doi: 10.55207/YAML4090

Intergenerational Dialogue in Practice: Reflections on a Dynamically Unfolding Conversation

Joan Walton, Louise Livingstone, Liam Bureau[1]

Abstract: Intergenerational dialogue holds particular significance in the current global context, as contemporary society continues to encounter obstacles that inhibit meaningful engagement with some of its most pressing challenges, including transgenerational trauma, structural injustice, gender inequality, limited youth engagement, and wider planetary concerns such as ecological degradation. In this paper that examines intergenerational dialogue within a participatory/post-materialist framework, we reflect on a dynamically unfolding intergenerational dialogue series that has emerged through the New Paradigm Navigators (NPN), a subgroup of the Scientific and Medical Network, an educational charity with a history spanning fifty years. The aim of this paper is to explore practice from inside this orientation. In that context, the first dialogue took place in April 2024, and a series of fourteen dialogues have since been convened, covering themes including leadership, ecology, gender, death, and work.

[1] Dr Joan Walton is an academic at York St John University, UK, a member of the Galileo Commission Steering Group, and former chair of the Scientific & Medical Network's Board of Directors. Joan is one of the founders of the Consciousness Education project, which emerged from the lived experiences of educators who recognised that the prevailing materialist paradigm in education was insufficient to explain their most profound experiences of consciousness, connection, and meaning.

Dr Louise Livingstone holds a PhD in Transformative Learning and a Masters in Holistic Science from Schumacher College, Devon, UK. Founder of the Heart Sense Research Institute, Louise explores postmaterialist frameworks that reorient ways of knowing and being. Through her Heart Sense approach – developed in dialogue with her own heart – Louise helps individuals engage with the heart as a wise organ of perception. Her work integrates research, consultancy, and education to re-imagine the heart's role in addressing global challenges, nurturing compassionate awareness, and restoring balance between intellect and embodied, heartfelt wisdom.

Liam Bureau is an American undergraduate student at Colorado State University studying interdisciplinary liberal arts, Spanish, and global environmental sustainability. Recently, his interest in global environmental issues has led him to more spiritual and philosophical questions – and possible solutions – to the complex crises we face as a species.

Joan, Louise and Liam collaborate on the New Paradigm Navigators (NPN) project that runs through the Scientific and Medical Network (SMN).

The project is grounded in a transformative learning context, with particular consideration to post-materialist approaches to knowledge and engagement that include the whole person – paying attention to how one is showing up in the relational space, both with and for others. This paper explores the project's rationale and ethos, drawing on co-operative enquiry (Heron 1996) and the Heart Sense methodological framework (Livingstone 2019, 2021, 2025), situating this practice within a broader participatory epistemological paradigm (Walton 2022). We include reflections from Liam Bureau, the young person lead in this process, draw on participant contributions from the dialogue notes, and analyse the dialogues through the lens of Heron's (1996) extended epistemology and Bohm dialogue theory (Bohm 1996; Isaacs 1999). The paper concludes with a reflection on the possibility of integrative learning for our times, suggesting that such dialogical practices may foster deeper connections between humans, the More-Than-Human world, and the Earth as a whole, and may offer a meaningful contribution to the challenges of multilateral governance and collective wellbeing.

Keywords: Relational space; heart-centred knowing; post-materialism; embodied cognition; wholeness

Introduction

The New Paradigm Navigators project emerged from a conversation between Dr Louise Livingstone and Dr Joan Walton in the Spring of 2022. What began as a shared concern about issues facing young people in turbulent times and the lack of meaningful intergenerational spaces within the Scientific and Medical Network (SMN) quickly evolved into something more expansive: a question about what it means to genuinely support the younger generations in finding their voices, their purpose, and their capacity to contribute to a world that is, by any measure, in considerable difficulty.

Both were acutely aware of the many challenges facing younger people – ecological anxiety, social fragmentation, economic precarity, mental health issues, and a pervasive sense that the inherited systems of knowledge and governance are inadequate to the moment. At the same time, they recognised that young people often lack spaces in which they can explore creative and constructive responses to these challenges in ways that feel genuinely open, supportive, and relational.

It is becoming increasingly evident that purely external or technical responses are insufficient for the complexity of our times (McGilchrist 2021, 2012). According to many post-materialist thinkers, including Dr Iain McGilchrist, what seems to be required, alongside such responses, are spaces in which people are able to think, feel, question, and imagine together – without being immediately constrained by predetermined frameworks or the pressure to arrive at solutions. The project began, therefore, with a simple but generative question: 'What can we do to improve the world for young people?'

From this question arose a clear intention: to facilitate a group of young people, through collaborative enquiry and the Heart Sense methodological framework, to pursue the questions that matter most to them, while supporting them in discovering their own innate wisdom and capacity to contribute meaningfully to the world.

Early work took the form of online gatherings in which young people were invited to share concerns and engage in dialogue grounded in deep listening. Rather than reinforcing despair, these gatherings sought to open space for constructive and participatory inquiry. What began as a small initiative has since grown into a developing international community, with a core group of participants, emerging projects, and a shared sense that something of value is unfolding.

In 2024, the project extended its work to include a dedicated intergenerational dialogue series, facilitated by Liam Bureau, in which younger and older participants were brought together around shared themes. This paper reflects on that series – its rationale, practice, and significance – and situates it within a broader theoretical and methodological context.

Intergenerational Dialogue in a Participatory Paradigm

Intergenerational relationships are often shaped, sometimes subtly, by assumptions of hierarchy – assumptions in which age is equated with knowledge, authority, or wisdom – indeed, from our lived experiences of running these dialogues, we have found that this is often the case. While experience undoubtedly brings depth, such assumptions can quietly constrain what becomes possible within dialogue, positioning younger participants primarily as recipients of knowledge rather than as active contributors to shared understanding. One of the generative questions arising from this work is whether something different might be possible: not in opposition to experience, but alongside it.

What might it mean to approach intergenerational dialogue not as a process of transmission but as a shared space of inquiry? This question has both ontological and epistemological dimensions, and it is worth pausing to consider each in turn.

A participatory ontology: The inseparability of knower and known

From a participatory perspective, knowledge is not simply held within individuals and passed between them. Rather, it can be understood as something that arises within relationship. The theoretical physicist John Wheeler (1994) proposed, on the basis of evidence from quantum physics, that we live in a 'participatory universe' in which there is a fundamental 'inseparability of the knower and known' – a view that

challenges the assumption of an objective, independently existing reality to which the detached observer has privileged access (Walton 2022).

This perspective resonates with a broader movement within post-materialist approaches to consciousness and inquiry which challenge the assumption that reality is fundamentally composed of discrete, separately existing entities. De Quincey (2002, 6) describes consciousness as 'our deepest mystery and our most intimate reality', noting that the classical scientific assumption – that consciousness is a by-product of the brain, and therefore ends with it – is increasingly difficult to sustain in light of findings from quantum physics, and from the lived experiences of those who encounter dimensions of reality that appear to extend beyond the material. There is a growing challenge to the materialist assumptions of classical science, with increasing recognition of the interconnected and relational nature of existence, and of the possibility that consciousness may be primary rather than derivative (Lorimer 2019; Walton 2022).

The Galileo Commission (2019), a project commissioned by the Scientific and Medical Network – the same organisation within which the NPN was formed – brought together more than ninety advisers from over thirty universities worldwide to contribute their views on the possibilities for a post-materialist worldview that integrates science, spirituality, and consciousness. This shared institutional context is not incidental: it reflects a community already oriented toward participatory and expanded understandings of inquiry.

Within such a participatory ontology, intergenerational dialogue can be understood less as exchange and more as a process of co-emergence, in which meaning arises through participation rather than being predetermined. No single participant holds the whole; rather, insight emerges in the space between – shaped by the presence, attention, and responsiveness of those involved.

Extended epistemology and ways of knowing

Donald Schön (1995) claimed that a new ontology requires a new epistemology. We agree. If knowledge is relational and participatory, then our understanding of how we know must expand accordingly. As Walton (2022) argues, there is an important congruence to be achieved: if we are to develop an epistemology and methodologies that are genuinely congruent with a participatory ontology, then researchers – and, we would add, dialogue facilitators – must be willing to include themselves in the inquiry. As soon as they see themselves as standing apart from the processes they are facilitating or studying, a lack of congruence arises that undermines the validity of the whole enterprise.

Heron's (1996) extended epistemology offers a helpful framework for understanding the richness of what participatory inquiry makes possible. Rather than privileging conceptual or propositional knowledge alone – the dominant mode in contemporary Western academic life – Heron identifies four interrelated modes of knowing, which he presents in a pyramidal form with experiential knowing as the foundation.

Experiential knowing is grounded in direct encounter – the felt, embodied experience of being in the world and in relationship with others. It forms the basis from which the other modes arise. Presentational knowing gives aesthetic form to experience through story, metaphor, image, and symbol: it is an expressive response to what has been encountered. Propositional knowing involves the articulation of concepts and ideas that seek to make sense of experience. Practical knowing, which sits at the apex of Heron's pyramid, is expressed through action – the capacity to act thoughtfully and responsively in the world, as the outcome of the other three modes of knowing in concert (Heron 1996, 1998).

These modes are not separate but deeply interdependent. In the context of the NPN intergenerational dialogues, all four are present and in dynamic interplay. Participants bring their lived experience into the space: reflections on ecological crisis, mortality, identity, and purpose. They express this through metaphor and narrative. They reflect together on what is emerging, and they begin to translate insights into action through collaborative projects, symposia, and new ways of being in the world.

This epistemological framing matters because it allows us to recognise that what is taking place in these dialogues is not merely conversation, but a form of knowledge co-creation that integrates multiple ways of knowing and that takes seriously the forms of understanding that conventional academic modes tend to marginalise.

Bohm Dialogue and Co-operative Inquiry as method

The methodological grounding of this work draws explicitly on Bohm Dialogue and Co-operative Inquiry (Bohm 1996; Heron 1996; Isaacs 1999). David Bohm, working from the ontological perspective he had developed through quantum physics, and reflecting on the Greek origins of the term – 'dia' meaning 'through', 'logos' meaning 'word' – devised dialogue as a form of 'collective participation' which allows for the 'harmony of the individual and the collective, in which the whole constantly moves toward coherence' (Bohm 1996, 32). Groups of people learn to think together; ideas and ways of perceiving reality are generated that no one person would have had independently.

Isaacs (1999) identifies five core dialogical practices that make this possible and which are worth naming precisely because they are present – sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly – within the NPN dialogues:

Listening, in this context, means more than waiting for one's turn to speak. It involves a commitment to quieten one's own thoughts, theories, and feelings, and to listen at a deep level to what others are actually saying, including what lies beneath the words. There is also the practice of collective listening: attending to that which lies beyond any individual contribution, which makes it possible to access new levels of shared insight.

Respecting involves valuing the right of another person to hold their point of view, and taking it seriously, even when it differs substantially from one's own. Differences in perspective are inevitable; what matters is that they are engaged without diminishing or critiquing the person who holds them.

Suspending is perhaps the most demanding of the four practices. It involves becoming aware of one's own deeply held assumptions, theories, and certainties, and holding them lightly – not suppressing them, but making them visible and available for examination. As Isaacs (1999) notes, this is essential if the 'wisdom in – and beyond – the room' is to become accessible. When assumptions are suspended rather than defended, a deeper order can become visible that allows the group to think in genuinely new ways.

Voicing is the capacity to speak in response to what is engaging one in the present moment – involving oneself as a whole person and not censoring one's own truth in order to conform to expected positions. Rather than repeating well rehearsed arguments, voicing invites participants to express what is actually arising within them, including uncertainty, and by doing so to contribute something genuinely new to the group.

A fifth element is the practice of silence. The ground rule articulated in the Spirituality and Consciousness Studies Special Interest Group, from which the NPN's own dialogical approach draws, states it simply: 'What takes place in the silence is as important as the content of the speaking' (Walton 2022). Silence is not absence – it is the space in which reflection deepens and in which new insight becomes possible. The NPN dialogues consistently create and honour this space.

The NPN intergenerational dialogues reflect all these principles in practice, shaped also by the Heart Sense framework developed by Livingstone (2019, 2025), which brings particular emphasis to relational presence, compassion, and engagement 'through the heart as an organ of perception'. Taken together, this creates what might

be described as a hybrid methodological space – integrating elements of Bohm Dialogue, Co-operative Inquiry, and relational practice – and one that participants themselves have shaped and developed over time through their engagement.

Seeking congruence: Research, participation, and reflexivity

Understanding intergenerational dialogue in this way has significant implications for research and inquiry. The conventional model of research assumes a separation between the researcher and the subject of research, a detachment that is held to be the condition of rigour and objectivity. But as Walton (2022) argues, there is a fundamental internal contradiction in using a methodology premised on the separability of researcher and researched to study phenomena that are, by their nature, participatory and relational. To do so is to apply the very assumptions that the participatory paradigm calls into question.

If we are to develop approaches to research that are genuinely congruent with a participatory ontology, then researchers, and, in this context, all three authors of this paper, must be willing to include themselves in the inquiry. This means engaging reflexively and relationally: attending to one's own experience, acknowledging the role of subjectivity in the co-creation of knowledge, and being willing to share something of one's own inner world in the process.

This is not, it should be said, without difficulty. As Walton (2022) notes, developing participatory approaches 'requires a level of vulnerability, and a willingness to trust, that many find difficult'. The fear generated by the prospect of genuine self-disclosure within a research or dialogical process may itself be an inhibiting factor. Naming this honestly is part of the reflexive commitment that participatory inquiry demands and it connects directly to the relational conditions that participants in the NPN dialogues themselves name as essential: trust, openness, and the willingness to be seen.

Rather than relying solely on replication or detachment as criteria of validity, participatory approaches may emphasise coherence, resonance, and transformative potential (Heron & Reason 1997). In the context of the NPN dialogues, this means attending carefully not only to what is said but to how people are present with one another and to what becomes possible as a result.

Taken together, these strands suggest that intergenerational dialogue, when grounded in a participatory ontology, extended epistemology, and a heart-sense approach, is not simply a facilitation technique. It is a form of transformative practice with genuine ethical, epistemological, and methodological significance.

The New Paradigm Navigators: Origins, Ethos, and Development

The New Paradigm Navigators project developed, from its earliest stages, through a growing recognition that meaningful engagement requires attention not only to what is discussed but to how people are present with one another. The project is grounded in co-operative inquiry (Heron 1996) and the *Heart Sense* methodological approach (Livingstone 2025), which foreground relational presence, deep listening, and engagement through qualities such as curiosity, compassion, and care.

In practice, this has involved a movement away from traditional facilitation, in which a leader directs content and outcomes, toward a model of space-holding, in which facilitators support the emergence of dialogue rather than shaping it. As Livingstone reflects, this involves 'sinking into the space with one another… engaging openly with others, through the heart as an organ of perception, with curiosity, gratitude and care'.

The initial objectives were deliberately open-ended: to create a safe space guided by deep listening and trust; to enable young people to focus on issues present for them; to support the organic growth of ideas through curiosity and 'not knowing'. These objectives reflect a commitment to process over outcome, a recognition that what matters most is not a predetermined destination, but the quality of attention brought to the shared journey.

Early webinars brought together a small group of young people to share concerns and explore possibilities for meaningful engagement. Rather than reinforcing overwhelm or despair in the face of global challenges, these gatherings sought to open space for constructive and participatory inquiry. From these beginnings emerged a core group of engaged participants, each bringing creative ideas and a genuine commitment to contributing positively to the world. This has since led to the development of symposia, collaborative projects, and educational initiatives, reflecting a movement from shared inquiry toward practical expression, what Heron (1996) might describe as the practical knowledge mode coming into fuller expression.

Participants frequently describe the space as one characterised by trust, openness, and belonging: 'We're building trust… we're not rejecting anyone… we're trying to work through things.' This quality of belonging is not incidental to the project: it is the relational ground from which deeper inquiry becomes possible. It is also, we would suggest, an instance of what the participatory paradigm asks of research: a willingness to trust, to be vulnerable, and to engage with what genuinely arises, rather than what it might be safer or more comfortable to explore.

The Intergenerational Dialogue Series in Practice

The intergenerational dialogue series, facilitated by Liam Bureau from April 2024 onwards, has brought together a maximum of eight participants per session of different ages and backgrounds to explore themes of shared concern. Fourteen sessions have taken place to date, with a recurring community of participants drawn from across the NPN project and beyond, including members from multiple countries and a wide range of professional and personal backgrounds. The materials that inform this analysis comprise notes, reflections and quotations that arose through the co-operative inquiry and Heart Sense methodological framing of each of these dialogues.

Liam, as project lead of the intergenerational dialogue series, formally sets the agenda for each dialogue. Remaining open and aware to the arising themes in each dialogue, Liam continually checks in with all participants, facilitating an open space to ensure that all voices are heard and that the chosen theme for the next dialogue resonates with all present. As much as possible, Liam holds open a safe and equitable space for all participants to express themselves safely and in a way that feels comfortable for them. In this context, Liam's holding of this space practically embodies both the methodological frameworks of co-operative inquiry and Heart Sense (the underpinning frameworks of the NPN project as already detailed) and participants are actively encouraged to pay attention to *how* they are showing up in the relational space *with themselves, for others*.

Liam reflects on the impact of these gatherings: 'People met others they would not have normally met… and attendees often shared that they had thought of something in a new way due to their conversations within the gatherings.' The dialogues have also been a significant site of personal and professional learning for Liam himself, in facilitation, in organisation, and in participation as a younger person in an intergenerational space: 'By simply being a part of these conversations, I could play a role in the intergenerational process; I learned things myself and shared my perspective with others with whom I would not naturally be in conversation.'

This dual role as facilitator and participant reflects the participatory ethos of the project, in which distinctions between those who hold space and those who inhabit it are softened in favour of shared inquiry. It also enacts the congruence principle articulated above: the facilitator does not stand outside the process but is genuinely included within it. What follows are reflections drawn from five of the core dialogue themes, each of which illuminates a different dimension of the intergenerational inquiry.

Leadership as an inner and relational practice

An early dialogue focused on the theme of leadership. Rather than approaching it as a set of external competencies or positional roles, participants explored leadership as something deeply internal and relational. One participant articulated this shift clearly: 'Leadership is less of an action or behaviour as much as it is a way of being, an energy or vibration, and an internal practice.'

This opened a shared inquiry across generations. Participants described leadership as 'a dance of leading by following', as 'working with our own shadow, mind, ego, and heart', and as 'something we practise in ourselves, which ultimately transforms the world'. These articulations move fluidly across experiential, presentational, and propositional modes of knowing, demonstrating how dialogue can access forms of understanding not easily available through conventional conceptual language alone. They also reflect the Bohmian quality of voicing: participants speaking from what was genuinely arising within them, rather than from rehearsed positions.

There was also a critical edge to the conversation. Contemporary leadership structures were described as often reflecting collective shadow dynamics: 'In our current society, our leaders represent our shadows and resemble parasites.'

Rather than resolving this tension, the group held it generatively, allowing the discomfort to intensify rather than foreclose the inquiry. What emerged was not a definition of leadership but a deepened awareness of its ethical and relational dimensions and of the relationship between personal transformation and structural change. The dialogue moved between the inner and the outer, the personal and the political, in a way that intergenerational encounter makes distinctively possible: each generation brought a different vantage point on why leadership matters and what it costs.

Connection to the natural world and ecological crisis

In a dialogue on the natural world and ecological crisis, participants moved quickly beyond conventional environmental discourse into more profound questions about patterns of thought and consciousness. One participant reflected, 'The planet will actually go on, nature will go on – it is us that are at risk.'

This shift from concern for the environment as an external object to questioning the forms of thinking that have led to ecological imbalance opened a more fundamental inquiry. Another participant observed, 'The same thinking which created the problems we face now cannot itself overcome them.' This resonates with the participatory paradigm's insistence that a new ontology requires a new epistemology: the chal-

lenge is not simply to find better answers within existing frameworks but to question the frameworks themselves.

The dialogue moved between ecological, philosophical, and experiential registers, drawing on practices such as sitting with a 'numinous tree', reconnecting with natural rhythms, and engaging with perennial wisdom traditions including the Tao Te Ching's principles of harmony and non-action. One participant reflected simply, 'If Life is asking us to live in harmony with Life, maybe we just need more time to listen.'

This quality of attention – pausing, listening, reconnecting – is itself a form of practical wisdom, and one that the Bohm dialogical tradition specifically cultivates. It is also an instance of what Heron (1996) would describe as presentational knowing: a way of engaging with ecological reality that is not purely analytical but aesthetic and relational.

The intergenerational dimension was particularly evident here. Older participants brought lived memory of different relationships to the natural world –periods of greater simplicity, different economies of attention – while younger participants brought the particular urgency of those who know they will live longest with the consequences of current choices. Neither perspective alone was sufficient; together, they opened a richer and more complex inquiry.

Gender, identity, and the ethics of openness

The dialogue on gender and sexuality opened a particularly sensitive and complex space. Participants reflected on the social, political, and familial roles associated with gender, and on the marginalisation and intolerance that can accompany challenges to existing beliefs. The dialogue notes observe that discussing these subjects can sometimes make participants feel vulnerable and uncomfortable, which may deter engagement. Nevertheless, the group held that such conversations must be approached with curiosity, 'in order to open our minds and hearts to other ways of being.'

A particularly illuminating insight concerned the relationship between identity and a deeper ground of consciousness. Participants noted that while social identities and roles are significant in this life, 'the eternal source of consciousness is not constrained by these concepts', suggesting that a participatory and relational understanding of being offers a ground beneath the differences that can otherwise divide. This allowed the dialogue to hold both the importance of advocacy and equal representation, and a wider perspective that transcends and includes these distinctions.

The notes record that across generations, 'minds and hearts have been opened by curiosity, by the good vibes, love and acceptance of those who embrace complex identities even when they challenge expectations.' This intergenerational quality, the capacity of different age groups to learn from one another's experience of acceptance and struggle, is precisely what this form of dialogue makes possible. Respecting, in Isaacs's (1999) sense – taking seriously another person's experience without requiring it to conform to one's own – was visibly at work in this session.

Death, meaning, and the continuity of experience

The theme of death opened perhaps the most philosophically rich space across the dialogue series, and the one in which the participatory understanding of consciousness – including the possibility that it may extend beyond the physical body – was most directly present. Participants spoke of mortality with both vulnerability and depth: 'In dangerous moments, when I've contemplated my own possible demise, I've been more frightened for the experience of my loved ones finding out, than for my own experience.'

Others explored the relationship between contemplating death and living more fully: 'Practising dying hypothetically helps us reduce regret and guilt by taking action. We can take action and make amends.'

The dialogues moved into territory that challenges conventional materialist assumptions about the nature of death itself. Several participants offered perspectives that understand death not as a terminal ending but as a transition: 'Death is the end of a chapter, not a book'; 'We have evidence that suggests reincarnation is not just a model or metaphor, but the reality of how our being is,' offered another participant, drawing on forms of knowing that resist reduction to propositional argument alone and that sit within a post-materialist understanding of consciousness as potentially extending beyond the physical.

These perspectives connect directly to the theoretical framework of this paper. If consciousness is, returning to De Quincey's phrasing, 'our deepest mystery and our most intimate reality', then a dialogue space that allows participants to explore their relationship to consciousness, including at the boundary of life and death, is doing something genuinely significant. It is not simply discussing an interesting topic. It is inviting a form of inquiry that the dominant materialist paradigm has tended to foreclose.

Rather than seeking consensus, the group held these perspectives in dialogue, allowing multiple ways of knowing to coexist with mutual respect. There was also an insight that speaks to the broader significance of this work across generations: 'Death

is an invitation to reflect on life.' Older participants brought experience of loss and the particular quality of attention that comes from knowing one is in the later stages of life; younger participants brought the energy of those still forming their relationship to mortality. Each had something the other needed.

Work, purpose, and the search for meaning

A later dialogue explored the theme of work and its relationship to purpose, meaning, and identity. Participants noted that the very definition of work is shifting: 'Is it work if we don't get paid for it? Is it work if we enjoy it?' One participant offered a relational definition that emerged through the dialogue itself: 'Work is what we do to contribute to something else, to other people.' This is, in itself, a presentational knowing, a way of understanding that could not have been arrived at through individual reflection alone but that arose through the shared space.

Generational differences were illuminating here. Older participants reflected on the stricter gender roles and hierarchical structures that characterised earlier working life, while younger participants described the particular challenges of remote and online work, in which the boundaries between personal and professional life become porous:

> 'Remote work has trade-offs. We're more independent, but work follows us home now. It's something like doing the dishes... when we're done with the dishes we feel accomplished because the next day we start new. But with big projects and online work, the work continues through time and follows you into your personal time.'

The dialogue drew out both the losses and the freedoms of contemporary working life and allowed participants across generations to validate and learn from one another's experience. The conversation also touched on the relationship between work and meaning, a recurring concern for younger participants. The dialogue notes observe that many young people today feel 'caught up in a system that claims purposelessness.' The intergenerational space offered a place to explore this, not abstractly, but in relation to the lived experience of those who have navigated similar questions across different decades. In doing so, it enacted what Heron (1996) describes as practical knowing: the movement from shared reflection toward a more grounded sense of how to act.

Tensions, Challenges, and Learning Edges

While the dialogues have generated many meaningful experiences, they have also brought into focus tensions and challenges that are instructive for the wider study of

intergenerational engagement. Naming these honestly is part of the participatory and reflexive ethos of the work and reflects the kind of vulnerability that the participatory paradigm requires of all involved.

One significant tension concerns assumptions about age and authority. While older participants may bring extensive experience, younger participants often offer perspectives that challenge established ways of thinking, revealing the limitations of hierarchical models. The meeting notes record a recurring concern: the importance of 'really getting to know one another – no "sage on the stage"'. The dialogue aims to hold this tension, honouring experience without reifying hierarchy, but it is not always easily achieved. The Bohm Dialogue practice of suspending is particularly important here: participants on all sides must be willing to bracket off their assumptions about what different generations know or can offer.

A second challenge relates to language and meaning. Participants across generations may use similar terms, such as 'community', 'purpose', or 'consciousness', while attributing quite different meanings to them. The dialogue notes record this as a recurring feature of the conversations. Navigating it requires patience, genuine curiosity, and a willingness to remain in dialogue rather than arriving too quickly at false agreement. This is, in effect, the practice of suspending applied to language itself: noticing that the words we share do not always carry the same worlds within them.

A deeper question, raised within the dialogues themselves and articulated by Joan Walton, concerns whether the creation of space is sufficient: 'Is creating the space for young people to think about these things enough? Or do you need something more?'

A related question, raised by participant Jeff, concerns structural constraints: 'Is having space(s) the biggest impediment? Are there other important challenges to be addressed, e.g., needing to afford food/shelter?' These questions are important, and the project does not claim to resolve them. The dialogues make no claim to address material inequality directly. But they do suggest that spaces for genuine reflection and connection are themselves a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for the kinds of personal and collective transformation that more structural change requires. The relationship between inner work and outer change is not sequential but recursive: each feeds the other.

The dialogue notes also record a broader cultural critique that emerged across multiple sessions: 'Contemporary society creates "bad questions"', that is, questions framed by unexamined assumptions about the nature of reality and who counts as a knower. This is, in effect, an intergenerational encounter with the limits of the dominant paradigm and it speaks directly to the participatory epistemological frame-

work of this paper. One of the contributions of this kind of dialogue may be precisely to slow down, question assumptions, and create conditions for new and better questions to emerge.

Practically, the series has also encountered the ordinary challenges of online community: sessions postponed due to low attendance, technical difficulties, and the fragility of digitally mediated presence. Two sessions in 2025 were postponed or cancelled. The meeting notes record this honestly. At the same time, they highlight the remarkable geographic and cultural diversity of participants who have engaged across digital boundaries, something that in-person gatherings alone could not achieve. Digital space both enables and constrains; the dialogue series is learning to work with both.

Integrative Reflections: Dialogue as Transformative Practice

What seems to be emerging through this work is not simply a series of conversations, but a living example of participatory, relational inquiry in action. The dialogues demonstrate that when certain conditions are present – trust, deep listening, willingness to engage across difference, attentiveness to silence, and genuine reflexivity on the part of all involved – something beyond the sum of individual contributions becomes possible. What arises is not owned by any one participant but belongs to the space between them. This is what Bohm (1996, 32) means by the 'harmony of the individual and the collective', and it is what the NPN dialogues, at their best, enact.

Viewed through the lens of the special issue's themes, the NPN intergenerational dialogue series speaks to several of its core concerns. In terms of theories and practices, the work enacts an approach grounded in participatory ontology, extended epistemology, and dialogical method, offering a theoretically coherent account of why this is more than a well-run series of conversations. Wheeler's (1994) 'participatory universe', Heron's (1996) extended epistemology, and Bohm's (1996) dialogical method together provide a framework within which the practice becomes legible as a contribution to the field.

In terms of knowledge co-creation, the dialogues demonstrate how intergenerational encounter can integrate experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical knowing, including the integration of ancestral and perennial wisdom traditions with the perspectives and concerns of younger generations. The ecology dialogue's engagement with the Tao Te Ching, the death dialogue's openness to post-material-

ist understandings of consciousness, and the leadership dialogue's exploration of inner transformation as a precondition for outer change are all instances of this.

In terms of digital spaces, the series illustrates both the opportunities and genuine limitations of online dialogue: its capacity to gather participants across continents alongside the qualities of presence that digital mediation cannot fully replicate. The practice of silence, in particular, works differently online than in person, and this is something the project continues to navigate.

With respect to gender equality, the dialogue on gender and identity illustrates how intergenerational encounter can both honour particular experiences of marginalisation and open toward a wider participatory ground that transcends category while taking it seriously. And in terms of positive peace, the dialogues offer a micro-level example of what it might mean to encounter profound difference, including difference in beliefs about the nature of death, consciousness, and reality, with openness and mutual respect.

Perhaps most significantly, the dialogues suggest that intergenerational encounter, when held in a participatory and dialogical spirit, may itself be a form of integrative learning, a practice that does not resolve complexity, but increases our collective capacity to hold it and to act from within it more wisely and humanely.

Conclusion: Stepping into the Unknown Together

Intergenerational dialogue, as explored in this paper, is not a fixed model or a transferable programme. It is an evolving practice, one that grows through the relationships it creates, the questions it refuses to close too quickly, and the care with which participants show up for one another across difference.

Taking a moment to reflect on these NPN intergenerational dialogues in relation to existing intergenerational dialogue literature, we suggest that our approach relates most closely to the Lifespan Perspectives approach, which focuses on human development across the entirety of life. Like Lifespan Perspectives, the NPN intergenerational dialogues are reciprocal, iterative, mutually informing, and founded on the deep importance of dialoguing across distinct age cohorts as different generations possess unique psychological, historical, and physiological needs that require mutual co-inquiry. Our general approach, however, is different from many of the existing theories, as we aim to make space for 'something more' within the dialogue space. For example, the intelligence of the heart (which includes emotional intelligence as well as somatic, intuitive, and spiritual ways of knowing and attending to the world) is welcomed, as is the potentiality and possibility of the relational space – not just in

relation to human-to-human, but holding a deeper sense of the importance of the space itself that is holding the dialogue.

What this work suggests is that something genuinely significant becomes possible when younger and older people come together not to instruct or persuade, but to inquire, to listen, and to co-create. The themes explored in the NPN dialogues – leadership, ecology, gender, death, work, and meaning – are among the most fundamental questions facing human societies today. That they can be explored across generational difference, with curiosity and genuine openness, and within a framework that takes seriously the participatory nature of knowledge itself, is no small thing.

We do not claim that dialogue alone is sufficient. The structural, material, and political dimensions of the challenges we face require responses that extend far beyond any conversation series. But we do suggest that the capacity to meet one another across difference, to listen with genuine openness – suspending assumptions, respecting difference, voicing authentically, and honouring silence – and to allow new understanding to emerge, is itself a foundational condition for more just, sustainable, and flourishing futures.

There is also, we would add, something important about the willingness to include oneself in the inquiry, to be genuinely present, genuinely affected, and genuinely changed by the encounter. This is what the participatory paradigm asks of researchers. It is also, we suggest, what intergenerational dialogue asks of all who enter it. The two are not so different. Both require the courage to step into the unknown, not alone, but together.

Bibliography

Bohm, D. (1996) *On Dialogue*, Routledge.

De Quincey, C. (2002) Radical nature: Rediscovering the soul of matter, Park Street Press.

Galileo Commission (2019) *Beyond a materialist worldview: Towards an expanded science*, Scientific and Medical Network.

Heron, J. (1996) *Co-operative inquiry: Research into the human condition*, Sage.

Heron, J. (1998) *Sacred science: Person-centred inquiry into the spiritual and the subtle*, PCCS Books.

Heron, J., & Reason, P. (1997) 'A participatory inquiry paradigm', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3 (3), 274–294.

Isaacs, W. (1999) *Dialogue and the art of thinking together*, Doubleday.

Livingstone, L. (2019) 'How Can the Thought of the Heart Offer Effective Ways of Engaging With Conflict', PhD. Canterbury: Canterbury Christ Church University.

Livingstone, L. (2021) Heart Sense in practice: Collaborative and emergent inquiry. Unpublished manuscript.

Livingstone, L. (2025) *The Heart Sense Journey – Your Heart's Invitation to Deeper Living*, Malvern: Heart Sense Research.

Lorimer, D. (2019) 'The Galileo Commission: Towards a post-materialist science', *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, 9 (1), 67–72.

McGilchrist, I. (2012) *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

McGilchrist (2022) *The Matter With Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World* – Volumes I and II, 2nd edn., London: Perspectiva Press.

Schön, Donald A. (1995) 'Knowing-in-Action: The New Scholarship Requires a New Epistemology', *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 27 (6), 26–34.

United Nations (2024) Pact for the Future, United Nations General Assembly.

Walton, J. (2022) 'The study of spirituality and consciousness through Bohm dialogue', *Journal for the Study of Spirituality*, 12 (1), 86–92.

Wheeler, J. A. (1994) *At home in the universe*, American Institute of Physics.