

## Dialogue as Collective Skillful Means

Dialogue is a core practice employed in a family of large scale (organisation or community-wide) inquiry and change work approaches. This family includes Theory U, Appreciative Inquiry, Future Search and other “dialogic” approaches to organisation development. It is a core practice because it allows participants to look at how thought (consciousness, language, ways of talking) (a) creates or constructs reality while obscuring that it does so (b) in ways that centre and separate self and other (what Chogyam Trungpa called “this and that” thinking). Of course, these themes are central to both the Shambhala and Buddhist teachings. So here’s the connection - dialogue is a *way of being and relating* that can bring us close to *‘practice mind’* and, so, bring us close to Other/ness and (just) “that”.

To get a better sense of what ‘doing’ dialogue involves it can be helpful to contrast it with the more usual practices of discussion and debate<sup>1</sup>. In these, ego-related, discursive, contests occur around *my* ego-related

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Dialogue

evaluative beliefs - *versus* some ‘Other(s)’ ego-related evaluative beliefs. The implicit assumption is that, in so doing, we can sort right from wrong and come close to ‘the truth’ through arguments and evidence., sound familiar? So, for example, in “*debate*”: dilemmas tend to get polarised rather than ‘befriended’ and explored; people speak with certainty; the intention is to persuade others; ‘abstraction wars’ dominate; individual intelligence and abilities are privileged; and, a false consensus is produced *while underlying differences remain*.

So, for example, practitioners working in areas of deep seated conflict (e.g., between Israel and Palestine or between Pro Life and Pro Choice) have developed a whole series of skilful interventions that allow participants to engage in dialogue, to hear the Other and to understand better the other(s) po-

<sup>1</sup> see for example, The “toolbox” provided by the Public Conversations Project

sition(s). Perhaps no-one changes their position but greater complexity and understanding along with less certainty that one has 'The' truth can result. In turn, this can then allow multiple community-based voices or realities 'to lie' rather than be attacked or annihilated<sup>2</sup>.

Another 'practice lineage', so to say, follows the work of theoretical physicist and philosopher David Bohm. For him, dialogue is needed in order for us to see the workings of consciousness. As I sketched above, he sees these "workings" as actively constructing a "fragmented" view - a world of separately existing 'things' - an ego-centric projection which positions self as able to know and achieve power over Other. So, through the cooperative efforts of extended open dialogues, participants can experience the truth of co-arising and therefore wholeness, rather than fragmentation, and connect with the intelligence that is enfolded in the whole. So the practice of dialogue can help us - when working with others - to practice what Chogyam Trungpa called True Perception<sup>3</sup>.

Bohm and his colleagues (Bohm et. al, 1991) observed that 'no firm rules can be laid down for conducting a Dialogue because its essence is learning... as part of an unfolding process of creative participation'. Instead, they set out three conditions: (1) Participants must suspend their assumptions by being aware of them and by making them available for exploration (2) participants must view each other as peers - 'a dialogue is essentially a conversation between equals', and (3) There needs to be a facilitator to hold the container, at least, in the early stages.

### **What then does dialogue look like?**

We can return to the characteristics of debate to help us with what dialogue looks like<sup>4</sup>: dilemmas are accepted and explored; doubts and reservations are voiced and the 'tone' is more 'open'; people speak from their own experience and do not attempt to change or persuade others; differences are explored and 'let be' rather than being worked into a false consensus; the process makes space for the wisdom that arises from space...

So, how to do this? The details of the 'how' will vary with the the particularities of the 'why' - the context and the purpose of the dialogue work. Usually, participants are offered a set of agreements as a "minimal structure" or 'container' which is 'not too tight and not loose'. They are invited to adopt

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<sup>2</sup> if you are working with serious, passionately expressed conflicts, look for more examples of dialogical ways of working in the work of The Public Conversations Project and related work that uses the language of "transformative dialogues".

<sup>3</sup> It seems connected with the following: "*The everyday practice is simply to develop a complete acceptance and openness to all situations and emotions. And to all people - experiencing everything totally without reservations and blockages, so that one never withdraws or centralises into oneself*" (Chogyam Trungpa quote from Maha Ati text)

<sup>4</sup> Of course 'doing' dialogue is not an all or none affair; it can be seen as *skilful means* - that we learn while practicing together

those agreements as (relatively spacious) guidelines for their practice and, perhaps, to add some of their own. An essential practice is “*suspension*”. It has many aspects but, in general, it means allowing and staying with complexity and ambiguity. For example: “*the first thing.... have a dialogue in which we listen deeply to the views of other people without resistance... suspended as it were without carrying them out and without suppressing them*”<sup>5</sup>. But this is a bit like giving people meditation instruction by telling them to ‘just relax’... more help is needed. So, some commonly used guidelines include:

- observe your observing (or’ listen to your listening’) (be mindful)
- speak from your heart and from your own experience (be meek, compassionate)
- ask questions in order to better understand the views of others (be curious)
- voice your doubts and uncertainties and your assumptions (be open)
- focus on co-ordinating with others, rather than arguing for our own position (letting go, going ‘out’)
- pause sometimes to ask ‘how are we are doing’ (reflexivity)
- slow down (especially on ‘hot’ topics where thoughts are especially ‘heavy’)

We can easily make links with the Four Dignities, together with mindfulness and awareness...

1 we tread carefully, with mindfulness of speech, with space, not speed, we don’t interrupt

2 we are gentle and inquisitive e.g., “what about you”..? We ask questions so as to better understand & to explore what usually is left tacit

3 we listen

- and ‘listen to our listening’

4 we “see further than the sky”

- as we open up to space/big mind

5 we generate lungta and ride on it...

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<sup>5</sup> David Bohm: Excerpt from the documentary "Art Meets Science and Spirituality in a Changing Economy - From Fragmentation to Wholeness" Artists, scientists, spiritual leaders and economists gathered in Amsterdam in 1990 to explore the emerging paradigm of a holistic world view and the implications <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDKB7GcHNac&t=643s>

As Chogyam Trungpa said, “*since (s)he possesses tremendous exertion (s)he accomplishes her purposes easily*”. So this path ‘works’ through relaxing into space and creating community while learning dialogue as a collective skilful means. ‘Decisions’ get made - but they emerge from collective wisdom. It is a way of working which goes beyond individual mind and individual ideas to allow genuine co-creation - of path, fruition and inspiration...this is how our collective wisdom arises.

## References on dialogue

David Bohm, Donald Factor and Peter Garrett, 1991, ‘Dialogue - a proposal’ available at [http://www.infed.org/archives/e-texts/bohm\\_dialogue.htm](http://www.infed.org/archives/e-texts/bohm_dialogue.htm)

Buber, Martin, 1958, *I and Thou* 2e, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark. Translation: R. Gregory Smith. 171 pages.

On Buber: see also <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-buber.htm>.

Freire, P. 1972, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

<http://www.laetusinpraesens.org/links/webdial.php> (selected sites on dialogue)

## Dialogue and transformative development/change work

Reason, P and Torbert, W. 2001, The action turn: toward a transformational social science: a further look at the scientific merits of action research. *Concepts and Transformation*, 6 (1) pp1-37, available at:

[http://www.peterreason.eu/Papers/Transformational\\_Social\\_Science.pdf](http://www.peterreason.eu/Papers/Transformational_Social_Science.pdf)

Katz, Arlene M., Loring Conant, Thomas S. Inuid, David Baron and David Borb, 2000, A council of elders: creating a multi-voiced dialogue in a community of care, *Social Science and Medicine* 50, p. 851—860

The MIT Dialogue Project: <http://www.dialogueproject.net/resources.shtml>

The Public Conversations Project (PCP) <http://www.publicconversations.org/>

## Discussions of need for new paradigm - for ‘real’ change

Senge, P., Scharmer, C., Jaworski, J and Flowers, Betty Sue , Awakening faith in an alternative future, *Reflections*, 5 (7) [www.reflections.solon-line.org](http://www.reflections.solon-line.org)

Hosking, D.M 2000, Ecology in mind, mindful practices, *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 9 (2), June, available at:  
[http://www.relational-constructionism.org/media/ecology\\_in\\_mind.pdf](http://www.relational-constructionism.org/media/ecology_in_mind.pdf)

## **Some connected lines of work**

Albert Einstein: "A human being is a part of the whole called by us "the universe," a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest - a kind of optical illusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening the circle of understanding and compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty." Einstein, Albert (1954), *Ideas and Opinions*, New York: Random House, [ISBN 0-517-00393-7](#)

### Paulo Friere

... dialogue involves people working with each other rather than one person acting **on** another. Dialogue in itself is a co-operative activity involving respect

### Martin Buber

... focused on the dialogical nature of existence (the relationship between self and other) as 'I-It', which involves separation and distancing, and 'I-You', which involves a sense of being part of the whole. Dialogue involves 'turning towards the other' (Buber 1947: 22). In dialogue, a person is present, attentive and aware, listening and waiting with an open heart...