberation. From its inception, we attempted to bridge the gap between dialogue and action. The Climate Action Labs model is our response to challenges we found in using study circles to support participant action. Here, I offer an overview of the programs: how we prepared for launch, how we approached design, what happened in terms of implementation and outcomes, and finally, the lessons we have learned to date.

The question at the center of Climate Dialogues was, How can we build a mandate for strong global warming policy when there is no public consensus and when public discussion is frozen into camps and undermined by disinformation? Our answer: (a) Start with well-designed dialogue; (b) take people through a learning and community-building process that gets past the obfuscations; and (c) use that as a launching point for collective political action. Our premise was that if we could create an opening for the public to actually hear and understand what the scientists are telling us, that members of the public would be moved to act.

### **Method, Preparation, and Promotion**

Knowing that the heart of our process would be small group dialogue, the study circles model was a natural fit. Study circles (we use the term in its generic sense, but much influenced by *Everyday Democracy*, formerly the Study Circles Resource Center) are characterized by a lightly scripted curriculum, a limited number of sessions (typically 4-6), and an emphasis on including all voices and encouraging elements of both heart and mind. Such circles are relatively easy to facilitate by volunteer organizers. The study circles approach envisions a community-wide process where many circles take place at the same time, which is exactly what we hoped to create.

Before we could plan how to run a study circles process, we immediately confronted the challenge of how to create an authoritative and credibly neutral citizen's guide for the climate change issue. With the facts of the issue so bitterly disputed in the public sphere, we knew that this document had to be

exemplary. Fortunately, we were able to establish science partnerships with two climate science institutes of international stature, the Program on Climate Change at the University of Washington, and the Joint Institute for the Study of the Atmosphere and Ocean (a collaboration of National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the University of Washington). Both institutes reviewed, revised and approved the briefing guide, which we released under a Creative Commons license and made available online (<http://www.climatedialogues.org>).

Because of our focus on action outcomes—specifically, political outcomes—we amplified the action component of the study circles model from the get-go. We used "Talk, then act" as the core theme of our discussion guide, planned for each dialogue circle to have a closing session focused on next action steps, and created an Action Statement form (see Appendix A) members of each circle would complete as the concrete focus of their last session. Although action is integrated into the study circle model itself, we took it a step further by conceiving of our whole process as building an ongoing network of dialogue circles that had become action circles. We hoped these circles would continue working together to support each other in the follow-up tasks and commitments. In short, we were building a movement from the ground up.

But not a typical movement, because we (at the center) did not define the specific action outcomes or political agenda, beyond the imperative for action commensurate to the problem. In fact, that was part of our intention in choosing the study circles model in the first place. We had framed our citizen's briefing guide as neutrally as possible in terms of four different views of the tradeoff between the costs of action and the risks of inaction. We expected and trusted our dialogue circles to come to their own conclusions based on the solid information provided in the briefing.

In addition to the study circles model, we also took inspiration from Perth's Dialogue with the City campaign (Hartz-Karp, 2005). That effort was remarkable for its eclectic approach to outreach and participation, drawing on all forms of media and creating opportunities to participate both in small groups and large. For example, they had major newspapers publishing regular issue papers and radio talk shows inviting the public to comment. What they did for Perth's local growth management issues, we hoped to do for climate change, creating a citywide buzz with efforts culminating in a Citizen's Climate Summit. However, without major media partners or significant financial support from our government partners—both of which we sought but failed to achieve—we had to be creative.

For example, we developed a unique collaboration with the Seattle International Film Festival (SIFF), one of the largest film festivals in North America. Throughout SIFF, our volunteer filmmakers roamed the festival, interviewing moviegoers about climate change. Then, on a daily basis, they

produced short trailers that were screened before over a hundred festival screenings. In conjunction, we handed out Win-a-Planet "conversation cards" with which we encouraged people to discuss climate while waiting in line and turn in later for prizes and to sign up for Climate Dialogues.

### **Design and Implementation: Climate Action Labs**

Climate Dialogues launched in October 2007, after six months of preparation that included creating our materials and building a list of interested participants. Our kick-off party was well attended and inspiring. We had two dozen non-profit partners. The City Council issued a proclamation of support. And then we began the real work of finding motivated individuals willing and able to organize and lead small group dialogue circles.

Meanwhile, about four months after launch, we brought our small but growing community together for a series of brainstorming sessions focused on the Citizen's Climate Summit that would be the capstone of our process. The idea of a citizen's summit always resonates with people, but getting the details right is another thing. Our partner America Speaks needs at least several hundred thousand dollars to put on a 21st Century town hall; we are a grassroots non-profit whose budget is less than \$50,000. What kind of a summit could we put on? Who should be there? How and why would the outcomes matter?

As the project director, I was also motivated by a more banal consideration. I knew that, (at the time, we had only one year of funding. If we were going to put on any kind of a summit, we had to start planning soon. I called these community discussions in part to see what level of enthusiasm our volunteers had for this side of the project.

As it turned out, there was a great deal of both enthusiasm and collective wisdom. The group put a hold on the idea of a summit writ large, and opted instead for what we thought of as neighborhood-scale mini-summits, which came to be called "Climate Action Labs." There were three key ideas here. First, that we would make the labs local; nothing gets folks fired up as readily as what's in their own backyards. Second, we would focus on a specific topic, such as food, transportation, or energy; climate change in all its sprawling complexity is too big to get stuff done. Third, unlike the many forums and panels held in Seattle on these issues, the labs would be all about action and hands-on participation. Several partners (Northwest Environmental Education Council, WSU King County Extension, and TGreen Consulting) came together to help put on the lab series.

## Design Principles

The key design challenge for us was how to bring the community together around complex political issues and generate specific action outcomes. We had learned from our dialogue circles some of the common ways that the intention to act gets thwarted, and we hoped to design in solutions to these obstacles. We developed the following design principles.

- First, *group support*. Nothing is as empowering as being part of a motivated group, and nothing blocks action as much as isolation. We designed the labs around a local host group precisely so that participants would have a ready-made home for their efforts.
- Second, *clarity of information*. The overwhelming amount of (often conflicting) information is one of the major barriers to action. The labs were organized around breakout sessions with local content experts to include expert knowledge directly in the conversation.
- Third, *identifying the leverage points*. Nothing motivates action as effectively as knowing that one's actions will make a difference; but in a complicated political landscape, how can a layperson figure out which actions will matter? Our labs included both local non-profit partners and elected officials, who were there to help parse the political landscape and ground participants' reflections in reality.
- Finally, *spelling it out*. If you've never written a letter-to-the-editor, called your congressperson, or spoken at a public meeting, you're like an electron in the lowest energy state; it requires a tremendous energy bump to get you to the next level, and a big part of that is you literally don't know what to do. Our Citizen's Toolkit provides a concise and pragmatic guide to the nuts and bolts of citizen advocacy.

## How a Lab works

Our Climate Action Labs last about a half-day and are organized in specific communities—our first one targeted Southeast Seattle—in collaboration with a local host team/organization. Our first labs focused on local transportation issues, because in our region of the Pacific Northwest, transportation is both at the heart of climate change (it is an even larger share of our footprint than in other regions) and has been hamstrung by decades of poor decisions and political knife-fighting. The local host organization—typically a community group—is crucial, because it is our outreach arm to the local community, and as discussed above is a key part of our empowerment strategy.

The lab starts out with a small group warm-up where participants get to know each other and share their vision for their neighborhoods. Then we have a brief plenary providing an overview of the day

and an introduction to our Citizen's Toolkit. It covers topics such as how to set up and hold a meeting with an elected official, how to engage public media through letters-to-the-editor and op-eds, and how to engage in public processes such as hearings and public meetings. (It is also released under a Creative Commons license so it can be copied and shared without copyright restrictions.) We find a sympathetic local elected official to come and say a few words about the toolkit and citizen engagement. It is hard to overstate how meaningful it is for the grassroots to hear about citizen advocacy from the people they will be lobbying.

The heart of the lab is the breakout sessions. These are topical sessions co-led by a facilitator and a content expert. (For example, at our transportation labs, the sessions have been bikes, pedestrian, transit, infrastructure funding, land use, and climate.) The experts come from our non-profit and local government partners. They are supported by posters and reports that we've assembled as background information, made available on tables at each of the breakouts. The expert opens the session with a concise introduction that hits three elements:

- *Inspiration*. What's possible or state-of-the-art in this area?
- *Reality*. Where are we now? How far are we from what's possible?
- *Action*. Where are the leverage points for action over the next 6-12 months?

After this ten-minute overview, the conversation is opened up to all, with a focus on discussing and refining the list of action items. For example, in one lab, the bike expert opened by talking about Seattle's bicycle master plan. A discussion developed around the fact that the master plan is oriented somewhat towards "hard-core" bike commuters, and there is a need for additional advocacy to help make the streets bike-safe for the masses who are not hard-core cyclists. In practice, we have found that breakouts can easily spend an hour on parts 1 and 2, and then come back from a break and spend a second hour on part 3 (action).

We do not expect new, standalone advocacy efforts to emerge from these breakouts. Rather, we expect that the combination of expert guidance and local, community enthusiasm will generate a short list of solid, actionable ideas along with a handful of people willing to run with them. We team those folks up either with the local host group or with one of our NGO partners (or both). For example, we encouraged people to join the transportation committee of Sustainable South Seattle (our host for the first lab). This gives these ideas a home, and it gives the individuals an instant support network for carrying the ideas forward. And, not incidentally, this approach builds the member base of our partners. We also run an announcements listserv for lab participants, so that they can stay informed about new action opportunities as they arise.

We believe this model really approaches the holy grail of community organizing these days, which is to build and support the network rather than to start a new and competing effort. There are so many excellent non-profit organizations at work, we're excited about the opportunity to help them build capacity through our Action Labs.

## **Outcomes**

In the one year since we completed the Citizen's Climate Briefing and launched our dialogue process, Climate Dialogues has fostered about two dozen dialogue/action circles in the Puget Sound region. Of these circles, some continue to thrive, others completed their dialogue process and disbanded, and some were just fizzles. The ones that thrive have tended to either join or create a local community group, for example, Sustainable Magnolia and Sustainable South Seattle. One continues to be a standalone lobbying group, and one is working with the City of Seattle doing outreach to local businesses.

In addition, we have formed partnerships and actively collaborate with both the City of Seattle and the King County Executive's Office, as well as with over thirty non-profit organizations and community groups both locally and nationally. We have tabled at dozens of events, had op-eds published in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer and articles about us published in smaller papers, had a proclamation issued by the City Council in our support, been featured on major blogs, given talks and led sessions at events such as Beaming Bioneers and GreenMyRide, and built an email list of over 1000 members. All told, we have about 600 people who have signed up to participate in circles, and almost 200 of those have indicated a desire to volunteer in other ways as well.

For experienced community organizers, the skewed ratio between list numbers and actual participants will come as no surprise. But there is a deeper challenge we have struggled with: we have not achieved diversity of opinion in our dialogue circles. The Climate Dialogues process has mostly attracted passionately concerned individuals who are looking for a vehicle for action. Indeed, we sometimes hear from participants that our briefing guide is "too neutral," and needs to be more shocking and pointed. Our action labs give these folks the vehicle they seek, while retaining a strong emphasis on community-based dialogue. But our core mission, to bring the *whole* community together so that we can wrestle with the ultimate challenge of our times, remains elusive.

## **Lessons Learned**

We have learned some key lessons from both the Dialogues and the Labs. Our original vision of

creating a Perth-like, community-wide conversation—but unlike in Perth totally from the bottom up—was a very tall order. I suspect we would have been better served if we had persisted in our efforts to get real buy-in from government and major media before proceeding. It is hard to overstate how difficult it is even to get noticed by the general public. We thought we would hit the jackpot with our SIFF partnership when we were on the screen in front of thousands of Seattlites, yet the membership boost that resulted from that effort was minor. It is not that people don't care, but that there is so much competition for their concern.

We learned that the success of a circle depends largely on the ability and enthusiasm of the one or two people who organize it. In hindsight, we would not even collect names of prospective "participants," but only sign up people willing to be organizers. And we would run a support group for these organizers, because they are the key.

On the other hand, possibly because we did not achieve a critical mass of activity, our circles have tended to go on and form (or join) new, freestanding community groups. We never intended that to happen, but it is nonetheless an outcome we are proud of. And our labs have, to a large extent, performed as designed. We have held two of them thus far, and both events have been well attended and very well liked by participants. You know a good participatory event by the intensity of the buzz in the room when people have gotten down to work together.

On that point, let me close with a story. I was in the audience at a panel discussion on global warming that was the capstone of a day-long (Focus the Nation) event at the University of Washington. The panel comprised leading political figures in our region (Mayor Greg Nickels, County Executive Ron Sims, and State Senator Phil Rockefeller). Nickels and Sims are national leaders on the issue. Almost a thousand people attended the event, listening as the panelists discussed the climate crisis. They differed little, agreeing on its urgency, sharing much that they had done as government officials, and offering sober assessments of how much remained undone and how large the gap remains between our political and ecological realities. At the very end, they took questions from the audience, and I had the chance to ask this:

You've told us that this is a crisis of unimaginable dimensions, and you've also told us that the political will is still lacking to address it. Then why on earth aren't you—without a doubt committed leaders on this issue—barnstorming this state, holding public meetings in every city and town, to build that political will?

The audience broke out into spontaneous, sustained applause; but the politicians seemed stumped by the question. That is a measure of what needs to be done, and the challenges we face to do it.

*Note:* The Appendix, Climate Action Lab *Action Statement form*, is linked from the Table of Contents.

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### Other Resources

- Deliberative Democracy and Climate Change: <http://climateconversation.ning.com/>
- Empowerment Institute: <http://www.empowermentinstitute.net>
- Everyday Democracy: <http://www.everyday-democracy.org>
- National Conversation on Climate Action: <http://www.climateconversation.org>
- Northwest Earth Institute: <http://www.nwei.org>

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