

Dialogue and the Transformation of Memory

Peter Garrett, Dialogos, Inc. and Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice, University of Bath, Bath, UK

Although conversation and dialogue have a heritage of many thousands of years, I am using the term dialogue to refer to a particular approach pioneered by a small group of us from the early 1980's. The roots of the word are interesting: dia means 'through' (as in the word 'diameter') and logos is 'the word'. This gives the sense of dialogue as 'the flow of meaning through' a group of people. Perhaps the following paragraph that one of the key members of that original group, physicist David Bohm, and I wrote shortly after a conference we held in England in 1984 (involving forty-six people) will give a feel for the origins of dialogue:

The weekend began with the expectation that there would be a series of lectures and informative discussions with emphasis on content. It gradually emerged that something more important was actually involved - the awakening of the process of dialogue itself as a free flow of meaning among all the participants. In the beginning, people were expressing fixed positions, which they were tending to defend, but later it became clear that to maintain the feeling of friendship in the group was much more important than to hold any position. Such friendship has an impersonal quality in the sense that its establishment does not depend on a close personal relationship between participants. A new kind of mind thus begins to come into being which is based on the development of a common meaning that is constantly transforming in the process of the dialogue. People are no longer primarily in opposition, nor can they be said to be interacting, rather they are participating in this pool of common meaning which is capable of constant development and change. In this development the group has no pre-established purpose, though at each moment a purpose that is free to change may reveal itself. The group thus begins to engage in a new dynamic relationship in which no speaker is excluded. Thus far we have only begun to explore the possibilities of dialogue in the sense indicated here, but going further along these lines would open up the possibility of transforming not only the relationship between people, but even more, the very nature of consciousness in which these relationships arise.(1)

Our exploration into this new kind of group conversation deepened through a series of public and private gatherings and on-going groups I organized in various locations in Europe and Israel, whilst other groupings also met in the United States. Seven years later we were in a better position to describe the initiative we had embarked on and were finding so fruitful:

Dialogue, as we are choosing to use the word, is a way of exploring the roots of the many crises that face humanity today. It enables inquiry into, and understanding of, the sorts of processes that fragment and interfere with real communication between individuals, nations, and even different parts of the same organization. In our modern culture men and women are able to interact with one another in many ways: they can sing, dance, or play together with little difficulty, but their ability to talk together about subjects that matter deeply to them seems invariably to lead to dispute, division, and often to violence. In our view this condition points to a deep and pervasive defect in the process of human thought.(2)

In Dialogue a group of people can explore the individual and collective presuppositions, ideas, beliefs, and feelings that subtly control their interactions. It provides an opportunity for them to participate in a process that displays their successes and failures of communication and it can reveal the often puzzling patterns of incoherence that lead them to avoid certain issues or, on the other hand, to insist, against all reason, on standing and defending their opinions about them.

Put in the simplest terms, dialogue is a way for a group of people to enquire together through conversation. The approach may be used by a group of peers (such as the partners of a firm), by all members of a team or department, or by a diverse group drawn from a diagonal cross-section of a company or organization. Typically, the group would meet on a voluntary basis and regularly, say for a couple of hours each week, or for a day each month. Participants are seated in a circle (or if the group is too large, two concentric circles) to signify that during the dialogue each person's voice potentially carries equal weight. In the early stages there will be the need for an experienced facilitator to help cultivate an enquiry, but that facilitator will 'lead from behind' and aim for the facilitation role to become redundant.

The intention of the dialogue is for those present to find a way of exploring together just what it is that leads each of them to feel, think, speak, and act the way they do. This inevitably requires people to be

candid and genuine, as well as a taking each others' points of view seriously, even when what is said seems outrageous or simply wrong. Curiously, through dialogue, people who hold (and maintain) deeply differing views can find themselves closely involved in the same enquiry together. Within an organization, this can free up deeply entrenched issues between individuals and sub-groups which otherwise persist to the detriment of the whole.

To cite one extreme example, I have run dialogues in a maximum-security prison in England which involved (amongst others) people from all factions of troubled Northern Ireland - i.e. prisoners who were Catholic (IRA), others who were Protestant, and yet others from the British Army which had been stationed in Ulster - all enquiring together into the roots of violence in Ireland. The men involved were politically active and had centuries of hatred to back up their positions, yet with the unique opportunity to think together within the dialogue they soon found themselves appreciating each other's company and able to turn over their thoughts in quite new ways.

The starting point is listening. As an agenda-free conversation, dialogue stretches one's capacity to listen to others. Beyond this is the listening to the thoughts and feelings within oneself which are stimulated and provoked by the conversation. Following these internal processes will yield clues to the assumptions and beliefs which are driving one's own behaviour. It takes time to develop the kind of attention and discipline required to both participate fully in the conversation and to recognize what is going on within oneself at the same time. Without reflection of this kind, however, it is not possible to engage in dialogue. Instead there is only the familiar exchange of opinions leading to discussion, debate, and eventually argument. The facilitator can usefully clarify things by participating in a way which actively demonstrates the nature of dialogue and enquiry.

The difficulty facing those wanting to establish dialogue lies in the nature of memory, which acts so rapidly that it is often unnoticed. There is an important distinction between 'thinking' (the present activity) and 'thought' (past thinking which arises out of memory). When we find ourselves reacting in an automatic way without inner listening, this is the action of memory. This tendency to react is greatly increased when we are under pressure or when we are talking about things which really matter to us. If you criticize my pet project or call me an idiot, for example, I probably find myself in a defensive mode before I have even considered whether or not what you are saying is true. This is the action of memory, with thoughts being mechanically stimulated or provoked by the conversation or circumstance. It can be similarly helpful to distinguish between 'feeling' (the present experience of emotion) and what has in the past been 'felt' (and now arises out of memory rather than immediate experience). I believe that 'felts' are just as common as 'thoughts' in the normal run of things. Both are rapid, automatic reactions which will cause trouble unless there is an immediate process of thinking and feeling to check their relevance to the present situation.

Initially, the challenge of tracking the processes of the conversation and distinguishing between present experience and prompted memory (i.e. thinking and thought, feeling and what had been felt) is achieved retrospectively through reflection. It is an achievement for a group to reflect together on what has occurred in a conversation. To really expose the patterns at work and make a behavioural difference which sticks, however, requires suspension. This involves metaphorically hanging (or suspending) ones thoughts and felts in the centre of the dialogue circle so that they can be enquired into by you and the whole group. One says what is occurring as it occurs, enabling the theory in action to be accessed whilst the collective pattern is still active which induces this kind of reaction. When a group of people are able to do this together, there is the possibility of the transformation of the collective consciousness out of which the various individual relationships arise.

During the 1990's considerable work has been done on the application of dialogue within organizations, and experience has been gained within multi-national corporations, medium and small commercial companies, as well as within prisons and hospitals. As a large system intervention, dialogue is proving invaluable as a forum within which disabling collectively held thought patterns can be revealed and changed. It encourages consideration of purpose, the practical implication of values, and engenders the kind of common sense which enables all involved to recognize their part in a collective endeavor without the traditional decision-making authorisations.

--

1 Unfolding Meaning, David Bohm 1985 - Ark, London

2 "[Dialogue: A Proposal](#)", David Bohm, Don Factor, and Peter Garrett 1991