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Reflections on the Restorative Conference Facilitator's Script

BY KATE SHAPERO

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In mathematics and science, the term elegant is used to describe a formula or explanation that is both simple and comprehensive. Elegant ideas use evidence to braid together many of the messy strings dangling from a problem. They reveal core mechanisms and are easily related between individuals. Though it inhabits a world seemingly separate from the rigid logic of science and math, restorative conferencing is extremely elegant. The organization of conferencing approaches emotionally chaotic situations and provides structured opportunities to create solutions.

The straightforward information presented in IIRP course YC/ED 502 gave me the tools I needed to deconstruct the magic in conferencing and understand the mechanics of the process. I was very impressed by the thoughtful work that goes into preparing for conferences, as well as the well-ordered script. Conferencing feels very real. It seems to honor cultural differences and family norms. It acknowledges and disapproves of harmful behavior but avoids arbitrary punishments.

After reading through the *Conferencing Handbook*, watching demonstrations and

participating in role plays, I began to appreciate how an organized meeting can lead to such powerful interactions. Conversely, I realized why conversations that do not honor the needs and emotional reactions of participants with clarity may lead to less satisfactory outcomes.



Kate Shapero, in front of the IIRP Graduate School, Bethlehem, Pa., campus

Following the prompts and guidelines provided in the script during role plays freed me from imposing my values and pushing suggestions on the participants. I was able to relax into a clearly defined role without being concerned about having to please everyone or come up with a great solution. I was energized by the idea that I could help orchestrate an opportunity for people to develop their own solutions to their own problems.

I delighted in the opportunity to practice facilitating during role plays, but I also enjoyed the empowerment that came through finding solutions as a mock conference participant. After suggesting a solution that changed the victim's attitude during a role play, I experienced

pride in my ability to care for the needs of the victim and offender. This was all during a "make believe" interaction! (This led me to wonder if any interactions, acting or not, are without emotional engagement.) I can only imagine the excitement and gratification a real conference participant might feel when they propose an idea that turns the tide of the group toward more positive affects.

Even though individual contributions can help build positive feelings in the group, it is not usually one participant who steers everyone toward a more positive relationship. It seems that the well-ordered chain of interactions guided by the script allows people to express their negative feelings and transition to more positive affects, as described in *Real Justice* (Wachtel, 1997, p. 88).

I've thought a lot about exactly what conferencing does and have carefully examined the systematic and scripted approach presented in the *Conferencing Handbook* to learn more about how it fosters positive outcomes. The following is a sketch of my observations about what is happening at each stage of the conference and why the order of these stages is particularly effective.

PREAMBLE

This section lays the foundation for the conference and establishes an environment in which people are expected to talk about an incident and how it has affected them. I think that both the removal of the terms "offender" and "victim" during this process and the statement "we are not here to decide whether this person is good or bad" serve to legitimize participants as real people instead of branding them with

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adversarial labels (O'Connell, Wachtel & Wachtel, 1999, pp. 17-20).

By attempting to find out how participants have been affected by wrongdoing, the script removes specific assumptions about how people may have reacted to the incident and what their feelings are likely to be. This section clearly establishes the purpose of the gathering and honors the free will of the participants by reminding them that their presence is a choice.

OFFENDER SPEAKS

Beginning the conference by addressing the offender effectively addresses a variety of issues that could potentially complicate the situation if the victim were to share his or her feelings and experience first. Hearing an offender own his or her part in an act and express how he or she has processed the ramifications of that act provides assurance for the victim that what was done to them was real and wrong. It also gives the victim time to understand what motivated the offender and how it has affected them. In addition, it allows the victim to see the offender as a complex person instead of a one-dimensional persona.

Having offenders speak first may also help them express themselves more clearly and without the added weight of everyone else's feelings. I have to imagine that offenders hearing many people express how they've been harmed before they have had an opportunity to share their side of the story could result in defensiveness and reluctance to openly communicate their role in all that hurt.

VICTIM SPEAKS

By following the offenders, victims can express themselves in an environment in which the wrongdoing has already been acknowledged. This probably decreases the pressure they might otherwise feel to convince offenders that what they did was harmful. Asking victims to say what was the "hardest thing for you" helps them share core issues that the of-

fender might never have thought about (O'Connell, Wachtel & Wachtel, 1999, p. 19). It effectively expands the focus of the conversation from immediate victim reactions and emotions to ways in which the incident affected broader quality of life issues.

VICTIM SUPPORTERS SPEAK

Sequencing the script so that victim supporters speak next allows victims to feel validated and less isolated in the conversation. It also creates an opportunity for offenders to realize that a wider web of people has been affected by their actions. This gives offenders an opportunity to process the main issues connected to the incident before they speak, so that their response is less segmented than it would be if they responded to each person in turn.

OFFENDER SUPPORTERS SPEAK

Having the offender supporters speak last effectively completes the circle of sharing so that offenders can hear messages of both disapproval and support before they respond. If emotional messages from victims and victim supporters do not register with the offender, their concerns may be more easily understood or carry greater weight when expressed by a family member or other supporter of the offender.

OFFENDER RESPONDS

This stage in the conference is very important because it asks the offender to make a choice. The question, "Is there anything you want to say at this time?" gives the offender an opportunity to clarify information, acknowledge and respond to the feelings of others and demonstrate increased empathy concerning the core issues surrounding the incident. Even if the offender decides not to speak at this time, the attention has been turned to him or her, and the entire group has an opportunity to gather information that he or she may be expressing through body language or other nonverbal signals. The offender's actions

at this time seem pivotal in shifting group energy toward appropriate resolutions in the next stage of the conference.

REACHING AN AGREEMENT

Since the victim has had an opportunity to hear the offender's response in the previous stage, he or she is much more likely to feel forgiveness and consider the needs of the offender in creating a conference agreement. If the "reaching an agreement" stage were to happen before the offender responded, I imagine that victims would be less understanding and supportive in their requests.

Checking in with the offender after each specific request is made helps ensure that each proposal is real, achievable and appropriate. Reading the proposals as a long list at the end of the conference instead of discussing them individually could seem overwhelming and lead the offender to feel victimized, as though the requests were simply a list of punishments.

CLOSING THE CONFERENCE

Providing a final opportunity for everyone to share their thoughts, questions and ideas allows participants to speak who might not otherwise have done so. It also provides a platform for sharing lingering feelings that could potentially inhibit the conference agreement from being fulfilled if concerns were left unresolved.

BREAKING OF BREAD

This ritual subtly assures the group that each participant is a real person. The process of sharing conversation and food continues to erode the earlier personas of "victim" and "offender" while providing new ways for people to get to know one another.☉

REFERENCES

- O'Connell, T., Wachtel, B. & Wachtel, T. (1999). *Conferencing Handbook*. Pipersville, PA: The Piper's Press.
- Wachtel, T. (1997). *Real Justice*. Pipersville, PA: The Piper's Press.