SYSTEMS SENSITIVE DIALOGUE INTERVENTION

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Abstract
This paper present a general methodology for dialogue interventions, Systems Sensitive Dialogue Intervention. Alongside the increased interest in dialogue, critical voices against the promised potential of various dialogue methods have been raised. Here, dialogue is viewed in the light of Gerald Midgley’s general presentation of systemic intervention. Through focusing on the key elements in two popular dialogue methods and a reference to the dialogue philosophy of Martin Buber, I a) propose that a group of people engaged in dialogue is a unique human system, and enhancing individual participants sensitivity to the unique human system they form is a primary task of the dialogue intervention. Thus in designing dialogue intervention the primary focus should not be on method but on the human system and its particular needs. b) In designing dialogical interventions it is useful to creatively use elements from different available dialogical methods and c) dialogue interventions should be designed in experiential and existential rather than in metaphysical terms.

Keywords: dialogue, systemic intervention, systems sensitivity
INTRODUCTION

Over the past ten years, dialogue has made a breakthrough in a number of fields. Dialogue has been recommended by organizational theoreticians and applied in organizations for various purposes. The Systems Thinking variant of the Learning Organization (Senge & al. 1990, 1994), The Knowledge Creating Company (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995) and the notion of Corporate Culture (Schein 1999) are examples of general organizational theories which regard dialogue as a central organizational practice. Dialogue and dialogical methods are presented as a core practice of specific organizational areas such as team learning (Senge & al. 1990 & 1994), leadership programs (Frydman & al 2000), corporate responsibility and human rights (Frankental & al. 2000) and Business Ethics (Maclagan 2000, van Hooft 2000). Dialogue has been implemented in various cross-cultural settings (Du Bois & Hutson 1997), Participatory planning, Community building (Freire 1972, Hammond 2004), and in national and international conflict resolution (Deutsch & Coleman 2000, Susskind & al 1999). Educational dialogue has been presented as an alternative to traditional teacher and fact centered education (Norris 2003). Moreover, general recipes for dialogical interventions and consultancy have been put forth by theoreticians and practitioners alike. (Isaacs 1999, Simmons 1999, Flick 1998, Yankelovich 1999, Ellinor & Gerard 1998).

Dialogue aims at providing an alternative conversational pattern, changing and improving the way of interaction, and strengthening people’s capability to think together. The most influential philosopher today with respect to the mushrooming of the practice of dialogue is David Bohm (Bohm 1992, 1996). His writings on dialogue have become a paradigm in Systems Thinking focused organizational management and have inspired practitioners in various fields to develop methods and guidelines for dialogue intervention. Another dialogue method, particularly popular in the field of philosophical
practice and the philosophy of management, is Socratic Dialogue, developed out of Leonard Nelson's (1956) dialogue conception. In contrast to Leonard Nelson and David Bohm, Marin Buber did not develop a method or guidelines for dialogue intervention. Common for the dialogue conception of all the three pioneers is the view that dialogue ought to be an everyday practice not only a philosophical theory, that dialogue transforms human relationship by overcoming individual and cultural barriers for sharing meaning and values, and that genuine dialogue is the overcoming of private superficialities and defenses that we normally submit to in everyday encounters, discussions and debates.

The purpose of this paper is to present a general methodology for dialogue intervention, Systems Sensitive Dialogue Intervention that can be used by practitioners and researcher in their planning of dialogue interventions. Follow Midgley (2000) I propose that dialogue interventions ought to take action for improvement as an explicit starting point. The key idea of Systems Sensitive Dialogue Intervention is that a dialogue intervention should take the needs of the human system that is to be engaged in the dialogue as the primary basis for the intervention. Improvement is thus defined temporarily and locally as different human systems and agents may use different boundary judgements (Midgley 2000). In Systems Sensitive Dialogue Intervention improvement is viewed through realization of the desired consequences of the human system engaged in dialogue. The aim of different dialogue methods include, for example be the clarification of a concept, conflict resolution, reflection and unity. When the aims are realized they represent improvement, if the system engaged in dialogue judges so. Also, Systems Sensitive Dialogue Intervention encourages the participants in dialogue to reflect on boundaries through rigorous communication and self-reflection.
Moreover, political and metaphysical considerations are left to the participants and hidden motivations are excluded.

The idea of Systems Sensitive Dialogue Intervention is related to the research on Systems Intelligence, Philosophy and Dialogue at the Systems Analysis Laboratory at Helsinki University of Technology (Saarinen and Slotte 2003; Slotte and Hämäläinen 2003; Saarinen and Hämäläinen 2004; Slotte and Saarinen 2004).

From the point of view presented here, the methods to facilitate dialogue interventions should not be regarded as static but flexible and should be chosen in compliance with the expectations, needs, fears, values and level of maturity of the individuals participating, and with the human system they together create. Thus, generally speaking, dialogue is not a method, but an attitude towards other human beings and issues that can be enhanced by different methods. In this aspect Martin Buber philosophy of dialogue is fundamental. Buber’s views on dialogue have been applied in counseling and to some extent in conflict situations (Schuster 1999) but when it comes to dialogue interventions in larger human systems his practical views on dialogue have remained somewhat in the shadow. For example Senge (1990), Isaacs (1999), Dixon (1998), Yankelovich (1999) and Flinck (1998) all mention Buber as an important figure. However, methods and applications are not put forward with reference to his work.

Attitudes towards engaging in a relational way must be promoted by pointing to the relational character of human systems. The importance of the relational aspects of dialogue cannot be emphasized enough. Dialogue becomes first and foremost a way to engage with the other participants partaking in the dialogue. The challenge is to
recognize the uniqueness of the human system comprised by participants and engage in it. This calls for participants to, for the duration if the dialogue, set aside perspectives from or connections to other systems.

Thus, Systems Sensitive Dialogue Intervention focuses on enhancing human systems, be that a team, a family, a class or a conflict situation, in order to recollecting, creating and strengthening systemic values and applying these to solve tasks specific to that system. Dialogue is associated with powerful changes in thinking and attitudes but the classification of the metaphysical nature of these experiences should be left to the dialoguers themselves, and not be pre-established by facilitators relying on possible but controversial metaphysical aspects of dialogue presented in the literature.

CHALLENGES

Recent criticism of dialogue questions the presumed power of dialogue. Ralph D. Stacey (2001) claims that dialogue is an attempt to return to the ancient wisdom and conversational patterns of old cultures, such as those of North American Indians. True enough, many practitioners present this as a strong idea of dialogue (Bohm 1996, Isaacs 1999). Stacey rebukes this as a nonsensical romantic idea of a lost Eden. However, the reference to Native Americans is more a pedagogical way of illustrating alternatives to aggressive debate, advocacy and dialectics. The rise of the idea and practice of dialogue is, in fact, a highly modern phenomenon with purely western roots (Taylor 1989, Walker 1999). Dialogue has been a central way to engage in philosophical matters with practical implications ever since the days of Socrates. During the Hellenistic era of philosophy, the practice of dialogue and dialogical skills, such as listening and
awareness, became a central skill in the philosophical quest for a good life (Hadot 1995). Not before the first half of the 20th century, however, did philosophers, such as Leonard Nelson and Martin Buber, formulate the basic ideas of dialogue as a practice that all men and women can and should engage in. It is these philosophies of dialogue that organizational practitioners, theoreticians, educationalists and consultants today are using in real world interventions.

In opposition to Bohm’s and Senge’s dialogue conception Stacey (2001) wants to draw attention to the multitude of everyday conversations that can be very creative but also very destructive. According to Stacey it is difficult to understand how the rapid changes we are currently witnessing are occurring in organizations, if the lost art of dialogue is the only way towards creative change. Moreover, Stacey claims that organizational theoreticians and consultants, instead of presenting dialogue and other conversational tools of an idealized kind should focus on understanding the communicative interaction we currently engage in within hierarchical organizations. Here it is necessary to point out that even though it is true that many companies experience a positive and rapid change, not all organizations do. Moreover, there is extensive evidence suggesting that ordinary communication and the “thinking” that accompanies it, often goes wrong in ways that may have negative, sometimes fatal, impact on a wide variety of organizational aspects: failure of change programs, failure of strategic programs, and collapse of internal and external ethics (Senge 1990, De Geuss 1999, Della Costa 1999). It is widely accepted that ordinary communication and thinking can, and at times should, be the object of change (Janis 1982, Huczynski and Buchanan 2001). Far from being an idealization, dialogue takes into account ordinary ways of communication and can, in the form of dialogue sessions, be a complement to these. The
lessons and skills learned in dialogue session can also be transformed and incorporated into other more ordinary forms of communication and interaction.

According to Stacey, dialogue wrongly assumes a distinction between individual and collective mind. Stacey argues that “the individual and the group are the same phenomenon and there is no transcendent whole, or group mind, or common pool of meaning outside of them. Instead, meaning is emerging in the communicative interaction between people in their local situation in the present (Stacey 2001).

However, dialogue is fundamentally not resting on such an ontological split, but rather in line with the view Stacey holds on this particular issue. Bohm, whose ideas about dialogue the argument is directed against, clearly states that individual thinking is dependent on cultural structures of thought and that individual thinking has an impact on the common structure and content of thought in a given culture (Bohm 1996).

Indeed, dialogue is not Cartesian in its ontology. Rather dialogue is to be understood as dynamically relational. Dialogue is not to be found in either one individual or another but in the interchange between them. This is the core of Buber’s dialogue conception.

SYSTEMS FOCUS

According to Buber, the entrance to dialogue is the realization that man is a relational creature that has the possibility to meet, communicate and create in a “space between”. The relationality and the “space between” is not just something one might choose or wish to engage in; it exists independently of any particular action between two human beings. The “space between” is not observable in space and time in the same sense that
a single individuals and a collective are. For example, changes in a person, such as aging, can be seen when observing that person for some time. Likewise, a collective and its changes can be observed in space and time. However, the “space between” is not observable in similar fashion. It is re-constituted in every accidental and inevitable meeting between two persons (Buber 1947). According to Buber the ontology, i.e. the reality of human existence is therefore systemic, in the systems theoretic sense of the word. A human system and its nature is neither comprised of the sum of the individuals engaged in it, nor of the individuals determined by the collective. The “space between” is the realm which two or more people can develop and nourish consciously if they set aside the misconception that thought or ideas can only be communicated from an individual to another (radical individualism), or that rules and forces external to these two individuals must determine what is spoken (radical collectivism). The space between can be said to be a sort of common reason where multiple voices create and work on single ideas. According to Buber (1947), to engage in dialogue is to fully engage oneself in that relation in every particular situation.

Without the engagement with, or a turning towards the other, dialogue is impossible. Dialogue is not first and foremost a detached presentation of ones ideas or a detached inquiry into the ideas of others. It is not I, communicating my opinions to you or vice versa. Dialogue is not communication about but communication with.

According to Buber dialogue does not necessarily mean to give up ones own point of view or fully accept that of the other. The individual sphere is untouched, but when both enter into the realm of dialogue “the law of the individual points no longer holds” (Buber 1947, 7). In dialogue two individuals become a system, but an intelligent system where responsibility resides.
As it turns out dialogue is something existing not as a pure theory or method but as a possible way of life or attitude. The variety of situations in life, the heterogeneity of human relations and the challenges of everyday life do not obey one method. Therefore, sensitivity to the human system striving for dialogue calls for using whatever methods it takes for them to reach dialogue. This, in contrast to the idea of using one single dialogue method on every particular problem. The necessary conditions for dialogue to emerge are recognition of relationality, trust, the idea of communication with, and responsibility (Buber 1947).

Participants of a dialogue should be encouraged to participate in such a systemic process. In dialogue the main focus is not on our selves or our own system, or on others or their system, but on the system that is comprised of the participants. This means that dialogue is not first and foremost aimed at exchanging views between contributors from to different perspectives or human systems. The focus of a dialogue should primarily be on the values, knowledge and ideas within the system currently engaged in dialogue, not on the values, knowledge and ideas of the individuals or the system they represent. Cross-cultural dialogue aims at exchange of worldviews and knowledge between dialoguers from different cultures. Recently Cross-cultural dialogue has been strongly criticized for encouraging such knowledge of the other that is considered inappropriate (Jones 1999). In a cross-cultural dialogue where white and black students were participating in order to exchange information about their own culture the demands by white students to know marginalized black students enforced colonizing attitudes and strengthened prejudices. According to Jones (1999) emphatic knowing in cross-cultural dialogue can thus prevent us from recognizing our own systematic complicity. From the point of view presented here cross-cultural dialogue is not dialogue in neither Buberian,
Bohmian or Nelsonian sense. Its starting point is communication about others, not communication with.

In a unique dialogue situation participants practice and focus on the virtues of dialogue, pay attention to their own habits of thought, mental models and possible prejudices. Especially dialogue aiming at mediating in conflicts between participants should aid understanding and respect for their counterparts by encouraging meeting the person behind the system or position they represent. Engagement in group dialogue leaves personal integrity intact but allows for surprise and unpredictable innovations in the interplay between dialoguers. A genuine dialogue is first and foremost neither a place to exchange ideas or a place of objective understanding but a place where “each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them” (Buber 1947).

Naturally, participants in a dialogue also have obligations and commitments to other systems and goals. The point here is that dialogue is especially well suited for understanding and working with the human system one is temporarily engaged with. When a dialogical relationship is established it can well serve as a basis for discussing and reflecting on commitments to other human systems.

MIXING METHODS

The systems focus in Systems Sensitive Dialogue Intervention bears consequences on method. First, the idea that there is only one particular method for dialogue must be abandoned. The proposal here is that the starting point of a dialogue intervention should not be one given method and its utilizations for a given purpose but rather the needs and
challenges of the human system that is to be engaged in dialogue. The human system comes first, then method. This is not to say that methods are superfluous. In the following I shall briefly present two popular dialogue methods, Bohmian and Nelsonian dialogue. I will point to the fact that they can be regarded as complements in dialogue interventions.

The Bohmian Method

According to the Bohmian School of dialogue, the focus in dialogue should be on process rather than on content. A dialogue should not have a predetermined agenda or a given content. By paying attention to the guidelines or virtues of dialogue, the agenda or issues are said to emerge during the dialogue process itself. William Isaacs (1999) presents four principal virtues: listening, suspension of judgment, expressing and respecting. The virtues are not simply presented as virtues that one can automatically turn to but rather as skills that one should develop and learn to practice. Other important virtues or skills presented by Isaac and other theoreticians and practitioners include thinking together, encouraging others to speak, focusing on the issue and not on personal character of other participants, winning together rather than winning for your self, speaking from experience, and changing the point of view.

The reason to engage in dialogue is, for Bohm and others who shares his view on dialogue, a practical matter. Dialogue creates shared meaning, values and a sense of community that supports joint action and the creation of culture. By making dialogue one of the core principles of an organization or a community a new communication and thinking culture can emerge. Isaacs (1999) and Senge (1994) provide a lot of examples how this happens. For Senge (1990, 1994) dialogue becomes a way to align action. According to Senge, Bohmian type of dialogue gives access to such information and
meaning that cannot be accessed individually, enhances new action, provides individuals with collective meaning and offers a place for innovation and inquiry (1990). Furthermore, all these capabilities are thought to improve efficiency in groups and in organizations.

**The Socratic Method**

Leonard Nelson developed the Socratic Method. The method, also known as Socratic Dialogue or Neo-Socratic Dialogue, is a way to engage people in an advanced philosophical dialogue. The method should naturally not be confused with the Socratic dialogues of Plato even if it is inspired by Socrates (Boele 1997). Participation in a Socratic Dialogue does not require prior experience in philosophy but an interest to discuss philosophical and ethical questions and a willingness to distance oneself from one’s own commitments (Boele 1998, Van Hooft 2000). In organizational contexts, Socratic dialogue has become especially popular in developing and investigating values and business ethics (Bolten 2001, Kessels 2001, Van Hooft 2000). The Nelsonian conception of dialogue stands out by always focusing on a concept, in contrast to the idea that dialogue is rather “process than content”. The merits of the Socratic Dialogue are a) that it provides a structured way to engage in dialogue about a given issue and b) that dialoguers find perspectives on the issue from personal experiences, thus avoiding speculation and possible power differences due to, for example, educational level or authority.

The core of Socratic Dialogue is called “regressive abstraction”. Regressive abstraction is an inquiry into the everyday experiences of participants and their understanding of these experiences by comparing, analyzing and seeing them in the light of the general concepts they are founded on. For example a concrete experience conceptualized and
described as an instance of freedom is contrasted with a general definition of freedom. Both the concrete experience and the abstraction are developed in the course of the dialogue by the dialoguers themselves.

A Socratic Dialogue starts with a question of investigation, for instance: “What is meaningful work?”, “What is freedom?”, or “What is love?”. The dialogue starts with all participants giving a personal example of a situation were they feel that an instance of the matter of investigation was realized. The participants, when presenting their examples, do not have to prove that their examples are an instance of the matter of investigation. Intuition or feeling is enough. The example should be one in which the participant herself is a main character. Also, the example should be concrete in space and time. For example; “Two weeks ago on Sunday, when visiting a friend of mine the following happened”. The dialogue proceeds by discussing which one of the examples should be chosen as a core example of the investigation. After choosing one example the dialogue gradually reaches a more and more abstract level culminating in a core definition: E.g. “freedom is X” were X stands for a sentence of attributes suggested and dialogued about amongst the participants. Thereafter the dialogue proceeds back to the concrete by analyzing the abstract judgments principles and rules and ending at the question about its applicability in concrete life.

**Content and Process**

For a general methodology of dialogue interventions both the Bohmian and Nelsonian method are important. The design of a dialogue intervention should take into consideration both content and process. Dialogue intervention can focus solely on content but often such dialogues do not have an impact on the way people interact. It does not provide dialoguers with a new ability for interaction. Dialoguers of purely
content focused dialogue may get information and viewpoints on an issue or a concept but it does not enhance further engagement in dialogue. Likewise, dialogue can focus purely on process. However, to engage in a dialogue with no agenda can easily grow into a feeling that it is a waste time especially if it is a conflict situation and in times of pressing problems (Frydman et al. 2000).

When the choice of method is based on the needs of the human system engaging in dialogue, a combination of methods can be useful. For instance a conflict situation might require that participants improve their listening skills, are encouraged to show respect for other stakeholders, and are presented to the idea of, thinking together, e.g. focusing on process. However, focusing on content or merely on some aspects of the conflict may be necessary to commit participants to the dialogue. Mixing of dialogue methods in creative ways has been done in educational (Slotte and Hjelm 2002) and natural resources decision making contexts (Slotte and Hämäläinen 2003). In the latter case the reflection on boundaries as an improvement itself became important. Creative mixing of dialogue methods can also be strengthened by other dialogue-related methods such as Appreciative Inquiry (Copperrider and Whitney 1999) or Communication Other/Wise (Bokeno 2002).

FROM METAPHYSICS TO EXPERIENCE

Commitment to any particular metaphysics of dialogue is not a necessary condition to engage in dialogue. Researchers and practitioners should sustain from advancing any metaphysical agenda of their own. Midgley (2000) points out and questions the fact that some people in the Community OR research community have included political agendas in their interventions. What applies to political agendas in Midgley’s analysis applies here to metaphysics. What matters is the personal experience of engaging in dialogue
and its potentially transformative power. On the personal level dialogue teaches the individual to pay attention to, for example, listening, awareness and respect in front of the other. On the group level individuals experience that it is possible to think together in various ways. The occurrence of collective thinking in dialogue, the group dynamical and conceptual understanding gained through dialogue and viewpoints for renewed action and behavior attained in dialogue are well-documented phenomena of dialogical interventions.

However, many of the prevailing dialogue methods and theories include metaphysical claims such as "the unfolding of thought", "the implicate order", "the self-confidence of reason” and "unity with God”. Philosophically, Bohm, Nelson and Buber are in their full right to ascribe metaphysical characteristic to dialogue but these meta-level descriptions should not inform a dialogue intervention. When the applicative literature presents the metaphysical hypotheses and metaphors of the philosophies of dialogue as hard facts of dialogue, dialogue often becomes a quest for these metaphysical and metaphorical states. Dialogue then becomes or is perceived by participants as a mystic procedure were the ultimate goal is to experience a metaphysical state such as the implicate order, collective intelligence, the one, God or the Platonic world of ideas.

For example, if dialogue is defined as quest for the platonic ideas or unity with God it would be difficult and ethically questionable to engage a relativist respectively an atheist in the dialogue. Participants in a dialogue should be given the sole right to draw their own metaphysical conclusion about the dialogue. Systems sensitivity does not involve, preclude or exclude any predetermined metaphysics but concerns observable relational aspects. In other words, I propose that the classification of the metaphysical nature of these experiences should be left to the dialoguers themselves. Imposing any
metaphysical ideas on dialoguers is at odds with the core ideas of dialogue. Participation in a dialogue which assumes some alien metaphysical principle can be awkward and restrain people from engaging in dialogue. When such metaphysical entities are presented as the goal of dialogue the core philosophical principles of dialogue as a free encounter between dialoguers become endangered. First, an ethical point: there is a risk that the metaphysical entities are at odds with the personal worldviews of the dialoguers. Second and third two pragmatic points: methods to facilitate dialogue become guided by the metaphysical entities in favor of the needs, creativity and engagement of the dialoguers. Third, dialogue looses its connection to practical issues, and instead of being a strong personal experience and a new possible attitude towards discussed issues it runs the risk of becoming a ritual predetermined by a metaphysical agenda.

It should also be noted that dialoguers often express their personal experiences in personal or subjective terms, sometimes reflecting personal, sometimes cultural values. When a group uses terms such as “magic” or “energy” to express their experiences, it should not automatically be viewed in metaphysical terms. Actors, as well as dialoguers often use the world “energy” metaphorically or poetically to describe the level of cooperation. If understood literally the experience of “energy” and talk of energy levels could easily be dismissed as unscientific but interpreted metaphorically it can make perfect sense (see for instance Collins 2004).

However, practitioners should not hide their personal view on metaphysical questions if they are strongly committed to any. They, should however make it explicit that the participants are free to draw their own metaphysical conclusions.

CONCLUSIONS
Dialogue creates meaningful joint action that can address and illuminate issues of great importance to participants. The scientist, philosopher, consultant or manager facilitating a dialogue should creatively and appropriately combine content and process with sensitivity to the human system that are to engage in dialogue.

Dialoguers should be encouraged to participate in a systemic process. In dialogue the main focus is not on our selves, the other, our system, their system but the system that is comprised out of the participants. For example in conflict and problem situations, emphasis on different viewpoints and problem-talk can in the worst-case scenario increase or maintain the conflict or crisis (Jones 1999, Copperrider and Whitney 1999).

When participants learn to engage in dialogue, they learn a new way of relating that in itself is more of an act than mere speech or contemplating on ideas. This action or attitude can be used in any human encounter. In other words, dialogue does not only provide tacit knowledge, align new action and values, inform decisions but is a possible attitude one can realize in every action with other human beings.

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