

SUSTAINED RESTORATIVE DIALOGUE



AS A MEANS OF
UNDERSTANDING AND
COMBATTING SEXUALLY
HARMFUL BEHAVIOR

PILOT REPORT
JULY 2018



Lindsey Pointer

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Over the past two years, Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) has taken significant steps towards becoming a Restorative University. This has involved the use of restorative processes both in a reactive way (as a response to misconduct or incidents of harm) and a proactive way (to build community, enhance belonging and mutual responsibility, and identify shared community norms).

The “Sustained Restorative Dialogue” method was designed by the VUW Chair in Restorative Justice team and piloted in July 2018 as a proactive restorative process to hold difficult conversations about important community issues. The inaugural dialogue explored the issue of sexual harm and harassment on campus. It was a “sustained” dialogue in that it was run over four sessions with the same participants. It was a “restorative” dialogue in that the conversation moved in sequential sessions through the main steps of a restorative analysis: What is happening? What are the impacts? What is needed to make things right? The aim of the dialogue was to understand the broader climate that gives rise to sexual harm in the campus setting and beyond and to explore possible solutions.

Participants

Facilitators: Lindsey Pointer and
Ryan Meachen

PhD Researcher: Amy Giles-
Mitson

Students: 9 Law Students (4
male, 5 female)

Session Dates

23 July, 2018: Relationship
Building and Norms

25 July, 2018: What is happening?

27 July, 2018: What are the
impacts?

30 July, 2018: What is needed to
make things right?

CIRCLE OUTLINES

Session 1: Relationship Building and Norms

- Welcome
- Introduction to the Process
- Introduction to the Restorative Approach and Three Restorative Questions Format
- Ground Rules
- Round 1: Your name and a story connected to your name.
- Round 2: If you could have one item with you at all times (no size constraint), what would it be and why?
- Round 3: What drew you to participating in this group? What do you want to talk about?
- Round 4: What do you need in order for this group to feel like a safe and supportive space to talk about this issue?
- Closing Round: Chance for a final word.

Follow-Up:

After the session, the facilitators made a visual of the group's agreed upon guidelines to re-visit at each session.

FOR THIS TO BE A SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE DIALOGUE,

WE NEED...

- To say as much or as little as we want
- To respect each other and suspend judgement
- Forgiveness when we use the wrong language
- Patience
- To assume best intentions
- An opportunity to learn
- An informal, friendly feel
- To not take offence when we may disagree
- To recognize our humanity and the humanity of others
- To be willing to separate the person from the idea
- To know that lack of education often leads to harm and explore that
- To ask for what we need
- To be open to different content, so long as we are speaking with each other in a respectful way

Session 2: What is happening?

- Welcome back
- Round 1: Where are you from and what is your favorite thing about where you are from?
- Round 2: If you could live in the world of a book or movie, what book/movie would it be and why?
- Ground Rules and Re-Visit Guidelines Set During Session One (Share Visual)
- Today we will be asking the first restorative question: What is happening?
- Round 3: What messages (from parents, teachers, etc.) did you receive about sex growing up?
- Round 4: Looking around at the state of the community culture in regards to sexual relationships, what are some things that you think people are just not getting?
- Round 5: What is preventing healthy sexual relationships (this might go beyond just individual lack of understanding)?
- Round 6: What are you taking away from today?

Session 2 Observations:

All circle participants stayed for nearly an hour after the culmination of the circle, continuing the discussion. Facilitators noted that even after the circle structure was suspended, participants continued to speak one at a time, without interruption, and with relatively equal voice. The impact of the circle on the nature of the dialogue continued.

Session 3: What are the impacts?

- Welcome back
- Round 1: Share a rose and a thorn from your day. Something that was great and something that was not so good.
- Round 2: What is something that has stuck with you since the last circle?
- Last session we talked about what is happening. Today we will be talking about impacts, the second restorative question: Who is affected and how?
- Ground Rules and Re-Visit Guidelines Set During Session One
- Round 3: Who is affected and how?
- Round 4: What is the impact on you?
- Round 5: What are you taking away with you from today?

Session 3 Observations:

In Round 2, when participants were asked to talk about what stuck with them since the last session, most talked about the experience of the circle, rather than the specific content. It was not what was said, but how it was discussed and the nature of the circle dialogue that stuck with the students. Many spoke of trying to explain the experience and how great it was to their friends.

Session 4: What is needed to make things right?

- Welcome back
- Round 1: What have you reflected on since last session?
- Today we are diving into the final restorative question: What is needed to make things right?
- Ground Rules and Re-Visit Guidelines Set During Session One
- Round 2: First, we want to talk about what we are working towards. Drawing on your own history, ideals, culture, what is the basis of healthy sexual relationships and a healthy sexual culture?
- Round 3: What is needed to make things right (big picture)?
- Round 4: What can you as an individual do?
- Round 5: What can we (as a group) do?
- Round 6: Chance for a final word.

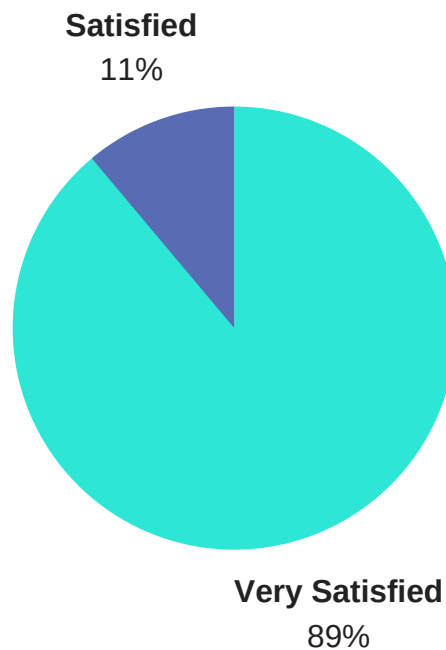
Session 4 Observations:

Participants expressed interest in the potential of Restorative Justice to meaningfully address issues of sexual harm and a desire to be proponents for RJ on campus and in their future law careers. Students shared a desire for the conversation to continue and for others on campus to have the opportunity to participate in a Sustained Restorative Dialogue. The group made a plan for an optional additional 5th meeting to discuss next steps more specifically.

FEEDBACK

How satisfied are you with the Sustained Restorative Dialogue experience?

- Very Satisfied
- Satisfied
- Somewhat Satisfied
- Somewhat Unsatisfied
- Unsatisfied



Would you recommend the Sustained Restorative Dialogue to others?

- Yes
- Maybe
- No



Why or why not?

"The process itself is one that I think every one should adapt into their everyday conversations they have with their friends and family and other people around them. It makes you feel listened to, encourages you to listen to others and be very thoughtful and considered in your responses. It felt like a safe and comfortable space which in of itself is a feat considering the magnitude of the the topic we were addressing and the fact we were a bunch of strangers to each other a week ago."

"It was a unique forum to develop a community voice on a significant topic affecting society. I got great insight from my peers and felt empowered to use what we'd discussed to try to effect positive social change."

"Enjoyed both the process and the end result."

"It is helpful and insightful."

"It was such a rewarding initiative to be a part of. To hear from everyone, share our own experiences was truly amazing."

"The process was a good learning experience for understanding the points of views of others with different experiences to your own. The content of the dialogue was eye opening but respectful. We all came out of the sessions feeling revived from what I could tell. The dialogue was positive and we worked together despite not knowing each other."

"I found it very rewarding and different. It was amazing how much everyone shared and how quickly we became comfortable with the process."

"It was a very effective way to have the conversation."

"I would absolutely recommend taking part in a discussion like this. It is a rare opportunity to reflect deeply on your own experiences of sexual harm and its consequences, but also to learn from the experiences of others. The nature of the participants - a semi-anonymous (or at least unfamiliar) and diverse sample of the student body - is conducive to open discussion and exposure to new perspectives. The discussion felt meaningful, important, and surprisingly optimistic - I thought it was a productive way of tackling an issue that can feel really heavy to carry around in silence."

What was your favorite part?

"The entire thing. Honestly I've never experienced anything like it in my life and I think it is such a valuable process and tool to have in your communicative capabilities."

"Fostering a shared trust with the other participants so we could share openly."

"The openness and evident learning."

"All of it."

"Hearing from everyone."

"Relearning that we are all vulnerable and open human beings."

"I really enjoyed everything! It's hard to pick anything in particular."

"I enjoyed being able to listen without having to respond or debate."

"It's hard to articulate – the feeling in the room? The vibe? How important and honest the conversation felt? I really loved that the first session was pretty much dedicated to setting ground rules and building trust, because it meant that the subsequent sessions were so much easier despite the difficult subject matter. I loved that the questions were phrased in such an open and interesting way. They guided the conversation but were not restrictive or assumptive. I definitely think they prompted me to think about and share things that I otherwise might not have thought to. Also, it was so nice to share thoughts and just know that people were listening and reflecting, without feeling judged or critiqued or like you would have to defend yourself. Lindsey and Ryan were also fantastic – they were so important to framing how the conversation would run and they did such a good job of making the space feel safe and open and valuable."

What can we do better (or what was your least favorite part and why)?

"My least favourite part (which I also appreciate is a part of the process!!) was the fact that sometimes you'd lose sight of the original question and your thoughts on the original question if you were one of the last people to have the talking instrument. Maybe it could be useful to encourage taking notes or having some time to bullet point your thoughts at the point of introduction of the question."

"I didn't have a least favourite part."

"Perhaps more of a focused line of questioning."

"Some of the questions were quite broad and at times I felt ill-prepared to answer them the way I would have liked to."

"I didn't like that it was split over a week. I think perhaps two 2 hour sessions would have been better. Due to the high emotion of the sessions it was hard to do anything after it ended anyway."

"I can't think of anything!"

"I think planning for longer sessions so that people are prepared for thorough discussions."

"I don't think there was anything inherently 'bad' or negative about the process. Two things that I have pondered which may improve the process are: 1) Allowing time to get even deeper into the discussion. I think this could be achieved by extending the length of the sessions, and perhaps by giving an opportunity for anyone that wished to 'respond' to another's contribution to speak at the end of each round. In saying that though, I thought that not feeling obliged to respond or like your contributions would be subject to verbalized scrutiny was quite freeing. If anything I think the fact that I wanted the sessions to be longer is a testament to how valuable they were - a positive, rather than a negative. 2) Giving more of a prior indication of the topics to be discussed. Again, I can see the reasons for not doing this - as Lindsey explained, that could lead to the discussion turning into a session of 'list-reading'. Maybe if the sessions were longer then that would cancel out the need for advance notice of the questions because people would have more time to develop and process their ideas on the spot."

Did the experience change the way you think about anything?
If so, how?

"It changed, or I guess the better word would be challenged, a lot of preconceived misconceptions I had about societal understandings of sexual violence and education whilst also simultaneously giving me hope for the community around me."

"It really developed my perspective on the issue and made me considering how some of the rules of conduct we worked within could improve my everyday interactions."

"Yes. Gave me many things to ponder."

"I now view dialogue as a productive tool rather than just talking."

"Yes because it made me realise how common sexual violence and harm is in our community."

"Yes, it made me think about the individual impacts of sexual violence but also helped me recognise the power of my own voice."

"I think it made me more open minded and perhaps trusting. I am more comfortable with vulnerability now."

"I found listening to a bigger range of experiences expanded my knowledge."

"It definitely changed the way I think about restorative justice practices in that before I knew nothing about how they would really work and now I understand that they - at least the circle method - can be a really effective way of having a conversation.

I realised that I had never had such an in-depth, considered, and structured conversation about sexual harm before. I thought I had, but I had actually only ever talked to people from similar backgrounds and with similar perspectives to myself. This in turn made uncomfortably aware of how narrow my perspective was, and how important it is to be patient with others who have different views and bear in mind everyone's backgrounds.

I think the experience gave me hope that things can change. I realised I should have more faith in the ability of people to listen and learn. As a result I also realised that if people aren't exposed to new information and perspectives, they may never become aware of things, and that we shouldn't hold that against them but should be open to discussions so that ideas can spread. I realised that re sexual harm we need more positive solutions that provide ideals to strive for, rather than focussing only on telling people what not to do."

Would you like to see this process offered to others on campus?
In what way?

"I would like to see it offered to other students. I think through word of mouth it has piqued the interests of others – in my friend group I know for sure they had wished they'd participated – so I think it would be valuable to extend the invitation to others. I'm unsure in what way whether it be on a larger-scale or a similar smaller group situation facilitated by people with training and interest in the field."

"Absolutely! A similar format could be used for a range of similar pertinent social issues (i.e. mental health) and the RJ approach could be usefully applied in lots of different forums."

"Yes. After significant events. Healing tool."

"Yes; as a way of discovering sentiments and reactions to a particular problem."

"Yes. I would like others to have the same opportunity I did. Possibly through a student led approach where we have time to break off in small groups and run our own sessions to try and heal harm done."

"Yes!!!! I think it should be voluntary but I would be happy to advocate for others to join."

"Yes- perhaps as a form of dispute resolution or a disciplinary measure (if it isn't already)."

"Yes, in the same way but more frequent and widely advertised."

"Absolutely. I really believe that this process will be valuable as a response to instances of harm but also as a preventative measure. I think dialogues like this should be easily accessible to any student that wants to participate in them. This process should be an option available to anyone involved in harm if they would prefer to address the issue in this way. I think it is important to ensure that a wide variety of students participate in such conversations so that they do not become echo chambers, so any further offerings should somehow ensure diverse participants. I would love to see all students participate in conversations like this as a form of education and community-building, but I understand that may be resource-dependent and impractical. I wonder if dialogues could be set up at times of particularly high tension – e.g. if an event/problem is getting a lot of media coverage, or is particularly relevant to the student body? Having shared dialogues between staff and students would be AMAZING and really insightful for all involved I think. We talked about structures being at the heart of the problem of sexual harm so involving those who have the power to enforce or change university structures/policies would be great."

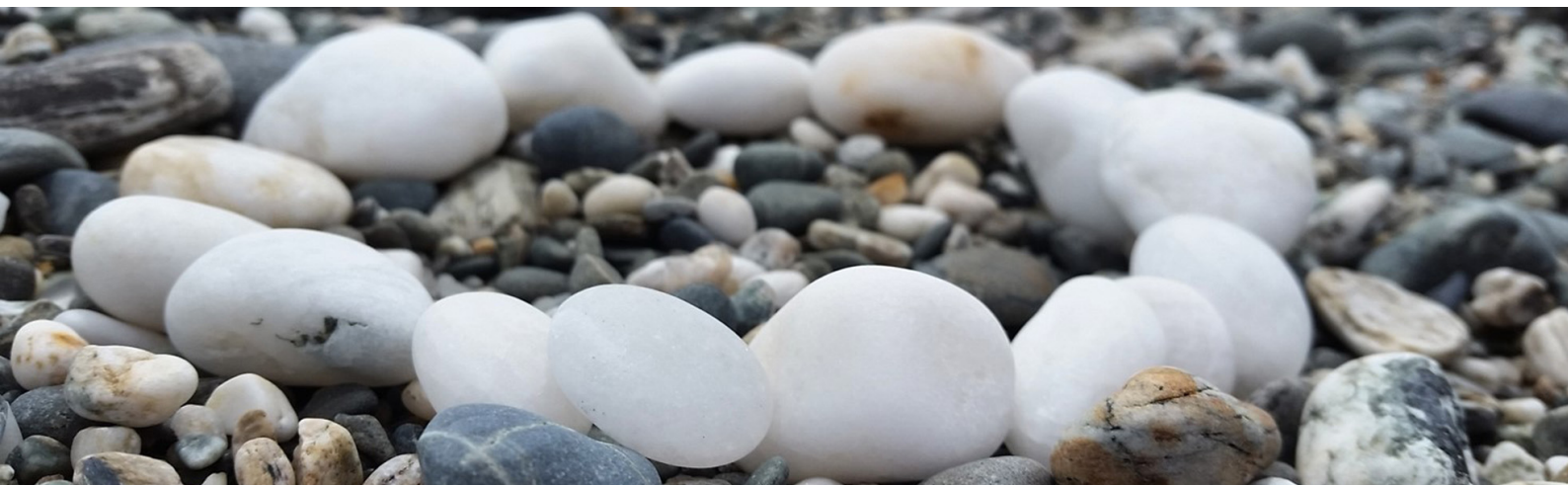
Any additional comments?

"Lindsey and Ryan were fantastic leaders of the conversation, making everyone feel super comfortable by being very approachable and open during the dialogue. I hope we adequately expressed our gratitude to them for allowing us to be a part of this process and experience with them."

"Restorative justice should be a bigger part of our legal education and experience at university."

"I can't say enough good things about this process. I feel very privileged to have been a part of it."

"I would strongly encourage the Law Faculty and wider university to support the increasing use of dialogues like this, and anyone to participate if given the opportunity."



LESSONS LEARNED

Time Commitment

At the point of recruitment, it was somewhat difficult to find students who could commit to all four sessions. Students have busy lives and varying class schedules, so the idea of committing so much time to a dialogue process seemed to deter some possible participants.

However, once the Sustained Restorative Dialogue process started, participants stayed beyond the end of the scheduled time, and expressed a wish for longer sessions and additional sessions (in particular, a 5th session to talk more specifically about next steps).

A balance must be achieved between asking for a daunting length of time or number of sessions in students' busy schedules and giving the dialogue the time in needs and participants ultimately want.

Recruitment Language

The first recruitment email (see "Recruitment Email #1" on the following page) that was sent out to law students focused more specifically on the prevalence of sexual harm on campus and pitched the dialogue as a preventative measure in response to that harm. This email generated a large number of responses from female students, but very few responses from male students.

The second recruitment email (see "Recruitment Email #2") used language that focused more positively on building a culture of respect and consent on campus. This second email resulted in a far greater number of responses from male students, which allowed us to achieve a balanced gender ratio in the final group of dialogue participants.

There were a few last minute drop-outs due to schedule changes. I recommend inviting a few extra people to participate in anticipation of this happening. Everyone who came to the first session continued to show up each time and ultimately participated in all four sessions.

Recruitment Email #1

Subject: How can we reduce sexual harm on camps? Join the dialogue!

Kia ora,

Are you interested in joining a sustained dialogue on **understanding and reducing sexual harm on campus?**

Preventing sexual harm is a major concern of universities all around the world, including here at Victoria University. The Diana Unwin Chair in Restorative Justice is looking for a small group of law students to take part in an innovative research project to explore the factors that contribute to sexual assault, harassment and other harmful behaviours and what can be done to create a safer and more respectful campus culture.

The project entails participation in a “Sustained Restorative Dialogue Group” over four sessions. The group will use a restorative enquiry framework to explore the issue of sexual harm, looking at what is happening, who is being affected, what can be done to repair harm when it does occur, and how can we prevent harm from happening in the future.

The dialogues will be managed by two trained facilitators and conducted in a safe, respectful, inclusive and confidential manner. The goal is to have a representative group of undergraduates from the Law Faculty, with a roughly equal balance between men and women.

The dialogue group will meet for four sessions of one hour each. **Participants must be able to commit for all four sessions. Dinner will be provided.**

Session Dates:

Monday 23 July, 6:00pm–7:00pm

Wednesday 25 July, 6:00pm–7:00pm

Friday 27 July, 6:00pm–7:00pm

Monday 30 July, 6:00pm–7:00pm

The project has Human Ethics approval and is supported by the Sexual Violence Prevention Group at Victoria, VUWSA and by the Dean of the Law School.

Spaces are limited. **To register your interest, and for further information, please contact: Lindsey.Pointer@vuw.ac.nz before 30 June.**

Thank you!

Lindsey

Recruitment Email #2

Subject: Help build a culture of respect and consent on campus

Kia ora,

Sign up for a new restorative justice approach to building a culture of respect and consent on campus.

Like many universities around the world, Victoria University is looking for ways build a culture of respect and consent on campus and to end sexual violence. Particularly in the wake of the #MeToo movement, there is a push for innovative ways to address this important issue. **We want your voice included in the discussion!**

The Diana Unwin Chair in Restorative Justice is looking for a small group of law students to take part in an innovative research project to **explore what can be done to create a safer and more respectful campus culture.**

The project entails participation in a **"Sustained Restorative Dialogue Group"** over four sessions. The group will use a restorative enquiry framework to explore the issue and what can be done increase respect, consent and communication on campus.

The dialogues will be managed by two trained facilitators and conducted in a safe, respectful, inclusive and confidential manner. The goal is to have a representative group of undergraduates from the Law Faculty, with a roughly equal balance between men and women.

The dialogue group will meet for four sessions of one hour each. A free dinner will be provided at each session.

Session Dates:

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Spaces are limited. To register your interest, and for further information, please **reply to this email (Lindsey.Pointer@vuw.ac.nz) before 30 June.**

Lindsey

CONCLUSION

The Sustained Restorative Dialogue was successful in its aim to facilitate a space and structure for a respectful and in-depth discussion about the important issue of sexual harm. The feedback from the student participants reflects the immense value of the opportunity to engage in this meaningful discussion and the positive impact on students' understanding of the issue and comfort engaging in difficult conversations.

Looking forward, the Chair in Restorative Justice team would like to offer the Sustained Restorative Dialogue to more students on campus, particularly in the Halls of Residence, where much of the community culture related to sexual relationships is formed.

The format of the Sustained Restorative Dialogue could also be used to hold conversations about other important community topics including mental health, cultural responsiveness, and racial diversity, among others. Using the Sustained Restorative Dialogue model to increase communication and understanding between students and staff within the university is another promising future application.

Acknowledgements

This pilot was possible thanks to the generous support and guidance of the following individuals and groups.

The Diana Unwin Chair in Restorative Justice
VUW Students' Association
VUW Sexual Violence Prevention Group
VUW Faculty of Law
VUW School of Government
VUW Student Counselling
Quaker Peace and Service Aotearoa New Zealand

**FOR MORE
INFORMATION
CONTACT:**

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