

What made ABCD work?

By Sarah Kirn, Misty Mallar, and Brenda Harrington

August 31, 2023

In the autumn of 2020, the Belfast Free Library was awarded an Accelerating Promising Practices for Small and Rural Libraries: Community Memory Project grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). The two-year grant to create the [All of Belfast Climate Dialogues \(ABCD\) project](#), which we extended to three years, enabled our small team of Brenda Harrington (Adult Programming Librarian), Sarah Kirn (community engagement consultant), and Misty Mallar (communications consultant) to plan, produce, record, and share a series of events and learning materials related to climate change.

Over three years we learned a lot - from our own processes of trial and error and from other people and organizations in the region. In the spirit of sharing, we offer our lessons learned and tips for other communities launching efforts to engage residents in thinking about and responding to the climate change crisis.

The following **ABCD elements were critical to our success**:

1. We had a **small but dedicated team funded to put time in on the project** - starting with a weekly 90-minute meeting. This gave us the capacity to maintain focus on the project. Our small group included:
 - a. A person **embedded in the community** who already had a public relationship with the community and a space. In our case, this was a librarian (Brenda). We think a teacher or leader of an established cultural or community organization could fill this role of amplifier and convenor as well.
 - b. A person with an **outside perspective** and a network of connections, skilled at meeting organization and facilitation, with the vision to see the things that were already happening as unusual/unique and ready for extension to the whole community, and who recognized the grant opportunity as applicable to Belfast.



All of Belfast Climate Dialogues (ABCD) is a 2020-2023 project of the Belfast Free Library, funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Learn more: www.belfastlibrary.org/all-of-belfast-climate-dialogues/

- c. Our project only began to get traction when we added a **communication specialist** who effectively managed social media and produced an emailed newsletter, and experimented with strategies to engage and connect with new people within the Belfast community through different channels and ways of communicating and connecting. Most importantly, she also listened to the voices who responded to or engaged with our messages.

2. We had **clear goals**, in part thanks to having written a proposal to get our project started! Our goals served as our north star throughout the project, even as we navigated a pandemic and had to rethink our approach. Our goals helped us stay focused on increasing the visibility and normalcy of community-based climate conversations. There's so much to do to respond to climate change, focus can be a challenge. Our goals were to:
 - a. **Engage** people, ideally a broader representation of people within the Belfast community.
 - b. **Educate** people about climate change and the importance of talking about it as an act of activism
 - c. **Foster discussion** about climate change, its impacts on Belfast, actions to avoid negative impacts on the community, and possible responses to those impacts
 - d. **Archive** the fears, hopes, concerns, ideas, and priorities shared by community members in our events, in their own creative contributions to our online ABCD collection. Documenting what we did was an important part of this archiving. When appropriate we recorded presentations and made them available. We collected notes that we shared. We reported out on events in our regular newsletters. We were careful in how we exercised our editorial powers in doing so and deliberate about when we reported what happened versus what it meant to us.

3. **We collaborated**, particularly with the Belfast Climate Crisis Committee, a municipal committee charged with advising the Belfast City Council. We co-hosted almost every one of our events with local organizations from the Belfast Garden Club to the Belfast Bay Watershed Coalition. We took opportunities to learn from others (thank you, A Climate To Thrive / Local Leads



All of Belfast Climate Dialogues (ABCD) is a 2020-2023 project of the Belfast Free Library, funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Learn more: www.belfastlibrary.org/all-of-belfast-climate-dialogues/

the Way and all the other great people and organizations from whom we learned!) and to share what we were doing and learning (from Brenda's presentation at the [Communities Leading on Climate conference](#) in Augusta in June of 2022 to this document).

- a. We are in a time when experimentation is really required - we are facing new challenges and need new solutions.
 - b. We can't afford to reinvent the wheel! We need to share what works - and what doesn't - with others to speed the rate of innovation and help communities get to strategies that work.
4. We made good and ample **use of technology and media** to create multiple ways for people to engage with our programs and messages.
- a. We had a website with well curated resources to help people learn about climate change.
 - b. We held most of our meetings on Zoom or, as the pandemic weakened, in person and on Zoom. We recorded our events and shared the recordings on our website.
 - c. We used social media - multiple types - to announce events and encourage attendance.
 - d. We produced monthly newsletters, which we distributed by email and printed and displayed at the library.
 - e. We made use of a low-cost, open source software package (Omeka) to archive our project materials and community contributions.
 - f. We hosted events that used art - from storytelling around a campfire to an art exhibit to a photography contest - to reach new members of the Belfast community.

Lessons learned:

- We - our team of three and, broadly speaking, the people we engaged - need to remember/relearn that we live in a democracy "by the people and for the people." We have both rights and responsibilities to see that our government works for everyone. Who has the power to make which decisions? What can citizens do? What decisions must be made by a municipality, who holds the authority, and what information or information sources do they consider? We need to have



All of Belfast Climate Dialogues (ABCD) is a 2020-2023 project of the Belfast Free Library, funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Learn more: www.belfastlibrary.org/all-of-belfast-climate-dialogues/

answers to these questions to enable action! Civics lessons are essential to organizing climate action.

- We didn't get the unusual suspects, not even all the people engaged in climate action to attend our meetings and events. We thought about but did not follow through on plans to make individual or organizational invitations to bring these folks to the table. Future efforts might consider using a more active recruitment strategy.

The ABCD program was a phenomenal learning experience for us! We each look forward to finding new ways to contribute now that ABCD has come to an end.

Sarah, Misty, and Brenda



All of Belfast Climate Dialogues (ABCD) is a 2020-2023 project of the Belfast Free Library, funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Learn more: www.belfastlibrary.org/all-of-belfast-climate-dialogues/