

# Lessons Learned

from

## Conversations for Common Wealth



*An Innovative Program that successfully uses arts and humanities materials to build relationships across difference, foster mutual learning, and spark civic engagement.*

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**Conversations for Common Wealth** (CCW) is an innovative program that creates settings in which diverse groups can reflect on the ethical callings in their lives and translate that response into generous change in the world.

Over a series of seven weekly dinners, groups of 8-12 participants reflect on difficult issues we share – environment, economic fairness, inclusion, and materialism – using poetry, music, images and “change-maker profiles” as the focal point for facilitated discussion. They ask themselves not “What’s the right answer or policy fix?” but instead, “How can I contribute? How might I need to change?” At a final session, participants make personal commitments to building our common good.



From October 2002 to June 2005, 106 people participated in twelve Conversations rounds. This brochure offers a summary of our experience and presents ideas for use by community leaders, arts organizations and a wide range of nonprofits concerned with civic change.

### **High Levels of Engagement**

Participants were highly engaged in CCW sessions, attending an average of 5.6 sessions in each 7-session series. A remarkable 60% returned to participate in at least one “Continued Conversation,” in which participants re-connected to support and challenge each other in their ongoing commitments. 36% attended two or more Continued Conversations.



Participant commitments were wide-ranging – from mentoring youth, to environmental clean up, to creation of an endowment supporting gay/lesbian inclusion, to job changes or residential location decisions intended to increase social involvement.

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## Response to the Program

Participants reported that the experience affected them in subtle, sometimes far-reaching ways.

CCW was rarely experienced as a “break-through,” but as a deeply reflective experience that carried into commitment decisions, relationships with others, leadership growth, and patterns of personal consumption.

What participants valued most was having a safe opportunity to talk about “things that really matter” and, especially, to learn from others different from themselves. Many stayed in touch with each other after the CCW experience, and even more reported increased openness to diversity in their regular interactions.



Most participants already had some history of social engagement, so CCW was most effective in supporting and renewing the aspirations of people already open to social change, helping to overcome discouragement, cynicism and burn-out.

In addition to touching individuals, CCW influenced institutions from which multiple members participated. In part as a result of CCW involvement, a university leadership program began to develop a service learning component for its students. A church congregation renewed previous efforts to formally welcome members of all sexual orientations.

On pages 9-11 of this brochure, participants share their own responses to the program, with respect to civic engagement, arts experience, and relationship building.

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## Effective Core Practices

While different participants appreciated different program elements, their collective experience clearly demonstrated the program’s value. The following core practices could be adapted by other organizations seeking to create engaging and productive mutual-learning experiences:

- **Safe Reflective Space**  
Tone, groundrules and discussion framework created a context of openness and respect, in which participants learned from each other – through shared self-reflection rather than debate about “issues” or what others should do.
- **Meaningful Diversity**  
Groups were structured to ensure meaningful diversity of some type – whether across race, income, age, religion, sexual orientation, or urban/suburban / rural living experience. Almost universally, participants treasured the opportunity to learn from others different from themselves.
- **“Shared Looking”**  
Each Conversation began by looking together at common materials, then sharing personal responses. Focusing on shared material for mutual exploration enabled participants to respond honestly without engaging in debate or implied criticism of others. The process consistently highlighted both human commonalities and illuminating difference.



### ■ *Arts Materials and Change-Maker Profiles*

The use of poetry, music, video, and stories of change-makers for “shared looking” played two key roles. It humanized issues at hand, so participants engaged personally rather than abstractly. Just as importantly, carefully selected arts materials centered



conversation on matters of real importance and deep human concern. Materials were chosen to be readily accessible, yet not didactic or “dumbed down” – and often were presented in pairs, so that one poem or image contrasted with or broadened the other. Stories of “change-makers” -- like Nobel prize-winner Wangari Matthai or washer-woman/donor Oseola McCarty -

- were especially welcomed by participants, offering hope and possibility in a world of cynicism and seemingly overwhelming problems.

### ■ *Supportive Facilitation*

Skilled, though not necessarily formally-trained, facilitation was critical for setting a safe and welcoming tone, ensuring participation by all, focusing discussion on the theme at hand, pressing for critical self-reflection over abstract theorizing, and giving the group a sense of progress and conclusion. The greatest facilitation challenge is balancing the need to let conversation flow versus the need to move through material that draws out key themes.



### ■ *Sustained Conversations*

While some participants wished for fewer sessions and others for more, it typically took three sessions for a group to achieve sufficient trust for honest sharing, self-disclosure, and exploration of more challenging themes. Meeting over time also enables participants to absorb conversation not as mere “information,” but as an opportunity to reflect self-critically on the possibility of personal change.



### ■ *Small Group Size*

Groups of 8-12 participants worked best. Smaller groups, though seemingly more intimate, often lacked collective energy and diversity of perspective. In larger groups, participants had less opportunity to make their voice heard, or felt that the group could get along without their fully-engaged participation.

### ■ *High Aspiration & Call to Action*

CCW provided a space for hope and high aspiration, not limited to the immediate constraints of a “task at hand.” At the same time, the goal was not “just talk.” Throughout each Conversation series, participants were reminded that the end goal was a personally-defined “new or renewed commitment to work for the common good.” A consistent theme was the importance of going beyond meeting immediate human need, to fostering structural change that reduces the need for individual amelioration in the future.



## Lessons for the Arts

CCW's experience offers useful lessons for a wide range of arts organizations:

- ***The arts can be a democratizing opportunity for shared meaning-making.*** Artistic materials selected for accessibility, brevity and human richness can engage diverse audiences, if participants are encouraged to react not as art critics, but as ordinary human beings responding to “distilled human experience.”

Although most CCW participants were highly educated, groups were leavened with individuals with various education levels. Participants with less arts facility consistently jumped in as others began to respond. Some participants, of all backgrounds, wrestled with “fit” between arts materials and the themes at hand – but the use of art as a focal point generally led to evocative, personally reflective conversations, in which everyone could share.



- ***Market meaning-making and human connections – and let the arts “show up.”*** CCW experience suggests that there's opportunity to attract new audiences to the arts by inviting people into settings to explore deep human concerns with others, then allowing the arts to appear as a vital meaning-making, mutual-learning tool.
- ***Explore alternatives to standard entertainment or performance modes.*** This can mean fostering mutual conversation (beyond audience/performer Q&A) and creating settings for sustained, rather than one-time reflection. But the real key is creating settings in which art is not an entertaining “object,” but where the audience is encouraged, directly, to consider: “What does this imply for me, and for all of us together?”

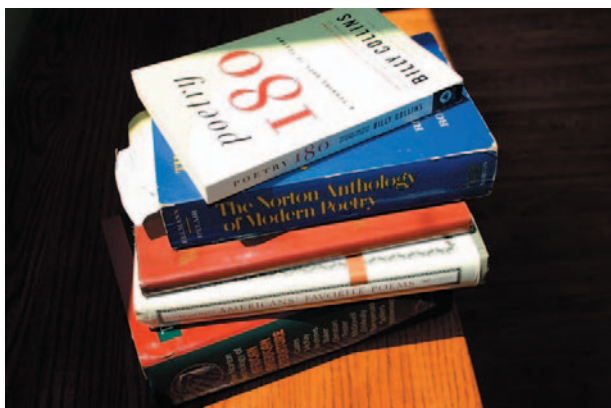
## Lessons for Mutual Learning and Civic Change

CCW also offers useful insights for community organizations and government agencies engaged in civic change, as well as other groups that foster mutual learning.

- ***We lack safe settings for meaningful connection.*** Participants valued CCW as a unique setting – a safe place to talk with others about things that really matter – with a clear purpose, but without the usual task-driven constraints. Creating such settings is a useful civic goal.
- ***Diversity is critical – with real value for participants and the community.*** Diversity can take a variety of forms – but learning from others across genuine difference was the most highly valued element in the CCW experience. After experimenting with a variety of recruitment techniques, CCW began inviting involvement from “paired organizations.” Participants felt safe because they attended along with several others from their group; diversity was ensured by linking organizations with differing memberships; and the community benefited from intentional creation of “bridging social capital” – a scarce commodity in our typically fragmented society.



- **Reflective materials can help to re-frame the task at hand.** Starting a meeting with a carefully-chosen poem or music, then structuring discussion in ways that call forth self-reflection and sharing can transform the context in which a group does its work. A reflective context can help move participants away from pre-programmed responses, highlight commonalities, and create a tone of mutual respect.
- **Increased involvement comes from “mutual learning” rather than civic “conversion.”** CCW learned that all participants come to discussions with positive aspirations for civic good and at least some awareness of our collective challenges. Rather than “converting” participants by highlighting a “problem,” our most effective conversation materials presented perspectives that wrestled with or explored an issue, inviting group members to explore, as well. Learning rarely works through “conversion.” CCW most often provided a setting in which participants grew incrementally, deepened their experience, or extended insights into new areas.



## CCW Participant Experience

### Civic Engagement



*“Mostly in a subtle, systematic way, I lean more toward the common good than I used to and that shows up in a variety of forms, from volunteering to voting, from attending meetings to speaking out.”*

*“I somehow changed what I was doing. I wouldn’t have said it had much effect except that, when I look back over the two years since, I’m doing stuff I hadn’t been doing for 15 years....”*

*“I was a lot more cynical prior to my CCW experience, believing that there was no point in getting involved, what one person can do etc. My experience at CCW helped broaden my perspective and energized me to be more willing and open.”*

*“I feel much more ready to make decisions and take action. Part of me was behind glass.... I feel much more in the open today.”*

*“It made me realize it was up to me to change.”*

*“It helped me pledge to myself that I would spend at least one week of my vacation time to my commitment.”*

*“...I am becoming aware that I have a voice, whereas before if I didn’t like something I would just walk away. But now I am really bothered by walking away. I just can’t do that.”*

*“It’s an emotional thing. I have to make it happen. Something must have gone on in those five meetings that made me take a step.”*

*“I felt more responsible for common wealth. I learned form others’ experience. It was pretty inspiring.”*

*“It wasn’t intended to bring up these issues to have us discuss them all and solve them all... It was...to raise these issues, leave them for us to take home introspectively [and] figure out how we will involve ourselves the rest of our lives.”*

## CCW Participant Experience

### Arts Experience



*“Once I got here and we looked at the AIDS video and we read the poetry. It was like wow! It just was a new experience for me, because I didn’t know, like, there was poetry that you could learn from about current issues...what it has done is to open up my eyes to the world...really start taking a look...”*

*“It’s hard to describe CCW’s influence on my work and pleasure in the arts, but I do see a link. Maybe it was seeing how art opened participants up to talking during our CCW sessions.”*

*“[Before] I wasn’t comfortable with poetry.... But it wasn’t as hard as I expected, especially when you started hearing other people and you could relate to what they were saying....I enjoyed it. I think it helped, instead of just having a conversation around an issue and everyone’s just talking and debating. Then we could say ‘that’s how I felt about the poem. This is what I got out of it.....’ Instead of saying ‘this is my opinion and I think I’m right.’ That doesn’t take us anywhere.”*

*“One of the things that surprised me I think was how effective [art and shared looking] was in bringing out significant kinds of pictures of what mattered to people...”*

*“...the art is there, whether it’s the poem or the picture or the music. So you don’t have to have gotten your BA. There it is, and you can just sit and talk about it equally....It’s democratizing.”*

*“I think if you put the art there, then what you can do is start to trust the other person a little bit more, because you’re on a neutral and safe thing to comment on. If someone else talks about the poem, then I can. And now maybe we all feel a little bit more comfortable talking about racism or what have you. I think that’s what makes [CCW] unique...”*

### Diversity and Relationships



*“I think what I liked about it the most, was that it was a really different way of meeting and talking to people.”*

*“I felt connected....Very few were like me. Most were very different, and yet I could relate to them.”*

*“I really liked our group. It was very diverse. There were three women, very different from me, African American... It was really good to listen to them react to what I was listening to. Hearing them talk and land on the same side of the issues as me but come at it in a very different way was very heartening and encouraging.”*

*“It helped me realize that it is not so much ignorance that hinders relationships across race, sexual orientation, or class, but fear. It also reminded me that everyone is trying to find a way to cope and live as healthy a life as possible, despite the prejudices that they have.”*

*“...now I would much rather if there were a group of people at a party and there is a really diverse group and there is a WASP group over here, I would rather go to the diverse group. I want to be with people that are different from myself.”*

*“I’ve thought – a long time – that people of lower social/economic/income would have quite different perceptions than I about realities of everyday life. ...I found that wasn’t true.”*

*“We could all use some increase in listening. And here’s a situation where you don’t know the answers. You have to listen. It’s good to stretch those muscles and learn from other people...”*

*“This is the most encouraging discussion my living room has ever seen!”*

## What We Learned About Evaluation

The CCW experience was very complex. It involved ethical self-reflection, human relationships, and change in multiple areas of participants' lives. Just as importantly, CCW wasn't an isolated event: each participant brought a life-time of experience into the conversations and moved on with his or her own personal trajectory. Finally, the program affected institutions (including CCW) as well as individuals.

We learned – for all these reasons – that effective evaluation had to be nuanced and multi-faceted.

CCW evaluation included not only questionnaires, focus groups, and phone interviews, but also the involvement of participant-observers within conversations themselves, as well as extended personal contacts with a limited number of individual participants. We found that meaningful change was observable, but, except in very large groups, it need not be statistical -- nor should we expect it to be. Ordinary human experience testifies to the same thing: Not everything that counts can be readily "counted."



## Lessons for Improvement

Over nearly three years of operation, we learned many ways to further strengthen the program. Here are three key areas for improvement:

- ***Make opportunities for engagement even more concrete.*** Throughout the sessions, we encouraged participants to consider a "new or renewed commitment for building our common wealth" and we let them choose their own areas of interest, rather than prescribing a set outcome. We also offered individual "coaching" sessions and provided a representative list of opportunities to get involved. Yet some participants still struggled with the practical "purpose" of the program. Providing more in-session time for exploring engagement options or, perhaps, a group opportunity for service, might have further grounded the experience in "real world action."

- ***"Less is more."*** As the program evolved, we incrementally pared down curriculum materials, leaving more time for conversation. In the future, we might also reduce the number of "themes" we explored, permitting more in-depth reflection about each.
- ***Personal stories can be art, too.*** In CCW sessions, people shared moving personal stories in response to arts materials or change-maker profiles, but we didn't specifically structure sessions around participant stories. That strategy might have fostered deeper connections among participants. So, in the future, we would likely use question prompts and story-circle format to generate thematically focused and concrete stories – letting participant narratives function more intentionally as the focal point for "shared looking."

## Future Directions

Under a new name, still to be determined, we hope to shift from operating a single "program" to offering a range initiatives that use the power of poetry and story to build connections among people and invite them to embrace lives of significance. Supported by individuals, fee-for-service contracts and foundations, we plan to expand our impact by:

- Helping others to incorporate reflective and mutual-learning practices in their own events and ongoing programs.
- Using the media and occasional special events to connect with an even broader public.

## How to Find Out More

Please see our web site at [www.communityhousepittsburgh.org](http://www.communityhousepittsburgh.org). Click on *Conversations for Common Wealth*.

Or contact Richard St. John, Executive Director, at 412.321.3900 x206.





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## **Conversations for Common Wealth**

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