

Engagement in dialogue: *Some brief unfinished thoughts*

Harlene Anderson

Dialogue seems a popular topic these days, especially in the business and therapy worlds. The focus is often on how-to-do-it formulas or recipes that, for me, hint of imposing, mandating, or manipulating. I say this because my perspective on dialogue is different; a matter of something that happens between us rather than something we do deliberately. I have been influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin's philosophy of dialogue, which Michael Holquist (2002) refers to as dialogism. Holquist suggests that dialogism is "a pragmatically oriented theory of knowledge; more particularly, it is one of several modern epistemologies that seek to grasp human behavior through the use humans make of language" (p. 15). Bakhtin's philosophy of dialogue proposed that "self" – being human – life is dialogic event with a structure to it, a relational event (p.21). Thus, self-other is a reciprocally determining, dynamic relation; relation; the meanings and perceptions we have of our lives, events, others, etc. continually emerge in and only in relation, over time.

My perspective is also influenced by John Shotter's (1993, 2008) discussions of Bakhtin, Merleau-Ponty, and Wittgenstein, among others, and their influence on his idea of the "conversational background of social life"; the "spontaneous, expressive-responsivity" nature of people expressions and responses with each other, and the dialogically-structured and unique nature of the event occurring in our meetings with each other. Based on the above perspectives I think of dialogue as a natural and spontaneous process and not something that can be planned, mandated, steered, or manipulated. It is therefore an "effortlessness" process, always emerging, always filled with uncertainty which does not suggest 'lost-at-sea', rather it suggests an openness to being determined in many different ways, according to our *carefully chosen use of words and the manner of their expression*, always both ethical and political.

The challenge, however, is how to share an understanding of such a dialogic process and invite others to engage with me in my curiosity of this perspective of dialogue, a perspective that is often encountered with puzzlement and surprise of experiencing it, as we are being and becoming with each other. In these brief thoughts, I will not attempt to articulate Bakhtin's philosophy or the abstract assumptions of others who share similarities regarding the inherent generative, relational, and transformative nature of language and knowledge. I will focus on a few of the things that these assumptions invite me to consider when thinking of dialogue.

I refer to my practice orientation as collaborative-dialogue. For me, this means people engage with each other in collaborative relationship and dialogic conversation (Anderson, 1997, 2007). Although, for me, collaboration and dialogue go hand-in-hand, these brief thoughts will focus on dialogue. They are a partial response to a question I am often asked about how to invite and engage others in dialogue. I don't think of questions as requiring answers; instead, for me, they invite responding with thoughts, like thinking out loud. My initial response suggests it requires a shift

in orientation about how we think about ourselves, the people we work with, what we do together, and our world in general.

Though Bakhtin suggests we are inherently dialogical beings, I find it helpful to keep some things in mind when desiring to invite and engage with others in dialogue that hopefully will be more meaningful and generative instead of less. Of course, I keep in mind that meaningfulness is emergent and that each person determines the significance any activity, occasion, or event has for them.

Inviting and engaging in dialogue requires a shift in orientation.

The conditions for dialogue (collaborative dialogue) and the inviter's stance flow from the above assumptions – I use "collaborative" (collaborative dialogue and collaborative-dialogic practice) because I want to emphasise the importance of relational and the kind of relationship that increases the potential for possibilities in meanings, perceptions, and understandings when thinking in Bakhtin's and Shotter's terms. The assumptions are intertwined, none stand alone, and collaborating and dialoging are likewise. The shift in orientation naturally guides actions (ways of being and becoming) that invite collaborative-dialogue. The shift can be challenging because it is based on beliefs and values that are, for the most part, not in sync with those we have learned and are accustomed to as we swim in our dominant cultures and discourses. A primary challenge is that, since dialogue in a Bakhtinian sense involves spontaneous, expressive-responsivity, it does not require personal attributes or repeatable skills, nor is it based on pre-learned formulaic words and actions.

Dialogue entails collaborative design. Collaborative design is inherently part of the mutual process of co-generating newness in meaning, understanding, and action. Collaborative design simply means doing-it-together. Though design often refers to designing something prior to it happening, here I use it to refer to an emergent process: what we do together as we go along with each other, adjusting and creating. Critical to collaborative design is genuinely believing and valuing that each person has their own unique expertise and earnestly inviting, learning, and respecting the other's expertise, wisdom, history, etc. and what and how they want to offer it. In other words, the other has to be invited in on equitable terms.

Dialogue is multi-dimensional. Each dialogic encounter is part of past, present, and future ones: no one conversation stands alone. Each encounter entails a multiplicity of voices; of those present and those not present. Each encounter is unique to the participants, their histories, situations, circumstances, goals, and so forth. Each dialogue is situational and contextual (for example, historical, cultural, organisational, relational); this is the backdrop on which dialogue occurs. The relational aspect seems to trump the others.

Dialogue is a natural, spontaneous activity that occurs moment-to-moment. You can prepare for dialogue but you cannot plan or pre-structure it, and it cannot be implemented, orchestrated, or managed. Dialogue cannot be step-ordered or formulaic, nor

is its process sequential or repeatable. The preparation is the orientation. I have written about this as the *philosophical stance*: ways of being and becoming (Anderson, 1997, 2007).

Dialogue is rhizomatic; there is no one entryway and no entryway is more correct than another. It is impossible to trace back to a starting point, a significant moment, or a person; all are observer punctuations and interpretations. Dialogue is not necessarily continuous. It is sporadic, wanders and surprises; it has interruptions and takes unexpected twists and turns. Its process is much like moving back and forth along a continuum: sometimes our talk is more dialogic and sometimes it is less. What is important is not punctuated moments, rather that its “wholeness” is more dialogic instead of less.

Dialogue as spontaneous, expressive-responsivity necessitates the reflexive, intricately woven processes of speaking, listening, thinking, and hearing. We speak to invite the other to speak so that we can listen. Listening is part of the active process of trying responsively to understand as best we can what the other person is saying. We respond to try to understand what we *think* we have heard (or seen) and, importantly, what the other wants is to understand. Responding to understand involves being genuinely curious, asking questions to learn more about what is said (not what you think should have been said), and checking-out to learn if what you think you heard is what the other person hoped you heard. Understanding involves carefulness not to assume you know what the other person means and not to fill in the blanks or details of their story, or what is thought to be behind the story. As well, pauses and silences are important to the dialogic process; they provide opportunity, space, and time for reflecting on what you think you have heard via inner or outer talk, and for preparing to respond.

Listening, thinking, hearing, and speaking are part of being a respectful learner who acts from a position of trust and openness to the ‘otherness’ of the other and their difference: open to learning from the other’s sense-making and logic and to having yours questioned, critiqued, or not agreed with by the other. Differences, whether expressed as tension, non-clarity, ambiguity, incoherency, uncertainty, and misunderstanding, necessarily inhabit dialogue, and are critical for more rather than less generativity. In other words, dialogue is not necessarily smooth and harmonious.

Some actions do not invite dialogue. Trying to persuade the other to understand or agree with you or to strive for consensus or synthesis does not encourage dialogue. Though any of these may occur; however, it must be emergent, growing out of the mutual responsiveness of the participants. Therefore, it is more likely to be situationally relevant than if externally guided. In other words, the “*arrived upon*” forms within the present moment are fittingly responsive and unique to what the occasion calls for (Anderson, 2007, p. 52).

The intent and hope of the inviter of dialogue is to engage with one’s self and with the other in dialogue, in a process that I call “dynamic sustainability,” nothing more.

The purpose is not a product, resolution, or solution, as we are used to thinking of and aiming for. Rather, it is “*something*”: something like the beginning of a newness – a process, a thought, an action, etc. – that has the ability to continue to live and emerge outside the professional arena with an adaptability potential. By adaptability, I mean a sense of capability that one will be able to respond to what life presents. If, as Bakhtin (1986) suggests,

meaning is never finalised, then what is seemingly produced is never finalised, and thus not duplicative.

Being able to live with the uncertainty of where the dialogue takes you, including its twists and turns and surprises along the way, requires us to let our intention and hope be challenged: let us be able to challenge it ourselves, and let us be able to give it up.

To be continued...

Acknowledgement

My sincere gratitude to John Shotter for his comments on the draft of this article.

References

- Anderson, H. (1997) *Conversation, Language and Possibilities: A Postmodern Approach to Therapy*. New York: Basic Books.
- Anderson, H. (2007) The heart and spirit of collaborative therapy: The philosophical stance. In H. Anderson & D. Gehert (eds.) *Collaborative Therapy: Relations and Conversations that make a Difference*. New York: Routledge.
- Bakhtin, M. (1981) *The Dialogic Imagination* (Trans. C. Emerson & M. Holquist). M. Holquist (ed.). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Bakhtin, M. (1986) *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Trans. V.W. McGee). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Holquist, M. (2002) *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World* (2nd Edition). New York: Routledge.
- Shotter, J. (2008) *Conversational Realities Revisited: Life, Language, Body and World*. Chagrins Falls, Ohio: Taos Institute Publications.
- Shotter, J. (1993) *Conversational Realities: Constructing Life Through Language*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Harlene Anderson is internationally recognised as an innovator, leader, and author in postmodern and social-construction practices. She is a co-founder and board member of the Taos Institute and the Houston Galveston Institute, Texas, and the editor of the *International Journal of Collaborative-Dialogic Practice*. Email: harleneanderson@earthlink.net / www.harleneanderson.org