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Bohmian Dialogue: A Promising Pedagogy for Transformative Learning?

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Abstract: *Between 1997 and 2002, dialogue, a process developed by the late theoretical physicist David Bohm and philosopher Krishnamurti, was adapted and used as the central form of pedagogy within two interdisciplinary courses at Portland State University. The purpose of this workshop is, through an interactive experience, to provide participants with an introductory understanding of Bohmian dialogue and its promise as a pedagogy for transformative teaching and learning in higher education. Throughout the past several years, Bohmian dialogue has developed into a process in which meaning and knowledge are created and shared between and among educators and learners during the learning process. Through this cultivation of shared meaning new understanding emerges and learners identify and are able to gain insight into their assumptions, belief systems, and thought processes. Our explorations of Bohmian dialogue in higher education have led us to conclude that it holds considerable promise as a pedagogy for transformative teaching and learning and for extending our knowledge of how individuals learn together.*

Keywords: dialogue, David Bohm, transformative learning

Conceptual Framework

I do not know if you have ever examined how you listen, whether to a bird, to the wind in the leaves, to the rushing waters, or how you listen in a dialogue with yourself, [or] to your conversation in various relationships with your intimate friends. ... In that state there is no value at all. One listens and therefore learns, only in a state of attention, a state of silence, in which this whole background is in abeyance, is quiet; then, it seems to me, it is possible to communicate. (Krishnamurti, as cited in Dia.logos, Inc. 2001, p. 4)

Bohmian dialogue is a process through which a group of individuals can develop and share meaning together. The late theoretical physicist David Bohm (1996) believed that shared meaning was necessary for society to work; for Bohm shared meaning provided the glue or cement that held a society together. Motivated by concerns over our collective inability to communicate, noting that “People living in different nations, with different economic and political systems, are hardly able to talk to each other without fighting” (p. 1), Bohm spent nearly 20 years trying to understand the various processes that helped and hindered effective communication. Over this time, Bohm, and later his students—including Peter Senge (1990), Danah Zohar (1994), and William Isaacs (1999)—honed their understanding into the process they referred to as dialogue.

According to Bohm (1996), *dialogue* comes from the Greek word *dialogos*: *Logos* meaning “the word” or “meaning of the word,” and *dia* meaning “through,” suggesting a stream of meaning flowing among, through, and between a group of people (p.6). Through sharing meaning in dialogue, new understanding emerges and group members identify and are able to gain insight into their assumptions, belief systems, and thought processes. Dialogue “is a way of taking the energy of our differences and channeling it toward something that has never been created before” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 19). Bohm characterized ordinary thought in society as incoherent and believed that as people sat together in dialogue over time the meaning they

created and shared increased in coherence. Just as light waves build in intensity as they become more and more coherent, so, Bohm believed, would the power of thought increase if people learned to think together in coherent ways.

Purpose of Workshop Related to Transformative Learning

Mezirow has described transformative learning as referring “to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open ... so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action” (2000, p. 7). This description fully embraces the aims and processes of Bohmian dialogue, thereby creating the need to explore its usefulness as a pedagogy for transformative learning in various settings, including college and university courses. The purpose of our workshop is to provide participants with an introductory understanding of Bohmian dialogue, to share our experiences using it in different university courses, and to invite consideration of its promise as a pedagogy for transformative learning in college and university environments.

Between 1997 and 2002, we adapted and used Bohmian dialogue as the central form of pedagogy within two interdisciplinary courses at our institution. These courses involved primarily graduate students and faculty within education, community health, and business. Most recently, Bohmian dialogue was integrated into “Leadership Development Through Dialogue,” a course offered during two summer sessions by two of the workshop presenters. The third presenter based her dissertation research on this course, in which she was a participant observer (Voetterl, 2002).

Our experiences have led us to conclude that Bohmian dialogue holds considerable promise as a pedagogy for transformative learning. For example, in response to course evaluation requests for feedback on the role of dialogue in their learning, students have offered observations such as: “Dialogue was where my assumptions, fears, and blind spots became visible, or at least more visible, to me”; “We dove deep in this class, examining not just what we know, but the ways we know it”; “Exploration of beliefs/assumptions is rarely a part of a graduate level curriculum in business; it’s a refreshing and provocative approach to learning”; and “The learning was on many levels: personal insight, shared wisdom, questioning and restructuring of paradigms.” These comments point to the transformative potential that Bohmian dialogue holds.

Discussion of Workshop Topics

This workshop will be organized into three segments. First, we will present a brief overview of Bohmian dialogue; second, we will engage participants in an abbreviated experience of a dialogue circle; and, third, we will conclude with an exploration of the role of Bohmian dialogue in transformative learning—including formal lines of inquiry that could accompany use of this pedagogy. During our initial overview, we will present information on Bohm’s conceptual foundation, including its link to the spiritual philosophy of Krishnamurti, and to the work of Chris Argyris (ladder of inference), Donald Schön (reflection), and Paulo Freire. We will provide an overview of the characteristics of Bohmian dialogue, a description of how we’ve used it in our interdisciplinary courses, and descriptions of specific dialogue practices such as listening, respecting, suspending (one’s opinions, beliefs, assumptions), and voicing (Isaacs, 1999). Participants will receive a handout containing this information as well as a detailed schedule of a typical class session, an example of a course syllabus, and course evaluation feedback. The

handout will also contain enough description and practical guidance on the dialogue process that participants will be able to take part in a dialogue circle.

We will invite participants to take part in an abbreviated dialogue that begins with posing a question to the circle and ends with the opportunity for each participant to comment on the content of the dialogue and/or aspects of the process. Examples of a question that might begin the dialogue are: What connections do you make between Bohmian dialogue and transformative learning? or, What relevance might Bohmian dialogue have to your practice as an adult educator? Following the circle experience, participants will be invited to offer further observations about their experience and about dialogue's promise as a pedagogy for transformative learning. We will also encourage discussion around potential research questions and methods that may be used to further inquiry into the use of Bohmian dialogue to further the goals of transformative learning.

Potential Uses and Outcomes of Bohmian Dialogue to Transformative Learning in Other Contexts

As mentioned previously, Bohm, his students and colleagues, and organizations such as *Dia.logos* and the Society for Organizational Learning, have explored dialogue's usefulness in businesses, non-profit organizations, and community groups for over 20 years. Although to our knowledge, we were among the first college and university faculty to initiate investigation into the transformative capacity and the practical aspects of Bohmian dialogue in higher education classrooms, by the time we began our explorations in the mid-1990's, dialogue's merits had already been well explored in other contexts. For three excellent explanations of Bohmian dialogue's potential uses in other contexts, see the work of Dixon (1996), Isaacs (1999), and Senge (1990). Included below are three cases describing experiences we have had facilitating dialogue circles in non-university contexts. These cases differ in group size, background intent, and length of time over which the dialogue circles were held. Together, they provide some sense of dialogue's transformative capacity in other contexts.

In the first case, members of a small bedroom community on the outskirts of the major metropolitan center in their state, held a series of dialogically oriented "community conversations" on the relationship between the local community and the K-12 school. Each participant was personally invited and visited prior to the first dialogue circle not only to ensure their full commitment to the process, but also to explain the practical as well as philosophical tenants of dialogue as a process that would guide their time together. All participants agreed to meet twice per month for the remainder of the school year (March 12 – June 25, 2002) for two-hour sessions. Present at these conversations were representatives from the local school district administrative staff, the school board, building level administration, teachers, parents, coaches, students, and community business and religious leaders. Each was reminded that this was not a meeting, rather it was a time to talk with one another about the things they cared deeply about as they worked together to improve the relationships between school, community, and county school district representatives.

At the conclusion of the first series of conversations, a second series was requested by the participants and completed the following fall with the addition of four members participating in a separate "dialogue facilitators" training. The group is now participating in a third series of conversations to learn how they might better involve teachers in the life of the community and their community in the life of the school. This series is being facilitated by members of the community and the school administrator. The success of these conversations lies not in their

repetition, or duplication, rather it lies in various new relationships that were forged during these meetings and in the empowerment of many otherwise “disengaged” community members who are now willing to contribute more directly in the improvement of their school. In the words of one conversation participant, “I didn’t come here to be involved in yet another project on behalf of my child. I came here to interact with and learn from other adults in our community about how we can work together on behalf of our school.”

In the second case, a dialogue circle was held to conclude a two-day forum on regional food systems and their development. The hope for engaging in dialogue toward the end of the program was to give the approximately 80 participants—who consisted of farmers, restaurateurs, food manufacturers and marketers, food bank and community garden coordinators, and policy makers—the opportunity to think deeply about their experiences at the forum. Because the group was large, the two facilitators suggested that the dialogue take place within two concentric circles. After explaining dialogue’s purpose and the conditions within which shared meaning was most likely to emerge, members of the group spent the next 90 minutes engaged in conversation around their deepest hopes and concerns for the region’s food system. The size of the group called for use of a portable microphone so participants who felt moved to speak had to raise their hands, wait to be noticed, and then wait for the microphone to arrive before they could do so. The facilitators explained the role of silence in dialogue and suggested that participants could benefit from silent pauses by resting their attention on various aspects of the dialogue process during them. Heartfelt concerns were raised, questions were posed, and hopes for regional food systems were shared during the session. As a sense of shared meaning began to emerge from the field, participants gained understanding not only of community food systems issues, but also of the way in which this understanding could be co-created in a participatory, collaborative fashion.

In the third case, dialogue was introduced to a group of professionals in the social work field who were part of a new statewide Child Welfare Partnership. This diverse group of teaching faculty, researchers, and field-based practitioners came together for a one-day retreat to examine what might be facilitating and interfering with their efforts to develop this collaborative. Following a brief introduction to its foundations and practices, about 40 individuals participated in dialogue together for 90 minutes. Reflections on the process of dialogue were very positive, although several members in the group expressed their need for clarifying “next steps.” This group was left wondering, “Where do we go after the dialogue?” a question that often arises when time in dialogue is insufficient for answers to this question to emerge on their own.

Anticipated Outcomes Related to Transformative Learning

As an immediate result of this workshop session, our hope is that participants’ understanding about the connections between the theory and practice of Bohmian dialogue and transformative learning theory will both broaden and deepen. Long-range outcomes we will encourage are: a) identification of participants interested in incorporating dialogue as a form of pedagogy and exploring its transformative learning capacity in classroom and other adult learner settings; and, b) initiation of a process to facilitate the development of a collaborative research and writing agenda focused on Bohmian dialogue and transformative learning.

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