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Collaborative-Dialogue Based Research as Everyday Practice: Questioning our Myths

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*“Didn’t you follow that exiled Austrian
Who stood on my murky lane with a walking-stick
Drawing diagrams for the birds to explain?
Sea-urchins mocked him with folkloric tricks.
He left, in my turf-shed rafters, a small sign
To question all our myths.... Dear Wittgenstein.”
from “Killary Hostel” by Richard Murphy*

People around the world increasingly want to have a voice and input into decisions that affect their lives: what kinds of services they need, the kinds of services offered, and how the services are provided. They call for a more egalitarian world in which they are respected as persons who know themselves—their lives, circumstances, and requirements—better than a stranger: a person often experienced as an interloper. In other words, as Wittgenstein suggests, people challenge us to question the institutionalized myths on which we base our practices.

Collaborative-dialogue practice joins an effort to question the myths—the established conventions—of our social science research practices, not as an alternative practice methodology but as a different way of conceptualizing research and knowledge. These conventions include: research is scientific inquiry, only researchers execute research, performing research takes professional training, research is carried out by an objective outsider, the researcher must be objective and neutral, research is best conducted after the fact, research tells us what is, methods must be validated and reliable, methods must be repeatable, and results must be generalizable. If we take an incredulous stance toward these conventions from a collaborative-dialogue perspective we are challenged to rethink the traditions of research and the distinctions between research and other practices and the distinctions between so-called subjects and researchers

For the collaborative-dialogic practitioner the same assumptions orient practice regardless of the practice domain. In other words maintaining congruence between one’s practices is important. Performing consistently within our practices, i.e., consultation and

research, requires among other things what learning systems theorist Donald Schön (1983, 1987) describes as a being reflective practitioner. Schön refers to the practitioner's reflecting-in-action: reflecting, pausing and inquiring into to understand one's theoretical underpinnings and to describe one's practice as one does it. The practitioner not only becomes more thoughtful and accountable, but in doing so, theorizing and practicing are reciprocally influenced as the practitioner makes new sense of ideas and experiences and thus continues to generate new learning. Based on his research about how professionals learn, Schön suggests that incorporating reflective practice in education leads to learning that is more profound. To paraphrase Schön, self-discovered, self-appropriated learning or learning that belongs to the learner is the only learning that significantly influences behavior. I would add, the way that one lives in both one's professional and personal worlds. Taking a slightly different perspective that is based largely in the works of Bakhtin and Wittgenstein, John Shotter refers to such learning-in-action and learning-by-doing as "performative understanding" or "performative knowing" as described by Shotter in his chapter in this book.

Research as Discovering or Generating Knowledge

I recently heard a talk by an expert in the internet technology industry on what is called "customer or user experience design". He stressed the importance of "collaborative design" which requires research to create an internet product that is meaningful and useful for the customer. To reassure the small business owners in the audience who expressed great apprehension, he said "anybody can be a researcher" and gave examples of how we research in our daily lives. Engaging the audience in the familiar piqued their curiosity as to how they could think of research as a necessary component of their businesses and something they could do. In hearing this I reflected on writing this chapter and wondered how I might engage the practitioner-reader to consider research with fresh eyes and to think of it as part of their everyday practice and themselves as researchers? I kept returning to the notion of understanding and doing professional practice dialogically and the inherent challenge to rethink the "role" of the professional and to maintain congruence between all our practices: of professional practice is considered as dialogic then the professional is a researcher.

Practitioners like business owners often turn away from anything associated with research. For many research is a daunting specialized activity that others do and its reporting is often experienced as a

dry foreign language that is difficult to understand. We pigeonhole ourselves and others into culturally and professionally designated roles and practices, and fit ourselves into the expectations prescribed by the associated discourses. Said differently, we fold ourselves into the familiar.

A collaborative-dialogue discourse offers an invitation into the unfamiliar. In other words, it calls us to notice and experience the uniqueness and nuance of the presumably known and to encounter it as if it is the first time. But before we turn to this discussion, let's step back a moment and look more closely at the etymology of the word research and its various meanings.

The Word 'Research' and Scientific Method

Some date the development of research or the scientific method back to Aristotle in the 300's BCE though the word research did not appear in the English dictionary until about 1577. The word

*“comes from Middle French *recherche*, which itself comes from Old French *rechercher* [meaning to] ‘seek out, search closely’ (re- ‘intensive’ + *cercher* ‘to seek out’. *Cercher* comes ultimately from Latin *circare* ‘go about, wander,’ from *circus* ‘circle.’ The meaning ‘a careful search for facts’ first appears in English in the first half of the 17th century”* (http://laser.physics.sunysb.edu/~wise/wise187/2002/weblinks/theword_research.txt).

This latter reference to research soon became the language and center point of scientific method. Though the meaning of research and particularly the questions “what is research” and “is it a discovery or generative method” are still under consideration in scientific debate (<http://telescope.wordpress.com/2012/03/08/the-meaning-of-research/>) as evidenced by cell biologist Frederick Grinnell (2009) in his *Everyday Practice of Science: Where Intuition and Passion Meet Objectivity and Logic*. He comments that Claude Bernard, a founder of modern biomedical research, “...warned that inability to put aside previously accepted beliefs, at least temporarily, interferes with the ability of the researcher to notice anything more than the expected.” Quoting Bernard,

Men who have excessive faith in their theories or ideas are not only ill prepared for making discoveries; they also make very poor observations. Of necessity, they observe with a preconceived idea,

and when they devise an experiment, they can see, in its results, only a confirmation of their theory. In this way they distort observations and often neglect very important facts because they do not further their aim (p.55).

Grinnell (2009) concludes from Bernard's words that "there may not be a method of discovery, but there is a clear strategy—be prepared to notice the unexpected. Nothing noticed—novelty lost. . ." He challenges a myth of scientific discourse: that science, whether discovery or generative and from observing scientists at work in their laboratories, is not linear and concludes that thinking of science as linear significantly distorts the everyday practice of science. We might infer then that Grinnell speaks to the risk of generalizing knowledge—knowing ahead of time. Grinnell's challenges and similar ones call into question the predictability or comprehension of the complexities, ambiguities and uncertainties of everyday life and practice by so-called academic or scientific research. Certainty in science and in everyday life as an illusion is echoed in the words of professor and theoretical physicist S. J. Gates (2012): "Science in my experience does not permit us the illusion of certainty."

The aforementioned challenges regarding conceptualizing and doing research are compatible with the alternative ideas about knowledge and its creation that weave through postmodern and rhizome philosophies and dialogue and social construction theories. We participate in constructing the world we live in. Though this is often thought to be a recent perspective, it dates back at least to the seventeenth century when Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico (1999) denounced the Cartesian method that truth can be verified through observation. He alternatively suggested that the observer participates in the construction of what he observes, attributes their descriptions to it and wears multiple interpretive lenses regarding the same. More contemporarily, constructivists such as Heinz von Foerster (1982) called attention to the notion of observing systems saying "believing is seeing" and Humberto Maturana (1978) suggested that "Everything said is said by an observer to another observer."

Put differently, embedded as it is in culture, history and language, knowledge is a product of social discourse. Its creation (e.g., theories, ideas, truths, beliefs, realities or how to) is an interactive interpretive dialogic process that occurs within the discourses of knowledge communities in which all parties contribute to its development, sustainability and transformation. As such it is not fundamental or definitive, it is not fixed or discovered and it is not a product of an individual or

collective mind. In such a dialogic activity there is not a dichotomy between “knower” and “not-knower”. As Maturana and Varela (1987) suggested there is no such thing as instructive interaction in which pre-existing knowledge (including meanings, understandings, etcetera) can be transferred from the head of one person (be it a teacher in person or the voice of an author on the pages of a book) and placed into the head of another (e.g., a student in a classroom or a reader). Knowledge acquisition by one person is not/cannot be determined by another person; for instance, a teacher cannot determine what a student will learn. Knowledge creation is relational, and it is fluid and changeable in its making. Yet personalized: when we share our knowledge with one another, we cannot know what each brings, we cannot pre-determine how each will interact with the shared knowledge and we cannot predict what each will create with what is offered and emerges in a dialogic process. The learning outcome will be something different than either started with, something more than either could have created alone, something socially constructed. This leads us to a review of some of the basic assumptions of collaborative-dialogue practice.

Basic Orienting Assumptions of Collaborative Practice

Collaborative-dialogic practice is largely informed by a set of abstract assumptions that weave through hermeneutic, postmodern and rhizome philosophies and dialogue and social construction theories exemplified by writers such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Hans-George Gadamer, Kenneth Gergen, Rom Harré, John Shotter and Ludwig Wittgenstein. These assumptions mainly signify alternative ways to consider language and knowledge, and thus our practice and the people we meet in it and ourselves in relation to each of these. As Wittgenstein suggests, it is within our relationships that language gains its significance. Orienting assumptions relevant to this chapter and the generation of knowledge in particular include:

Grand knowledge, and the meta-narratives and dominant discourses on which it is based, is best held in doubt and questioned as fundamental, universal and definitive.

Such knowledge is mostly invisible and taken-for-granted and makes up the contexts and conditions that have become a monopolizing influence on our practices. The authority and conventions of these seduce us into practices that are dualistic and hierarchical and to place ourselves in the role of the knowledge expert. Interestingly, Noah Richards

(2007) suggests that “any universal concept is unknowable or not understandable, since the act of knowing it would mean that it is not universal.” This is not to suggest that we abandon these truths. Instead we are urged to conduct our daily practice with a certain amount of skepticism and reflection regarding their value, what they permit us to do and not do (including thought and action) and our reasons for doing and not doing, and in doing so as Richards suggests develop our local understanding.

Dominant discourses, meta-narratives and universal truths create pre-knowing that risks generalizing.

Pre-knowing has several risks: One, we tend to perceive similarities, to find what we think we know and are looking for, to fill in the gaps and then proceed based on these. Two, we are led to see the familiar and in so doing we close ourselves and miss the uniqueness of each person, situation and circumstance. Three, we consequently synthesize, thematize and summarize what we think we have learned and in so doing reduce personal distinctiveness to non-personal facts or figures. Four, we also distill the special and intimate into themes which then can quickly become fixed truths and future practice maps. This increases the probability that we classify people, cultures, and problems and so forth into categories, groups and kinds and in so doing we depersonalize them or worse yet we stereotype them. The ultimate risk of generalizing is that we can limit the potentials and possibilities both for us and the people we work with.

Local knowledge has advantages over universal knowledge.

Local knowledge is the indigenous narratives--the unique wisdom, expertise, competencies, truths, values, customs and language--created and used within a community of persons (e.g., people in a family, classroom, board room, factory team or neighborhood). The community of persons can be thought of as a knowledge system that has its own history and meaning-making practices. The unique nuanced meanings and understandings of the community members' first-person experiences bring a wealth of resources for the creation of practical, customized, useful and sustainable knowledge for its members. Privileging local knowledge inherently challenges and transforms the relationship between knowledge, expertise and power. We must, however, keep in mind that the local knowledge system is always context bound--developed and influenced by the background of universal narratives and dominant

systems of discourses in which it is embedded.

Knowledge creation is a relational-dialogic social process that minimizes the dichotomy between “knower” and “not-knower”.

In dialogue participants join in a shared or mutual inquiry in which they jointly examine, question, ponder, wonder and reflect on the topic to be addressed. Through their joint engagement of back-and-forth exchanges of asking questions and making comments they are, as best they can, involved in a process of meaning-making. That is, shared inquiry is meaning-making: trying to learn and understand the uniqueness of the other's language and sensing its uniqueness from the other's perspective, not theirs. Shotter refers to this process as relational-responsiveness: “A ‘good’ conversation is dynamic and opinions and feelings are woven across the ‘gap’ between us [i.e., the dichotomy between knower and not-knower], bridging us through responses that are ‘crafted’ and ‘tailored’ that particular instance...” (Shotter 2006, p.53). One must exercise caution, however, in reading the words crafted and tailored. These words do not refer to strategic means but rather to a ‘know-how’ (Anderson 2009): being careful to maintain coherence with the other person's language, and distinctive characteristics such as manner of expression and acting.

In summary, these orienting assumptions are not posed as a knowledge meta-narrative and do not call for the abandonment of any knowledge tradition. They simply suggest an alternative language and perspective for thought and action that provides a seemingly simple yet not-so-simple orientation to practice and how we educate practitioners and even approach life itself. In other words, relative to this chapter is an inherent appeal for a habit of continual consideration and re-consideration of how we think about research, and how we think of ourselves as practitioners and where our knowledge comes from.

Brief Thoughts on Inquiry as Collaborative-Dialogue

Collaborative-dialogue is a meaning-making process with language as its medium. Language refers to any means by which we express, articulate and communicate with others and ourselves. This would include the spoken word, and any conveyance such as written words, sighs and emotions and the multitude of bodily actions such eye movements, and gestures. We are, however, prisoners of our language: as we try to understand and make sense of our experiences, ourselves and others through our familiar language, we mostly do so within an inherited framework of language as representational rather than language as gaining its meaning in its use (Wittgenstein 1953).

Participants in collaborative-dialogue are always on the way to learning and understanding and being careful to not assume or fill in the meaning and information gaps. In other words participants mutually 'inquire into' something that has relevance for them. This learning, understanding and carefulness requires a responsiveness in which a listener (who is also a speaker) is fully attentive and present for the other person and their utterances whether expressed orally or otherwise. This also requires being aware of, showing acknowledgment of and taking seriously what the other person has said and the importance of it. In other words, a listener-speaker not only listens attentively but also responds so as to make sure that they have heard the other person as best they can. Such responsive understanding as Bakhtin (1986) refers to it tends to help clarify and "check-out" understandings and misunderstandings which in turn is part of the meaning-creating process, making responsive understanding is a generative process. This aim to learn and understand does not refer to asking questions to gather or verify information, facts or data. Questions, as is any utterance, instead are posed as part of the conversational-dialogical process: to learn and understand as best one can what the other person is expressing and hopes will be heard. It is a responsive interactive process rather than a passive one of surmising and knowing the other and their words based on pre-understanding such as a theory, hypothesis or experience. It is this kind of responsiveness to the other that invites them into collaborative-dialogue (see Anderson 1997). In other words, people are considered as naturally relational-dialogical social beings as suggested by Bakhtin (1986), Buber (1970) and Wittgenstein (1953) and by Shotter's interpretations' and extensions of Bakhtin's and Wittgenstein's perspectives.

I use the word dialogue to refer to a particular kind and quality of conversation: talking in which meaning-making is its essence-as previously discussed in Anderson, 1997. Dialogue according to Bakhtin (1984) is polyphonic: multiple voices and authors are always present, not just the spoken and silent ones of the in-person participants but others as well. Each person, present or not, has multiple voices, sometimes in harmony with each other though not necessarily so. Though humans are dialogical beings who are always in the process of meaning-making, sometimes we are more or less so, we oscillate on what can be thought of as a dialogical-monological continuum (Anderson 1997). In other words, sometimes we slip from multivocality into univocality. Monological refers to one idea or thought dominating to the exclusion of others and curiosity as well. Though this is not to suggest that is bad; it is a natural part of conversation. When monologue dominates, the opportunity

for newness is diminished. Relating this to research as inquiry, the so-called researcher needs to be open to the newness of the other and their experience. If the researcher cannot maintain curiosity, the risk becomes that the researcher may only find what they are looking for and potentially does not learn anything new.

Our inner dialogue is a critical component in engaging another into dialogue with us and themselves, and sustaining it. In other words, to be in dialogue with another person requires first being in dialogue with one's self. This entails being able to suspend our pre-understandings, to be aware of when our pre-understandings are leading, and to open ourselves to the other and their otherness and let it enter us. What dialogue is and how to engage in it are not easy questions to respond to and are unanswerable if the questioner is seeking a structured map or step-by-step instructions. These questions though important are difficult to address because dialogue and collaborative-dialogic practice are based in a particular philosophy of *ways of being 'with'* others: a philosophical stance (Anderson 1997, 2012; Anderson & Gehart 2007) or as Bakhtin (1986) suggests, a way of being human. 'With' is a basic characteristic of the stance and the features of dialogue: talking with, thinking with, acting with and responding with. The stance can be expressed in many ways as dialogue is specific to the participants, relationships, contexts, circumstances, agendas and so forth. It is situational and depends on these specificities including the participants' styles, tones, mannerisms and so forth. In other words, the stance allows adaptability. Dialogue thus is a spontaneous activity and not a step-by-step one. As such it cannot be implemented, managed, predicted or guaranteed. Though dialogue can be invited and encouraged (e.g. by a consultant, coach, manager, and members of organizations¹.) it cannot be prescribed, scripted, or demanded. The invitation to engage in and the encouragement to sustain dialogue take continuous awareness, effort, flexibility and carefulness on the part of the inviter. Some features of this invitation and encouragement include: expression of sincere attentiveness to the other person, openness to and learning about their differences whether in values, opinions, language, etc., viewing dialogue as necessarily filled with the challenges and opportunities of tension, unclarity, ambiguity and incoherency as well as harmony, intelligibility, synchronicity and agreement.

In dialogue, each participant brings their local knowledge to the process; it is through the sharing and exploring of what each person offers that newly created understandings, meanings and actions relevant to the intent or agenda of the dialogue emerge. As a relational-dialogic

process knowledge, therefore, is not viewed as something that already exists and lies in wait for discovery by the consultant or researcher. Instead, knowledge is viewed as an interactive social activity that people do with each other. New knowledge is created through the mutual inquiry, through the joint exploring and looking into the focus of the conversation and the various paths it takes. As mentioned above this requires, however, that we remain willing and able to put aside what we think is there and what we want to find. In failing to do so we are apt to find what we look for and justify our finding. In other words, the production of knowledge—the result of inquiry—is considered a generative and not a discovery activity. This is a shift from what might be thought of as retrospective knowledge that is objectively established from a neutral outsider's perspective who then privately determines what is learned and the conclusions of the learning. Important here is to keep in mind that knowledge is used in its broadest sense: expertise, wisdom, truth, beliefs, and so forth.

Dialogue therefore is a relational generative pathway to newness and possibilities in which each participant contributes to what is created through dialogue and not a unilateral monovocal content search for facts of details. It cannot be otherwise.

Returning to Schön's (1983, 1987) notion of a reflective practitioner in-action and Shotter's notion of performative understanding, this rethinking requires a practitioner to pause and inquire into their practice to try to understand its theoretical underpinnings and to describe their practice as they do it. This becomes especially challenging if we think that most of what practitioners do is not only invisible but most likely involves tacit knowledge that one might not be aware of at the time. Often it is only in retrospect that one describes and interprets it. For instance, how would you describe or make sense of your choice when you took a particular fork on a conversational path instead of others? It's all after-the-moment.

Theory and practice reciprocally influence each other and co-evolve as the practitioner becomes more thoughtful and accountable, makes new sense of each, and invites their clients to join them in this. The consequence of this mutual inquiry perspective is that the separation between research and other practices, or between the learning (the doing) and the knowing (the outcome), is dissolved. This is contrary to the accustomed ways in which we separate practices.

Collaborative-Dialogue Practice-Based Research

Research from a collaborative-dialogue practice orientation as described above steps outside our familiar frameworks of understanding. Research becomes like other practices a subject-subject ‘withness’ shared inquiry. Research as shared inquiry is distinct from the more usual researcher-subject or researcher-object dichotomous form of inquiry in which the researcher is an external observer who looks backwards from outside and then describes, analyzes and explains (we might say partly determines) what *was* there. Importantly, shared inquiry focuses on the means of the dialogic process as relationally reciprocal. Each participant is influenced by the other, and each contributes to what is produced; it cannot be otherwise.

Research becomes a decentralized process of learning and knowing that brings in the voices of the people--the so-called subjects that the so-called researchers want to learn from--as active participants in learning with each other. It flips learning *about* to learning *with*. Each participant contributes to the determination of what is inquired into and how. This is in contrast to the one initiating dialogue-e.g., consultant or researcher-being in control of the direction of the talk or authoring its outcome. We might think of research from this perspective as social inquiry instead of scientific inquiry. In suggesting this I do not refer to the debate regarding qualitative versus quantitative social inquiry. My intent is call attention to the relational “engagement” and mutually beneficial aspect of the knowledge that is created in the inquiry process.

Characteristic then of shared inquiry is that each participant has the opportunity to contribute their voice and viewpoint to the determination what is inquired into, who is invited into the inquiry, what is learned--the interpretation or assignment of meaning--and how what is learned is used. The inquiry process, and its ensuing direction, is an iterative, emergent and fluid process in which each step informs the next. The destination that participants first agreed upon can change as the inquiry proceeds. For instance, the initial question(s), goals and “method” often change as the research proceeds.

In considering research as part of everyday practice, the consultant and client become co-researchers. Though what is it that they are researching? Interestingly, we could consider that the entire consultation is a process of researching the topic of inquiry: that is, the reason for the client seeking consultation. Likewise, we could consider that client and practitioner are researching the usefulness of the consultation and determining its future direction. Regarding the former, if the

collaborative-dialogue relationship and process is similar regardless of the context and the agenda, then from this perspective there is not much difference between the process of consultation and research, or distance between the academic ivory tower and the everyday practice room.² With the latter the focus is to look at what the client and consultant are doing together: for instance, is it useful, how is it useful, is there something that could be accomplished differently, what suggestions do the client and consultant have for doing-the-doing differently? Any focus of inquiry or questions would be jointly created by a client and consultant, learner and teacher or members of an organization and leader and would be specific to the local organization culture, specific context, and agenda of the task as well as the relationship and other considerations particular to the task. As well, the inquiry would be part of the ongoing process of the task instead of something only conducted at its conclusion. This is similar to the idea of the reflective practitioner: researching or inquiring so as to extend, elaborate and refine what you do. In other words, understanding what we are doing, learning what we might do differently from within, and using what is learned by the insiders in the here-and-now.

Pausing my thoughts, consistent with the notion of knowledge creation discussed in above, what is learned—what is created in the meaning-making process of shared inquiry—in collaborative-dialogic research is practical knowledge that has local relevancy and usefulness for the participants. In other words there must be context specificity. This is the case whether the inquiry is centered on the topic of the client’s agenda or on the “evaluation” of what the client and consultant are doing together: client and consultant are therefore co-researchers or co-inquirers. In conclusion, a collaborative-dialogue approach to research becomes more prospective than retrospective. Like any collaborative-dialogic practice it is characterized by dynamic sustainability. What is produced is not a fixed duplicable result. The process of the production becomes a springboard for the many other possibilities that can emerge in the outside-the-consultation-life of each participant. They carry with them *their* new means for navigating challenges and generating ways forward that have specific personal, relational and contextual relevance.

Notes

- 1 In the remainder of the chapter I mostly use the terms consultant and researcher, though I invite the reader to insert the word that best fits their practice: teacher, leader, manager, etc.

- 2 Discussion of education as mutual or shared inquiry is beyond the scope of this chapter (see Anderson, 2013).

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