

Chapter Two

What is Dialogue?

So, if you are thinking of meeting in a group, one thing I would suggest is to have a discussion or seminar about dialogue for a while, and those who are interested can then go on and have a dialogue. And, you musn't worry too much whether you are or are not having dialogue, that is one of the blocks. It may be mixed. So, we will discuss dialogue for awhile – what is its nature?

~David Bohm, On Dialogue

Dialogue comes from the Greek words “dia” and “logos.” Dia means “through” and logos means “word” or “meaning.” The combination of these words in a Greek context is generally accepted to mean “the flow of meaning between or in a relationship.” This simple interpretation is very helpful for me. When talking with others, there is a *flow of meaning between us*. This helps me to consider more than the words and statements that are exchanged, but rather to consider the meaning of the words from the perspective of the person who has shared them.

In addition to understanding the role of meaning in our dialogues, there are methods that can help improve the way we speak to each other. Simple observations, such as group size, forming a circle and using a facilitator, are all useful when trying to engage in a good conversation.

We often spend a lot of time in groups, talking and planning in hopes that we might work better together. We take workshops on effective team performance; we set rules of engagement and conflict management; and we even assess meetings after they are completed. But, we rarely talk about what we do 95 percent of the time we are together, which is engage in dialogue.

What might a conversation about dialogue look like with David Bohm or William Isaacs, author of *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*, or Joe Schaeffer, author of *The Stone People* (and my thesis advisor and mentor)? Without doubt, the dialogue would be rich. Here are some thoughts on dialogue from their perspectives.

David Bohm, a well-known physicist, studied dialogue and is often cited by individuals who write about dialogue today. He shares one of the most useful descriptions of the value of effective dialogue when he says, “Dialogue is the collective way of opening up judgments and assumptions” (David Bohm, On Dialogue). When we open up our judgments and assumptions, we are able to move to another stage in the conversation. Instead of “convincing” others or proving we are right, we have the opportunity to speak with and build upon other peoples’ ideas.

With meaning comes assumption. I assume that, because you are white, you do not know what it is like to experience racism. I assume that, because you are rich, you do not know what it is like to be poor. I assume that, because you are in business, you care only about making money and the bottom line. I assume that, because you have power, you do not know what it is like to be powerless. I speak and listen through my assumptions. These assumptions are not easy to overcome because they are the ropes that tie together our entire belief system.

In training exercises, Joe Schaeffer would hold up a cup and ask, “What is this?” I would respond by saying, “A cup.” He would smile and say, “No! It is a chalice given to me by the Gods and, should you drink its nectar, I would need to kill you!” What we see as a cup in our culture might be seen as a religious symbol for others.

Joe would then ask, “Could we engage in another person’s meaning for awhile?” The anthropologist in me would say, “I could do that!” Then, he would lead us through a variety of exercises that would help us engage in each other’s meaning, reminding me that, in dialogue (among other forms of communication), everything is attached to a contextual meaning.

When I speak, I find it helpful to understand, to the best of my abilities, my own assumptions and opinions. When listening, Joe advocates trying to “suspend” your assumptions or meaning. While you do not need to believe in the speaker’s beliefs, try to engage in his or her meaning. To practice this, Joe would ask us to engage in the meaning of a powerful leader, a disenfranchised person or a racist. Although I found this exercise difficult, especially when asked not to judge someone who believed skin colour defined character, I also found it useful.

The basic assumption is that if we interpret everything someone says through our meaning, we cannot actually hear what the speaker is saying. Instead, we can only hear what we *think* he or she is saying. Basically, if I hear what I think you are saying, I am really just hearing myself. David Bohm calls this act of engaging in another’s meaning, “to suspend opinion.”

Suspending meaning for awhile can also help us overcome our need to believe in what we think is necessary for a meaningful conversation. For instance, I might think it is important that, in order to speak deeply with someone, we must possess the same values. Some of my university colleagues were military officers. As a pacifist, I questioned our ability to communicate about peace or peacekeeping, considering that their values led them to serve in the military. I assumed that only pacifists could really talk about peace. Such assumptions can be found any and everywhere. For example, someone living in poverty might believe that only impoverished people can really understand what it is like to live in poor conditions.

Our impulse to believe that like minds are necessary for dialogue can hinder our ability to listen, hear and learn from others. I have tried to replace my assumptions with curiosities. Differing perspectives can create a wonderful conversation. Although my colleagues from the military had a different perspective, they taught me a lot about peacekeeping. Entering into a conversation with them led me to correspond with officers on a peacekeeping mission in Somalia, allowing me to hear, in real time, what peacemakers in the military really do. What a wonderful gift curiosity can be!

In the next chapter, we will discuss the link between dialogue and engagement.



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