



Safe Spaces in Unsafe Environments—Experiences from COP26 About Hosting Inclusive Spaces for Deep Encounters and Reflection

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7.1 INTRODUCTION—THE NEED FOR ‘SAFE-ENOUGH’ COMMUNICATION SPACES IN TRANSDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

There has been steadily growing attention, both academic and in the broader society, to sustainability and socio-ecological transformation (Clark et al., 2005; Kates et al., 2001). Increasingly, researchers believe

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that the current challenges of sustainability and global warming are best described and addressed from an understanding of complex adaptive

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systems (Clark & Harley, 2020; Espinosa & Porter, 2011; Kay et al., 1999; Liu et al., 2007; Ravetz, 2006; Steffen et al., 2011; Waltner-Toews et al., 2008). In academic institutions this has led to a growing call for transdisciplinary research (TDR) as a mode of addressing complex social challenges in a more encompassing way (Bergmann et al., 2012; Felt, 2010; Hirsch Hadorn et al., 2006; Jahn, Lang et al., 2012; Thompson Klein, 2004). The intention of transdisciplinary approaches is to generate results that draw on a more inclusive knowledge base and are hence better able to provide viable responses to complex, ‘wicked’ (Rittel & Webber, 1973) and ill-defined problems (Lawrence et al., 2022). Involving non-academic perspectives from the outset and throughout all stages of the research process is deemed an appropriate way to generate knowledge that adequately meets sustainability questions, which involve multiple different stakeholders and epistemologies (Newig et al., 2019). Since TDR researchers have to engage with non-academic perspectives throughout the research process, this chapter focuses on the kind of communication practices that are appropriate and effective for engaging with people from potentially very different backgrounds.

The diversity of perspectives is considered essential to ensure a just and fair research process and is valued as a necessary resource and contribution to develop a comprehensive understanding of an issue of shared interest among everyone included in the research process. Ensuring that

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participants can engage meaningfully with the different perspectives does, however, present several practical challenges, including how to design and host the communication process. Recommendations for ideal-type TDR process suggest a careful process design, considering whom to include at which points and how in order to achieve effective and fluid interactions. Real-life transdisciplinary processes, however, often take place under non-ideal circumstances. For effective transdisciplinary processes it is important that those involved establish a communication and relationship culture in which their different perspectives can connect and interact meaningfully. This in turn requires everyone involved to engage in dialogue about controversies and differences in a constructive way. While it might not be necessary to achieve a full consensus, it is crucial that potentially different or even mutually exclusive perspectives can be voiced and managed in a way that is respectful to everyone involved. Consequently, research processes need to be designed in such a way that participants can establish mutual trust as the basis of a good and effective relationship. We could refer to such spaces as ‘safe enough’, meaning that all participants feel comfortable to engage in differences and vulnerabilities or uncertainties, etc., with no fear of getting hurt but being able to stay in constructive relationship with the other participants.

7.1.1 Specific Challenges in Transdisciplinary Communication and Interaction

Against this background, scientists have paid increasing attention to modes of communication and interactions among scientists, policymakers and civil society with respect to their co-creative potential (Bruhn et al., 2019; Lawrence et al., 2022; Nanz et al., 2017). Participants with different backgrounds and perspectives (such as their academic discipline, culture, ontological and cosmological differences, etc.) may construct knowledge and meaning differently and hence run into misunderstandings and related conflicts. All participants in a transdisciplinary process are challenged to—at least temporarily—leave behind their seemingly clear and well-founded understandings and assumptions about their own knowledge. Through the lenses of different perspectives, the same phenomena might be interpreted differently. This may create situations outside the participants’ ‘comfort zone’. For the researchers it means that in these communication processes they need to acknowledge the non-objective nature of their research and include reflexive practices in the

research process (Fazey et al., 2018; Lang, Wiek et al., 2017; Popa et al., 2015). Engaging in communication with people with diverse perspectives brings various challenges to a research process with which academics from conventional disciplinary settings are usually unfamiliar. This may also be influenced by the level of experience of those involved, for instance if for some researchers a certain disciplinary rigour is critical to establishing their identity or career path.

Besides an interest in procedural and institutional aspects, there is also a growing interest in the role of mindsets and mental models for effective transdisciplinary interaction. This includes both the relevance of, and possible engagement with the participants' inner lives—notably beliefs, values, worldviews, emotions and motivations—in transdisciplinary communication (Brink et al., 2019; Creutzig & Kameier, 2020; Grothmann, 2018). It is claimed that these often-disregarded dimensions of transformation have strong leverage in driving change towards sustainability—not only in relation to individual agency, but also to groups in all sectors, including business, government and education (Wamsler, 2020; Woiwode et al., 2021). At the same time, the term 'inner' might be misleading as it suggests a dichotomy between 'inner' and 'outer' dimensions of change. Many writers therefore tend to integrate the more subjective 'inner' aspects into a 'relational' understanding of transformation (Walsh et al., 2020; West et al., 2020).

This raises questions about how to host communication formats or 'spaces' in which people with different perspectives and viewpoints can interact in such a way that they can not only talk *at* each other but engage in genuine mutual learning *with* each other. Co-creation of knowledge may require an atmosphere in which participants do not feel pushed to defend their positions but feel safe enough to openly explore the methodological and normative assumptions underlying the various positions on a given topic. Spaces and formats that emphasize honesty, openness and trust as foundations of their communication culture can strengthen connectedness to oneself and others (Wamsler et al., 2020). When these spaces, which are usually based on experiential reflection and communication, are safe enough for disagreements or mistrust to surface and be addressed, they can initiate profound change in a person's life and, consequently, support cultural transformation (Pereira et al., 2020). We further suggest that such formats can enhance the perception and understanding of deeper, common concerns that underlie what appear to be conflicting interests and can help overcome polarization and opposition (Mar et al.,

2021, 2023; Wamsler et al., 2020). In times of increasing social division, it seems especially important to foster a mode of communication that works constructively with potential differences and generates mutual and respectful understanding. Within this context, the former Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS) (from 2023 the Research Institute for Sustainability—Helmholtz Center Potsdam (RIFS) has made efforts to experiment with spaces and formats for communication that allow for self-reflection and reciprocal dialogue among stakeholders (Fraude et al., 2021).

It is key for the effectiveness of such spaces that participants, including the researchers, can question definitions and explore potential inconsistencies and vulnerabilities in their interactions. All of this requires a degree of trust. Participants in such a process need to be able to relate to each other on a basis of mutual respect and listening. In practice, however, the presence of diverging or conflicting positions can trigger defence mechanisms in people and groups, particularly when the issue is perceived as a risk or even threat to some participants. This calls for careful efforts to design safe enough conditions for effective communication when researchers try to engage in critical fields such as sustainability. Learning how to design and host such safe spaces or transformative spaces (Pereira et al., 2020) is an ongoing challenge for researchers in transdisciplinary processes and needs to be highly adaptive to each specific research context.

7.1.2 The UNFCCC COPs as an Exemplary Context for Research on Transdisciplinary Communication

One of the most pressing issues in relation to sustainability is global warming. Every year, the secretariat of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) hosts a major two-week Conference of the Parties (COP). These COPs usually gather some 15,000 to 20,000 representatives from the 193 UN member states and accredited local, national and international organizations. The COPs involve official political negotiations as well as a broad range of side events. Here, a wide spectrum of stakeholders including, among others, academics, civil society organizations (CSOs), Indigenous groups, businesses and youth groups present their knowledge and positions to anyone attending the COP. These side events are dominated by conventional

formats, usually in slide-based presentations, or conventional panel discussions, with limited time for questions or audience interaction (Mar, Fraude et al., 2021). More specifically, research on the communication culture at the COPs found that the current culture of communication and negotiation fosters deep-rooted distrust between different stakeholder groups (Wamsler et al., 2020). At the same time, the COPs represent a unique setting for researchers to engage with an exceptionally large spectrum of perspectives and expertise. So, they present an interesting context for researchers to experiment with formats for transdisciplinary communication.

This chapter reflects on our experiences of hosting a space for co-creative reflection and dialogue at COP26 in Glasgow in 2021. Tens of thousands of people from all over the world and all kinds of backgrounds come to the COPs to address climate change. Some part of the COP is dedicated to high-level political negotiations while the COP is also a major venue for delegations of organizations with observer status. The conference takes place in an overall atmosphere of growing urgency and threat of ecological collapse, conflicting (political) interests, uneven historic responsibilities and unfairly distributed impacts of climate change. This tense environment makes it difficult for participants to engage openly with each other, and most sessions are designed around the one-way dissemination of knowledge to participants. Consequently, there is a need for more dialogical exchange and trust-building among stakeholders. Responding to this need, the Co-Creative Reflection and Dialogue Space (CCRDS) offered a series of sessions that invited all COP26 participants to (spontaneously) engage in joint reflection and mutual learning on a range of topics.

The CCRDS represents a transdisciplinary experiment in various ways. First, the individual sessions hosted at the COP are spaces for transdisciplinary dialogue, meaning that they are designed to facilitate conversation and meaning making for diverse participants, including academics. This enables us to observe these sessions and learn something about principles of communication in transdisciplinary settings. Second, the observation and evaluation follow transdisciplinary principles. The findings from methods drawn from the social sciences (participant observation, qualitative surveys) are integrated with the reflections and observations of those involved in hosting sessions, such as the co-authors of this chapter. And third, the entire project of the CCRDS is set up as a TDR project. It began in 2018 based on consultations among scientists and non-scientific

stakeholders such as the UNFCCC and several CSOs. Under the formal leadership of the IASS Potsdam (now RIFS) a transdisciplinary group designed the overall process and every year a transdisciplinary group forms around the preparation of the new iteration of the experiment.

We will first describe the COP as a context for transdisciplinary work and the CCRDS as an experimental intervention of transdisciplinary communication. In outlining our findings, we explore the challenges facilitators faced in hosting inclusive spaces in the COP context. For example, aspects such as the noise level and the physical venue affect how far it is possible to offer spaces that aim to be sufficiently safe and inclusive for relationship building as part of a TDR process and knowledge integration.

We also outline some of the specific challenges that hosts encountered when trying to provide and maintain a ‘safe enough’ atmosphere that would allow participants to engage in conversation outside their usual ‘comfort zone’ and disclose potential learning edges or vulnerabilities. We describe practical approaches, in terms of the mindset, skillset and toolset that hosts used to tackle these challenges. Based on these experiences and reflections, we offer recommendations on how to design and host inclusive, safe enough spaces in politically contested context such as the COPs.

Our reflections are aimed at researchers who want to experiment with more interactive, dialogical and reflective communication formats, and to facilitators who are not grounded in research but are eager to contribute their expertise in settings such as the COPs. We also hope our findings will be valuable for researchers who are rather new to TDR practices and motivated to contextualize their work in the more ‘messy’ conditions outside conventional academic research, particularly in a project funded by a third party. We would also hope the chapter will help interested readers to avoid some of the pitfalls when engaging in communication with non-academic perspectives in non-ideal settings. Finally, we aim to motivate researchers by sharing the rewarding experiences of our experimental set-ups in such challenging conditions.

7.2 INVESTIGATING THE CCRDS AT COP26: BACKGROUND AND METHODS

Responding to the opportunity to improve the communication culture at the COPs, the IASS Potsdam (now RIFS Potsdam), together with several partners, decided to experiment with and research alternative forms of



Fig. 7.1 Impression of the typical conversation atmosphere in the CCRDS at COP 26

communication at the COPs, where we have developed various iterations of communication formats.

7.2.1 First Experiments at COP24 and COP25

The initial experiments with communication formats led by the IASS Potsdam took place during the COP24. They ran in parallel with research activities to assess the demand for alternative forms of communication at the COPs to enhance mutual learning and consequently enable more effective climate action. The experiment started with only a few sessions at COP24 in which participants were invited into genuine encounters and dialogue about affective aspects and potential vulnerabilities regarding climate change, such as climate anxiety or climate grief. These first experimental sessions involved 40 diverse participants (e.g. youth, government representatives and non-government organizations (NGOs)) and the overall feedback was very positive. In particular, participants supported the IASS researchers' assumption regarding an (at least partly) dysfunctional communication culture at the COPs. Positive participant feedback encouraged further research and engagement activities in this direction (Fig. 7.1).

When assessing the options for the COP25 in Madrid, it became clear that the facilities that IASS researchers could rent for limited time-slots at the COP venue would be unsuitable for the intended interactive and dialogical sessions of the type in which the IASS was interested. The pavilions or side-event rooms were designed for conventional presentations or panels and it was difficult or forbidden to rearrange chairs for a conversational session. Therefore, the IASS decided to establish its own science communication space at COP25 in Madrid: The Co-Creative Reflection and Dialogue Space (CCRDS). We rented a 20m² room near to the office and pavilion spaces of the different delegations where we hosted 20 interactive workshops, including dialogical sessions, reflective practices (such as silent journaling, guided meditation, associative drawing and other formats) and action-oriented workshops (Fraude et al., 2021). We used a comprehensive research approach, triangulating surveys, participatory observation and expert interviews. Our results confirmed our initial assumptions: COP participants who connected with us in the context of the CCRDS saw a clear need for different forms of communication. They also expressed a wish for a changed communication culture, particularly including dialogical and reflexive processes to foster an atmosphere of deeper trust and collaboration (Wamsler et al., 2020). Once again, CCRDS practices were found to be valuable.

7.2.2 *The CCRDS at COP26*

Consequently, at COP26 in Glasgow, we offered a new iteration of the CCRDS, building on the experiences at previous COPs. This time, the IASS rented a 25m² space in the pavilion area in which countries or organizations hold presentations in booths of various shapes and sizes. Two sides of the space were open to the hallways and the other two closed by the neighbouring pavilions. One reason for this set-up was to respect the requirements of social distancing due to COVID-19 and ensure sufficient air flow. The standard arrangement in this space was a circle of 14 movable chairs (see Fig. 7.2).

In this pavilion, a total of 40 sessions were hosted, 15 of which were hosted by IASS staff. The other workshops ('guest sessions') were hosted by people and organizations selected by the IASS before and during the COP. In the lead-up to the conference, the IASS invited organizations/partners to submit proposals for sessions to be hosted in the CCRDS. Altogether, the sessions were attended by ~ 200–250 participants. Further



Fig. 7.2 Set-up of the CCRDS at COP 26, located rather exposed at the crossroads of two highly frequented hallways

details about the workshops can be found elsewhere (Schäpke et al., 2023) and will be published separately. The participants' backgrounds were roughly comparable to the data published about the CCRDS at COP25 in Madrid (Wamsler et al., 2020).

The key idea behind these guest sessions was to enhance the diversity of approaches and the professional backgrounds of hosts and organizations involved in experimenting with communication formats within the framework for sessions within the CCRDS. The IASS also offered two preparation sessions in which those interested in hosting were told about the principles of dialogue and reflective interaction that were meant to be at the centre of the CCRDS. The IASS did not influence which *topics* the applicants chose to address, but gave the applicants instructions about *what kind of values, rules and forms of communication* should be applied in the sessions. The ideas for this design and invitation drew on principles from selected facilitation approaches and concepts such as the *Art of Hosting*, the *Manifesto for Slow Thinking* and *Transformative Learning* (Habermann & Schmidt, 2018; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Pogatschnigg, 2021).

Box 1. Principles for good dialogue displayed in the CCRDS at COP 26

- We will treat personal stories and material confidentially.
- We listen to each other with compassion and curiosity.
- We speak with intention: noting what has relevance to the conversation in the moment.
- We stay aware of the impact of our contributions to the circle.
- Suspend judgements, assumptions, and certainties—It is not about knowing who is right or wrong. It is about exploring together and surfacing what we do not know or see yet.
- Connect your thoughts to what was said before.
- Listen together for insights and deeper patterns or questions. Maybe we discover meaning behind meaning.
- Listen together for insights and deeper patterns or questions. Maybe we discover meaning behind meaning.
- Accept that diverging opinions are OK—We do not always need to reach consensus. New ideas can come from putting different perspectives together.
- Focus on what really matters.
- Play, doodle & draw—It can be helpful to use a large sheet in the middle of the group as a space to capture the essence of our collective thinking and reflection.
- Contribute your full self with mind and heart. All of us are invited to be both a professional and a human being.
- Listen with attention.
- Have fun!

The call for guest session proposals attracted stakeholder groups who shared the general intention, hypothesis and interest of the IASS, but also brought their own interpretations on how to translate these into specific communication formats. Many of the guest hosts had limited or no prior experience with hosting dialogical and reflective formats at the COP. Those who were familiar with hosting safe enough, participatory and inclusive communication formats had done so in contexts and under conditions that they had designed themselves, often for their own events. In fact, they would usually consider it crucial to ensure certain ideal-type conditions to provide a certain safety within a space or process.

So, offering a format for deep encounter at a venue like the COPs was a new challenge for most of the guest session hosts. The specific challenges and context factors will be discussed in the findings section.

7.2.3 *Workshops to Investigate Hosts' Experiences in the CCRDS at COP26*

One of the key research interests for the IASS was to examine how facilitators (either of guest sessions or of sessions hosted by IASS staff) design and host communication spaces and formats that aimed at being inclusive and participatory as a means to enable deep encounters and trust-building among the participants. Therefore, after COP26 and outside the COP venue, the IASS hosted three online workshops in which everyone who had hosted at least one session in the CCRDS discussed the following:

1. How did you perceive COP as context for hosting workshops that aim to be safe, inclusive etc.? Which aspects were essential in influencing the form/quality etc. of providing space?
2. What challenges did you face with respect to providing and maintaining a 'safe-enough space' in this environment?
3. Which practical approaches did you use to tackle these challenges?
4. What specific recommendations would you give others aiming at facilitating 'safe enough' spaces at the COP or similar venues, i.e. where one is not used to this kind of communication, but where it would be very important in light of the challenges facing societies?

The participants discussed these questions both in small groups and in plenary during the workshop session. The responses were collected on in an online whiteboard and participants were invited to add further comments after the workshop.

When discussing their practical approaches, the hosts were invited to cluster their responses in relation to the three competencies *mindset, skillset and toolset* (Fraude, 2021) defined as follows:

Mindset refers to the internal lens through which people see and navigate life, which influences perspectives and attitudes (Wamsler et al., 2020), and covers the ability to observe and understand one's own attitudes, thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and reaction patterns and consciously steer these. It includes the ability to adapt one's inner self, respond to others, and respect

any kind of developments during a session. It also encompasses how one personally embodies the principles and qualities in any given method.

Skillset refers to communication and social skills, such as the ability to design reflection and dialogue processes and related understanding. It also includes the ability to facilitate a diverse group, even if there is internal disagreement. Here, practical experience is crucial, for example, when handling culturally sensitive issues or people who are emotionally more sensitive or reactive than one would usually expect.

Toolset relates to one's repertoire of tools, methods, techniques, instruments, and technologies for reflection and communication in the context of climate- and sustainability-related conferences. For example, it also refers to a practical recognition of the right moment to use a certain method, tool, or technique, and its limitations.

The present chapter is part of the hosts' self-reflexive exercise, led by the IASS-based organizers of the CCRDS. The first author synthesized the workshop findings were synthesized as a draft chapter, on which everyone who had hosted sessions at COP 26 CCRDS were invited to comment, and if they so wished to further collaborate on the chapter as co-authors. This various iterations of the draft. In the following, we present the reflections of hosts on their experiences, practices and recommendations.

7.3 FINDINGS FROM EXPERIENCES OF HOSTING INCLUSIVE SPACES AT COP26

7.3.1 *COP as an Overall Context for Hosting*

The hosts perceived the conditions at the COP26 venue as extraordinarily challenging in many ways (Fig. 7.3).

On arriving, they felt 'tired from the commute' and from the process of getting into the venue, including long queues and security checks. Hosts felt a 'sense of being uninvited' and it took a 'long time to acclimatize' to the venue. An impression was that the COP 'needs people to feel welcome' but the 'human part [is] put in the corner'.

The general atmosphere was characterized by a confusing sense of breathless busyness, with a 'very up-paced atmosphere' with a 'constant lack of time' and people 'always running around'. One host mentioned that 'the trade fair setup was perfect for retail, to walk around and see what was available *to buy*'. A particular aspect that several hosts emphasized was a sense of inauthenticity and ingenuity. The venue appeared



Fig. 7.3 Surrounding of the CCRDS at COP26. The CCRDS was set up in an open fair venue with high noise levels and the hallways directly at the CCRDS were highly populated

‘polished’ and ‘perfectionist’ with ‘indifferent people’ and ‘lots of hollow words’. The impression was that ‘people [were] wearing masks not just for Covid’. Despite the presence of people and stakeholder groups from various backgrounds, hosts perceived ‘diversity as a pretence’. Others described the COP as ‘pretending to be inclusive’, but just ‘to feel-good’ and with ‘no real interest’. Some expressed the feeling that the atmosphere was shaped by ‘a pressure to be busy, to be important’ and wondered whether this busyness was actually some kind of ‘protection from actually thinking about the issues’.

A key aspect that many hosts mentioned was the impression of a disconnect between people inside the venue and those who could not get in. One pointed out that ‘COP is an exclusive space’. Consequently, some hosts were ‘sad about people who were not able to be there’ and felt a ‘pressure [due to the] privilege to be there’. But even inside the venue, hosts noticed ‘many walls and barriers’ that made them feel ‘isolated’. In the usual communication formats, hosts experienced a ‘wall built between speakers and audience’. One said that ‘the rows of seats

looking at the *expert space* at the front did not encourage listeners to take part—there was often no dialogue, no discussion—just several monologues’. The disconnectedness also related to a sense of ‘much separation (between civil society and policy)’ and that a large part of the conference was ‘disconnected to negotiations’. One host perceived the presence of ‘traumatic memories’.

Combined with the ‘cold hallways’ and the high noise level, hosts experienced the atmosphere as ‘confusing’ and ‘triggering lots of uncertainty’ were ‘constantly figuring out *what is going on?*’ wondering ‘what are people’s objectives’.

Summarizing their subjective and emotional experience of the venue, hosts described their experience at COP as ‘painful’, ‘very uncomfortable’ and ‘extremely unsafe’. It was emphasized that ‘safety requires the opportunity to be easily heard’ but that ‘the noise and the busyness prevented that’. At the same time, several hosts reflected that this sense of unsafety was a subjective perception that was not necessarily shared by all COP participants. While some hosts emphasized that it was ‘impossible to acknowledge the profound existential unsafety’ of the COP setting, while others felt that ‘many COP participants flourished in the noisy and busy atmosphere’ with no impression of unsafety. So, in conclusion, it was emphasized that the subjective sense of safety or its absence for a certain kind of activities was very much an individual matter.

7.3.2 *Typical Challenges When Hosting Inclusive Spaces at the COP*

Hosting a session in the CCRDS with the aim of offering an inclusive and safe enough space for deep encounter presented many specific challenges to the hosts that required specific attention and care. These ranged from dealing with the hectic conditions of the environment described above to challenging dynamics in the sessions due to the open/free set-up of the space to the presence of participants with strongly conflicting perspectives or backgrounds.

Overall, the CCRDS hoped to facilitate ‘deep encounters’ where people could attend and relate not only as bearers of knowledge and power or as stakeholder representatives but rather as human beings with their own emotions, ambiguities and struggles. The two main challenges in trying to facilitate such encounters were the venue’s noisiness and its open setting, particularly as it was not enclosed on two sides, giving it a ‘crossroads feeling’ because it was situated at the entrance of the hall.

Almost all hosts found the presence of ‘lots of distracting noise’ difficult to cope with, not only in creating an atmosphere of focus and mutual attention but also in terms of making sure that everyone could understand each other properly. There was even a sense that the sessions in the CCRDS were ‘competing with noise all around’. Hosts were wondering ‘how will we engage people and get them to speak in an open noisy space?’.

The physical openness of the space posed additional challenges. Because there were no doors, participants saw the ‘constant movement of people passing by’. During the sessions ‘people [were] walking in and out’ or ‘people came in during the session or left in-between’. So, while aspiring to be inclusive it was ‘difficult for them to come into the meeting’ in the middle of a session. It also entailed extra efforts to deal with people who joined spontaneously out of curiosity. Thus hosts wondered ‘how to include those that do not come intentionally’. Another common issue was that ‘people [were] taking pictures during [a] session’. Such ambient disturbance as well as during the sessions made it ‘difficult to create a sense of containment’ (Fig. 7.4).

Various factors arising from the setting were also brought into the session through the participants. Hosts noticed that ‘people arrived tired



Fig. 7.4 Perspective from inside the CCRDS showing COP participants passing by during a session

from context' and that participants with leadership roles or perceived authority had a particular impact on the dynamics in the sessions. It was mentioned that it was 'impossible to hold settings against disturbances [from leaders]'. For example, 'leaders brought some *busy* energy into the space' and hosts witnessed that the participants' 'attention [was] unconsciously drawn to men with perceived authority'.

The hosts also struggled with their own inner state. The circumstances were perceived as 'overwhelming' which made it 'hard to focus'. The busy and polished atmosphere also triggered 'self-doubt', inner 'self-talk' and lack of clarity about whom the hosts were actually serving. They found themselves 'comparing' and 'becoming judgmental' about themselves and their hosting rather than staying mindful and appreciating what was present.

A whole field of challenges related specifically to the sessions that attempted to combine online participation with hosting deep dialogues at the COP. Several hosts made considerable efforts to '[be] digitally inclusive' in the sense that they tried to allow people who could not participate in person to join online (video-call or Twitter spaces). Due to the various distractions, hosts experienced an 'attention split between digital and physical' spaces, both for the participants and for themselves.

In terms of participation, online sessions made it easier to join and it also became clear that 'nobody walks *randomly* into the digital space', unlike in physical sessions when people passing by often chose to stay spontaneously. The wish to create safe enough spaces and simultaneously be inclusive also created a tension between the intimacy of an open atmosphere that provided space for confidential conversation and the need to consider aspects of data protection and privacy. For example, people felt unclear about 'who was secretly listening in'. Another issue was the depth of engagement, particularly when trying to host a dialogical session in which in-person participants interacted with the participants of a Twitter space. While online participation was in principle easier, hosts noticed that 'Twitter has to be short [superficial]' which conflicted with the aim to facilitate deep and reflective conversations.

In summary, the hosts perceived many 'tensions and trade-offs' such as 'safety vs. openness' and 'inclusivity vs. commitment'. They noted the 'collision of two modes', i.e. the 'attention economy/commercial' mode of the COP environment and the 'search for depth' in the CCRDS.

7.3.3 *Responses to These Challenges with Respect to Mindset, Skillset and Toolset*

During their sessions, hosts found different ways of responding to the challenges described above. We clustered these around their responses on their mindset, skillset or toolset.

Mindset

With respect to responding through their **mindset**, hosts described various ways of staying consciously in touch with the various tensions and challenges rather than judging them and going into resistance.

Specifically, some hosts described ‘dropping all expectations on a result’ or went into a mindset of ‘openness to whatever happens as what should happen here’. Rather than attaching to a specific goal they ‘accepted that this was not planned’ and chose to ‘focus on how to make the most of it’. Also, for specific challenges like ‘people leaving mid-session’ they cultivated a ‘deep acceptance’ and ‘advised participants to take care of themselves and leave when they needed to’.

They reminded themselves that they were ‘responsible only for how I show up, so I’ll embody what I want to communicate [deep listening, open sharing]’.

Some hosts prepared for these kinds of challenges by a ‘private meditation before facilitation to prepare my practice’. For several hosts it was helpful to make themselves ‘aware of the trade-off between safety and fluidity, flexibility and inclusivity in an unsafe and busy space like that’ and accepted the imperfection of their sessions and processes by ‘making [a] choice on this trade-off for each session’.

In order not to be drawn into certain dynamics of the environment or session some hosts practised ‘identifying and labelling unconscious patterns being reinforced’ such that they could consciously deal with these patterns while facilitating. Particularly in the face of a perceived lack of safe circumstances, hosts were ‘opening [their] heart fully as a space holder to support the participants in this unsafe space’.

Acknowledging the perceived lack of safety of the environment they also recognized that it would require more ‘ability to set rules/structure’. This referred, for example, to ‘being better prepared facilitating decolonizing and diversity practice’, including clearly facilitated exercises on how to practise communication patterns that did not reproduce patterns of established power-imbalances or transgressions.

Skillset

In terms of their **skillset** hosts practised various techniques, particularly to bring the challenges consciously into the space or into the conversation. Rather than just silently dealing with them many hosts chose to voice the aspects of distraction and lack of perceived safety.

For example, hosts mentioned that it was helpful to ‘play with the fact that it is unsafe and distracting’, for instance by inviting participants to ‘wear[ing] a hat if you are distracted, wear[ing] a veil if you are unsafe’. They practised ‘voicing how the space distracts and name the distractions’ and described it as ‘a relief for the whole group when people name their lack of focus’.

Generally, hosts consciously drew the participants’ attention to the various aspects that made the space unsafe or uncomfortable. For example, hosts were ‘asking questions on how unsafety feels inside and outside’. To make these aspects transparent to the participants also required ‘more regular reflection on unconscious and unsafe patterns we are reinforcing as facilitators’. This was especially so for online sessions, where some hosts used their struggles with technology or the imperfect technical set-ups as a prompt to reflect with participants about the pressures for perfection as experienced in the surrounding venue.

Another host used ‘reframing an interaction that is giving rise to negative feelings in the group into something positive and generative’. For example, the rather harsh and aggressive intervention of one activist on another participant was reframed ‘as a sign of her deep love for the work she is engaged in, rather than as a disruption’. In the dynamics of the session, it helped ‘providing a new perspective with which to view the situation and to empower a transformative energy’.

Compared to their usual facilitation, hosts emphasized that hosting a session in the CCRDS at COP required ‘doing more emotional release work’ such as ‘co-regulating together’ ‘through embodied practice (e.g. breathing together)’. Hosts mentioned that they ‘recognized emotions’ and ‘welcomed silence’. For their own support, several hosts also preferred ‘having several space holders’ by their side in the workshop, meaning trusted persons to support the facilitator, and were keeping ‘eye contact with colleagues’ or applied ‘self-talk to overcome doubts about perfection’.

Toolset

With respect to their **toolset**, hosts mentioned several practices that allowed the group to cope better with the specific challenges they experienced at the COP.

Following the above-mentioned intention to consciously acknowledge the distractions and surrounding unsafety, hosts often started with a ‘check-in’ explicitly ‘asking for people’s feelings’ or ‘how do you feel/experience at COP?’. A popular tool was to split up the participants into ‘smaller groups’ which made it ‘closer to talk’, particularly to cope with the ‘sound level’. Given the multiplicity of languages these small groups could also function as ‘translation groups’.

Several hosts described ‘meditating with the noise’. One also ‘started with a meditation on the noise reframing it as expression of intensity and number of people caring about climate change. So, the context became positive and showed that people cared’. This included ‘asking the participants to listen to all sounds at once without focusing on particular voices and feel the positive energy of many conversations in the venue’. By naming the distraction of noise they helped participants with ‘finding out how to remain focused when it’s loud and people [are] moving in and out’.

Given the circumstantial influences, several hosts were ‘announcing very clear communication rules’, suggesting for instance ‘five seconds between people speaking’ or ‘not speak for 10 sec. after someone spoke’ as a way to create spaces of silence to allow participants to process what had been said before jumping to an immediate (and potentially less conscious) response.

7.3.4 Recommendations for Future Hosting

Based on their experiences with hosting one or several sessions in the CCRDS at COP26, hosts made a several recommendations.

Various recommendations related to the space itself such as ‘include nature in the space (plants, sounds, smells)’ or ‘install a curtain to be flexible’ with respect to moving between and open and closed space more easily. One recommendation was also to ‘have a few comfortable chairs and a small table with information about the aims of the space on the periphery of the main discussion space to encourage people to stop and find out more’. This would make it possible to ‘begin dialogue already outside or before the formal start of a session’.

The wish to better manage the boundary between the inside of the CCRDS and the external circumstances also has implications for the staffing of the CCRDS. Several hosts recommended including ‘a supporting *bridge* role’, namely someone in charge of receiving late arrivals who want to join the session. Another host suggested having ‘[an] *admin* person assigned to speak to any people who are passing by but stop to find out what’s happening’. This recommendation picked up on observations made by some hosts that ‘there was a significant flow of people past the space that resulted in increased attendance’ due to the openness of the space with only two walls unlike the closed space at COP25. Related to the constant transition of people during a session, it was recommended that a visible ‘small *manifesto* on rules, etc.,’ would help give people an orientation regarding the desired communication culture before joining.

With respect to online sessions, the hosts recommended we ‘explicitly contact people who have commented online on previous COP’ or to ‘inquire [about the] needs of those who will be absent’ for example through a ‘public call for the *excluded voices*’.

There were many recommendations on how to stay in the state of mind that allows effective facilitation under the conditions at the COP. Hosts recommended, for example, the need to ‘free yourself from any expectation of the outcome’ and ‘stay centred in the energy you want to represent’. Hosts should ‘admit explicitly that this [the COP venue] is an unsafe space’ and ‘guide attention to unsafety’ or ‘play with this unsafety’ but ‘don’t make it invisible’. Generally, it was emphasized that the host’s perceived safety and comfort would significantly influence the atmosphere at their session.

7.4 DISCUSSION—BEING CONSCIOUS ABOUT THE UNSAFETY MAKES SPACES SAFER

7.4.1 *Bringing Awareness to Experiences of ‘Unsafety’ and Challenge*

The obvious special feature of the CCRDS at COP was its direct connection with the unsafe surroundings of the COP venue, both in terms of the physical set-up and the atmosphere and communication culture. The CCRDS was not an ideal-type remote place for people who intentionally wanted to enter a safe and inclusive space for deep encounters but was

an open, almost ‘unprotected’ space in the middle of a venue that rarely fosters similar aims and values.

The environment of the COP was perceived as busy, noisy, painful, confusing and unsafe, dominated by disconnectedness and hollow encounters or words. In summary, despite the diversity of perspectives at the COPs, diversity and inclusion were perceived as a pretence. Usually, hosts who aim at providing inclusive spaces for deep encounters spend a lot of thought and care in designing ‘ideal’ conditions to minimize disturbances and provide participants with enough time to build a trust with each other. In the CCRDS the situation was dramatically different. The atmosphere and influence of the environment was a constant intrusion for the hosts and participants.

At the same time, this contrast between the atmosphere inside and outside the CCRDS was reflected on in a critical fashion. We assume that many COP participants appreciated the design and venue of the COP and may not have perceived it as unsafe. These participants might not be expected to join sessions in the CCRDS or in turn even perceive these as ‘unsafe’ if they did so. We assume that most people who join the CCRDS sessions are looking for ‘something different’ and have a strong longing for more authentic encounters—and potentially a disdain for the currently dominant communication culture. Consequently, it is fair to assume some self-selection bias among the participants of the sessions in the CCRDS.

The hosts’ reflections clearly showed the struggles arising from the tensions between a turbulent, busy and unsafe environment and the aspiration to offer a safe and inclusive space for deep encounters and various disturbances into the space, ranging from the noise level or interruptions as people entered or left during a session, adding to the hosts’ confusion and self-doubts caused by the environment or the participants who brought the busyness of the venue with them into the CCRDS sessions. It becomes clear that it requires specific considerations and skills to design and host safe enough spaces that relate to this tension constructively.

An important finding emphasized by several hosts was that consciously acknowledging the unsafety of the setting made it feel safer. If there were obvious factors such as noise, late arrivals, etc., it was helpful not to ignore these but make them and their influence on the process explicit. As mentioned above, some hosts even chose to include meditation explicitly on the noise as a way to transition people into their encounter with each other.

This acknowledgement of the unsafe conditions (instead of ignoring them) was also reflected in the practices hosts applied to their own mindset. It seemed that in the presence of the polished and perfectionist environment of the COP many hosts felt a certain pressure leading to self-doubt and self-judgement. They found it helpful to consciously accept the imperfection of the conditions and the process they were facilitating and go into a mindset of deep acceptance, not complaining about the non-ideal conditions or feeling pushed by specific expectations. Just as the hosts supported themselves in keeping their presence, they also took extra care, such as by establishing stricter communication rules, to help participants keep their focus who otherwise might be drawn into the kind of behaviour that dominated the rest of the COP setting (long monologues, competitive talk, etc.).

It was also considered important to mediate the transition of participants between the unsafe setting outside the CCRDS and the reflective and dialogical atmosphere inside it. It was found helpful to include an extra person—often called ‘bridge’—who could welcome late arrivals and explain what was happening. This helps ensure that people would not just ‘crash’ into an ongoing deep dialogue but could enter somewhat prepared and integrate themselves more smoothly. Such a ‘bridge’ allowed the hosts to keep their focus on what was going on inside the space and feel less distracted about what was going on around it (see Figure 7.5).

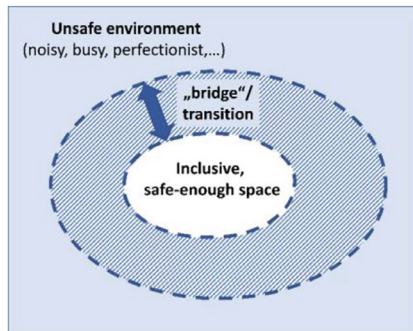


Fig. 7.5 The need for ‘bridging’ between the unsafe environment and the inclusive, safe-enough space

The transition between the COP environment and the CCRDS was, however, also a topic for the beginnings and endings of a session. All

participants joined a session with the experience of the wider environment of the COP. It became obvious that it requires special care to help them transition into an atmosphere that is safe enough to facilitate deep and inclusive dialogue.

7.4.2 *Reflection on Methods: Safe Enough for What?*

A central question in these reflections concerns the meaning, impact and outcome of the CCRDS in this setting. Most of the challenges and efforts the facilitators/hosts endured are related to the fact that the CCRDS offers its sessions in a non-ideal surrounding to people who do not expect to come across such sessions at the COP. In fact, many participants had little prior experience with the kind of format in which they were involved. Obviously, the CCRDS does not follow the dominant culture of its environment. Already from the distance, attendants of the COP can see that there is something ‘different’ about the CCRDS, potentially only starting with its imperfect appearance or that some people are sitting in a circle or even on the floor. Yet, the strategic decision behind the experiment is to not displace the deep encounters and more inclusive conversations into sessions ‘outside’ the COP venue where the only people who would join are interested in these kinds of spaces anyway. Rather, the idea is to make its aspiration and culture visible to those passing by and being unaware that a more reflexive, safe and inclusive mode of interaction is possible. Merely by its presence the CCRDS reflects back to the surrounding environment that the dominant communication culture, of one-way presentations, panel discussions with passive audience, is not the only way to host encounters at the COP.

Importantly, the analysis is based on our hosts’ perceptions of safety. While this may relate to actual threats in physical terms or regarding career potential or social acceptance, the reasons for the perceived (lack of) safety were less prominent. This understanding relates to the aim of the present communication approach to allow learning based on open reflection, including on values, norms and emotions, as well as on surfacing and addressing disagreement and conflict. In this regard, perceptions of (un) safety have strong implications for the possibility of opening up and engaging with one another in a more trusting way. It is in this sense that we investigated challenges and possibilities of establishing and maintaining a safe enough space for reflection and dialogue. On a critical note, the preoccupation with noise levels and a distracting atmosphere can be

questioned in a situation where participants actually engage with issues that are critical for the physical, economic and social safety of millions of people, very few of whom attend the COPs. Here, being busy with one's own safety might even unconsciously work as a welcome distraction from confronting the severity of the actual situation. For this very reason, it remains critical to understand the establishment of safe enough spaces to enable deeper engagement with situations that would be even harder to bear and to relate to otherwise. Thus, building a safe enough, relational space needs to remain oriented towards supporting effective climate action.

As an action-oriented transdisciplinary experiment, the CCRDS combined practice and related research. The presented three iterations of the CCRDS generated insights on the actual demand for formats of communication and collaboration that enable more relational and collaborative encounters. On a general note, research supported the relevance of the practical approach of the CCRDS. More specifically, CCRDS at COP26 revealed important insights about how to host inclusive encounters in safe enough environments given the specific circumstances. The feedback from the participants continues to be very appreciative. Yet, it remains an open question how exactly the CCRDS aspiration to host safe and inclusive spaces at the COP is contributing towards more effective climate action. Future research will aim to understand more clearly what kind of experience participants have in the CCRDS and how these experiences can be a resource for their engagement towards climate action.

7.4.3 Towards Changing the Established Communication Culture

We hope the experiences from COP26 will be useful to all researchers or non-academic stakeholders who see the need for more inclusive engagement in contexts where such processes are seldom foreseen. We believe that our lessons may not only be supportive in the context of the COPs, but also illustrate a broader tension between an established mode of communication that is often a one-way, hierarchical and competitive discourse and an emerging trend towards more inclusive, reflexive and co-creative formats. In our experience, various stakeholders would like to work in more inclusive and co-creative ways, but their contexts essentially prevent these forms of communication. This includes early career researchers, who call for more interactive formats, transdisciplinary approaches and profound engagement with stakeholders in the different phases of their research process (Care et al., 2021; Schrot et al., 2020).

There is also a growing recognition that approaches for transformative action need to consider multiple forms of knowing as relevant aspects of learning and transformation processes (Wamsler et al., 2021), including, for example, emotions, affects or intuitive knowledge.

Confronted with such tensions, one option is to leave the established settings and launch new ones that may be more conducive to these kinds of engagement. For everyone seeing important potential in engaging in more conventional settings and aspiring to host spaces that emphasize co-creation, inclusiveness and safety, our findings may be of help. They may sensitize the organizers and hosts of such settings on how to handle the experience of unsafety of their environment, not only in order to accept an annoying aspect of the context, but rather as a manifestation of the communication culture that is subject to transformation. Seeing this as a focus for further research and engagement strategies could be a promising route for future iterations of the CCRDS. The immediate unsafety of the dominant communication culture could offer a powerful experience base for participants to reflect this atmosphere and its significance with respect to fundamental aspects of sustainability-related transformations. Specifically in relation to hosting practices, acknowledging and embracing the unsafety of the environment helps people connect around their shared experience of unsafety and related feelings of discomfort and fear. This may make the space to feel safe enough, welcoming deep encounter across apparent differences and vulnerabilities. In this sense, experiences of unsafety do not get in the way of more relational encounters and transformative learning, but they are actually the (only) way there.

In terms of TDR, these findings generate several interesting new perspectives. The task for the future may not necessarily be to design ideal processes for transdisciplinary communication. Rather, it seems promising to provide formats that help participants to acknowledge the unsafety and imperfection of any transdisciplinary communication process and integrate these reflections constructively. It may also be helpful to include a phase in TDR processes in which the participants can explore explicitly how safe they feel in a given context—which of their perspectives can comfortably be addressed, and which cannot. This might support processes of re-evaluating our own positions or convictions without the fear of losing face or inadequately exposing vulnerabilities to other participants. The entire phase of ‘problem transformation’ (Jahn et al., 2012) in a transdisciplinary research process might benefit substantially from this kind of deepening of the communication during in this phase.

7.5 CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have reflected on experiences of hosts of sessions in the CCRDS that aimed to be safe and inclusive under the prevailing circumstances at COP26. We have summarized perceptions of the COP as cold, noisy, perfectionist and unsafe and gave an overview on the challenges that this environment meant for hosting. We collected various lessons about the mindsets, skillsets and toolsets required, giving insights into how to deal with various kinds of disruption. A first key learning point was the relevance of being able to go into a deep acceptance of the imperfection of the situation and the process. Letting go of specific expectations helped hosts to remain present and hold the focus of the process. A second key insight was that it helped significantly to bring the disturbances and unsafety of the surrounding explicitly into the awareness of the participants and to make it part of the reflections during the session. Acknowledging and working consciously with the experience of unsafety made the atmosphere in the space feel safer. Finally, the reflections show the importance of including an extra person to function as a ‘bridge’ to receive and potentially transition people who approach the space and want to observe or join midway through a session.

The insights offer a valuable basis for researchers who want to experiment with inclusive and reflexive formats in settings that are not (yet) conducive to these kinds of formats. Our findings may be helpful in designing such spaces and better preparing to host them.

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