The Elicitive Model

We have no brochures announcing elicitive training, nor many real-life training events on which to base our analysis. Nonetheless, in the following pages, I wish to describe the distinguishing characteristics of a model of training that lies at the opposite end of the spectrum from the prescriptive approach. At this point, our purpose is to make explicit the key aspects of how the pure elicitive model approaches conflict resolution and mediation training. In subsequent chapters, I will outline a number of exercises and training formats that emerge from an elicitive frame of reference.

The elicitive approach starts from the vantage point that training is an opportunity aimed primarily at discovery, creation, and solidification of models that emerge from the resources present in a particular setting and respond to needs in that context. Its motto, borrowed from the theme of appropriate technology, suggests this concern: Discovering ways to catch fish in our own ponds. The emphasis is not only on empowerment as participating in creating models, but also in seeking resource and root in the cultural context itself.

For descriptive and analytical purposes, let us assume a trainer who comes from one cultural-linguistic context is working with participants who share a different language and cultural
setting. As outlined in figure 7, our description of the elicitive approach will seek to answer relevant questions about the goals of the training, how trainers and participants understand their roles, and the fundamental elements involved in the training process.

The Training Roles

The starting point of elicitive training involves a reconceptualization of roles. On the one hand, the trainer sees himself or herself primarily as a catalyst and a facilitator rather than as an expert in a particular model of conflict resolution. Therefore, the key contribution of the trainer-as-catalyst does not lie primarily with the expertise the trainer may possess about the operation and skills inherent in a particular approach to conflict resolution or mediation. Rather it lies with the facilitating skill of providing opportunity for discovery and creation through an educative process that is highly participatory in nature.

Correspondingly, the participants and their knowledge are seen as the primary resource for the training, whether or not they initially see themselves as such. By knowledge-as-resource I refer to the often implicit but rich understandings people have about their setting. Included is their knowledge about how conflict emerges and develops among them and about how people try to handle and manage that conflict. Also included are their understandings about what things mean; that is, how language, perception, interpretation, and meaning are constructed around events and interactions in their context. Simply put, the foundation of this approach is that this implicit indigenous knowledge about ways of being and doing is a valued resource for creating and sustaining appropriate models of conflict resolution in a given setting.

Even in its purest form this approach does not exclude comparison with and study of other models. However, outside approaches are bracketed, that is, put off as secondary, in the early phases of the training. Primary emphasis is placed on first discovering and identifying what people already have in place and already know about the strengths and weaknesses of their own models of conflict resolution. Although the participants’ knowledge is trusted, this trust is not directed at the glorification of indigenous knowledge in and of itself. Rather it is a trusting that participants have the capacity and creativity to identify, name, critique, create, and recreate models that correspond to needs they experience and identify.

Starting from these premises, the trainer assumes a perspective of ignorance at two levels. First, at a very broad level, the design and goals of the training are identified and formulated by the participants rather than determined a priori by the trainer. Such a process can also take place in the prescriptive approach to the degree that people are seeking help because of a felt need.
Generally, the prescriptive model would suggest that a prepackaged training fits that need. Elicitive training begins with a more open approach of identifying the needs in a given context and then working with the participants to create the training that corresponds to the needs. Among other things, this approach leaves wide open the possibility that participants may wish to pursue areas of conflict transformation that have little to do with a given package. For example, participants may identify the need to work on nonviolent confrontation, or mediation, or trauma-healing work, or all three together.

A second aspect of "ignorance" relates to a more specific level of training. It suggests that the trainer not assume that his/her experience and expertise accumulated in one setting is the key resource for the training in another. Although the trainer may have many important and relevant experiences in a variety of settings, in the elicitive approach, these are not presented as the central core of the training process, but rather are bracketed in order to permit a participatory process of discovery. The attitude of the trainer is essentially, "I do not have the answer, but I can work together with others on a process that may help us find it."

The Training Approach

The elicitive nature of the training is accomplished through at least five interrelated kinds of activities. These can be arranged in chronological sequence; however, they also represent attitudes and goals throughout the training process. For descriptive purposes, I will outline them here as distinct, sequential elements in the training process as depicted in figure 8.

*Discovery.* The first set of activities are exercises aimed at participants engaging and interacting with their own understandings of how conflict and their response to it operate in their setting. These activities create a catalyst for people to think about implicit knowledge as a resource. To make commonsense knowledge a resource involves both discovery and description. The activities place before people questions such as: "What do we do?" and "How do we do it?" These differ from the prescriptive approach that begins with "This is..." and "Here's how..."

For example, rather than preparing role plays for the training ahead of time, an elicitive approach posits that it is possible to invite participants in small groups to discuss real-life situations that involve them, and to subsequently use their description and presentation of the cases as raw material for discussion and the development of role plays in the course of the training. This simple shift places emphasis on the process of exploring their own situation, invites them to think through how it should be described, and often creates a sense of community as people share and recognize certain patterns and shared realities.
Naming and Categorizing. Throughout the training process, serious effort is made to foster a level of innovation and creativity that permits participants to make explicit and take ownership in the approaches and models that emerge from their implicit understandings. The movement from implicit to explicit knowledge is discovery. Sustaining and making explicit a constructive social tool involves naming. However, unlike the prescriptive approach, the elicitive model does not provide names for tools and action. It rather encourages the participants to define and name their own understandings. This idea of course is not new. At the cutting edge of innovation in the field of conflict resolution, people are discovering and naming new processes, techniques, and models. Subsequently, these innovations are passed on as techniques but having eliminated the process of discovery and naming. What may be new in the elicitive approach is the guideline that discovery and naming are legitimate, possible, and necessary as training processes, processes that are both rooted in and dependent on the knowledge of people and that foster creativity and innovation.

As a step in the training process, this component represents the opportunity to identify and categorize more clearly the types of activity, approaches, and roles that are typical to how conflicts are handled in their setting. The effort here is descriptive in nature, permitting a process of naming and categorizing what is and not whether what it is works, is appropriate, or is desired.

Evaluation. A third component involves the element of contextualized evaluation. Participants are invited not only to rediscover and describe what is present in their setting, but also to evaluate what helps and what does not. Contextualized evaluation simply means that participants in a given setting evaluate their own action and behavior according to the standards and values of that setting, rather than judging their approaches according to outside criteria. In other words, participants are afforded an opportunity to explore questions such as: “What is helpful and good that we do?” “What gets in the way?” “What do we lack?” “What needs to be changed?”

Adapt/Recreate. A crucial step involves the adaptation and recreation of what exists toward what participants suggest as a more suited or desired modality of operation. Here, one may seek new ways of handling conflict, adapt old approaches into a new and evolving context, build on strengths, but change aspects that are weak. This step may well involve comparing and contrasting approaches coming from other settings and experimenting with how conflicts should be approached. What begins to emerge is their own model and proposals for application.

Practical application. Finally, the training process involves exercises and opportunities for experimenting with and refining the ideas, approaches, and models that emerge. Although this may initially take place through simulated application, practice of the model in real life is paramount involving the cycle of reflection and action. Freire (1970, 76) once wrote that humanity is not “built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection.” By this he is referring to the cycle that encourages the development of education based on discovery, naming, and application; then discovery, renaming, and reappraisal.

In essence, the key to model application and development comes from the test of trying it out in real-life circumstances, then returning with experience to the process of description and evaluation. This process takes the training cycle a full circle but leaves the participants at a different place than where they began.

The goals of the elicitive process may include, but go beyond and are oriented toward, a different level than the mastery of technique. The approach underscores that training, like the practice of conflict resolution and mediation, is participatory and circular. Its primary goals are empowerment through self and context awareness and creation of appropriate models of conflict resolution. Empowerment in the training process is understood as validating and building on the strengths and promise of resources within a context rather than from outside. Training is thus based on a participatory design for creating appropriate models of conflict transformation.

The methodology, based heavily on a problem-posing approach, pushes out these goals. The training format is understood as a catalyst. By catalyst, I refer to exercises and inputs aimed at creating an encounter between participants and their knowledge of conflict in their setting. Natural in-setting resources, such as everyday language, proverbs, and current situations and
problems, are sought as windows and raw material for stimulating the knowledge. Role plays, for example, are not used primarily as a device to master a technique or process, but rather to discover and subsequently name the approach emerging from participants' natural way of thinking about and responding to situations. The trainer's role is to help facilitate that encounter and the ongoing innovation that emerges.

Conclusion

In summary, our purpose here was to outline the key elements and characteristics of the elicitive training approach. The overview suggests that this approach is not based on transferring knowledge from trainer to participant, but rather on building and creating models from an interaction among participants themselves and with the trainer. The overall approach to training, rather than depending on the trainer as expert, draws a closer parallel from facilitation of an encounter in which leaders help participants create their own learning environment and develop models for dealing with conflict. Thus, the base of the pure elicitive approach does not lie with a series of techniques to be mastered by the trainee, but rather in the shift in relationship between participants and trainer that redefines expertise as implicit in the setting rather than in the trainer, and redefines power as participation in discovery and naming rather than transfer of knowledge.

Fundamentally, the elicitive approach builds from knowledge in a setting, and thus, unlike the prescriptive approach, it cannot bracket culture. Culture, in other words, natural and taken-for-granted knowledge in a given setting, is understood as the foundation and seedbed of model development and creation. This brief conclusion leads to a more detailed comparison of the prescriptive and elicitive models.

Prescriptive and Elicitive
The Critical Tension

If I have learned anything through the years of working across very diverse settings, it is a respect for both the importance and complexity of culture. In the preceding two chapters, I outlined the key characteristics of two different pure-type approaches to training. In my own cross-cultural work, I have experienced a slow and sometimes painful process of self-awareness in regard to how much a prescriptive modality has dominated my training style. My challenge has been not only to recognize when and where that approach is useful, and where it has been inappropriate, but also to learn to work at moving down the spectrum toward the elicitive approach and at broadening my training repertoire. I refer to this movement as developing an elicitive-oriented approach to training. With this orientation I recognize a critical tension that lies between the self-confidence and experience I have in working with conflict in my home setting—often classified as expertise—and the ultimate goal of empowerment of others and development of appropriate models of conflict resolution in other cultural contexts.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a comparison of the prescriptive and elicitive models. In building these models, I have
suggested that they represent typifications on extreme ends of a
spectrum and not exact descriptions of actual training practice. In
real life, any given training inevitably has some elements of both.
However, setting up the spectrum and comparing these models
help us to identify a number of key aspects about how we approach
both training and the complex issue of culture (see figure 9).

Comparing the Models

There are numerous areas where the differences between the
two models emerge with clarity. Each of these could well merit a
detailed explanation; however, the purpose here is to provide a
summary, highlighting the key distinctions, as laid out in figure 9.

In the prescriptive model, training is conducted on the basis
of transfer, of passing on to the participants the approach, strategy,
and technique mastered by the trainer. The event itself is built
around providing, teaching, and learning a specific model of con-
flict resolution. The elicitive approach, on the other hand, under-
takes training as an opportunity and an encounter for participants
in a given setting to discover and create models of conflict reso-
lution in the context of their setting. This fundamental difference
in how training is understood and approached creates a number of
distinct features in the two models.

The guiding framework for the prescriptive approach lies in
the how to's, in other words, in providing recipes suggesting how
conflict and its management ought to be pursued. The guiding
efficitive framework is constructed around the what do's, in pro-
viding a process for people to engage what they know and build
from that knowledge.

Thus, in the elicitive model, the participants and the knowl-
edge they bring about conflict in their setting are a significant re-
source in the training. The prescriptive approach, however,
underscores the centrality of the trainer's models and knowledge.
In this latter instance, training is content-oriented, with the express
purpose of having the participants master the approach and tech-
niques. The trainer plays out the role of expert, providing a model
for how the technique works and facilitating the event. The
elicitive model is process oriented, providing an opportunity for

people to participate in model discovery and creation. The trainer
constructs a role of catalyst and facilitator.

Both models can create dynamic education to empower
people, but do so from a different basis. The prescriptive approach
empowers participants inasmuch as they learn and master new
ways, techniques, and strategies for facing and handling conflict.
The elicitive pursues empowerment as validating and building
from resources that are present in the setting.

Training and Culture

Particularly crucial to the broader discussion in this book are
the points of view these models embody with respect to the role
and place of culture. Succinctly, the prescriptive approach sees cul-
ture as technique. The elicitive understands culture as a seedbed
and as a foundation. Both perspectives merit further exploration.

There are two levels at which the prescriptive approach un-
derstands culture as technique. At one level, prescription assumes
a certain amount of universality. The model is transfer-based:
knowledge and experience that has emerged from and has been
applied in a particular cultural context is now moving to another. The premise of universality not only suggests that such a transfer can successfully take place across lines of culture, class, and context but further that the techniques are culturally neutral. Participants who learn the basic components and techniques involved in the model can and will adapt them to meet their particular cultural context and needs. At a second level, the prescriptive approach sees culture itself as an area of advanced training. Here, practitioners already trained in the basic model receive advanced levels of skill training related to culture. This training is often reduced to short recipes: How to recognize cultural differences, how to work with a given ethnic group, or how to negotiate effectively across cultures.¹

In these approaches, culture is understood primarily as a special area of technique, an assumption that makes few if any provisions for two key factors. First, such a transfer can easily sidestep the resources available in a given context by embracing those coming from outside the setting. And second, the working assumption that the incoming model is culturally neutral and applicable across contexts is taken at face value. In fact, the incoming model is embedded with culture, but is rarely recognized as such.

For example, if I use a prescriptive approach to teach Hondurans how to do neighborhood mediation, based on my experiences in Virginia, my model will carry implicit cultural assumptions common to a Virginia setting. These assumptions will affect how participants see the role of the third parties and conflictants; the pace, purpose, and style of communication; and the purpose of the resolution process—to name a few. I will likely make more concrete cultural assumptions in terms of specific conflict-resolution techniques that are fundamental to the implementation of the model we use in Virginia. For example, conflictants may be expected to be autonomous decision-makers, who can openly and directly talk about their problems and negotiate an agreement in a two-hour “session” in my office.

1. An overview of these training approaches is delineated in an interview with Dianne LeResche and Jennifer Spruill in the Conciliation Quarterly, 9, no. 1 (Winter 1990).

Given a fundamental proclivity toward technique skill development in most trainings, many of the techniques will be based on suggestions evolving around language and communication patterns common to the Virginia setting, for example. In a pure prescriptive approach, I would likely use role plays developed around typical cases I have experienced in Virginia, which are useful for highlighting aspects of the process or practicing the model. Each and every one of these aspects of training include implicit cultural assumptions, which are often appropriate and helpful to a particular sociolinguistic context and community, but are foreign and may even be counterproductive in others.

In sum, prescription suggests universality of technique. Transfer into different cultural contexts is accomplished through model adjustments or minimization of the relative importance of cultural boundedness in the proposed model to be transferred.

On the other side, the elicitive approach does not see culture as an element to be added as a further level of technique, or as a challenging complication to which techniques must be adapted. Cultural context and knowledge about conflict-in-setting make up the foundation through which the model development happens. Participants’ natural knowledge, their way of being and doing, their immediate situation, their past heritage, and their language are seen as the seedbed in which the training and model building will be rooted. Validating and exciting these cultural elements as resources is the fundamental goal of the training endeavor.

However, an elicitive approach held in its pure form may miss many important cross-cultural points of contact and fertilization. If we restrict outside contact and exchange, then the process of training minimizes learning and limits the education into a narrow field of exploration. After all, people are interested in and attend trainings precisely because they want to move beyond current practices. Cross-cultural and cross-experience exchanges are among the richest and most beneficial ways that people learn and expand. What is crucial in maintaining empowerment is a high view of participants being provided a voice and the power to evaluate and decide, which ultimately is rooted in their understanding of themselves and their own setting.
Conclusion

This comparative overview has suggested key aspects of the prescriptive and elicitive approaches to conflict resolution training. Both of these models have strengths and weaknesses. The prescriptive approach is based on teaching a model that has emerged from considerable experience and knowledge the trainer brings from real life. The model has demonstrated itself to be both operative and useful in a given setting and perhaps in multiple settings. The techniques provide concrete ideas and skills, and move the participants toward application, often with a keen sense of accomplishment and empowerment. The prescriptive approach can be compacted and may take relatively little time to pass on and accomplish goals of preparing participants for application.

On the downside, as delineated above, the assumptions of cultural universality that underlie the prescriptive approach do not always hold. In fact, what becomes universal may be the homogenization of people to fit into the approach. The prescriptive model also sends the subtle messages that the trainer’s ways are best, that resources for empowerment lie outside the setting, and that productive conflict resolution—like other models of development—lies with emulating those who have made more “progress.” This concern becomes all the more important when the trainer and the trainer’s model emerge from a dominant culture—white, anglo, middle-class, academic, urban, western, modern, industrialized—but are applied in nondominant settings.

The strength of the elicitive approach is its diligence in respecting and building from the cultural context, in fostering participatory design, and in constructing appropriate models in the setting. It places emphasis on participants designing, discovering together, and naming the conflict resolution models that emerge. This approach understands its role in a longer time frame and sees the use of culture as a resource rather than as the short-term transfer of technique or adaption of models to a cultural setting.

In its pure form, however, the elicitive approach takes time and involves considerable commitment. The proposed outcomes are not easily measured, and the creation process can often be painful. The elicitive approach does not provide formulas or answers. The ambiguity of discovering and then moving toward application can produce a sense of frustration and impatience. Further, if held in its pure form, it may unnecessarily minimize comparison and contrast with other settings denying participants important learning and growth opportunities.

Although we set out to describe two ideal types of training, I believe that the mainstream of conflict resolution training, particularly mediation, is closer to the prescriptive than to the elicitive end of the spectrum, even though many of the training events take place in culturally, economically and linguistically diverse settings.

This comparative framework provides us with some elements useful for a critique of current conflict resolution training practices as they relate to the issue of culture; however, that is not the exclusive purpose of this essay. Rather, it is my intent to use the creative tension inherent in the framework to provide a handle for exploring the potential of an elicitive approach and how it changes our thinking about training, relationships, and intervention. Moving toward the elicitive model suggests the need for critical reflection about what we are moving away from—in this instance, transfer-based training in cross-cultural settings.

Let me make this case by returning to the framework for building peace outlined in the second chapter. I believe that framework invites us to critical reflection not only on the content of what we teach but also on the method by which we teach it. As the conflict resolution field has grown in popularity in recent years and has begun to carve out a professional niche in North America, we need to raise the question of whether training is approached primarily as a question of professional and technical expansion, over and above the project of promoting a movement for social empowerment and transformation. Although these are not necessarily incompatible, I believe that as opportunities have emerged in other cultural settings, we have too easily assumed that our approach to conflict resolution is technically transferable and have thus, so to say, put all our eggs in the basket of developing and mastering the transfer of conflict resolution knowledge and technique.

My own position is that most trainings provided in diverse cultural settings would benefit from a combination of the two
approaches. On the one hand, accumulated expertise and knowledge about approaches to conflict and its transformation—knowledge that stands at the base of the prescriptive approach—is an invaluable resource in working with others. Undeniably, as far as I know, people learn by experiencing new approaches, and they can often reflect more clearly and constructively on their models through a process of comparison and contrast. In fact, the pattern distinguished in social history is one in which the meeting and interaction of cultures produces change and growth. However, when a given approach to conflict is presented as the model, and when no efforts are made to build from the context and cultural resources in a setting, the very strength of the expertise becomes its main weakness, dominated by a narrow vision and even arrogance. On the other hand, respecting people and their knowledge and encouraging them to look for answers within themselves and within their context—the essence of the elicitive approach—are crucial aspects of building appropriate models and long-term sustainability. Yet if the elicitive approach adapts a purist stance that does not encourage comparison, does not share full knowledge of others’ approaches and ideas, it can be disempowering and narrow in the opposite direction, by keeping people ignorant.

My experience has suggested the need to expand my repertoire and capacities on the elicitive side. In many ways, the key to movement toward an elicitive approach is not as much a change in training content as it is a change in relationship between trainer and participant. It invites us to move away from the residue of imperialism embedded in the prescriptive framework—subtle as it often is—and toward a relationship of social and cultural empowerment based on mutuality and respect. Such transformative movement is never easy nor necessarily clear. It is a little like Gandhi’s depiction of nonviolence as a story of experiments with Truth.

Up to this point in the book, I have presented primarily analytical and at times abstract descriptions of these models. In the final section, I will share some of my experiments with the elicitive-oriented approach, which will flesh out through stories and concrete examples how I have slowly made the journey to expand the repertoire of training capacity.