

## THE VALUE OF DIALOGUE

Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), a visionary advocate for technology, is known for declaring: "The medium is the message," He also predicted that advances in mass communication that would lead to the "global village" that is now a reality. His views align with the importance of communicative literacy in this technological age. Unfortunately, in spite of the marvelous achievements in technological communication, there is the "general feeling that communication is breaking down everywhere, on an unparalleled scale. People . . . are hardly able to talk with one another without fighting (Bohm, 1996, p. 1). Conflict and adversarial relationships exist around the globe and in communities, schools and families. A catastrophic outcome of poor communication is a feeling of pervasive fragmentation. Such fragmentation creates confusion, misunderstanding and social isolation. Fragmentation causes insurmountable barriers to communication. Bohm uses the metaphor of a smashed watch that is beyond repair to represent the fatal effects of fragmentation. To prevent this from happening, communication must be given priority.

### *Communication*

All communication involves speaker(s), listener(s) and contexts. Speakers initiate communication and convey meaning. Listeners attempt to understand communication. The environment is both a situation for communication and a context ("co-text") that is a source of meaning. Thus the immediate environment is a "participant" in communication (Pinell, 1998). Consistent with this view, in the

Reggio philosophy, the ECE environment is described as a “teacher” (Gandini, 1998; Gandini, Hill, Caldwell & Schwall, 2005).

The context of communication has other dimensions also. It includes where the communication takes place as well as the contexts related to what happened, is happening now or may happen in the future (Pinell, 1998). Therefore contexts may be immediate, remote, historical or imagined. For example, think of communication in one’s school (immediate) that also refers to practices in another school or community that may have been visited or read about (remote), or that existed during another time (historical) or the ideal school that one would like to work at someday (imagined). All of these contexts may come into play in designing one’s own classroom and curriculum.

### *Communication Games*

Communication can be categorized into different types of activities. Because, each type of communication has specific roles, rules, purposes and expectations, they may be likened to communication games (Wittgenstein, 1958). Some familiar communication games include: conversation, discussion, debate, argument and dialogue.

Conversation is an informal, spontaneous exchange of thoughts, information, opinions, advice and feelings. Conversation is often used to initiate and develop relationships. Thus conversation is other-oriented rather than task-oriented. For the most part, conversational has social purposes and assists in developing relationships.

Discussion involves the analysis of a topic. Discussion seeks to discover all the information that is relevant to the topic at hand and eliminate nonessential or erroneous information. Discussion is more task-oriented than other oriented.

Debate is an argument or contest between opposing viewpoints. Debate is task-oriented and views the other as an opponent rather than a partner in communication. Communication is directed to an audience or judge rather than the other speaker. Being right, persuading, convincing, refuting and winning are the main objectives.

Argument seeks to attack the other. It is disrespectful, hostile, hurtful, irrational and charged with negative emotion. Argument is self-oriented and is one of the most limiting forms of communication. In her book, *The Argument Culture*, Tannen (1998) expresses the disturbing opinion that the US has become an “argument culture” that “urges us to approach the world—and the people in it—in an adversarial frame of mind. It rests on the assumption that opposition is the best way to get anything done” (p.3). In such a culture, relationships are reduced to combat zones.

Wherever they occur, at home, in the classroom or in the political arena, arguments are demoralizing, paralyzing and isolating. According to Tannen, the either-or, right-wrong dualistic nature of debate and argument, result in oversimplification and polarization of highly complex issues. Rather than there only being two sides, most issues have many different facets that require in depth study. By looking at issues in this way, creative solutions and new, more complete perspectives can emerge that allow a greater degree of agreement or consensus among people.

## *Dialogue*

Dialogue differs from conversation, discussion, debate and argument. Dialogue is concerned with understanding ideas and opinions of others. Attentive listening, sensitivity, turn-taking, the desire to communicate experiences and ideas, sharing understanding and planning actions are typical in dialogue interactions. Dialogue is both task- and other-oriented.

Dialogue is an occasion for learning and development within a social group. The viewpoint that learning arises from social interaction is consistent with Vygotsky's theory of the social construction of knowledge (social constructivism) detailed in *Thought and Language* (1932) and the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator whose book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (year) concerns the rights of all South American children to receive education and how society can change for the better by developing thoughtful and participatory future citizens.

Dialogue is a multilayered, complex process. Dialogue elicits questions, values, emotions, ideas and beliefs in a joint quest for meaning (Bohm, 1996). In dialogue, language, relationships, thinking and contexts are interactive and interconnected. Dialogue is an opportunity for expressing, refining and expanding communicative literacy through the process of social interaction. During the process, learning and development by individual participants is socially mediated by the other members of the group.

The term, *dialogue* stems from the Greek, *dialogos*, in which *dia* means *through* and *logos* means *words*. Dialogue literally means, "through words."

Dialogue is a dynamic, interactive, meaning-centered activity that fosters communication, openness and mutual understanding among people. Indeed the concept of logos encompasses far more than words, speech or meaning. The concept of logos has profound significance in the history of metaphysics, theology and philosophy. Logos represents the unifying, essential force in the world, creating order from chaos and linking humans to god and the cosmos. For the ancient Greeks, logos is identified with fire, for Christians, with The Word and for philosophers, with thought (Cambridge Encyclopedia, 2005). The term, *logic*, the study of thought, also derives from logos. Dialogue involves direct communication of two or more individuals and usually is a face-to-face encounter. However telephone conference calls, electronic chat and webcasts now allow “virtual” dialogues.

Dialogue works to create and sustain the collective thought of the group. Habermas (reference) describes dialogue as the ideal speech situation, perfection in communication. Through dialogue, we are able to make sense of experience and order our thoughts with the help of others. The imagery Bohm uses to describe dialogue alludes to power of logos: “a *stream of meaning* flowing among us and between us . . . out of which may emerge some understanding. It’s something new . . . It’s something creative. And this shared meaning is the glue or cement that holds people and societies together.” (p. 6). This description suggests the value of dialogue for developing insight, synergistic relationships and a civil society where members live in harmony and show concern for the welfare of others. At its best, dialogue results in distributed knowledge, full participation and enhanced humanity (Bohm, 1996).

When groups of people decide to engage in dialogue, whether in social or professional groups, a vast kaleidoscope of knowledge, experience, ideas and possibilities come out. Such dialogue is energizing, delightful and insightful. Although good dialogue is hard work and can be frustrating at times, as a result, close relationships grow in the group dialogue process.

### *Properties of Dialogue*

According to Pinell (1998). dialogue has certain, defining properties:

*Sequential organization.* Like text, dialogue has a beginning middle and end. Dialogue also includes a “core act” or event that organizes, focuses and directs the flow of ideas. Dialogue occurs over time.

*Asymmetry is a contributing factor.* Different from debate where comparable ability, knowledge and experience are necessary, dialogue adjusts to different levels of experience, knowledge, education, interests and communicative abilities among participants. These differences are positive, contributing to lively dialogue and supportive interactions.

### *Context specific*

*Collaborative negotiation of meaning.* Participants interact productively, exchange ideas, work on problems, allow differences of opinion, revise thinking, project hypotheses, share understanding and engage in planning new experiences.

*Coherence.* Practicing dialogue regularly increases coherence, making ideas and views sensible to others. In practicing dialogue, the ability to express

ideas coherently improves as participants strive to make their thoughts meaningful to others. According to Bohm, coherence is an antidote to fragmentation.

*Surfacing differences* is a pivotal stage in the process of dialogue. When tensions arise, participants who accommodate differences into the dialogue are able to progress to a new level of openness. When this state is achieved, a group is able to think together and deal with the challenges that are the focus of the dialogue.

### Communication Projects

In dialogue, people choose to focus on a particular task, question, problem or topic may be called a “communication project” (Pinell, 1998). Communication projects involve dialogue over time with regularly scheduled meetings. While the same group of participants attending each time would be ideal, some changes in who attends and how often are permissible.

In a social group or institutional setting such as an ECE program, complexity multiplies when there are a number of participants entering a dialogue for purposes of a communication project. In order for dialogue to proceed in an intelligible manner, a plan or structure for dialogue may facilitate communication. A number of dialogue formats have been devised. Nearly all recommend that participants sit in a circle. The circle is a powerful, universally recognized symbol of unity, connection, wholeness and community (Augé, 1982).

### *The Role of the Facilitator*

Many although not all group dialogues, designate a participant as a facilitator. The clarity, focus and ultimately, the success of dialogue may improve when one of the participants is designated as a facilitator.

Facilitation is a way of helping a group to accomplish its goals. The facilitator acts in a crucial role as coach, model and catalyst. Frequently the facilitator is someone who more background or experience. Kennedy (2004) describes this role as the *bridge*: with the facilitator 'restating the positions of others, summarizing, calling for clarification, asking or offering examples and definitions, pointing out contradictions, connecting and distinguishing ideas, building on another's idea . . . . When the process is working well, there is a sense of . . . emergent growth." (p. 754). Other suggestions for facilitators include: active listening, recognizing the importance of conflicts, creating and observing the system while avoiding the temptation to control it, remaining conscious that intervention changes the system and should be minimized.

## Dialogue Formats

Prior to introducing collaborative dialogue to develop communicative literacy in ECE settings that is examined in the next chapter, different formats for dialogue practiced in different social and institutional settings are reviewed. Knowledge of these formats may be helpful in thinking about ways to dialogue in one's own setting.

*In the Socratic Tradition: Bohmian Dialogue*

Bohmian dialogue is a classical dialogue in the Socratic tradition of open dialogue with topics and questions developed by participants in a search for truth. Bohmian dialogue involves between 15-40 people and uses an unstructured format without a preset agenda. A group of this size represents a *microculture*, a sample of the larger culture or society as a whole. To begin, the purpose of dialogue is discussed among the group. Principles for productive dialogue or as Bohm puts it, a “vision of dialogue” include suspend judgments, no pressure to agree or disagree, become attentive and aware of the thoughts of oneself and of others, each member participates and also gives space for the other members to talk. It is essential that the group work through issues of frustration, polarized views, etc. by continuing to dialogue over time. In spite of their limited social history, the group discovers that dialogue creates trust and openness.

As a result, an “impersonal fellowship” or bond develops among group. For Bohm, this is the reason to dialogue. Bohm insists that dialogue is not intended to resolve personal problems or provide therapy but is for the purpose of addressing serious and compelling questions. Bohm uses the term, “impersonal fellowship” to describe the social dynamic that arises.

### *Quaker Meeting*

Adapted from the method used for decision-making by the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) for almost 350 years, the Quaker meeting seeks consensus for collective action. In this particular form of dialogue, full expression of diverse viewpoints results in a full picture of the issue, multiple possibilities for approaching the issue and potential for consensus. As a result of the dialogue,

group unity, cooperation, collaboration, and co-ownership. The leader of the dialogue aims to deepen interpersonal relations and spiritual life among members of the group. Fremon (2004) finds correspondences between the Quaker meeting--joining together and sharing different perspectives--and Parker Palmer's 'meeting for learning' in a school setting.

### *Support Groups*

Loosely based on the group therapy model, support groups tap into the healing power of dialogue. The phenomenal success of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Weight Watchers are two examples that offer persuasive testimony that deeply ingrained behavior patterns can be changed through the subtle process of dialogue among peers. As with other types of dialogue, a structured format is used to guide the meeting. In Weight Watchers, facilitators are typically members who are successful in making these changes. At an AA meeting, members give an extended presentation to the group on how alcohol affected their lives and on their subsequent recovery.

### *Community of Philosophical Inquiry*

Kennedy (2004) is a proponent of *a community of philosophical inquiry* (CPI). CPI is a group dialogue around a discussion agenda created from participants' questions in response to a text or other stimulus. According to Kennedy, CPI emphasizes *thinking for oneself with others* (Kennedy, 1999).

The dialogue is facilitated by someone skilled in philosophy. The dialogue is a means for co-constructive and negotiated learning characterized by

“distributed thinking” among the group, is self-regulating and has transformational effects. According to Kennedy, all dialogical inquiry is philosophical inquiry. Through this inquiry process, philosophy and practice, including educational pedagogy, are connected. Ontological, epistemological, ethical and aesthetic themes are explored in this knowledge-building process.

The facilitator acts as a bridge among participants, who, ideally, have had many intensive dialogic experiences and have already worked through emotional defenses and issues that block communication. Although the tradition of philosophical inquiry as a group process dates back to Socrates, CPI differs in that the facilitator is a group member rather than an instructor who dominates the group. During CPI, “we individuate even as we coordinate—with the other and with the group of others, which as a whole is in turn another kind of other” (p, 747-748). The CPI process continually searches for knowledge, meaning and unity. Simultaneous to the process, “each individual becomes more oneself, more relational” (p. 749) as one adapts to the views of others. CPI diminishes institutional boundaries; and builds a sense of identity with those in the community.

### *Collaborative Inquiry*

The interdisciplinary application of collaborative inquiry to identifying and solving problems through dialogue is examined. This approach to dialogue is like the one that is described in the next chapter.

Co-inquiry in ECE settings (next chapter) uses documentation as a means for developing communicative literacy in dialogue.

## *Listening*

According to Carlina Rinaldi, “listening” is critical to collaboration. Some of the basic ideas underlying a “pedagogy of relationships and listening” are:

- Listening should be sensitive to the patterns that connect us with others. Our understanding and our own being are a small part of a broader, integrated knowledge that holds the universe together.
- Listening should be open and sensitive to the need to listen and be listened to, and the need to listen with all our senses, not just our ears.
- Listening should recognize the many languages, symbols and codes that people use in order to express themselves and communicate.
- Listening as time. When you really listen, you get into the time of dialogue and interior reflection . . . It is a time full of silences.
- Listening is generated by curiosity, desire, doubt and uncertainty.
- Listening produces questions not answers.
- Listening should welcome and be open to differences, recognizing the value of the other’s point of view and interpretation.
- Listening is not easy. It requires a deep awareness and a suspension of our judgement and prejudices. It requires openness to change.
- Listening is the basis for any learning relationship. Through action and reflection, learning takes shape in the mind of the subject and, through representation and exchange, becomes knowledge and skill.

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