The Practice of Generative Dialogue

*Suppose we were able to share meanings freely without a compulsive urge to impose our view or to conform to those of others and without distortion and self-deception. Would this not constitute a real revolution in culture?*

-- David Bohm, *Changing Consciousness*, 1992

"Dialogue" comes from the Greek "dia-" = "through" and "logos" = "the word, the meaning." David Bohm suggests the original meaning of dialogue was "meaning passing or moving through . . . a free flow of meaning between people in the sense of a stream that flows between two banks."

In this sense, dialogue stands in contrast to discussion, which comes from Latin "discutere" = "to smash apart." English gets "concussion" and "percussion" from the same root. Many discussions are closer to advocacy battles than processes of consciously sifting through and examining different perspectives. However, "skillful discussion," using inquiry skills and collaborative reflection, is an excellent tool for coming to agreement, making decisions, and the like.

As William Isaacs writes in *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, "In skillful discussion, you make a choice; in a dialogue, you discover the nature of choice. Dialogue is like jazz; skillful discussion is like chamber music."

Dialogue is also different than debate, which comes from Latin "dis-" = "apart, against each other" and "battre" = "to fight, beat." Please see [Dialogue and Debate -- One Comparison](http://www.cipknowledgeweb.com) from the CIP Knowledge Web.

Dialogue is a central discipline for organizational learning because it facilitates collective thinking, learning, and communication. It is not the only useful conversational practice, but it's an essential one because it is so different from our usual habits of thought and communication.

Dialogue creates the opportunity for coherent, collective thought instead of fragmentation, because it is a way to step back and consciously *notice* how we are thinking and feeling. Then we can begin asking questions about the deep sources of those thoughts and feelings.

**Dialogue:** To reach mutual understanding to form connection, mutual interests, relationship and opportunities.
## Distinctions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussion / Debate</th>
<th>Dialogue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Use:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Key Use:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Used for problem solving where parameters are known and conventional solutions are still working.</td>
<td>• Used to explore new territory.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• May creates expanded thinking / knowledge about a topic.</td>
<td>• Uncover unknown assumptions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• May create a 'win / lose' scenario.</td>
<td>• Encourages deeper understanding of diverse perspectives – not about winning or losing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Usually used to confirm what &quot;I&quot; already know.</td>
<td>• Cultivates the creative and reflective capacity of people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>•</td>
<td>• Can be the basis for breakthroughs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>•</td>
<td>• To move to new perspectives about self and the world.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Some Attributes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discussion / Debate</th>
<th>Dialogue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Some Attributes:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Some Attributes:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Approach tends to support dominant positions / voices – best story wins.</td>
<td>• Enhances the other person through acceptance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• People look for conclusions.</td>
<td>• No conclusions – just understanding and learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Belief systems prevail.</td>
<td>• I don’t know what I don’t know.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I know what I know.</td>
<td>• Emerging beliefs - open systems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Closed systems.</td>
<td>• Relationship focused.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Knowledge focused.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- What are our deeply held beliefs?
- What are the assumptions from which we're operating?
- What are our mental models of what's going on and being considered, and where did those models come from?
- What images and metaphors pervade our language?
- What is happening inside us as well as in the team or group?
- Are we even looking at the same data?
- Are we thinking in the moment or from memory or projection?
- What is the quality of our listening -- to ourselves and to each other?
- What is the collective field and meaning we are creating together?

In Dialogue we slow down the action so we can observe it and understand more clearly how we create meaning individually and collectively.

Theoretical work on Dialogue during this century comes from three main sources. Martin Buber used the term in 1914 to describe a mode of exchange between people in which there is a true turning toward and a full appreciation of the other as a genuine being. In the 1980s psychologist Patrick DeMare suggested that large "socio-therapy" meetings could help people understand and alter the cultural meanings within society and thus help heal mass conflicts. Physicist David Bohm focused on the nature of thought and suggested that collectively attending to the process of thinking as it arises would help surface our tacit assumptions, opinions, rules for managing differences, and the like.
Generative and Strategic Dialogues

Some Dialogue practitioners make the distinction between "strategic" and "generative" dialogues. In both forms we release on the need for outcomes and instead engage in collective inquiry and the process of meaning making.

A strategic dialogue has a topic or focus. Its purpose is to explore that topic and the underlying assumptions we hold about it. It's not to make decisions or choices but rather to listen for deeper understanding and insight, which may lead to further inquiry.

It begins with "double-loop" learning in which we are surfacing and inquiring into the mental models we hold about the topic. As we examine our assumptions, values, and reasoning behind our actions and choices, and explore the ways we reason defensively (in response to perceived threats), we begin to understand how our thinking and feeling is shaped and filtered.

A generative dialogue has no topic or focus. All material arises from the group, in the moment. Its purpose is to learn about the processes of thinking, feeling, and dialogue themselves.

It begins with "triple-loop" learning in which we are going further to become more conscious of the context from which assumptions and beliefs arise. As we observe thought in action, we can observe how we are making our observations and even ask who is observing? We are inquiring into the nature of thought itself.

But it IS more than that – generative dialogue takes us away from ‘judgment’ to ‘acceptance’ where people can just BE and and thus choice becomes itself, as an open system of exploration, discovery and creation. (Trottier, 1985)

Dialogue Building Blocks

In Glenna Gerard and Linda Teurfs’ work with Dialogue, they have identified four building blocks or overlapping and interwoven sets of skills:

- suspension of judgment
- identification of assumptions
- listening
- inquiry and reflection
General Guidelines:

- Listen and speak without judgment.
- Accept the other person from where they are at – not where they ‘should be at’.
- Respect differences – even celebrate them.
- See through and suspend role and status.
- Balance inquiry and advocacy.
- Avoid ‘cross-talk’.
- Focus on learning about the other and about oneself.
- Constantly seek the next level of understanding.
- Release the need for answers and specific outcomes.
- Speak when ‘moved’ – be authentic and genuine.
- Say, “I don’t know”, when I don’t know...which, for me, is most of the time.

Surfacing and "Suspending" Judgments and Assumptions

A key practice in Dialogue is surfacing and then "suspending" assumptions and judgments. "Suspend" comes from Latin roots that mean to "hang up," like hanging clothes on a clothesline. Suspending assumptions and judgments is not putting them in abeyance, but rather holding them up in front of us for conscious examination and exploration.

How often are we mindful of the assumptions and judgments from which we operate, make choices, and act in the world?

In Dialogue we begin to see others' points of view and become more open to new ways to perceive and think about the situation. We realize our judgments about how we think things are is not necessarily the "truth." Each person's comments are seen as "true" in their own right, and our challenge is to see how they fit together into a coherent pattern.

In exploring our underlying beliefs, assumptions, inferences, and generalizations, we can begin to explore our differences with others and discover where there is common ground.
Listening

Listening is essential to Dialogue, not just to others but also to ourselves and our inner processes. This goes far beyond basic active listening for understanding to deeply reflective and mindful listening.

The Chinese characters which make up the verb "to listen" tell us something important:

As Krishnamurti reminds us in "Listen..." we can truly listen and learn only when we are giving someone (or something) our undivided attention.

In Dialogue, we also listen for the larger meaning that is emerging from the honest, open sharing among our different perspectives.

Inquiry and Reflection

In Dialogue, we ask questions to reach new levels of understanding. We inquire together to make our thinking processes visible to ourselves and others, rather than assuming that we automatically know what is meant or intended. We inquire to learn, rather than to make points or to confirm our own assumptions. We inquire from a place of genuine curiosity and wondering. Focusing on penetrating questions opens the way for seeing things with new eyes. As Sherrin Bennett and Juanita Brown write, "Inquiring into our most critical challenges and simultaneously noticing the way we think about them has the potential to yield insights which neither can do alone."

Reflection is also necessary for learning and creating meaning. We step back and look again at what is happening, how we think about it, and what it means to us now. We learn to work with silence and slow down the conversation so we can pay attention to our internal processes and patterns. Reflection allows us to turn things over in creative ways and improve the quality of our thinking together.
Shift Happens

Dialogue generates ‘shifts’ in how we are and how we relate to others and the world. Assimilating ‘different perspectives’ can and does accommodate emerging perspectives, synergies and systems to experience and act from – A transformation to “a creative state”.

(Trottier, Patrick; 1975)

As William Isaacs points out, we must shift from:

- certainty to uncertainty
- arrogance to humility
- competence to vulnerability
- knower to learner
- hearing to listening
- foreground to background
- fragmentation to wholeness
- disembodied observer to mindful participant

As thought is attended to and observed, it changes. The challenge is how to attend to how we know, think, feel, and act collectively. Dialogue creates a setting for where we can practice collective mindfulness.
EVOLVING (naive) PRINCIPLES:

- We construct what we need / want to learn…
- Continuous learning comes from continuous ‘construction’…
- Dialogue is a ‘construction’…
- There are no ‘right’ answers…or results…
- Beliefs are a closed system…
- People learn best from where they are…
- Learning moves from the natural to the unnatural and unknown… and FORWARD to the natural.
- Learning is an evolutionary process…
- Transformation occurs naturally…
- Development happens over time and needs performance to sustain.

GENERATIVE DIALOGUE is a relational extension of observation, reflection, insight and interaction. Engaging in the above processes with others in relation to scenarios and social construction processes by engaging in relational dialogue, may result in learning and new performance. Generative dialogue generates learning, new possibilities for action and alternate ways BEing.

RELATIONAL EXPERIENCE is engaging with the self, the world, or a scenario in a relational way. Experience uses many mediums. Dialogue is a major medium, especially in community / groups. Dialogue involves some degree of interpretation and coordinated action. A community of thought, feeling and sensing forms around experiences of mutual interests. Since we socially construct reality via relational interpretation processes and frequently supplement relational acts from these interpretations, when we accompany our experiences with generative reflection, we form community around our experiences. When dialogue is continuous and reflection is continuous, learning is continuous.

REFLECTION is consciously engaging with; a. our interpretations of our experiences (self and others), b. our lenses for viewing our experiences, c. and our practices with our experiences – what we do in and with them. Reflection involves observing ourselves in the observation/interaction process. If observation is a first order activity, then reflection is second order. Assimilation and adaptation (learning) from different ‘levels’ of continuous feedback would be third order. It includes observation of the observer/interpreter/actor coordinating with self, others and the world around.

INSIGHT occurs in coordination with observation/reflection. Insight occurs as the emergence of ‘news’ of difference and distinction. For example, when a scenario is experienced in a way in which new possibilities emerge; or when a social reality construction process is experienced as being one of many possibilities for going on, emerging insights can be said to occur. (e.g., shifting co-ordinations with other from conflict to inquiry, seeing self as a ‘victim’ to a ‘creator’, from experiencing self in chaos to a receptionist being able to handle many situations within a skilled pattern or form).
PERFORMANCE OF THE UNNATURAL AND UNKNOWN is performing what we don't quite yet know because we haven't yet done it in our practice (e.g., first time riding a bike, or making love, or walking). Performance is the process of assimilation and accommodation (action) towards a goal, or way of Being. This is the zone of new discovery. With ‘practice’ and experiencing continuous feedback, we adjust our perspectives and actions to that which is ‘known’. In generative dialogue and ‘relational practice’ in a community, performance of the unnatural and unknown frequently occurs and learning and development moves as a natural process.

Some Resources on Dialogue


"On Dialogue," by David Bohm, David Bohm Seminars, 1990

"Learning From Online Dialogue," by Greg Kramer and Terri O'Fallon, sent to all CIP members via e-mail, August 1996