Why Dialogue?

The Value and Potential of Bohm Dialogue

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Abstract

What does the method of group process developed by David Bohm offer in terms of the

potential for individual and group transformation? What in the experience is found to be

of such value to participants that they keep returning to engage in the process?

The physicist, David Bohm, developed the method that he referred to as Dialogue to

provide a venue that offers the possibility and potential of individual and collective

transformation. Through engaging in this approach, he conceptualized the possibility of

new and creative responses to current issues confronting humanity through a

transformation of our process of thought. This paper examines the value and potentials of

transformation provided by Dialogue, exploring what Bohm saw as the benefits of

participating in his method of Dialogue as group process and through examination of

personal experiences of participation in Dialogue.

Key words: dialogue; David Bohm; transformation; group process; consciousness;
collective.

Introduction

Dialogue is a term that is used in many different ways, with many different meanings, and refers to a number of different processes. This paper explores the specific methodology of group inquiry developed by the physicist, David Bohm, for which he used the term dialogue. Throughout this paper the term Dialogue, with an upper case 'D', will refer to this particular method of group process. Bohm created this method of group inquiry out of his concerns for the current state of the world, his understanding of physics and quantum mechanics, and the form of deep inquiry that he participated in with the Indian sage, Krishnamurti. Bohm felt that if we looked carefully at the process of thought and how thought is created, we could open up the possibility for new ideas to emerge, bringing greater understanding and communication, and potentially, new solutions to the problems confronting society.

Bohm deliberately used the term dialogue to describe this method. The reasons for the use of this specific term are made explicit in the second chapter of his book *On Dialogue*:

> I give a meaning to the word "dialogue" that is somewhat different from
> what is commonly used. The derivations of words often help to suggest a
> deeper meaning. "Dialogue" comes from the Greek word *dialogos*. Logos
> means "the word," or in our case we would think of the "meaning of the
> word." And *dia* means 'through"—it doesn't mean "two" (1996, p. 6).

Therefore, dialogue is communication through words. It is not two people communicating with each other, but any number of people communicating through words. Bohm envisioned groups sitting in dialogue to explore the roots of crises that face humanity. In the paper, "Dialogue: A Proposal", Dialogue is described as an "inquiry into, and understanding of, the sorts of processes that fragment and interfere with real communication…" (Bohm, D., Factor, D. & Garrett, P., 1991, p. 2). Bohm felt that there was an incoherence and fragmentation in human thought and that this incoherence is what has led to the current, very challenging, world situation. The incoherence of our thought is evidenced by the disconnect between our intentions, our actions, and the results of those actions. Through inquiring into the processes of thought itself and becoming aware of the assumptions underlying our thoughts, we can reveal from where the incoherence arises. By thought, Bohm was not only pointing to conceptual ideas, but also to our feelings, emotions, intentions, and desires. Bohm felt that by the examination of all these aspects of thought as they occur through dialogue in groups, we could begin to reveal how thought functions and then through that understanding develop a more coherent group process, one that was less factionalized and fractured, which would allow more creative ideas to emerge.

As a quantum physicist, Bohm's ideas about the nature of thought were deeply grounded in his understanding of the questions raised about the nature of reality by the uncertainties inherent in quantum mechanics. He came to the understanding that there is an implicate order that underlies and informs our manifest explicate reality, and from which manifest reality emerges and into which it re-submerges. Everything that is manifest is connected

through this implicate order, giving an underlying wholeness and coherence to that which

we see in the manifest world as differentiated, fragmented, and incoherent. Bohm

referred to this process, most evident at the unseen quantum level of reality, and which

informs all manifest reality, by the term 'holomovement' (1980). Not only does matter

arise from and subside back into this implicate order, but thought also emerges from and

re-submerges into that order (1985).

As both our thoughts and our physical being arise from the implicate order, they are

deeply connected to each other. Through their mutual emergence from the implicate

order, they are also connected to the wholeness that is inherent within that order.

Examining this relationship in *The Essential David Bohm*, Lee Nichols writes:

> …the structure of reality implied by twentieth-century physics is seen by
>
> Bohm *to be enfolded within and therefore available to human experience.*
>
> Wholeness is thus understood to be more than a theoretical construct—it
>
> is a meaning-field, a living totality that includes us. Here we enter into a
>
> new terrain in which we are active participants, not simply detached
>
> observers (italics in the original) (2005, p.5).

Thoughts, expressed through words (and I would aver through physical actions as well)

therefore draw on and unfold from the meaning-field of the implicate order.

The Method

Bohm developed this method of Dialogue as an approach that would allow the

exploration of thought through direct inquiry into the process of thought while it occurs

'through words.' Because he wanted to keep the process as open as possible he was clear that there was no one correct way to engage in the process of Dialogue, that Dialogue itself was an emergent process. He felt that a more structured approach, with definitive rules, would hamper the emergence of creativity and learning in the group process. The nature of Dialogue is exploratory, allowing creativity, rather than the kind of learning that is produced by taking in "a body of information or doctrine imparted by authority" (Bohm, 1991, p. 2). In the process of observing the emergence of thought, Dialogue itself is an emergent process. By engaging in Dialogue, inquiring through and into words, we can explore the meaning-field, seeing the connections in the implicate order, and perhaps allow a greater coherence to emerge. The implicate order becomes more diaphanous as participants engage in the process of dialogue.

In their paper "Dialogue: A Proposal," David Bohm, Donald Factor and Peter Garrett (1991) expound on what they consider to be the essential features of Dialogue as it was originally envisioned by David Bohm. Some key features are the exploration of individual and collective presuppositions, participation in a process that reveals both successful and unsuccessful communication, and the creation of a space where collective learning can take place. Participants can observe the way that hidden values and intentions inform and direct our behavior. Dialogue is seen to be an experiential learning process that is created through the participation of peers. There is no leader or authority to tell the group what they are supposed to be doing or learning. There is no doctrine of how Dialogue is 'supposed to be.'

One of the important features of participating in Dialogue is the sense of proprioception. In his use of the term proprioception, Bohm is referring to more than just the sense of knowing where our body parts are through the internal sensation of them. He asks that we pay attention to the sensation of feelings throughout our body, and to feel thought as it arises. By heightening our awareness of our own internal experience we can begin to observe thought as it is occurring, slowing down the process so there is an opportunity to reveal the impulse for unconscious reaction and to examine what underlies that reaction. For Bohm, proprioception is not occurring just at the level of the individual participant, but also at the collective level: "[Dialogue] allows a display of thought and meaning that makes possible a kind of collective proprioception or immediate mirroring back of both the content of thought and the less apparent, dynamic structures that govern it" (1991, p. 4).

Following on the idea of proprioception, Bohm offers the concept of suspension. He suggests two differing meanings of the term as ways of engaging in Dialogue. One meaning of 'suspend' is to pause, to have a temporary interruption of a process. In Dialogue, by pausing we create the space to observe our thoughts as they emerge from the underlying field, allowing for closer examination of what lies behind and beneath their emergence. A second meaning of suspension is to hang something. By offering our thoughts as well as our observations as to the underlying assumptions, to 'suspend' them out in view of the group without trying to do anything with them other than observe them, Bohm feels we have the potential for both observing the underlying meanings inherent in the thoughts and the possibility for the creation of new thoughts: "Suspension

involves exposing your reactions, impulses, feelings and opinions in such a way that they

can be seen and felt within your own psyche and also be reflected back by others in the

group" (1991, p. 8).   The process of pausing, slowing down our own process, and

holding it out for both others and ourselves to observe, may allow us to perceive the

deeper meanings of the thought. Then any action we may take as a result of the thought

can be a more considered response rather than an automatic reaction. Suspension of

thought, in both of its meanings, is an important part of the process of Dialogue.

In order to work with our thoughts we need to be aware of them and the implications and

assumptions they contain. By slowing down our processes, listening more carefully to

our selves and others—both at the level of the concepts and at the level of our emotional

and somatic responses—we can begin to unfold the underlying meanings. In his work on

dialogue, *Dialogue: The Art of Thinking Together,* William Isaacs points out that

Dialogue attempts to bring about change at the source of our thoughts and feelings (2008,

p. 20). Rather than merely changing our behavior and reactions it aims to reveal and

allow change at the source of those thoughts and feelings, allowing new creative

responses to emerge.

Sitting in Dialogue creates a space where both individual and collective underlying

assumptions to any given thought can be revealed and explored. Because, by its nature,

Dialogue is exploratory and considered to be an unfolding process, there are no firm

rules. In convening a dialogue group, the primary structure consists of the location, the

time frame, and if possible, sitting in a circle so that each person can see the face of every

other group member. Isaacs emphasizes that "dialogue is generated out of all of the interactions of the people, not a set of rules that they can apply from the outside" (2008 p. 10). It is an emergent process rather than one that is structured by a set of rules.

Because there is a tendency to see our own point of view as the only way that the world can be interpreted and to discount or want to override the views of others, we at times approach discussions with the desire to convince the other of the rightness of our point of view. This makes it difficult to listen to what there is to offer in each point of view, to consider it rather than immediately rejecting it. In Dialogue, one has the opportunity to examine why we hold the opinions we do, without accepting or rejecting them. What is of interest in Dialogue is not whether or not there is one 'right' point of view but what the thought processes and feelings are that underlie those points of view. In Dialogue, the goal is not to alter or change behavior of the participants. It is rather to reveal through the observation of our own experience in the group what the underlying values and assumptions are that drive our responses and our interactions. There is no task "beyond the interest of its participants in the unfoldment and revelation of the deeper collective meanings that may be revealed" (Bohm, 1991, p. 5). Curiosity and inquiry, rather than finding a definitive answer or solution, are supported by the openness of the process.

Parameters

In order to support the process of Dialogue, Bohm, Factor and Garrett propose a number of basic parameters. They feel that dialogue works best in groups of twenty to forty people. With a larger group, sub-cultures and subgroupings are more likely to emerge.

The diversity of groups within the larger group can help reveal how thought operates

collectively. Whereas individual participants can observe their own underlying

presuppositions and call attention to underlying presuppositions in the thought of other

individuals, a larger group may find that it contains groupings of sub-cultures. If so, these

sub-cultures can be observed and examined for presuppositions at the collective level. A

smaller group can lack this level of diversity. As such, a group smaller than fifteen tends

to examine thought more particularly at the individual level of experience. In the next

section of this paper I will explore the experience of being in groups of less than twelve

and examine the value inherent in exploring this form of group process in that context.

A second parameter is simply structural. It works best to have the group sit in a single

circle if this is possible. In a single circle, each participant can see the faces and body

language of all of the other participants, facilitating communication at a level beyond the

simple auditory verbal exchange. It is important for the process that all the participants

the group be able to see and hear one another clearly.

Because Dialogue is an emergent process, it needs time to unfold. The paper, "Dialogue:

A Proposal" suggests that a two hour session is optimal, as in the authors' experience two

hours is long enough for the process to begin to unfold while not leading to fatigue.

(1991, p. 9). (I will examine the effectiveness of differing length sessions and offer a

context for understanding that effectiveness in the second part of this paper). Having

regular group meetings dispersed over time has two beneficial effects: through meeting

regularly the group has a chance to develop trust between participants and deepen the

territory that is being explored; by having intervals between sessions there is an
opportunity for individual reflection and further thinking. As Dialogue is a learning
process for both content and, more importantly, the learning of new ways of being with
our own thoughts and with the process of being in a group, the intervals between sessions
allow what is learned to settle more deeply in us and to become available in subsequent
sessions.

The length of the session is determined before hand and one participant is charged with
calling the time at the end of the session. This allows the majority of the participants to
be present in the flow of the session without having an eye on the clock. In the next
section of this paper, I examine the experience of being in different length sessions and
explore some thoughts as to how the time boundaries of the sessions contain the flow and
trajectory of the process.

When it is fully functioning, Dialogue occurs amongst peers. There is no group leader,
no one participant holds the authority to direct the group. By necessity, there is a
convener who makes the arrangements for the time and location of the group. The
convener often provides an introduction to Dialogue for participants with no prior
exposure to the form. In the early stages of a Dialogue group, "Dialogue: A Proposal"
suggests that some facilitation from an experienced convener can be helpful in aiding the
group in the process of collective proprioception. If the convener does step in, it is in the
interest of Dialogue that he or she step back into the role of equal participant as quickly
as possible.

Along with there being no designated leader for the group, there is also no particular

subject or agenda. The Dialogue can begin with any topic that is of interest to and arises

from the participants who are present. No topic is to be excluded as any topic can be

examined as it arises through the process of thought, and the underlying assumptions that

underpin the discourse can be revealed. When discomfort or frustrations arise with either

the topic or the process of discussion of any given topic, these can be examined as a

particularly rich basis for moving the Dialogue to deeper level of meaning and coherence.

In discussing subject matter, "Dialogue: A Proposal" states:

> Often participants will gossip or express their dissatisfactions or frustration
>
> after a session but it is exactly this sort of material that offers the most
>
> fertile ground for moving the Dialogue into deeper realms of meaning and
>
> coherence beyond the superficiality of " "group think", good manners or
>
> dinner party conversation (p.10).

In my work as a Tavistock group relations consultant, I frequently noted that much of the

important work of Tavistock self-study groups was carried out during the breaks and

outside of the formal sessions, and that this also seems to be a dynamic in

organizations—that much of the work of communication gets done at the water fountain.

So it is of interest to note that this dynamic also occurs with Dialogue groups and that it is

advised that participants bring that conversation back into the context of the session to

explore it.

Experiences in Dialogue

This section examines some experiences from Dialogue sessions that illuminate a few of the parameters of Dialogue discussed in the preceding section. In personal experience as a participant in, and occasionally convener of, a number of different Dialogue groups, I have had a different experience with two of the parameters previously noted.

The first parameter where my own experience has led me to a different perception of its necessity is that of the recommended group size being over twenty participants. I have rarely participated in groups of more than twenty-five. While I agree that groups of this size can explore sub-cultural differences in a way that is unavailable to smaller groups, I have experienced very effective Dialogue sessions in groups with as few as four participants. In these smaller groups differences of perspective can be examined as well as a deeper inquiry into one's proprioceptive experience in the moment. Many of the values and potentials inherent in Dialogue can be effectively explored with a group size ranging from four to fifteen participants. The presuppositions, hidden values and intentions that underlie and control our behaviors can be successfully revealed and engaged with in these smaller groups. While this does not directly address the sub-cultures and fragmentations of the larger society, it does give the individual participants the opportunity to learn another way of being in conversation and relationship to other that they can then, through the practice, take out into their interactions and relationships to the world at large.

The second parameter is the recommendation as to time. "Dialogue: A Proposal"

suggests that the ideal length for sessions be two hours in duration in order to have time

to allow enough time for a process in the group to develop yet not long enough for a

fatigue factor to enter. My own experience has been in groups that have varied from as

minimal as fifteen minutes (with a group of four participants) to three hours. When the

group consists of a larger number of participants, a longer time frame offers more

opportunity for each of the participants to participate verbally. A deep experience can

also be had with a small number of participants invested in the process of Dialogue and

knowing the time boundary. I have found that each of these time frames can allow an

effective experience of Dialogue.

Drawing on my experience as a group relations consultant, I have seen that groups tend to

pace themselves within the time allotted to them. If the group has a specific agenda to

address, the main body of the work will get done in the very last portion of the session no

matter what the length of meeting. For this reason having a clear end boundary to the

time frame of the Dialogue session is as important as the actual length of the session. No

matter what the length of the session is, Dialogue groups tend to flow into and out of

coherence a number of times during a session, and often after much meandering,

participants find the discourse has come full circle to rest upon whatever subject or

subjects arose at the very start of the session. There seems to be a natural flow to this

process that is not directed consciously by the group but is often noted in retrospect.

I have also found that participants seem to be energized by a session of Dialogue. Several times I have been in sessions where one or more of the participants enters the session reluctant to stay for the three hours as they are feeling drained from their day. Each time they have expressed that at the end of the session they no longer feel tired, that they instead find that the session has enlivened them.

Worthy of note is a third parameter discussed in "Dialogue: A Proposal." This is the recommendation that Dialogue groups meet regularly, with at least a one-week interval between sessions. Occasionally, Dialogue is practiced in one-time, extended sessions. While the participants can have an effective experience of the value of Dialogue in a single session, when sessions are spread out over time, participants have a chance to reflect on the experience between sessions. This allows what has been learned to settle more deeply into the participants, to make the move from short term to long term memory, and to become more embodied. And then in subsequent sessions, the benefits of the experience can be put into practice. Cognitive neuroscience has demonstrated that sleep performs an important role in the process of learning, that as we sleep we continue to process information that we have learned during the day (Baars, B. & Gage, N. 2013). By participating in multiple sessions with a space of time between sessions, participants are provided with the space to internalize their experience in the group and then to bring this learning to future sessions.

The Value of Dialogue

The last section of this paper looks at comments that participants in various Dialogue groups have provided on what they find of value in the process. The following comments are reproduced verbatim and speak for themselves:

 Participant 1: "The value for me comes from:

   -- having a place to share issues that are pressing on me in that moment . . .

   -- getting to share time and space with people i really like and care for . . .

   -- having a chance to be challenged by a person or situation and just be able to sit with

the discomfort "in the moment" to see what emerges as a response from me . . ."

Participant 2: "Every month it feels like a priority to be there for the meeting ... it

remains a mystery as to where from within myself the urgency arises …"

Participant 3: "Entering into the dialogue space is like having a switch flipped. The space

becomes a neural network of connections. I feel, see and hear more of what people are

saying. I can see them, accept them,

        and as that happens …

As we continue talk I see colors, patterns, hear songs, make links to other things past, and

brand new ideas …

When serious topics arise, it feels right to go there too, shed some light on them, explore

them, and it feels safe to do so. **Magic happens!** I feel both engaged and buoyant. Time

flies by. I leave with a medley of songs running through my head and literally smiling

from the inside out.

In the rest of life I often have difficulty fitting into conversations greater than one-on-one. Can't find an entry point, or worry how "exactly" to say what I feel I should share correctly. It's like being faced with a game of skipping rope where the other two people are holding the ends and turning the rope (the conversation) – for me, trying to time jumping in correctly, plus using the correct words is daunting! Add more people and the room looks like a gambit of ropes turning at different speeds, angles and intensities. Not so conducive to sharing ideas."

Participant 4:

- "much pleasure from a seemingly spontaneous and fairly unbounded conversation with people in which ideas, experiences and insights can be explored in depth and carried by the group in a participatory manner. Each individual plays an equal part in the dialogue whether they speak or not.

- I value how much dialogue group challenges my expectations, boundaries and comfort zones. When involved in a one-sided or unbalanced, conflictual or draining dialogue session, the rules ensure that I hold my self accountable for my role within the imbalance and voice the experience I am having. I have to over come my social programing towards compromise, silent endurance, and passivity and truthfully speak to my experience. This skill hones diplomacy, honesty and assertiveness yet makes me confront my fears of shaming or being shamed, conflict, and game playing.

- the observation of how the group dynamic and/or morphic field changes and adjusts in response to each pivot point in the dialogue is endlessly fascinating to me. The different qualities of the field with each participant and how it strengthens or changes over time all provide me with insight on how to attune to a the group consciousness and perhaps assist me with resolving/restoring dysfunctional dynamics as they arise in other contexts or being more comfortable within them as they occur."

Participant 5: "Dialogue is a thoughtful pursuit—a refreshing change from our hurry-up, fast-paced world. It is a laboratory for observing my own thought and that of others. It is fascinating to watch the many aspects of what may seem like individual thought be proven collective. Like when I'm thinking something but somebody else says it. How freeing to not have to talk all the time! Dialogue has also helped to build my curiosity muscles. I especially appreciate the silences in my group. They are not imposed but occur spontaneously…sometimes not as often as I'd like. Often there will be a call to slow down. That allows us to sit with a thought to let it bloom versus move on quickly to show off our own knowledge as often occurs. Magic happens when, as a group, we are truly thinking together.

Dialogue feels so grown up. Each person in the group is free to facilitate at any time s/he chooses. There is no one wise keeper of the knowledge or a guru 'leading'. Ahhhh – how refreshing!"

Conclusion

While there are individual differences as to what is held of value by participants in

Dialogue groups, there are several consistent themes that appear in the above comments.

It is striking that two of the participants from separate Dialogue groups both used the

identical phrase, "magic happens." The "magic [that] happens" speaks to the emergence

of coherence in the group. A third participant feels internally impelled to attend these

sessions. Engaging with others in a deliberately thoughtful manner, with minimal

structure and without a preset agenda, allows a different and deeply satisfying way of

being in a group for these participants.

Several of the participants noted that they value their sense of being challenged by the

experience and that when a challenge arises, the Dialogue process provides space for

them to sit with the experience, and through suspension, to 'see what emerges as a

response…" This opportunity to explore without the necessity of 'solving' a problem or a

challenge when it occurs is of high value to participants. Suspension, both in terms of

creating a pause and of suspending the need to judge or act immediately on their

experience allows new ways of being with experience to emerge. Proprioception of the

participants' internal reactions and feelings allows them to note, recognize and sit with

their discomfort. The expression of that discomfort can be an offering to the group,

allowing for others in the group to note, proprioceptively, their own responses and to

inquire into the underlying assumptions and presuppositions that are driving those

responses.

Bohm's idea in developing his method of Dialogue were focused on the hope of

extensive changes in culture and society through a deeper awareness of the process of

thought and how it impacts our relationship to each other and the world around us. While

individual participants in Dialogue groups may hold this as an underlying value, the

benefits have a more immediate personal impact, providing a context where the

participants feel the freedom to be present and participate in a group in a more conscious

manner. Through this participation they can develop a deeper understanding of their own

and others' thought processes. As Bohm hoped, a deeper understanding and ability to

communicate ensues. These understandings then can be used to more effectively

participate in other contexts, bringing the value of Dialogue to the individual participant

out into the world.

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