Dialogue: The Art of Listening and Speaking Together

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Dialogue is a culturally and historically specific way of social discourse accomplished through the use of language and verbal transactions. It suggests community, mutuality, and authenticity—an egalitarian relationship. So understood, dialogue provides a meeting ground, communitas, and manifests itself in a variety of spontaneous and ritual modes of discourse in which nature and structure meet (Turner, 1969, p. 140). In this section we examine the meaning and nature of dialogue.

Etymological Meaning of Dialogue

Etymologically, dialogue means a speech across, between, though two or more people. Dialogue comes from the Greek dialogos. Dia is a preposition that means “through,” “between,” “across,” “by,” and “of.” Dia does not mean two, as in two separate entities; rather, dia suggests a “passing through” as in diagnosis “thoroughly” or “completely.” Logos comes from legein, “to speak” Crapanzano (1990, p. 276). Logos means “the word,” or more specifically, the “meaning of the word,” created by “passing through,” as in the use of language as a symbolic tool and conversation as a medium. As Onians (1951) points out, logos may also mean thought as well as speech—thought that is conceived individually or collectively, and/or expressed materially. Consequently, dialogue is a sharing through language as a cultural symbolic tool and conversation as a medium for sharing. The picture or image that this derivation suggests is a “stream of meaning” flowing among and through us and between us. Etymologically, dialogue connotes a flow of
meaning through two or more individuals as a collective, and out of which may emerge new understandings (Bohm, 1996, p. 6).

Dialogue is focused conversation, engaged in intentionally with the goal of increasing understanding, addressing problems, and questioning thoughts or actions. It engages the heart as well as the mind. It is different from ordinary, everyday conversation, in that dialogue has a focus and a purpose. Dialogue is different from debate, which offers two points of view with the goal of proving the legitimacy or correctness of one of the viewpoints over the other. Dialogue leads the participants towards what is right instead of who is right. Dialogue, unlike debate or even discussion, is as interested in the relationship(s) between the participants as it is in the topic or theme being explored. Dialogue means a process of interpersonal as well as intra personal communication.

In a Bohn dialog, twenty to forty participants sit in a circle, for a few hours during regular meetings, or for a few days in a workshop environment. This is done with no predefined purpose, no agenda, other than that of inquiring into the movement of thought, and exploring the process of “thinking together” collectively. This activity can allow group participants to examine their preconceptions and prejudices, as well as to explore the more general movement of thought. Bohm’s intention regarding the suggested minimum number of participants was to replicate a social/cultural dynamic (rather than a family dynamic). This form of dialogue seeks to enable an awareness of why communicating in the verbal sphere is so much more difficult and conflict-ridden than in all other areas of human activity and endeavor.

Participants in the Bohmian form of dialogue "suspend" their beliefs, opinions, impulses, and judgments while speaking together, in order to see the movement of the group’s thought processes and what their effects may be. According to Dialogue a Proposal [Bohm, Factor, Garrett], this kind of dialogue should not be confused with discussion or debate, both of which, says Bohm, suggest working towards a goal or
reaching a decision, rather than simply exploring and learning. Meeting without an agenda or fixed objective is done to create a “free space” for something new to happen. “... It may turn out that such a form of free exchange of ideas and information is of fundamental relevance for transforming culture and freeing it of destructive misinformation, so that creativity can be liberated.

William Isaacs (1999) claims to be building directly on Bohm's work. He goes into a many possible techniques and skill sets that can be used to view and enhance dialogue in a group. He focuses on a four-stage evolutionary-model of a dialogue (p.242-290):

Stage one is "Shared Monologues", where group members get used to talking to each other.

Stage two is "Skillful Discussion", where people are learning the skills of dialogue.

Stage three is "Reflective Dialogue", which is approximately Bohm's idea of dialogue.

Stage four is "Generative Dialogue", a special "creative" dialogue Isaacs seeks for his groups.

Weisbord & Janoff (1995) quote Bohm’s concept of a “common pool” of meaning created when people listen to one another – “what they say becomes a part of you, whether you like it or not”. Weisbord’s Future Search technology seems designed to maximise people’s exposure to one another in a structured series of small group discussions, in the hope that a common purpose and action will arise at the end of the process. He admits that evidence of its efficacy is anecdotal but he believes that by confronting complexity, rather than trying to resolve it, actions may come out of the process that is genuinely collective. Future Search shares with dialogue a belief that following a particular conversational process in a group can enable new meaning and new understanding to emerge, leading to new action. By bringing people together to talk in large numbers in a particular way they will develop “a shared psychological field” which is made up of all of their views and experiences.
Margaret Wheatley (Wheatley in Weisbord et al, 1992) sets Future Search in the context of the new sciences and envisages an underlying ordering process that takes hold when we generate large amounts of information and don’t attempt to impose order upon it. Café Conversations also handle large numbers in small groups with people moving from table to table, taking the threads of their conversations with them for exploration in different configurations. As with Future Search and Dialogue, descriptions of Café Conversations include references to something larger than the individuals making up the group – Wheatley (in Brown, 2005) calls it “discovering collective wisdom”.

Speaking together as a process is listening to the others Connect to others and reflects to others. These are the keys of dialogue. Speaking/listening as a tool to connect. When combined with one-on-one dialoging to explore interpersonal sticking points, a powerful combination of learning comes out. This unites emotional growth with intellectual knowledge. Connect is a process completed by listening others voice Listening relation generates dialogue, and dialogic communication constructs reflections. Reflection helps us to realize a sense of meaning from complex issues; it takes us out of the present moment, and allows us to see a world through a self with the added dimensions. Only these three basics can help building the positive environment for Shared learning, for the intelligence and development of each member. These three behavioral forms are the foundation stones to build an environment for Effective Dialogue. Johan Galtung says “There is something valid in every position.”

Dialogue is not a tool or a methodology. Dialogue facilitates building of sufficient common ground and mutual trust, and to make it possible to tell what is really going on in one’s mind. With this context, dialogue must be cultivated as an essential skill for all teachers. Dialogue is not a quick fix nor is the journey easy – it requires risk-taking, patience and a willingness to let go of the familiar and embrace the unfamiliar and new ones. Over time it can be a catalyst, allowing for generative and creative problem
solving. When facilitated well, dialogue fosters the kind of openness and trust that characterize healthy learning and teacher’s transformation as learners that can be sustained.

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