

Combining Future Search and Open Space to Address Special Situations

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Abstract

Open Space and Future Search can be combined as related steps in a process of helping a community decide on its future. Doing so creates new ways to address difficult situations that neither method may be able to handle as well on its own. Two specific case studies following a similar combination design are presented showing the complementary nature of both methods when used together. Some conclusions are offered on when to consider this combined approach.

Future Search and Open Space are two proven designs for involving large numbers of people in dialogue and decisions about issues of importance (Weisbord and Janoff, 2000; Owen, 1997). While a number of practitioners of large group methods use both approaches, often these are considered to be distinct approaches and applied separately. Clearly, both approaches work alone, but there may be advantages in combining them in one engagement, using each approach for what it does best. The two methods are based on fundamentally similar principles though they have unique characteristics.

Future Search and Open Space are intended to engage whole systems in conversation. Both approaches stress the value of including diverse points of view. Open Space can involve as many people as choose to participate. In large systems, Future Search selects a representative sample of the whole system to ensure that those with authority, resources, information and a stake in the outcome are present.

Focus, Roles and Outcomes

The two methods stress the importance of a clear purpose for the group's work. In Open Space, conversations are focused around a theme. Participants define the agenda by proposing topics they believe are important and relevant to the theme. Future Search defines a task for the group's work. Participants work together on this task through a series of small and large group conversations about past and present conditions before considering what they all desire for the future.

Both approaches stress self-management of participants' work. Neither approach provides additional facilitation of small group work beyond that of general guidelines for time, process, and output.

Future Search is designed to help the group arrive at agreements about the future they want and actions to achieve it. Open Space is designed to explore the issues of greatest importance to the group. Many practitioners add some prioritization and planning in the closing hours of Open Space, but others leave it open ended.

Comparing the Application of Both Methods

Future Search can accomplish two very specific outcomes: creating a common set of agreements about the desired future, and building action steps to get there. Future

Search can be relied upon to achieve these results, across all kinds of settings, in a 16 hour period.

Future Search, however, has two characteristics that affect how it is used. The first of these is the number of participants. The design of a Future Search conference is based on a series of small group activities and whole group conversations. The number of participants is limited to about eight groups of eight people since eight is about the maximum size for effective, self-managed, small group work. This means that 64 participants is an ideal size for a Future Search. Future Search has been used effectively with groups as large as 100 and even larger with modifications, but as the number of participants increases it becomes more likely that the Future Search design will have to change to accommodate the large number of small groups and the scale of any whole group discussion. Concurrent or sequential Future Searches have been held to involve larger numbers of people, but this approach is not always feasible.

A second characteristic of Future Search is planned, sequential activities that build dialogue and move a diverse group towards a shared set of outcomes. This structure is very effective, but in politically charged environments there may be such a low level of trust and strong feelings that some individuals believe certain topics cannot be raised or will not be heard. In these situations, the structured activities of Future Search design may cause some to resist the approach as not responsive to their concerns.

In contrast to Future Search, Open Space can be planned to accommodate any number of participants. A complete Open Space conference can be conducted over different time periods with three days as an ideal period for a full, large conference. Its design has a very minimal overall structure and enables the participants to discover what they are willing and able to discuss with little direction from facilitators. There is very little in the method's structure to create resistance, other than the overall decision to open decision making to all who choose to participate.

Open Space, however, is less predictable in terms of who will attend the meeting, or who will participate in particular conversations. Participation is something that the design of Open Space specifically does not try to control. If the intent is to arrive at conclusions based upon the input of representatives of all those with a stake in the decisions, then Open Space cannot ensure that certain stakeholder views are heard by all or that specific cross-sector dialogue actually occurs.

A second difference between Open Space and Future Search is the limited extent to which Open Space offers assurance as to its eventual outcomes. While Open Space can achieve essentially the same outcomes as Future Search in a similar amount of time, its design means that the process and results of the meeting are harder to predict. These considerations often are important in choosing a particular approach.

In summary, both methods, while effective on their own, also present certain trade-offs in their respective approaches to engaging the whole system in deciding and acting upon important concerns. Combining both approaches when facing challenging client situations may resolve these trade-offs. Two contrasting cases will illustrate the usefulness of a combined approach.

Combining Methods: The Case of too Many Participants

An initial experience with combining Open Space and Future Search involved work with a large Unitarian Universalist congregation. The church had grown rapidly in recent years to 1000 members. The community was undergoing various challenges given its growth and now was looking ahead to its 50th anniversary. The congregation wanted to develop a common vision about what kind of community they wanted to be as a “mature” organization. After reviewing several approaches, they chose Future Search for this process.

A critical problem arose in early meetings with the committee formed to plan the Future Search. The church was not only large, but it contained several distinct theological and philosophical communities. All voices needed to be involved in considering the church’s future. Inclusiveness was a key value of the community. Even more of a problem was the necessity of holding a specific meeting at one place and time as many people would not be able to attend on any given date. The committee was concerned that their actions in setting one date and inviting specific participants would be viewed as being exclusive and not reflect their values. A proposal to conduct parallel or sequential Future Search conferences was viewed as impractical as it would take too much of the church’s time and resources to convene two or more 16 hour conferences.

After some discussion, a plan was developed to hold a series of “conversations” with the Future Search as just *one* such conversation in the middle of the whole process. The Future Search would be preceded by three rounds of Open Space conversations. We called these “Beginning Conversations.” The Future Search would be followed by a whole community session engaging everyone in “Further Conversations.” Each meeting event had its own role. The Open Space “Beginning Conversations” would provide multiple opportunities for anyone to participate and for the whole community to learn more about members’ thoughts on current issues and future desires. The Future Search would provide an opportunity for extended, focused conversation to produce a common ground for the future and action plans for working towards this future. The final session would provide an opportunity to engage everyone in action areas of their choosing.

Beginning Conversations

Three separate sessions of Open Space were conducted over a two week period to provide multiple opportunities for people to participate. All three sessions were convened under the same overall theme. They were held on a Sunday afternoon, a Saturday morning and a weekday evening. Each session was approximately three hours in length and drew from 25 to 50 participants. None of them were intended to build toward specific conclusions. Each session began by explaining the theme and ground rules. Participants then proposed the conversations they wanted to convene relative to the overall theme. This was followed by two, 45 minute rounds of parallel small group conversations with a brief break in between. In closing, there was a general session in which the discussion groups reported out the results of their conversations. The outcomes of the sessions were posted on flip chart paper where all could see them. These sheets remained posted in the church throughout the two week period so that everyone could see what was being discussed. Some topics evolved from session to session. In effect, the three sessions were part of one continuing Open Space exchange. No attempt was made to provide closure on common themes or prepare a final report prior to the Future Search. It was enough for all to know that these were the conversations that various members wanted to have.

In addition to providing an opportunity to get more people involved and for everyone to learn what was on people's minds, another benefit of these sessions was that the Future Search planning committee was able to see who was raising various topics. This helped the committee identify additional people to invite to the Future Search to build broader representation of the whole congregation. In a community of 1000 individuals, there were people they otherwise would not have known to invite.

Future Search

The Future Search was held a few months later following the standard 16 hour design over one weekend. More than 70 people were present across 10 stakeholder groups. By the close of the conference they had identified 19 areas that they all held in common for the future of the church. At the end of the conference, they formed action teams and began to plan how they would share their experience with the rest of the congregation.

Further Conversations

Two weeks later, the church held a four hour, open meeting to share the results of the Future Search and engage people in further conversations about action areas. Approximately 180 people attended, including about 40 people who were at the Future Search. To begin, participants from the Future Search shared their experience of the various activities in the conference. People had a chance to build their own Mind Maps of the trends impacting the church and to reflect on their vision for its future. Finally, 90

minutes were devoted to giving everyone a chance to “vote with their feet” and meet with others on the common ground items of greatest interest to them. In this final section, the action teams picked up from where they had left off at the end of the Future Search and began to involve more of the community.

Results

Nineteen conclusions about the future of the church were developed with related action teams. Among the specific outcomes from this process were:

- A change in the structure of the governing board of the church to include a youth representative on the board.
- New committees and programs on various topics, for example a program on handling conflict.
- Changes to adult education and outreach activities.
- Work to foster a satellite church to spread their denomination to a neighboring community.

In the middle of the overall process, just before the Future Search, both the senior minister and the assistant minister decided to retire. This was due to personal circumstances and somewhat unexpected, but it certainly raised new issues for the congregation. In retrospect, a member of the church board said that she felt that going ahead with the Future Search was the right thing to do, even though at the time they never realized the impact this leadership transition was to have—a transition which took over two years to complete. The series of conversations about their future helped the community to know itself better and this assisted them in the search for new ministers to lead them. The changes did impact the church’s ability to stay focused on the various actions they had identified, but five years later, they still hold the 19 conclusions as important agreements on their direction.

Combining Methods: The Case of a Politically Charged Environment

A second use of the combined approach involved a consortium of seven conservative Jewish synagogues. They were all located in one area of a major city that had a historically high concentration of Jews but had been losing its population to the suburbs. All of the congregations were facing declining attendance and financial difficulties. All had a long history of competing with each other for members. The group had received a grant to define a more viable future and a planning committee was formed to prepare for a Future Search.

The planning committee was very aware of what had happened in past attempts to discuss joint programs. Several years earlier, one person had been castigated by the

community for suggesting that the synagogues share church school resources. The committee wondered what would happen this time when many more issues would be on the table.

A series of Open Space sessions was proposed to precede the Future Search to find out what the community was ready, willing and able to discuss. Three sessions were then held at different times and locations. All were about three hours in length and intended to provide a forum for people to talk about what mattered to them and not to produce final conclusions. Notes were posted and shared in the communities. Planning committee members provided updates to their synagogues.

After the first of these sessions, community members began to realize that it was now safe to talk about a wide range of subjects. They began to realize that the future was in their hands, and was not just the responsibility of those with formal authority. It was still a risky proposition and two synagogues withdrew their participation, but the remaining five continued.

As in the previous case, the planning committee attended the sessions and learned about individuals and points of view to be considered in planning for the Future Search. This helped them shape the task for the conference and identify specific community members to invite.

When the Future Search was held some weeks later, participants from five synagogues explored new relationships, even mergers, and arrived at a common agenda for their future. Such an outcome would have been inconceivable six months before. As in the first case, the Future Search was followed a few weeks later by an open community meeting. In this meeting Future Search participants shared their experience, described the outcomes and opened up action planning for any and all to get involved.

There were both short and long term impacts from this series of conversations. In the months that followed, several of the synagogues began combining resources and activities. In particular, two of the synagogues began to run combined schools. However, over the next few years the community's changing demographics continued to lower participation in the synagogues. As our lead client, the chair of the planning committee said recently,

“I think the [process] breathed a number of extra years into the community. If nothing else, it made everyone understand that they had a shared future and could in fact work together as a broader community. Long term, the consortium continues to function (albeit with fewer members) and they seem committed to keeping a community alive.”

We also asked our client to comment on how the overall process had affected the outcomes.

"The meetings in advance of the Future Search brought topics into the open that had been unspeakable. In the past, they could not be raised without fear of bloodshed. By the time we got to the Future Search, people knew that it wasn't going to be the leaders making the decisions, but rather that they all would be responsible. The pre and post meetings gave the whole process a sense of transparency. Things weren't done behind a closed door with a select group of people. Rather the process was open to all."

About three years after the Future Search, one of the synagogues merged with another synagogue outside of the original consortium. By coincidence (or maybe not), this other synagogue had also recently undertaken a combined Open Space/Future Search process to consider its future. This merger was truly a courageous act as some of the other synagogues chose to close rather than to merge. The story is still unfolding.

Other Applications of a Combined Approach.

In addition to the two cases described here, we also have used a similar combination of Open Space and Future Search for work with other religious communities. In all these situations, multiple Open Space sessions were held before the Future Search to help the community hear what people wanted to discuss and ensure opportunities for broad participation. The two methods continued to work together well.

Finally, there was one situation that highlighted the potential risk of using Future Search by itself in a highly charged political environment. This risk might have been reduced if Open Space had been used in conjunction with the Future Search. Future Search (or Open Space) alone often is effective in politically charged settings, yet this time there were problems.

In this situation, the client was a county government office which was creating an integrated service to address domestic violence, sexual assault, and child abuse. There was a history of distrust between government and non-government groups addressing these problems and the new service implied changes in funding and service philosophy for some of them. Things were moving fast and a number of the existing nongovernmental and neighborhood-based groups were growing alarmed at the implications for their organizations. The decision was made to hold a meeting to gain wide input and involvement to shape the important programmatic and service decisions which would actually define how the new center could operate to serve its clients, and how it would relate to existing groups. Future Search was chosen as the design for this meeting.

The facilitators were concerned that the Future Search was occurring late in the process of developing the new center and wanted to consider Open Space in addition to

Future Search. In the end, however, the speed of events along with the interests and resources of the client precluded doing anything other than the Future Search itself.

Problems began to arise as the planning committee for the Future Search was formed and began its work. Participation on the planning committee became a significant political act for some committee members and they seemed to avoid its decisions. This became apparent when some members would sit through a meeting only later to tell others that they had not heard or agreed to certain subjects that had been discussed. This affected their ability to communicate the purpose of the Future Search to particular stakeholders in advance of the Future Search.

The task for this Future Search was to develop a common picture of how the new center would operate. Seventy invited participants from all aspects of the system were present but things did not proceed smoothly. From the start, there was more tension than usual around the task and process of the conference. Some participants wanted to stop the meeting to share their concerns over whether the center should exist at all. Other participants felt their views could not be “heard” in this setting and made the structure of the Future Search itself a kind of scapegoat for their frustration. In spite of these difficulties, a set of common agreements on the center’s future shape was achieved by the end of the conference and action teams began to form. However, the conference was a tough experience for everyone and produced less alignment than usual.

Looking back, it seems that many of the difficulties with both the planning committee and the subsequent Future Search might have been addressed if there had been an opportunity for more unstructured dialogue across the community in advance of the Future Search. A series of Open Space conversations would have given more community members a chance to be heard. Such conversations could have helped the Planning Committee confront some of the tough issues they were facing in the community’s trust of the overall effort and their own ability to work together. In particular, these conversations would have helped the planning committee clarify and agree to the conference task and use this understanding to better explain the role of the conference as they recruited people to attend. Everyone attending the Future Search would have had a clearer idea of the task and the opportunity that this Future Search represented.

Conclusion

The joint use of Open Space and Future Search seems quite effective. When is this combined approach most appropriate? When one or more of the following conditions are present:

- A fairly large and diverse community of people who need opportunities to be included in the process.

- A low level of trust across the community in which some participants may feel that it is either not safe to speak out or that they will not be heard.
- Uncertainty about who needs or wants to be included in conversations about future action on the topic.
- Uncertainty about how to focus the task or the stakeholder groups for the Future Search.

There is, however, one change we would recommend to the combined design described here. It is in the duration of the Open Space sessions. If at all possible, they should be held for longer periods. Anything less than four hours is very short for an effective Open Space meeting. Over a longer period with more rounds of conversation, there is greater opportunity for synergy to emerge.

Finally, compared to the overall way Open Space and Future Search were used together here, might there be other ways to combine the methods effectively in different situations? Two approaches come to mind. First, what if Future Search was the initial activity and a series of Open Space sessions were used as part of the conference follow-up to develop action areas more fully? While we tried some Open Space techniques in the community meetings that followed the Future Search to gain broad involvement in action planning, much more could be done. Second, what if Future Search and Open Space methods were combined within one, three-day event? In this approach, the meeting could begin as a Future Search using initial activities that build dialogue and provide a broad understanding of the context. In the middle of the conference, during consideration of the desired future, the design might switch to Open Space as people formed various groupings to discuss future states and actions of particular interest to them.

There may be still other ways these approaches could be combined in whole or in part. However, both designs work very well as they are and some combinations could be less effective than either method used alone. More action research could help to determine answers to questions such as: When does combining these methods improve whole system dialogue and action? Are there certain limits beyond which a mixed approach becomes ineffective? How can you respect the underlying principles of both methods while continuing to find more flexible ways to use them in addressing needs of particular systems?

References

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