

# Community Dynamics of Moving toward System Thinking

## A Dialogue Grounding Community Action in Dialogue and System Dynamics

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### **Abstract**

*This paper reflects on our attempts to integrate social, economic and environmental actions into a system-thinking informed approach for addressing divisive and persistent local issues in Door County, Wisconsin. As we pursue this work we explore and utilize a variety of methods and community-building techniques to move community actions toward more holistic and inclusive results. The paper examines our evolving attempts to engage a cross-section of people to develop a partnership between K-12 education and the community with a focus on applying system thinking to community dilemmas.*

*We examine our Door County experiences and offer a series of reflective discussion points to ground an interactive dialogue with conference participants focused on issues common to community action efforts in many settings.*

*These reflective discussion points include:*

- exploring the nature of and proclivity to resist change in practical terms;*
- how language and communication can and will become a barrier;*
- how to assure that K12 education initiatives in system dynamics become recognized assets and resources to support decisions for the future direction of communities;*
- and can K12 education utilize system dynamics to create viable learning experiences with the local community?*

A Dialogue  
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**Preamble**

Welcome, we would like to set the stage for the next 2\_ hours by first sharing a brief sketch and overview of our experiences in trying to bring a learning-community perspective to the public decision making process in Door County, Wisconsin over the past four years

The goal of this workshop is to share our experiences and to listen to yours using the dialogue process. We believe this approach can help us and others more fully tell the stories of our experiences out of which more useful understandings and outcomes may grow.

A widely, and sometimes intimately, related story with an apparently universal embedded truth is that in every decision-making context decision-makers never seem able to have all the information needed to make good (or sometimes even better) decisions. But, we contend, when used together dialogue and system dynamics each reinforce the other to support public and private understandings that help communities think and learn together.

We have decided against hands-on exercises for this workshop because, while such exercises can be helpful, we think the time will be best spent in dialogic conversation around the difficulties inherent in change initiatives. We do however, endorse one exercise, which you can easily construct for yourself. As we experienced it, this exercise started from a brief and somewhat abstract written story about a minor, potentially criminal incident. Analysis of the story based on a quick reading of it by any number of individuals using a sheet of statements about details some of which were validated in the story and others which were not, like: There were two people involved. There was a gun. The cash drawer was forced open.... The exercise then invites the same individuals to make the same review and analysis of the same story, but in small teams. The differences in assumptions and judgments between individuals working independently and the ones offered within a team context were quite noticeable, with the team results always being closer to the "truth" of the initial story.

While this exercise would clearly benefit by use of multiple stories so that individual and team iterations would not have to rely on the same content, even the simple and quick exercise, as we experienced it, effectively demonstrated the power of collective thought. The teams that experience this result represent nascent dialogue groups and the exercise always engenders confidence in collective wisdom. In short, dialogue is a way to piece together a better version of "the story." And, while we do not want to take time for it today, this exercise is a great introduction to the power of dialogue.

So lets get started here's the workshop scenario:

First we'll tell you some of our story. If you have, or can later, read the summary of it in our paper, that will be all the better. The paper is just an attempt to ground this exercise in our experience. We're sure that you've had similar experiences in your own institutional contexts and will find it easy to relate to general issues like the ones we describe.

Then, we will briefly recount the experience and insights of several systems thinkers and change agents, highlighting parts of their important contributions and valuable research, that already have, or that we think may eventually help with our work.

Then, we'll offer several guidelines we find useful in dialogic conversation. We hope that within the next 20 minutes you will all join in to begin sharing stories, experiences, issues and concerns around the topic of K-12 education and system dynamics and their potential to help communities find better direction for their futures.

## **Background**

Door County, Wisconsin like other especially attractive places throughout the world experiences growth pressures from many directions. The list of pressure points could be presented as several pages of what often appear as divergent and sometimes isolated social, economic and environmental issues.

Over the years we and our community and most likely you and your community in your and its own ways, engaged in activities at various levels and in differing scopes that contributed to the present situation in the community and strongly influence its apparent potentials for the future. Some of these influences were intended, but most such actions create unintended consequences. In today's complex world issues tend to be addressed in isolation with limited consideration of potential unintended consequences.

The experience discussed here comes primarily from our efforts to enhance public engagement with resource-management decision making in the context of an attractive, rapidly growing recreation-dominated community. Other contexts for collective decision-making yield similar experiences. These realms extend to all forms of both "public" and "private" corporate decision-making and include questions and concerns typically regarded as either political or, because they are viewed as corporate, purely private. In reality, all such concerns share aspects of both public and private interest and are thus appropriate realms for community engagement. Such concerns, include, recreation, education, transportation, public health, esthetic, and natural resource infrastructure and many other realms including some, like employment creation, where the public/private distinction becomes quite blurred. In this context, decisions regarding all kinds of public infrastructure or institutional investments are obscured and made more difficult by contexts similar to those we have encountered. These decisions dominate cultural-political energy nearly everywhere with minimal obvious success and satisfaction.

Our intent for this paper and for the dialogue section of the workshop is to develop a deeper appreciation for the difficulties inherent in any attempt at institutional change, no matter how small or how noble the desire. "The biological world teaches that sustaining change requires understanding the reinforcing growth processes and what is needed to catalyze them, and addressing the limits that keep change from occurring." (Senge, 1999) Knowledge and expertise in these realms doesn't render the tasks less difficult, but helps to make the diversions, shortcomings and road blocks less stressful and helps save and focus energy where we hope it can further the original objectives.

### *Overview of history of planning and public engagement efforts in Door County.*

Table One, on page 16 provides an overview beginning with the County's first known land use planning activities in 1939. Although early efforts didn't involve community participation, the issues didn't appear to be significant and growth pressures were not a factor. During the early 1960's economic activities in the County, in particular cherry

orchards and agriculture were taking a downturn. Local business leaders pushed to find alternatives and thought that attracting light industrial businesses would help off-set the slow down in other areas. These concerns lead to the first countywide comprehensive planning initiative in 1964. Citizen participation during this period was limited. However, as pressures continued to increase so did citizen concerns. The increase of citizen participation and involvement in land use controversies was slow and didn't reach a significant level until the 1980's.

The long and protracted comprehensive planning initiative that started in 1986 was difficult and many citizens lost interest and dropped out of these planning activities. The county's officially created Citizen Planning Organization, went through a series of chairpersons during the long eight-year process. The result however was a reasoned and comprehensive plan for the county. But, implementation was weak and the resulting zoning ordinance favored development interests by leaving many of the preservation components of the plan out of the final ordinance. A variety of reasons led almost half of the fourteen townships to approve neither the plan nor the zoning ordinance.

Failure of historic approaches characterizes community planning and governing activities over the past 30 to 40 years and demonstrates a need for improvement. Typically, these activities modeled the traditional features of command and control and usually concluded with one or two interest groups managing or trying to manage the outcomes. The two endeavors directed toward creating comprehensive plans appeared to be holistic and visionary, however attempts at meaningful implementation broke down when competing values and beliefs surfaced.

### **New efforts at this work - Beginning in June 1996:**

Early in the summer of 1996 a small group of Door County's citizens began to think about how a different approach to citizen involvement might transform ambivalent attitudes into meaningful dialogue and action on local issues and concerns. The first community event of this kind took place in June of 1996

#### *Door 2000 - Community Land Use for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conference - June 1996*

This daylong workshop featured some of the most progressive ideas then in use in other places where people are facing issues similar to those in Door County. Four breakout sessions were offered to conference attendees: Political Action, Purchase of Development Rights, Land Use Issues-Zoning & Impact Fees; and Affordable Housing. Approximately eighty people attended this conference with developers, homebuilders and elected officials notably absent. The conference was sponsored and promoted by the Chamber of Commerce and a local property owners association concerned about future growth and development.

#### *The Omelet Conference & Continuance - August 1996*

Shortly after the Door 2000 Conference several of the participants gathered at a private residence along the shores of Green Bay in Egg Harbor to continue discussing questions from the conference. This conversation focused on how to engage a diverse community of interests in meaningful conversation about the community's future in the face of pressure for ever-more growth and development. A series of small group breakfast and luncheon meetings intended to gain a better sense of the attitudes and feeling of the local community followed this meeting over the summer and fall months. More than a dozen

conversations were held and over one hundred residents participated in these small group discussions. Most people entered these conversations feeling somewhat powerless and hopeless about the community ability to cope with the forces of growth. However, on many occasions the meetings ended with a renewed sense of hope and vision. In January 1997 many of those who had participated in the small group discussions, formed a steering committee, which ultimately led to a Future Search Conference in April of 1997. Imagining Together: Door County was formed to handle the logistics of organizing the conference.

#### Future Search Conference April 1997

The future search process, which we learned of from Weisbord's 1992 *Discovering Common Ground*, was used in a two-day conference style workshop. The conference brought together 9 stakeholder groups of 9 people each, with the common purpose of bringing further clarity and understanding to questions about the future direction of community development. The conferees addressed the question "How Do We Enhance the Quality of Life and Economic Future of Door County, While respecting its Character, Beauty and Natural Resources?" Conference participants agreed on eleven significant issues and concerns impacting the future of the community. Although no apparent answers resulted from this initiative, there were many elements of the work that informed next steps and laid the groundwork for numerous follow on initiatives.

Interestingly, the proceedings of the Future Search bear painful similarity to those from a similar community engagement eleven years earlier. It thus seems clear that the previous issues and concerns remain, and that little has been accomplished in the intervening decade.

#### Future Search Conference Participants Reunion - April 1998

Approximately half of the participants in the original search conference attended a brief three-hour evening gathering to recap some of the successes where the workshop may have played a role, or where a personal experience may have had some impact. Some discussion and considerations were given to future initiatives. Attempts to find common ground between the development and environmental communities were made shortly after the 1997 conference. Several tenuous meetings produced few results; similar attempts to find shared purpose among local environmental and conservation organizations during the same timeframe were more successful.

#### Attempts to form a coalition of environmental activists groups - April & May 1998

Efforts to move local environmental activists and their respective organizations, Door County Environmental Council, Door Property Owners, and Gibraltar Preservation Council toward some measure of collaboration were attempted with two Saturday morning summits. The significance of these two meetings was for many, in the new learning experience of using dialogue principles during the discussions. But, for the most part these meetings were "gripe" sessions. Attitudes, hardened by years of sparring and opposition to growth and development, remained skeptical in the absence of any letup in the continuous efforts to build and develop the county.

The most significant of these attitude-hardening experiences is, the lack of meaningful implementation of the County's Comprehensive Development Plan of 1995, by other than a zoning ordinance that favors development over protection even more than does the already pro-development plan. As a result, those favoring protection and trying to push for it find themselves drawn deeper into ever-more expensive interactions with the legal system when they persist. The broad outcome of all this is that those favoring protection see little

opportunity to do any thing but continue to oppose one development proposal after another, and quite naturally, find themselves labeled negative, and only "nay-sayers", by those proposing or supporting what appears to the opponents as "development at all cost."

#### *Retreat at the Bjorklunden Conference Center - May 1998*

This small gathering was an attempt to develop next steps in the continuing process of community-building activities. Four organizational consultants and community process practitioners from different perspectives participated with eight local community activists in an all-day conversation at a secluded conference center on the shores of Lake Michigan. Our purpose was to determine what methods and processes might be most effective in the continuing efforts to build community interests. This was the occasion where most of us received our first in-depth exposure to systems thinking and casual loop diagramming of intentional conversation.

At day's end many felt that the marriage of a local issue with the disciplines of dialogue and systems thinking in a forum or workshop setting could yield new insights, offering a chance for better problem solving. This idea spawned Door County's deep engagement with an initiative from the local state university campus: -a stewardship academy.

#### *Community Stewardship Academy (CSA) September 1998*

The academy was a training / learning experience created through the collaborative efforts of the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay's Outreach & Extension, Cooperative Extension and Social Change and Development Programs. Developed as a day and a half curriculum, the program revolved around an issue or project currently challenging a specific "community". Team members were provided with an integrated introduction to the use of dialogue, system thinking and stewardship principles to create a sustainable set of action scenarios for the team's selected issue or project. Through dialogue and interaction with team members, and by interacting with an instructor well versed in the technical perspective of the issue, the team grappled with their project from holistic perspectives. Two teams, one from Racine, Wisconsin and the other from Door County, Wisconsin, worked in combined and separate break out sessions, to experience how dialogue and systems thinking can assist with uncovering assumptions and bringing previously hidden aspects of an issue to light. The "crime scene" scenario-development exercise discussed in the "Preamble" to this dialogue and another very useful exercise to demonstrate the significance of positive and negative feedback in systems were presented by the systems thinking and dialogue consultants who facilitated the workshop.

#### *Community Stewardship Council - Charter Development - October 1998*

Considerable discussion followed the Stewardship Academy workshop about the usefulness of this approach and how we might use what had been learned through our experience with the processes introduced during the workshop. These continuing discussions lead to our convening a full-day strategy session with several system thinking and dialogue practitioners.

Many of those present had been involved with the larger process since June of 1996. During these discussions we began laying the groundwork to create a partnership among various citizen organization and several local and state government agencies. The partnership's purpose was to leverage the technical, financial and human resources of participants and to seek creative ways to cooperate in resolving controversial local resource management issues.

Over the next five months, ten informational gatherings were conducted to inform people of the initiative to create the council and invite their participation in working toward the Council's purposes.

*Community Stewardship Council - Beginning February 1999*

The initial meeting of the council took place as a mid-day session with about 35 people attending. An organizing group had planned the event to be well structured and to incorporate many components of dialogue. Regular meetings of the council, with varying attendance, have continued one Monday evening a month since its beginning in February of 1999. While we have not had the luxury of professional facilitators, but a local participant with national facilitation experience has now volunteered to serve as a very light-handed facilitator and her efforts have seemed to have positive impact in the last two meetings. We have taken many opportunities, in short segments of these meetings, to emphasize, discuss and experience selected attributes of dialogue and system thinking.

For reasons we did not understand in the beginning, some have attended but not returned after a meeting or two. Others, however have continued to come and share our experience of attempting to bring clarity to some of the more difficult issues in our community. Several worthy resource management related projects are underway, many were at least seeded by Stewardship Council discussions conducted on Monday evenings, but most are handled through activities and organizations not directly initiated by the Council.

Some see the Council as a place to develop understanding and a common language across subcultures within the community. We who share this view think we have seen positive results from these seemingly unstructured conversations. But attempts by the organizing team to minimize control and direction by implementing ideas of shared leadership and shared responsibility for the council's conduct have frustrated some participants, who frequently respond with something like "Let me know when you decide to DO SOMETHING and I will consider getting on board."

Recent meetings are becoming more action or project oriented, especially under the recent casual facilitation mentioned above. And, we are by no means where we would like to be with implementation of our vision of partnership and collaboration, but we believe we are making slow but certain progress.

## Methods and New Processes

### Dialogue & Systems Thinking: Keys, Guides and Principles

The practice of sitting in a circle and talking seems to have been part of every indigenous culture down through the ages. The Greeks, from whom we get the name dialogue were perhaps the last Western culture to explicitly use his practice which was largely washed away in the wake of the modern ways of organizing society. You may be familiar with the Greek root of the word "*dia - logos*", or "flow of meaning". David Bohm, a theoretical physicist, was influential in grounding much of the modern understanding of dialogue. (Bohm, 1996) In the last several decades others have contributed substantially to reestablishing dialogue as a core process for self-government in large institutions and have attempted to understand the successes and failures in these efforts through experimentation.

Today, by comparison with what we imagine of indigenous cultures, making dialogue effective can be complex. These complexities interact with the nature, openness and discuss-ability of participants' commitment, the variety of participant interests and availability and quality of facilitation. "Dialogue has many levels, starting with observable behaviors, the basics of listening and respecting one another, of suspending one's views and voicing. But what makes these new behaviors possible is not simply trying to act differently. New behaviors that last come from new ways of seeing, from new awareness and sensibilities". (Senge, 1999).

William Issacs's recently released book "*Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*" introduces the "four-player model" a system for understanding the structures that lie behind group behavior, first developed by family system therapist David Kantor. This "four-player" perspective models the dynamics of "movers, opposers, followers, and bystanders", as viewed from the perspective of dialogue and adds a useful dimension to our understanding of human interaction. In genuine dialogue, these roles can be dynamic, rather than static, and participants can to some degree take on new roles, when there seems to be a need to shift the conversational energy.

Issacs explores other insights from the work that Kantor calls "structural dynamics" in a discussion of the contrasting approaches of "system paradigms" that exist in both families and larger social institutions. Issacs combines these system paradigms, which Kantor labels *open, closed and random* with a discussion of the languages of "power" (or action), "feeling" and "meaning", to diagnose structural dynamics and overcome structural traps.

*"A structural trap is a condition where one part of the system requires people to act in one way, while another part of the organization requires them to do something else that directly contradicts this. This is because different subsystems of any organization often have very different assumptions and ideas about what is wrong and what needs correction, and tend not to communicate well to one another. The net effect is that people feel their efforts to produce change are constantly being undermined and neutralized despite many well-intentioned efforts to reverse the decline."* (Issacs, 1999)

Maintaining individual and/or group interest and commitment in any reform or change effort is no small task. The stress and anxiety brought out by what seems to be lack of progress or failure can be measurably reduced with at least some understanding of organizational structures, structural dynamics, and principles of systemic thinking. Simply understanding, in a small way, why a system, organization or individual pushes back, helps us fashion a more reasoned response or reaction when resistance is encountered.

When we think of "structures" many of us picture an organizational chart or the layout of a building or an architectural blueprint. But the term structure is used in a variety of different ways in other context. Ideas about structure in fields like biology refer most frequently to the physical structure of an organism. Issacs describes structure as those patterns of organizing, thinking, and acting that produce causal pressures on what human beings do in face-to-face interactions. Structure in human conversation and interactions are defined as "the set of frameworks, habits, and conditions that compel people to act as they do." (Issacs, 1999)

Not only do we unintentionally set structural traps, but we spring them as well. This can happen when our inability to deal effectively with volatile social, economic and environmental issues is made worse by our lack of understanding and appreciation for these structural traps, and for the defensive routines that individuals and institutional cultures use to protect, defend and perpetuate operating structures. Conventional responses to the resulting impasses and conflicts often make the situation even more difficult and less productive.

A useful perspective in applying the practice of dialogue helps uncover four habits of thought that foster "thinking alone", and thus, prevent dialogic conversation and thinking together. Issacs asserts that four "pathologies of thought" abstraction, idolatry, certainty and violence lie at the feet of most difficulties in relationships with family, friends, organizations and society. (Issacs, 1999,)

Two of these pathologies, abstraction and certainty are made most obvious when we realize how thinking systemically bids us to stand back at a distance and look for the larger view, rather than extract out (abstract) only a portion of the whole. Similarly, the pathology of "certainty" limits our ability to broaden our awareness. You might consider a little self-examination How firmly do I hold to my own view? Do I really have room for another's point of view? Without skills to enable us to let go of, or to "suspend" certainty, thereby releasing the firmly held opinions we have formed, we negate any chance for sustained learning to take place.

Taking advantage of the considerable research and experience of such resources as the book "*The Dance of Change*" (Senge, et. al., 1999) enables our learning and ability to sustain our efforts to nurture change. "*The Dance of Change*" provides a rich series of guides in a format offering numerous pointers to collateral material and is an excellent reference to help us better understand why sustaining significant change is so elusive.

The book's subtitle, "*challenges to sustaining momentum in learning organizations*", reflects the considerable challenge of initiating, sustaining, redesigning and rethinking transformation at any level of culture. These challenges are encountered not only in the corporate world, but also in other institutions, even including families, across the fabric of society.

Another reference and study guide is the *"Fifth Discipline Fieldbook"*. Written in a manner similar to that of *"The Dance of Change"*, it covers many of the critical strategies and tools that can be useful in building learning communities. Several additional and closely related resources are represented in the work done at the MIT Center for Organizational Learning. All of these resources illustrate that developing new organizational capabilities requires deep reflection and testing.

Several years ago, Fred Kofman and Peter Senge proposed not so much the definitive answers, but rather several guiding principles for action to support basic shifts in how we think and interact that are at the heart of learning communities. An interesting point of discussion in their paper (Kofman and Senge, 1993) addresses basic problems of interaction in our larger culture. They proposed three fundamental problems with our current cultural model or paradigm: fragmentation, competition and reactivity. Fragmentation leads to linear thinking, which is ineffective when attempting to address systemic problems. Competition is both a good and a bad thing, the problem arises when competition is not in balance with cooperation, particularly at a time when we need to work closely together. We have become accustomed to changing or reacting to outside forces. Reactivity fosters a fixation on solving problems to make the troublesome issue go away which crowds out human nature's natural creativity.

Another useful paper in this realm is Edgar Schein's discussion of the impact on the theory and practice of social and organizational psychology of Kurt Lewin's work. Schein posits that all forms of learning and change start with some form of dissatisfaction or frustration. He points to survival anxiety and learning anxiety as typically preventing us from being able to accept new information and promoting a defensive reaction within us.. (Schein, 1999)

Beginning practitioners often consider dialogue as a place or environment to "practice" ways of interacting that are quite different from normal contexts and methods of communicating and conducting activities in family, business, government and public arenas. However, if we hold to a perspective that encourages continuing to conduct everyday meetings, one-on-one conversations, and responses to challenges in much the same way we did yesterday we reinforce, or "practice", yesterday's ways. On the other hand, if we think of our day-to-day interactions as reinforcing our habits, good or bad; we begin to appreciate the logic of creating "practice fields" to promote new ways of interacting.

We can adopt known processes for changing habits by practicing new and different ways of interacting. Every athlete knows the benefits of practice of grooving our response and reaction, developing a fluid golf swing, honing our physical skills. No less, improving our human communications and thinking skills require practice and honing as well.

One critical issue is the need to address the many tugs on our time and energy. How can we find ways to help people come to the center of community interest and become more involved and concerned. Tugs on time and energy most often lead to the inclination a real and deep need to give up, leaving the confrontational aspects of community and cultural politics in control.

The natural inclinations to resist change, misunderstood organizational and human dynamics, learning anxieties and the pathologies of thought are all factors contributing to the public's disenchantment with interest and participation in its own affairs. While these factors sometimes seem overwhelming, it is our belief that such alienation can be overcome with appropriate use of available resources.

Gregory Bateson, biologist, anthropologist, psychologist and systems thinker of the last century once claimed that the most of our problems are rooted in the difference between the way man thinks and the way nature works.

This paper has touched on but a few of the keys that can unlock different understanding and perhaps thus lead to change. Many of these keys, guides and principles are embedded in the works of many of our current modern-day systems thinkers including Chris Argyris, Jay Forrester, Art Kleiner, Fred Kofman, William Issacs, Barry Richmond, Edgar Schein, Donald Schön, Peter Senge, John Sterman, and countless others whom we leave off of this short and incomplete list both begrudgingly and undoubtedly, out of ignorance.

In any; case, our intent is not to pull together any conclusive reference work, which could be perceived as an answer or a playbook. Our intent is to offer something of a circle of reference opportunities, and to invite you and others to join us in our continuing explorative journey.

## The "*Practice Field*" of Dialogue

"Come now, let us reason together ..."

Isaiah 1:18

There have been many words written to describe or define dialogue and has often meant different things to different people. Issacs defines dialgoue as *a conversation with a center, not sides*. We've heard someone in our community describe it as being able to disagree without being disagreeable. Dialogue is not about reaching consensus or "getting to yes." Unlike conventional conversation, dialogue attempts to explore problems much closer to the core of our thinking processes and is willing to allow the conversation to evolve without demanding agreement, conclusion or consensus.

Dialogue can be further defined as a sustained collective inquiry into the processes, assumptions, and certainties that compose everyday experience. (Issacs, 1993) As you will see from the few principles described here dialogue supports the underlying concepts of systems thinking and is, in our opinion, the best way to fashion the story needed to grow good thinking about how any system works.

We'll briefly discuss six of the building blocks for dialogue and refer you to Issacs (1999), Ellinor & Gerard, (1998) for further information. These six building blocks are:

Identify Assumptions  
Suspend Judgment  
Inquiry and Reflection

Balance Inquiry & Advocacy  
Release need for outcomes  
Listen without Resistance

Identify Assumptions: Assumptions are what we think we know. Assumptions underpin the quick judgments we apply as we think and react. We make judgments constantly, many times our judgments are based on erroneous assumptions, and sometimes they are based, at least in part, on real world fact. Decisions or actions are the result of applying judgments based on assumptions we make or use to filter what we hear or see prior to our actions. Don't discount the evidence that our assumptions are too frequently disguised as fact or truth. A useful example comes from the widely experienced fact that conflicting or differing assumptions that result from growing up in different cultures and surroundings sometimes produce arguments and conflict over what should be taken to be true or correct. A critical component of dialogic conversation is the skill to identify our own assumptions. Learning to identify one's own assumptions requires thoughtful and frequent practice and benefits from regular dialogue with friendly collaborators. From a pre-dialogic perspective it is a disturbing thought that *any conclusion we arrive at, can only be an approximation of the truth.*

Suspend Judgment: Dialogic conversation encourages and requires an ability to observe our own judgments, and those of others, from a somewhat open or neutral perspective. Suspending does not mean eliminating judgments; it is, rather, about holding or setting aside internal and external reactions to what we observe or hear. Judgments limit the ability to listen, whether you're agreeing or disagreeing. Judgments reinforce our values and beliefs, and inhibit our ability to entertain new perspectives and ideas. David Bohm believed that in order to learn to think creatively, as opposed to reacting, we need to slow down our thought processes to recognize our quick-draw judgments and move toward assembling additional information to allow us to develop fresh alternatives.

*Inquiry and Reflection:* "Inquiry is about asking questions and holding an attitude of curiosity, opening the door for new insights. Reflection is about holding the door open long enough for new perceptions to emerge". (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998) Inquiry builds opportunity for creativity and innovation. It is also very much a necessary ingredient for effective problem solving and is an integral part of systems thinking, where better questions help us see the relationships among the parts that comprise the whole.

"And if you ask a thousand questions, yet do not pause to listen and reflect on what emerges in response, how will you learn". (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998) The lack of reflective periods during conversation is endemic to a fast paced culture where we are expected to have an answer. The pressing need to have answers, to be right, and to move with deliberate speed, colors how we communicate and act, and is counter to insightful conversation that advances reflection and learning.

*Balance Inquiry & Advocacy:* Advocacy is just as important to powerful conversation as good inquiry, however these two dimensions of the search for understanding need to be in balance. In the absence of advocacy we often fail to hear different views. However, advocacy with the intent to persuade, control, or manipulate will quickly move others to become defensive, aggressive or to withdraw from the dialogue. When this happens, the invitation for inquiry can be lost, but if your desire in advocating is to offer your perspective as another element in building a larger view of the issue and promote inquiry, then your efforts will lend to the group's collective understanding. "In dialogue the intention that motivates inquiry is to expand understanding, to build a more inclusive view of the whole." (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998)

*Release need for outcomes:* One of the most difficult stumbling blocks to dialogue is the culturally reinforced need most of us have for particular or specific outcomes. This need for outcomes must be released for dialogue to flourish and to open the possibility of finding new perspectives even if the search for those new perspectives takes longer than either we would like or our culture says it should. Our experience has been that people see this principle as having no purpose, and as aimlessly wasting of their time. But, when need for outcomes can be released and dialogue can be given time to evolve throughout the group, the process can become an effective means for expanding understanding, developing collaborative partnerships and being more intentional about co-creating a shared purpose. Learning and creativity can be sacrificed when they are dominated by an attitude of quickly finding the right answer and moving on.

*Listen without Resistance:* The shaping of effective dialogue is interwoven like a fabric made more serviceable by being woven from different types of material. Resistance to giving up our own ideas about how things are, or should be, can be substantial. Its somewhat like peeling away the individual layers an onion, layers of prejudices, opinions, and judgments which we've added one after another over years of interacting with those who are predisposed to do the same.

Webster's dictionary describes paradox as "a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true", and also as "a self contradictory statement that at first seems true". Dialogue challenges us with just such paradoxes, one of letting our inner voice hold our own truth, but recognizing that others also have a part of the truth. Another aspect of paradox requires that we constantly remind ourselves to shift our thinking from positions of "either/or" to those of "both/and."

## Conducting Dialogue as a Practice Field

We've just told you our version of the story we all share. So now let's all share a dialogue about where any of us can go as we play out our versions and pieces of stories like this one in our various niches.

In setting the stage for this "learning experience" you can help us establish the following guides for the dialogue practice. Start your participation by taking your turn around the circle - introduce yourself and maybe give everyone a brief indication of your thoughts or concerns at the moment. But, in the interest of time, try to limit your statement to no more than a minute. We, and many other dialogue practitioners, call this introductory exercise a "check-in". If you wish, you may only tell the group who you are and just say "pass" to indicate no desire to make any further comment. In many dialogue circles individual check-in statements end with the words "I'm in" to indicate that the statement is finished and that the next participant is invited to begin their "check-in." Toward the end of our allotted two and one-half hour period we'll close with a comparable brief "check-out" from anyone interested in offering closing thoughts, reflections or comments. We will follow the convention of saying "I'm out" at the end of each check-out statement. Like check-in, check-out is optional, but at least until groups become fluent in working together it is comfortable to move the check-in or check-out process consecutively around the circle and to have those who choose to not participate to say "pass" to indicate their intention without slowing the process.

At this time would you help us rearrange the chairs in a circle, if the group is much larger than 30 or so, we may do better with two concentric circles. If you have not previously been a part of a large group dialogue, don't worry we have seen this process work well with more than a hundred people.

Several easels are placed around the room with guidelines posted to assist us as we interact during the next 90 minutes. We invite any of you to sketch casual loop or stock-flow diagrams that approximate the system interactions suggested as the dialogue progresses. You may then wish to share your sketches before we close.

Here are some questions or discussion points that we think might be useful for us to consider together this afternoon.

1. Can K-12 Education utilize system dynamics to create viable learning experiences with the local community?
2. Can or should K-12 Education initiatives in system dynamics become recognized assets and resources support decisions for the future direction of communities?,
3. How do you see language and communications as barriers or becoming barriers to the continuing progress of system dynamics in K-12 Education?, and
4. What is your sense about the resistance to change, particularly with respect to K-12 Education and system dynamics?

## Summary and Conclusions

As an outgrowth of interaction with the processes summarized above, the authors began collaborating to implement and institutionalize a course on system dynamics for teachers, students, and community members. The initial course was taught at Sturgeon Bay High School five hours per week on Saturday mornings and Monday evenings, starting in fall 1999. Initial participants included five high school teachers; six high school sophomore students, with one of the six remaining engaged with the project at this writing, and four community members.

The course was the product of the intersection of two specific agendas among the larger stream of activities summarized above. One of those agendas focused on enhancing and empowering public engagement in policy issues for the county. This agenda had expressed itself in efforts under the sponsorship of Imagining Together Door County, The Door County Stewardship Council and antecedents including an outreach program, The Community Stewardship Academy, from September 1998 and a major community visioning process, Future Search, from April 1997. The other agenda focused on System Thinking and System Dynamics as critical tools for collective decision making and was informed by efforts to bring these tools to public access throughout the country and world. Antecedents of this agenda reach back to efforts to make System Dynamics and System Thinking accessible to public decision making centered on the efforts of Professor Jay Forester at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The authors of this paper are all participants in the initial Sturgeon Bay course. They include: the courses' teacher and the longest-standing advocate of system thinking and system dynamics in the community, Paul Newton; two of the community members who had extensive experience with the larger public engagement agenda, Roy Aiken and Larry Smith; and several participating teachers, Don Ziegelbauer and Steve Schmelzer.

We hope the course will help bring system thinking and system dynamics to help inform issues of concern in many areas. These include wetlands, wildlife habitat and open space protection; urban and rural sprawl; citizen engagement in public policy issues generally; transportation planning; and equity in bearing the costs of meaningful land use protection and planning.

Table 2, on page 17 generalizes one perspective of the polarized community of interests and the extreme sides or viewpoints that are taken on a number of broadly defined issues. All such issues involve complex tradeoffs, which are not readily apparent, that invoke seemingly intractable conflicts

Your thoughtful listening and participation with this short dialogue practice is appreciated and with your permission, we would like to provide you with the feedback from today's dialogue as part of our post session research. Possibly in the future there will be another opportunity to share new experiences and we will look forward in anticipation to that future time and space.

Table One, identifies and briefly describes significant events in the history of resource management or land use planning and public engagements in these activities in the County.

**Table One**  
**Overview History of Public Engagement in Resource Management**  
**Door County, Wisconsin**

Date	Activity	Product	Participants
Pre 1950	State initiated for Door County (1939)	Rudimentary and tentative map for zoning districts - Not accepted by the county.	Document provide to the county by the Wisconsin State Planning Board
1952	Initiated by the County Board	Zoning Ordinance - Brief 7 pages - 5 zoning districts, with permitted uses	Very few towns approved of ordinance - no implementation or enforcement
1964	County wide Comprehensive Planning Initiative	Comprehensive Plan 300 Pages, maps, tables, etc. lead to a zoning ordinance in 1968 (Excellent Document )	Wisconsin. Dept of Resource Development & various county agencies and Citizens. Marginal acceptance by towns. Some enforcement procedures implemented.
1982	Advisory Planning Initiative	Small 30 page document of recommendation and priorities	60 citizens selected based on local involvement and interest. Coordinated by the University Wisconsin Extension Service.
1986	Phase I of a Comprehensive Planning Project - Advisory Only	Facilitated workshops 15 meetings in 5 geographical areas of county	Multiple interest groups - 185 people. Assisted by Dept of Landscape Architecture-University of Wisconsin - Madison
1995	Door County Land Use Zoning Ordinance Door County Development Plan	County Development Plan 115 Pages and accompanying zoning ordinance	8 year process - (CPO) citizens planning organizations, many dropped outs from process -Certain interest favored over others.

1997	Future Search Conference 2 1/2 days of interaction and facilitated discussions.	Eleven priority concerns for the community - Unknowingly reflected 1986 planning project outcomes.	81 people, 9 stakeholder groups of 9 people each. Citizen instigated, organized and funded.
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Table Two, generalizes one perspective of the polarized community of interests and the extreme sides or viewpoints that are apparent on several broadly defined issues.

**Table Two**  
**Viewpoint Extremes across Selected Issues**

One Extreme	Supporters toward this dimension of this issue	Issue	Supporters toward this dimension of this issue	Other Extreme
Rising land values lead to increased taxes	Fixed, moderate, and old-economy property owners	<i>Land Values</i>	Some land owner, some businesses and Chamber of Commerce, economic development advocates	High land values good since they represent economic prosperity and more business & a higher tax base
Diverse housing stock encourages desirable diversity in community	Community "richness" advocates	<i>Affordable Housing</i>	Some developers, some supporters of "status-quo" cultural mix	Keep affordable housing away from existing community in isolated, inexpensive settings and imported labor when necessary
Ground & surface water are the essential resource for Door County	Ecological advocates, almost everyone takes this side of this issue.	<i>Water Quality</i>	Very Few	Don't worry - we will eventually develop a collective water treatment system
A "living" wage is essential for a viable community	Community "richness" advocates	<i>Labor Supply</i>	Some businesses & some economic development advocates	Keep wages down to support business
Critical to the viability of ecological communities and ground water	Ecological advocates	<i>Wetlands</i>	Some property owners, some developers	Of limited value, private desires take precedence
Critical to the viability of ecological communities and esthetic appeal	Ecological advocates, esthetic advocates	<i>Open Space</i>	Some property owners, some developers	There is lots of undeveloped land in Door County, more 'development is important than open space preservation.

Much "development" cost more than it is worth.	Open space advocates, cost of services-concerned folk	<i>Development</i>	Business & develop interests, including Chamber of Commerce	Essential at all cost Tax base is essential
More roads bring more congestion - alternatives are needed	Ecological advocates, esthetic advocates, Open space advocates, cost of services-concerned folk	<i>Bridge Transportation</i>	Business & develop interests, including Chamber of Commerce	Must "develop" transportation to serve business and tourism
Not all land uses pay the full cost of the services they require as taxes	Cost of services-concerned folk	<i>Tax &amp; Spending Base</i>	Business & develop interests, Chamber of Commerce, Lots of elected officials govt. players, & many tax payers	More is Better

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