A Place-based Approach to Online Dialogue: Appreciative Inquiry in Utrecht, the Netherlands during the Coronavirus Pandemic

Evelyn Henderson-Child[1]

Abstract: Dialogue has a unique place in Dutch society. In 2001, in response to the 9/11 attacks in New York, the first Day of Dialogue was held in Rotterdam. The event was organised by the municipality with the aim of creating greater social cohesion and mutual understanding between local people of different backgrounds, using the principles of Appreciative Inquiry (AI). In 2008, this became a week-long event, which has since been replicated in 100 municipalities throughout the Netherlands by a network of local dialogue organisations. In some cities, these organisations now hold dialogue meetings all year round. Utrecht in Dialogue (UID) is one of these organisations, working with government, business and civil society partners to create events that speak to Utrecht residents since 2008. True to its mission, UID welcomes loyal participants, first-timers, speakers of different mother tongues, long-time Utrecht residents, newcomers: anyone who wants to engage in this dialogue practice. When the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in 2020, UID moved all dialogues online and continued to coordinate Zoom dialogues on at least a weekly basis. Thanks to the online format, a growing contingent joined meetings from other places in the Netherlands and even abroad. Several participants would never attend a face-to-face meeting. Yet even as the virtual format gives rise to a more geographically dispersed audience, UID remains highly local in its focus on community cohesion and mutual understanding; the community-building strategy is centred around the city districts, as are the topic choices and partner network. This article explores these structured online dialogues as a place-based practice, by means of ethnographic observation of ten dialogue meetings. The research thus contributes to an understanding of the role of online dialogue in creating local community cohesion, of online and offline dialogue and to the specific practice of AI dialogue in the Netherlands.

Keywords: Dialogue, Appreciative Inquiry, Place, Community, Cohesion

---

[1] Evelyn Henderson-Child holds a Master's degree in Intercultural Communication from Utrecht University in the Netherlands, with a specialism in the study of multilingual interactions and language policies fostering inclusive multilingualism. She gained her Bachelor's degree in Languages (French, German and Dutch) and Management from the University of Cambridge in 2019. Her MA thesis explored virtual conversations between native and non-native speakers, comparing the approaches of monolingual and multilingual native speakers to instances of misunderstanding. She has worked as an event coordinator and dialogue facilitator at Utrecht in Dialogue, a foundation bringing local people from different backgrounds into a conversation, with the aim of creating greater mutual understanding and combatting polarisation in Dutch society. She is now an independent researcher and social impact consultant.

Background

Dialogue in the Netherlands

Since 2001, dialogue has been practised across the Netherlands in a highly intentional manner. This 'structural approach' to achieving greater community cohesion and mutual understanding in Dutch cities began with the first Day of Dialogue in Rotterdam, following the 9/11 attacks in New York (Plokhooij 2020). Social organisations, local government, businesses and religious organisations, concerned that the debates emerging in the wake of the attacks were only creating greater polarisation among Rotterdam's inhabitants, decided that a form of dialogue would contribute to greater cohesion and understanding in the city. At the suggestion of the Brahma Kumaris Sprituele Academie, organisers chose to ground the Day of Dialogue in the principles of AI, an asset-based approach to community change that focuses on individual experiences of what is working well and encourages participants to dream together of a shared future.

In practice, this AI dialogue looks like a round table of six to eight people sharing experiences connected to a predetermined theme. The conversation unfolds according to a particular structure, with the support of a trained facilitator who ensures that all participants have an opportunity to share their experiences. In her reflection upon the evolution of the Day of Dialogue, Olga Plokhooij, co-initiator of the Day of Dialogue in Amsterdam, notes that this event took dialogue out of the intellectual sphere and made it accessible to a wider audience, contributing to another aim of the dialogue: to bring people together who would not otherwise have met (Plokhooij 2020).

In the years following the first Day of Dialogue in Rotterdam, the concept was taken up by other municipalities across the Netherlands and organisations dedicated to this practice of dialogue began to crop up in various cities. In 2008, the Day of Dialogue became the Week of Dialogue and in some cities, AI dialogue began to be practised all year round. By this time, dialogue coordinators across the Netherlands were collaborating as a national network to select annual themes, run facilitation training and provide guidance on the dialogue approach. In 2011, the Netherlands in Dialogue (NID) Foundation was established. Plokhooij (2020) describes the waxing and waning of this coalition of local dialogue facilitators over time. At its peak, the foundation had a budget of €300,000 to put towards national coordination of dialogue activities; dialogue was being practised across the whole of the Netherlands, NID trained a total of 3000 facilitators in AI dialogue, and 100 local coordinators or organisations were coordinating dialogues in their local area. However, the foundation experienced challenges too: tensions between national and local under-

standings of dialogue and varied preferences for dialogue methodologies led to decreased activity at a national coordination level (Plokhooij 2020). Although the foundation was dissolved in 2019, dialogue continued to be practised across the country at a local level and coordinators continued to communicate with one another in a more informal network and to share best practice. In 2021, a new document was written to set the direction for dialogue in the Netherlands, under the network name *Dialogue in the Netherlands*. This document introduces a new focus on the Sustainable Development Goals and proposes that dialogues should be offered in both online and offline formats (De Buck 2021).

Utrecht in Dialogue

The Day of Dialogue came to Utrecht for the first time in November 2008, and in 2015 dialogue began to be practised in the city all year round, with support from the Utrecht Municipality and other social organisations based in the city. Since 2018, UID has been the national training centre for the practice of dialogue. The new steering group for Dialogue in the Netherlands includes three members of UID, making up the largest contingent from a local dialogue organisation (Utrecht in Dialogue n.d.a).

Utrecht in Dialogue describes its mission as follows:

> Utrecht in Dialogue stimulates meaningful conversations between people from Utrecht with different backgrounds, about themes that are important to them. A dialogue respects differences, leads to new, enriching insights and connectedness in the city. (Utrecht in Dialogue n.d.b)

The organisation is particularly proud of its city-wide presence, which spans every *wijk* (an officially recognised neighbourhood or part of a city in the Netherlands) in Utrecht. UID coordinates dialogues with more than 100 partners in (prior to the shift online necessitated by the coronavirus pandemic) around 50 locations in the city, including libraries, community centres, schools and sports clubs. The dialogues, which happen at least weekly, cover a wide range of themes: including poverty, loneliness, sustainability and inclusion. A key guiding principle for UID is their *Buurtaanpak Erbij Horen* [neighbourhood approach to belonging]. With this in mind, UID has identified a number of neighbourhoods in Utrecht where they want to focus their efforts. The aim of this is to build '*sterke gemeenschappen*' [strong communities] while also combatting loneliness and exclusion (Utrecht in Dialogue n.d.c).

In 2020, then, when the coronavirus pandemic began to change daily life in the Netherlands, and around the world, the usual locations for dialogue in Utrecht became inaccessible to UID. While some local dialogue organisations in the Netherlands decided to put their operations on hold during lockdown, UID decided to continue with their frequent dialogue meetings, moving them all online, using the video conferencing platform Zoom. This decision was made to ensure that people could stay in contact with one another, even when it was not possible to do so in person.

I started volunteering as an event coordinator at UID in January 2021, by which point UID had months of experience of coordinating and facilitating online dialogue meetings. During my time with the organisation, I undertook an ethnographic exploration of the relationship between online dialogue and sense of place, which I present here. In particular, I reflect on the role of online dialogue in creating place-based community cohesion in the city of Utrecht during the coronavirus pandemic, begin to describe the new communities that emerge from these interactions, and pose questions to be considered when coordinating online dialogues in the future. I begin by sketching a theoretical framework for this study, before introducing my method, results and discussion. Finally, I share some reflections and possible avenues for future study.

Theoretical framework

Appreciative dialogue

It seems important to begin by unpicking what is meant by dialogue, in a national context where the term carries a particular meaning and history. A glance at the UID website reveals multiple ways of defining dialogue: in terms of the people involved (people with diverse backgrounds or people who would not usually come into conversation with one another), the structure of the meeting (four key stages, which will be outlined below), the outcomes of the event (new insights and connections) and in opposition to debate (Utrecht in Dialogue n.d.d).

Central to the approach of both NID and UID are the principles of AI, which were developed by David Cooperrider and colleagues at Case Western Reserve University. AI is a social constructionist, asset-based approach to community change that locates the root of all knowledge in people's relationships and experiences: 'social knowledge resides in the interactive collectivity' (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987, 136). As a form of action research, AI allows researchers to gather more insights about the world in which they find themselves, while simultaneously shaping the world of the future. As such, the practice of AI is concerned with imagining a shared future, based on the parts of a system that are working already, with the aim of empowering

people to bring that future about together. AI is often used to promote community engagement in decision-making. For example, the organisation Appreciating People used the practice of AI to support community-building and the establishment of a community network among the BME population in Liverpool in 2007 (Appreciating People n.d.); Involve, the UK charity for public participation also promotes AI as a means to foster community engagement and cohesion (Involve 2018). In this study, it is the relationship between online AI dialogue and sense of place in the city of Utrecht that is under investigation.

There are five key principles of AI (Finegold, Holland, and Lingham 2002):

1. Constructionist principle (knowledge shapes action)

2. Principle of simultaneity (research is action)

3. Poetic principle (human systems are open to interpretation)

4. Positive principle (inquiry into what works is more enduring than interrogation of the problems)

5. Anticipatory principles (be guided by a vision of the future)

These principles form the basis of AI activities, which are further structured around four stages: discover, dream, design, destiny. Through this cycle, groups can move from appreciating what works in a system, to imagining how it could look, to designing and living that future system (Finegold, Holland, and Lingham 2002). This is known as the 4-D cycle and it is recursive by nature, as the imagined future is realised and a new one imagined.

Recalling the UID mission statement and the origins of dialogue in the Netherlands, the motivation for grounding dialogue in the principles and methodology of AI become evident; AI serves the aims of these dialogue activities very well. In particular, the poetic principle of AI can be recognised in the respecting and appreciating of difference that is central to UID dialogues. That is to say, the ideal UID dialogue table brings together people with diverse interpretations of the world around them, who together make a new, collective interpretation and thus co-create a new future. The positive principle is perhaps the most explicitly upheld AI principle in UID communications; the UID website reads as follows:

We talk about themes from a positive angle, look for more or other possibilities and perspectives and what actually works. We investigate themes that deserve attention, that we want more of, that we want to progress further together. (Utrecht in Dialogue n.d.e.)

Indeed, the annual dialogue theme for 2021 was *worthwhile*. While not the focus of this study, it is interesting to consider the role of the positive principle in dialogue that necessarily took place online, due to a devastating global pandemic. To what degree can online dialogue be a source of optimism in dark times? Is there a place for negative themes in appreciative dialogue? These are the very questions that Cooperrider himself asks in his recent article, *Appreciative Inquiry in a Pandemic: An Improbable Pairing* (Cooperrider and Fry 2020). Cooperrider and Fry argue that the practice of AI is the search for 'what gives life, what fuels developmental potential', rather than simply looking at the world through rose-tinted glasses (269); it is about looking for what makes us strong as a community and using this knowledge as a tool for collective empowerment.

True to the AI structure, UID dialogues follow a four-step cycle: get to know one another, share experiences, dream, do. These stages are depicted, along with UID's own principles of dialogue, on the placemat given to participants in Figure 1.

Figure 1. UID Participant Placemat (Utrecht in Dialogue n.d.f)

While Plokhooij (2020) makes a distinction between dialogue organisations employing AI principles and Bohmian principles, it is clear that central concepts are consistent across both dialogue schools. Notably, both conceptualise dialogue as a

creative process, through which some new meaning, understanding or insights emerge, by drawing on experiences as the locus of knowledge.

The way in which these principles and format are realised in online dialogue and the degree to which they connect to conceptions of place will be explored in the discussion.

Place

Considering the role of online dialogue in the city of Utrecht, it is first necessary to reflect upon how we define place at all.

A city could be defined or delineated in terms of its streets, distance from neighbouring cities, local government jurisdiction, institutions, sports teams, the accents of its residents or its history, to name a few commonly used markers. There are endless markers that could be used to define a city or place, yet no single one seems sufficient to sum up any in its totality. Indeed, in the context of a study of dialogue, where individual experience is knowledge and systems are open to interpretation, description of place using any one or several of these markers excludes other perspectives or interpretations of place. Doreen Massey's (2008) definition of place is helpful here. In her seminal work, *A Global Sense of Place*, she suggests that place can be understood as 'articulated moments in networks of social relations' at a particular locus (p. 28), rather than an area with particular boundaries around it. This definition recognises the fact that the concept of place is dynamic and shaped by the people who interact with it. It also represents an outward-facing conceptualisation of place that does not pit the local against the global; this is Massey's global sense of place. Massey (2008) proposes four key principles that underpin her definition:

1. Place should not be conflated with community;

2. Places do not have boundaries; they are not enclosed;

3. Places do not have singular identities but are made up of conflicts;

4. Places are unique, a particular coincidence of social relations.

The concept of a 'particular locus' is hard to grasp and allows for a highly flexible conceptualisation of the word place (Massey 2008, 28). With this definition and these principles in mind, we might well see the Zoom environment as a place, unbounded and representing a particular moment in a social network. It will be important to consider the different ways of defining this locus in the discussion to follow, by asking why and how social relations came together in the online meetings of UID.

Here, it is useful to draw on a study by Keith Hampton (2002), who examines the role of computer-mediated communication in creating a sense of shared place. In his review of research into 'wired' cities and neighbourhoods, he suggests that 'ICTs may hold as much promise of reconnecting us to communities of place as they do in liberating us from them' (Hampton 2002, 1). He finds that computer-mediated communication encourages the formation of local community, through increased visiting, neighbour recognition and collective action; computer-mediated communication represents increased potential for social contact, rather than a replacement, therefore. These findings being from an era long before pandemic-induced lockdowns and isolation, it is interesting to consider them in this recent, unique context. For many, virtual communication was indeed a replacement for in-person social contact. The question remains as to what this virtual communication meant and means for local, place-based relations. Furthermore, it is important to consider how computer-mediated communication might mean different things for the diverse participants at the dialogue table. Andrea Kavanaugh and colleagues (2005) call for a nuanced approach to studies of community and digital communication:

Internet use can strengthen social contacts, community engagement and attachment for people with relatively high levels of education, extroversion, sense of community belonging, community collective efficacy, group memberships, activism and social use of the Internet. But these results have a darker side with respect to the potential impact of computer networking on people with lower levels of education, extroversion, efficacy, and community belonging. Over time, will not these patterns aggravate the digital divide? (18)

Both Massey and Cooperrider figure the individual as participant or agent, with a role to play in shaping the reality that they live and will live. However, in the context of the virtual dialogue, it is important to consider the degree to which this is always true and think about how voices that are not at the table are or are not heard.

This ethnographic study endeavours to answer the question: how is sense of (local) place constructed and revealed through the practice of online dialogue? The later discussion will draw on the theories of AI and place laid out above in order to answer this question.

Method and Data

In order to understand the relationship between online dialogue and sense of (local) place, I decided to conduct an ethnographic study, to create a 'thick description' of virtual dialogue culture and practice (Dörnyei 2007, 130). By employing the method of participant observation, I was able to observe the unfolding of interaction and collect data while preserving the naturalness of the setting to some extent. Martyn

Denscombe (2017) notes that participant observation may be covert, overt or somewhere in between. In this case, I made my role as researcher known to and sought approval from the UID coordinator and facilitators. Some participants were aware of my role as researcher from its advertisement in the organisational newsletter and an announcement at the start of each dialogue meeting. However, those that joined the session late and did not read the newsletter may not have been aware of my role. Thus, my observation of these participants was covert. While the observation took place in a public forum, it was important to ensure that no participant could be identified in this study, so that no one would be negatively impacted as a result.

I took part as a participant rather than facilitator, in order to limit my influence over the structure or focus of the dialogue and in order to preserve the naturalness of the dialogue. Having already taken part in several dialogues before beginning my research, I already had a general feel for the setting. I therefore engaged in focused observation, paying attention to aspects of the setting that related to place, community, online and offline interactions, while also leaving room for other interesting features to emerge (Denscombe 2017). I made observation notes, which serve as my primary data in this study. After each dialogue, I took time to write up my notes based on the bullet points made during the meetings. I later analysed these, coding the various emergent features to draw out themes that go some way to indicate how sense of place was constructed and revealed through online AI dialogue. These are articulated and discussed in the next section.

In many ways, these online dialogue meetings resembled the offline version that preceded them, with a few key changes. Notably, the meetings were shortened, from 120 to 90 minutes. As before, participants could sign up for dialogue events via the UID website, as could dialogue facilitators. Prior to the event, participants received an email containing the Zoom link for the meeting, which was the same every time. While some dialogue event themes reflected the strange times in which the meetings took place (with themes such as creativity in lockdown, or returning to normal), many maintained a broader focus that was not specific to the coronavirus pandemic. Dialogue facilitators and volunteers had the opportunity to take part in special training sessions for dialogue hosting and facilitation in the online environment, but broadly the methodology remained the same.

Most dialogues took place between 19:30 and 21:30 on weekday evenings, with some taking place on weekday or Sunday afternoons. The standard agenda for online dialogue meetings was as follows:

19:00 Zoom space opens
19:30 Introduction and inspiration material (e.g. poetry, video)

19:45 Into breakout rooms for the four-step dialogue
21:15 Plenary session, group reflection on the dialogue
21:30 End of meeting

Results and Discussion

In the following section, I present four features of these dialogue meetings and discuss these with respect to the theory laid out above, in order to answer the question: how is sense of (local) place constructed and revealed through the practice of online dialogue?

Self-identification in relation to place

On arrival in the Zoom space, participants would often spontaneously introduce themselves with reference to their current location. Most frequently, participants named neighbourhoods in Utrecht as the location from which they were calling. If someone else was from the same neighbourhood, they might go as far as comparing street names to find out where they lived in relation to one another. Two participants reacted very positively to discovering that they both lived in a small Dutch village (outside of Utrecht). One dialogue was focused on community-building in Utrecht neighbourhoods and in this meeting, participants actively sought out other participants who lived close to them, asking to join the same breakout rooms as one another, for example, so that they could think up new local initiatives together.

While the UID mission centres the poetic principle, or, in other words, encourages participants to seek out and make new meaning from their differences, it was interesting to observe that many nonetheless looked for aspects of their own identity in others and used this as a basis through which to construct a new reality or sense of place.

These findings seem to align with those of Hampton (2002): online interactions serve to strengthen sense of place. Participants were keen to recognise their neighbours in these interactions and at times used dialogue meetings as an opportunity for local community action. The online environment enabled non-Utrecht residents to enjoy this same opportunity too, although far more rarely, as participants could in theory join from anywhere although they did so less frequently than those located in Utrecht. However, the degree to which neighbourly sentiment, or simply face recognition, played out in the streets of Utrecht (or elsewhere) following these dialogues is impossible to determine.

Some participants joined from other cities or towns in the Netherlands. Sometimes they explained that they used to live in Utrecht before moving away and were joining

because they used to take part in dialogues in person and were now able to take part remotely. Rarer were participants who joined from other countries and this usually only became clear when they were asked to introduce themselves, particularly when a host or facilitator did not recognise the participant. In one dialogue, a new participant was asked to introduce herself and explained that she was calling from Scotland and saw the dialogue as an opportunity to get to know her future home, as she planned to move to the Netherlands in the following year. In a dialogue about cultural diversity, participants were asked to type where they were from into a word cloud. Inputs varied from Utrecht neighbourhoods and Dutch city names to other countries or even *the world*.

While the online medium resulted in the participation of more geographically dispersed participants, by dissolving boundaries to participation that were previously imposed by travel times, several participants insisted on the importance of the dialogues' rooting in Utrecht, in some cases even while they joined from somewhere entirely different. For the participant looking ahead to her move to the Netherlands, this particular moment in a network of social relations, or this place as defined by Massey (2008), was interesting and valuable to her precisely because she saw them as situated in Utrecht, or saw Utrecht to have brought these social relations into being.

The frequent, often spontaneous, references to various physical locations, such as street names, ensured that the online dialogue space felt rooted in the geography of the city. In dialogues where many participants were based in Utrecht, it almost felt as if you could step out of the virtual room onto the streets of the city. At times this created a distinction between Utrechters and non-Utrechters and thus a boundary was drawn, even in the virtual space that was accessible from around the world.

Online dialogue: temporary or here to stay?

Time and again participants and facilitators talked about online dialogue as a temporary measure. They used turns of phrase such as 'when we meet for dialogue in person again', implying an assumption that dialogue would go back to the same format as before. In several cases, this was accompanied by an expression of preference for the in-person format, as participants hoped to be able to return to live dialogues in the summer. However, for some participants, including active volunteers such as me, the online format was all that they knew. One such participant commented that the use of the same Zoom link every time created the feeling of arriving in the same room each week. Other relatively new participants posed lots of questions about what live dialogues used to be like.

In some ways, this discussion of the future 'return to normal' felt to be in conflict with the AI principle of simultaneity, which positions research as action. It created a

sense that participants were waiting to do the real dialogue work, and that this could only be done properly in person. Indeed, the dialogue about community-building in Utrecht, some participants (who were also dialogue coordinators in their local area) explained that they had decided not to organise any online dialogues and instead waited until it was possible to do them in person again. By contrast, one dialogue host explained that some dialogues would stay online indefinitely, due to the different public that could be attracted to dialogue tables via this medium. Similarly, one participant talked about the greater diversity of perspectives that could be found at online (versus offline) dialogue tables, as it allowed people from around the world to join. She saw this to be particularly preferable for dialogues focused on inclusion or cultural diversity, for example, as participants had the opportunity to draw on a wider breadth of experiences which could enrich their dialogue.

On the one hand, by imagining a return to in-person dialogues, participants were being guided by the anticipatory principle, by a vision of the future (Finegold, Holland, and Lingham 2002). Yet, as they waited until they could 'do dialogue properly', participants and hosts disregarded the simultaneity of inquiry and action and seemed to cast online dialogue as a weak replacement for in-person dialogue. This prompts an interesting question around AI's positive principle: if the aim of AI is to identify what gives a system strength and to bring this version of the system into being, as Cooperrider and Fry (2020) argue, what happens when strength is found in a version of the system that is out of reach? It is a challenge for (online) dialogue facilitators to bring the focus to the power in the resources in the system that we have, rather than focusing on those that we lack. The impact of this attitude on dialogue quality and perceived value was not investigated in this study, but it does suggest that the AI dialogue was realised differently in the online environment.

Even as online dialogue was dispreferred in favour of in-person dialogues, the online Zoom meeting had become a distinct place in itself. Drawing on Massey's (2008, 28) definition of place, online dialogues created new 'moments in networks of social relations', bringing together different people with different perspectives to inhabit this place for a couple of hours at a time. This place was highly dynamic and extraverted, open to change and to the participation of those who entered it. However, this openness seemed at times to be conditional; extraversion supported the goals of events with explicitly 'global' themes such as cultural diversity. What did this mean for other dialogues without such themes or with a focus on 'local' matters? In some ways it sets up an opposition between the local and the global, inward- versus outward-looking. Who is part of the static, stable local identity, while others come and go at the dynamic, global level?

Community-building

Some dialogues started with the stating of the dialogue principles, format and purpose, particularly when multiple participants were taking part for the first time. On several occasions, hosts explained that dialogue played an important role in building strong communities. It was rare for them to elaborate further. However, on a few occasions participants spoke about dialogue representing an opportunity for newcomers to build connections in the city of Utrecht.

In the dialogue about community-building, participants talked about the advantages of building dialogue communities in a neighbourhood, whereby the same participants returned time and again to have dialogues about different topics. This would allow them to build more trusting relationships with one another and thus to have deeper, more insightful dialogues. These neighbourhood dialogues were said to be about creating a sense of belonging in the local area. Here, we can recognise the importance of the principle of simultaneity in building place-based relations through online dialogue: not only is dialogue a means to an end (to create a more connected local area), but it is also an end in itself: the practice of online dialogue brings into being a (dialogue) community and a (virtual) place, at a particular moment in a network of social relations that may never be repeated again.

The idea that place is constructed through interaction is important here; participants agreed that to know a place (for example, as a newcomer), it is necessary to know the people that make it up. Furthermore, by recognising participants' agency and giving them the opportunity to co-create this place through the practice of AI, ties to place are strengthened. At the same time, while Massey (2008) defines place as a moment in a network of social relations, what recurred here was the importance of continuity of place, in order to build community. It was particularly interesting that relationships at the level of city neighbourhood remained so important for participants, even in a time where in-person interactions were so limited. The meaning that place gave to these online relationships was of real significance to many participants. It would be interesting to observe the degree to which these went on to support increased neighbour recognition, for example, and thus the degree to which these online interactions supported or were an addition to in-person interaction, rather than a replacement. Furthermore, the degree to which this is specific to the Dutch context cannot be determined from this study alone.

Who was and was not present

While the online environment granted some people access to dialogue who would not otherwise have been able to participate (people joining from abroad, people isolated in their homes, for example), it is important to note that some voices were

excluded precisely because dialogues took place online. Those who did not have or had limited internet access, for example, were unable to participate in these dialogues. Furthermore, the removal of dialogue from places such as community centres or schools meant that some audiences no longer participated; previously, the fact that some places were used for multiple different activities meant that some participants joined in dialogues out of convenience or coincidence. In this way, we see that the dedicated Zoom space for dialogue served to attract participants who were looking for dialogue (for one reason or another), rather than those who happened across it. The motivations of individual participants for joining a meeting and the perspectives that they brought to the dialogue table may have been impacted by this fact. With this in mind, it is clear that the Utrecht experienced in the virtual setting is likely to be a different place to the one experienced at the physical dialogue table, not just because of the location of dialogue, but more importantly because of the people and perspectives that it welcomes and excludes.

Conclusion

The findings demonstrate that connections to physical place can be constructed, maintained and sense of local place even strengthened by the practice of online dialogue; These online interactions can serve to encourage and provide more opportunities for interaction with neighbours, rather than simply replacing the in-person. This supports the findings of Hampton (2002), who suggested that 'ICTs may hold as much promise of reconnecting us to communities of place as they do in liberating us from them' (Hampton 2002, 1). In a time when in-person interactions were necessarily reduced, and as we continue to navigate hybrid interaction, this idea may provide some optimism for the formation of local community. Indeed, for many participants it was the dialogues' rooting in the locality of Utrecht that was so important, as it allowed them to make connections at their neighbourhood level, or to feel connected to a city that they wanted to discover.

While connection to a local place can be established and revealed through reference to physical locations and can contribute to a local sense of inclusion for some, for others, a rooting in the physical environment may serve to exclude them from the virtual space. It is important to remember that even as the virtual environment is open to all in theory, in practice, the social relations that emerge constitute a place that may not be welcoming to all. For example, those who join without connection, knowledge of or interest in Utrecht may feel that they cannot participate fully. Different motivations for joining dialogues should therefore be taken into account by dialogue coordinators and hosts. Furthermore, the virtual space creates a new kind of exclusion, digital exclusion, whereby participants who might be able to participate

in person are not able to access the online environment and therefore unable to co-construct this dialogue space.

This reminds us that the Zoom room is in fact a place in itself, constructed through social interaction, which can be as extraverted or introverted as a non-virtual space. For the most part, the Zoom room was figured as an outward-looking space or opportunity for interaction with participants beyond Utrecht. This extraversion was seen as particularly desirable or valuable when it came to dialogues about themes of diversity or inclusion or about being a newcomer in the city of Utrecht. This is reminiscent of Massey's (2008) discussion of the counterposition of local and global that can emerge through definition of place.

Finally, even while Zoom asserted itself as a new place for dialogue, reference to its temporary nature at times seemed to undermine its validity as a space for dialogue. Whether it is in fact temporary, however, remains to be seen.

Limitations and further research

It is important to note that this was a small study conducted by one researcher. While I made efforts to ensure that my position as volunteer did not influence my findings, it is likely that another researcher who was not working in the organisation would not have had access to the same information which may have influenced the way that I interpreted information or interacted with other participants during the dialogue sessions. Furthermore, without experience of the offline dialogues that came before and have begun to be organised since, I am unable to make comparisons between the characteristics of online and offline dialogues, nor am I able to be more precise about the way in which participation has been affected by the move online. Indeed, it is hard to say how much is a result of the very particular context of a pandemic, rather than a voluntary move online and how much is specific to the Utrecht or Dutch context. Finally, I was obliged to choose one dialogue table on each occasion and so I only heard the conversations of a few participants each time.

In future research, it would be interesting to consider the differences between place-based dialogues that have always been online, versus those that moved online necessarily due to the pandemic. Furthermore, it would be interesting to consider the degree to which local community-building activities, such as neighbour recognition, contributed to life in the neighbourhood beyond the Zoom meetings and beyond the period of the pandemic that I observed. Finally, it will be intriguing to follow the evolution of online and offline dialogues in the Netherlands, to see which changes are here to stay and how these are (or are not) integrated into the approach of the Dutch dialogue network.

Bibliography

Appreciating People (n.d.) *Toxteth BME Community Project* [online] Available at https://appreciatingpeople.co.uk/portfolio/community-development-and-collaboration-with-toxteth-bme/ [23 October 2021]

Cooperrider, D. and Srivastva, S. (1987) 'Appreciative Inquiry in Organizational Life'. *Research in Organization Change and Development* 1

Cooperrider, D.L. and Fry, R. (2020) 'Appreciative Inquiry in a Pandemic: An Improbable Pairing'. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science,* 56 (3), 266–271

De Buck, W. (2021) *Voorstel Dialoog in NL*. Available at https://www.utrechtindialoog.nl/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Voorstel-Dialoog-in-NL.pdf [30 August 2021]

Denscombe, M. (2017) The Good Research Guide: For Small-Scale Social Research Projects. McGraw-Hill Education (UK)

Dörnyei, Z. (2007) Research Methods in Applied Linguistics: Quantitative, Qualitative, and Mixed Methodologies. Oxford Applied Linguistics. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press

Finegold, M.A., Holland, B.M., and Lingham, T. (2002) 'Appreciative Inquiry and Public Dialogue: An Approach to Community Change'. *Public Organization Review,* 2(3), 235–252

Hampton, K. (2002) 'Place-Based and IT Mediated 'Community''. *Planning Theory & Practice,* 3(2), 228–231

Involve (2018) *Appreciative Inquiry* [online] Available at https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/methods/appreciative-inquiry [23 October 2021]

Kavanaugh, A., Carroll, J.M., Rosson, M.B., Zin, T.T., & Reese, D.D. (2005) 'Community Networks: Where Offline Communities Meet Online'. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* [online] 10 (4). Available at https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2005.tb00266.x [29 August 2021]

Massey, D. (2008) A Global Sense of Place. Routledge

Plokhooij, O. (2020) *The Netherlands in Dialogue: A Structural Approach to Dialogue Across Society – Leerweg Dialoog.* [15 April 2020] Available at http://leerwegdialoog.nl/2020/04/15/the-netherlands-in-dialogue-a-structural-approach-to-dialogue-across-society/ [21 August 2021]

Utrecht in Dialogue (n.d.a) *Dialoog in Nederland - Landelijk netwerk Dag/Week van de Dialoog* [online] Available at <https://www.utrechtindialoog.nl/nederland-in-dialoog/> [29 August 2021]

Utrecht in Dialogue (n.d.b) *Homepage* [online] Available at https://www.utrechtin-dialoog.nl/ [21 June 2021]

Utrecht in Dialogue (n.d.c) *Buurtaanpak Erbij Horen* [online] Available at https://www.utrechtindialoog.nl/buurtaanpak-eenzaamheid/ [30 August 2021]

Utrecht in Dialogue (n.d.d) *Wat Is Een Dialoog* [online] Available at https://www.utrechtindialoog.nl/wat-is-een-dialoog/ [30 August 2021]

Utrecht in Dialogue (n.d.) *What Do We Talk About?* [online] Available at https://www.utrechtindialoog.nl/en/what-do-we-talk-about/ [23 October 2021]

Utrecht in Dialogue (n.d.e) *What Is a Dialogue?* [online] Available at https://www.utrechtindialoog.nl/en/what-is-a-dialogue/ [30 August 2021]