

# focus on practice

## LOCAL-GLOBAL LEARNING EXCHANGES

### Imagine Chicago's Celebration of Imagination

At the time of publication of the first edition of this book, Imagine Chicago was set to host its first international Imagination Celebration in September 2002, in conjunction with its 10-year anniversary. The six-day event connected intergenerational Imagine project teams, ranging in age from 17 to 91, from Chile, England, Denmark, Sweden, Scotland, Kenya, Serbia, South Africa, Israel, Nepal, India, Singapore, Australia, Canada and the U.S. Participants shared tools and approaches that create hopeful futures for organizations and communities, and experienced new ways of building fruitful global-local learning exchanges.

The Celebration consisted of five inter-connected learning opportunities: an open space exchange, a gala celebration, a history and storytelling workshop, neighborhood site visits, and private consultation with Imagine Chicago.

Learning principles embedded in the conference design included:

- *Learning is contextual; the specific place, time, environment and people involved are very important.* We incorporated a range of sites and learning partners, hosting the conference within museums dedicated to cultural understanding, and neighborhoods committed to expanding citizen leadership.
- *Learning happens socially and cooperatively.* Constructive experiences of difference open up new areas of the mind, heart and spirit. We therefore encouraged the participation of highly diverse intergenerational teams, providing scholarships for young people and those who otherwise could not have come.



Learning opportunities abound at IC 2002.

- *Among and within us are a diversity of learning interests, styles, intelligences, needs and aspirations.* We provided a range of formal and informal learning opportunities, and a mix of small and large group settings. Participants were invited and expected to take charge of their own and of the larger group's learning. Their questions, enthusiasm, inclination, curiosity, determination and energy drove the conference. Using Appreciative Inquiry and Open Space Technology, conference participants shared their stories and images, gained insights into their challenges and struggles, and generated new questions and possibilities. There were no 'experts' at the conference; rather, everyone was a 'learning activist'. The celebration incorporated a diversity of learning styles, with the active inclusion of artistic expression, like painting, dancing, music-making, theater, and photography, as well as time focused on 'practical' skills: project management, fundraising, volunteer engagement, creative partnerships, etc.
- *Learning happens when we are having fun,* so ample time was devoted to relaxing, laughing, and enjoying Chicago and each other. Many new friendships resulted.

### Days One to Three: Celebrating Community Imagination and Developing Community Futures

The conference began with participants from North and South America, Asia, Africa, Australia, and Europe gathering in the Maori meeting house of the Field Museum. The meeting house is a re-creation of the sacred *hui* of the Maori peoples of Aotearoa (New Zealand), where people gather to take community decisions. The morning opened



*Opening in the Field Museum's Maori meeting room*

with each person introducing him/herself by sharing something special from his/her own place or tradition, which makes community building possible. Many objects were brought forward and placed on a Dogon mud cloth from Mali in the center of the meeting house. They included a peace vessel from the Buddhist temple in Kathmandu, a candle brought by an Palestinian-Jewish team from Jerusalem, and a photo of Nelson Mandela. With gratitude, reverence and deep listening, the tone was set for the time together.

The rest of the afternoon, and the following two days, participants became deeply engrossed in an open space learning exchange of over 50 conversations. This format (see p.35) is congruent with Imagine Chicago's confidence that everyone — when given space, time and respect — can make a substantial and unique contribution, and that agendas for community gatherings should be set by participants' questions.

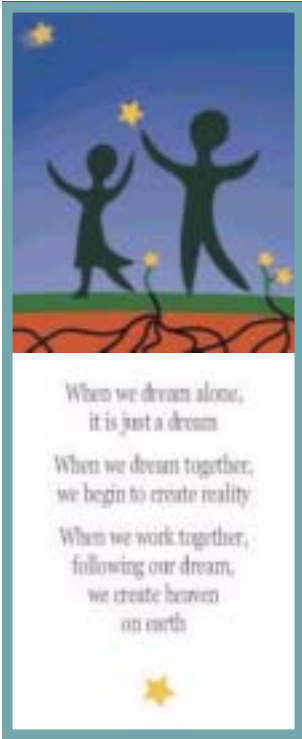
On the third morning, each participant received all of the notes from the first two days of sessions. Based on these, two last breakout rounds of 'action' issues were convened, which included launching a global imagination network, starting new and furthering existing Imagine projects, and utilizing Appreciative Inquiry in different forums. The closing circle invited comments from each participant. Two teams assembled mystery jigsaw puzzles made for the occasion which turned into images of a caterpillar and butterfly. Participants were each given a metamorphosis mug on which the caterpillar becomes the butterfly when a hot liquid is poured into the mug. The gift giving continued with the Imagine Nagaland team presenting Bliss a magnificent painting which captured the spirit of the celebration, the Ladder of Peace, painted by .



*Imagine Nagaland's gift, Ladder of Peace*

## Some of the Issues Discussed in Open Space

- ◆ Learning to listen
- ◆ How to integrate the generations in a community?
- ◆ Meaningful intergenerational connections around storytelling and oral history
- ◆ How to create and use collaborative community media in Imagine work?
- ◆ Creating learning communities
- ◆ How can a city agency practice civic engagement?
- ◆ What is a model for sustainable volunteer community stewardship?
- ◆ How can we make sure we are as inclusive as possible (especially including those that are seen as 'part of the problem')?
- ◆ Funding, fundraising and sustainability
- ◆ How to work with skepticism and lack of motivation?
- ◆ Making a place at the table of hope and possibilities for pain, grief, anger, despair and cynicism
- ◆ Appreciative inquiry and peace-building
- ◆ Participation through mime and movement
- ◆ The role of artists in building and connecting communities
- ◆ Sharing moments, stories, experiences where relationships healed and the past transformed
- ◆ How do we hear our ancestors over the noise?
- ◆ Unlearning barriers to imagination
- ◆ Faith, imagination and transformation — relationship and application



**Imagination in Orbit: Gala Celebration**

Imagine Chicago hosted a gala celebration at the Adler Planetarium, where nearly 350 guests — overseas visitors in colorful native dress and Chicago residents — gathered for an evening of sharing, learning, friendship and fun.

Prior to dinner, ‘out of this world’ activities engaged guests in exploration, including viewing Planetarium exhibits, music jamming, cake decorating, **Power of Place Exhibits** (created by conference participants to share the images and stories of each Imagine project), a **Living ‘Orbit’-uary** (a self-generating exhibition of people/places who send our imaginations into orbit), and a **Magnetic Poetry** board (around the question, “What brings you here, to be a part of this imagination conference and of the imagination movement?”) Art supplies were abundant and gala attendees created unique table centerpieces out of recycled materials on the theme of ‘Imagination in Orbit’.

Yasmeen Basheeruddin, (at 18, the youngest of the celebration’s organizers), got rave reviews as the gracious and inspiring mistress of ceremonies. She invited

testimonials from around the world about the power of community imagination. Music and dance completed the celebration. The Chicago Children’s Choir, partners with Imagine Chicago on multiple projects, performed songs of hope, including a world premiere by Bruce Saylor called “Lights of Honor”. As a thank you, the Dogon mud cloth, which held the global gifts brought to the celebration, was donated to the Chicago Children’s Choir school. Call and response, and lively partner and group dancing to the rhythms of Funkadesi (a world music band, local to Chicago) rounded out the sparkling gala.



*Artistic expression,  
diversity, friendship, new  
adventures, listening,  
sharing, learning  
everywhere!*

*What more could you  
imagine in a global-local  
learning exchange?*

*(images from the conference  
and community visits)*

**Day Four: “The Power of Place and Story”**

Scrap Mettle SOUL opened a day-long workshop at the Chicago Historical Society. Participants explored the power of story in developing identity in a place, listened to intergenerational interviews on young adult life and how it is influenced by place, and developed community performance out of their collective stories. The ‘storytelling game’ led by SMS has subsequently been woven into many Imagine events around the world, including work with

1. Divide the large group into groups of eight. Divide the groups of eight into pairs. Each person in the pairs decides to be "A" or "B".
2. Facilitator asks a story-provoking question (e.g., Tell me about a life-changing experience). (Or, each group selects their own topic around a common focus, like a public good that requires everyone's participation, and designs a question that inspires a powerful story about that.)
3. "A" tells a story to their partner "B" in 2 minutes. "B" tells "A" her story back, in the first person, making it "B's" story. 2 minutes.
4. "B" tells "A" his story in 2 minutes. "A" tells "B" his story back, in the first person, making it "A's" story. 2 minutes.
5. A and B in each pair decide which story to share with another pair in their group of eight. If "A's" story is chosen, "B" will tell it. If "B's" story is chosen, "A" will tell it.
6. Group one in the group of four will tell its story to group two. 2 minutes. Group two will tell group one its story. 2 minutes.
7. Process is repeated with each group of four sharing one story with another group of four. 5 minutes.



*The South Africa team's performance in action*

### practice tips

## Storytelling Game

8. The group of eight decides which story to act out. 1 minute.
9. Each group of eight decides how to portray, and then rehearses their chosen story. 6 minutes.
  - a. One person can tell the story while others mime it.
  - b. They can act the story out, without a narrator.
  - c. They may use anything in the room (including themselves) as props, sets, costumes.
  - d. They can use any combination or invent something utterly new.
10. Each group, in turn, acts out their scene, wherever they choose. 5 minutes per group.

When all groups have performed, they will have experienced how language, story and creative expression build personal and group identity, and expand understanding and shared leadership. They will have a taste of community performance.

municipal employees, and rural community health workers, in Western Australia, Imagine Goteborg (Sweden), and Imagine a Learning Community in Greater Pollok, Scotland.

### Day Five: Chicago as a Learning Community

Day-long site visits were hosted in three Chicago neighborhoods: Englewood, Uptown, and West Garfield Park. Excited neighborhood hosts eagerly engaged celebration participants in conversation about community regeneration, education, health, civic engagement and the arts. The day concluded with a closing dinner and concert at Bliss' home.

### Day Six: Bringing it Home

The final day was left open for tourist activities, and for informal consultations with Imagine Chicago staff. Many teams used the opportunity to talk through what they had learned and their plans for action. Participants returned home with "fire in their bellies", as the Mayor of Singapore put it in a thank you note-- full of new ideas for Imagination practices, tools to use, and a network of friends to contact for future support. An electronic infrastructure (a wiki website) has been put in place to support ongoing local-global learning exchange. The celebration continues!



*Wrapping up Imagination Celebration 2002 at Bliss' home*