

Conversation as Experiential Learning

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# CONVERSATION AS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

## ABSTRACT

As conversation is a primary medium of human interaction, enhancing the learning potential of conversations is a strong interest of the authors as well as of many scholars and practitioners. This article proposes a theoretical framework for understanding the social construction of conversation interpersonally as experiential learning . By embracing the differences across multiple dialectical continua concurrently - i.e., staying with their inherent contradictions - the dialectical extremes can open a conversational space. By attending to this conversational space to enable those in the conversation to remain engaged with each other, their differing perspectives can catalyze learning experientially. This article elaborates on the deliberate choice of the word conversation, on the five relevant dialectics, and offers a conceptual perspective on the creation of conversational spaces that can promote learning at the social, interactive level of experiential learning.

# CONVERSATION AS EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

## INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, the power of conversation in learning and making meaning interactively from experience is being recognized. Yet, the theoretical foundation for experiential learning at the interactive, conversational level is yet to be developed. The primary intention of this article is to begin to expand the existing theory of experiential learning at the social, interactive level of conversation.

This article suggests a way of being in conversation and of fostering experiential learning that increases the likelihood of creative learning within conversational spaces - i.e., providing a common ground that is safe and broad enough to invite a deepening engagement with differences. As participants in a conversation engage with and inquire into the span of possibilities across a dialectical continuum, multiple perspectives and differences are shared in that dialectical space and can be catalysts or impediments for learning. Hence, attention needs to be given to the unfolding conversational inquiry and to the context or space that holds the conversation if it is to promote learning (Baker, 1995; Jensen, 1995).

## CONVERSATION AND DIALOGUE

Given the currency of the use of the word dialogue and the traditions of dialectical discourse, our careful and deliberate choice of the word conversation was not accidental. While some dictionaries define dialogue and conversation as synonyms or define both words as "talk," a deeper etymology reveals very different root origins of the two words. The origins of the English word dialogue can be traced through French to Latin and ultimately to the Greek *dialectos* (American Heritage Dictionary, 1994). The meaning later evolved to include conflict in general. The root of "dialogue" is then related to "opposing voices in search of truth," a definition that emphasizes talk, comprehension, and exchange of differing ideas.

The history of the word "conversation" has very different origins. The Oxford English Dictionary (1993) gives the first recorded usage in 1346 as "to be united in heaven in conversation." Nearly all of the 12 definitions of the word emphasize the emotional, apprehensional, and communal aspect of conversation.

The word dialogue generally is preferred by critical theorists, classicists, and other theorists who are epistemologically oriented - those who see "talk" primarily as an intellectual process of refining knowledge. Edgar Schein (1993), one of the early leaders of the sensitivity training approach to group dynamics, makes this point by contrasting dialogue with communication in sensitivity training settings.

Most communication and human relations workshops emphasize active listening....Dialogue is focused more on the thinking process and

how our perceptions and cognitions are preformed by our past experiences...In the typical sensitivity training workshops we explore relationships through opening up and sharing, through giving and receiving feedback, and through examining all of the *emotional* problems of communication. In dialogue, however, we explore all the complexities of *thinking and language*. We discover how arbitrary our basic categories of thought and perception are, and, thereby, become conscious of imperfections or bias in our basic *cognitive* processes.

(p. 43)

The term conversation, in contrast, is used by more ontologically oriented writers like Gadamer, Rorty and Palmer, who focus more on human understanding than abstract knowledge. According to White (1994),

Gadamer's hermeneutics illuminates an approach to understanding where interpersonal communication or *conversation* reveals, constitutes, or embodies the *world* between people. His point is that interpersonal understanding does not consist of the transmission of preexistent meanings from one person to another but is a creative or *productive* understanding that occurs in conversation. (p. 84)

In addition, we prefer the term conversation because it implies a somewhat softer approach to method. Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1989), for example, can be read as a treatise on the limitations of the use of method in the search for truth.

On the other hand, the introduction to the *Organizational Dynamics* special issue on dialogue, in which Schein's (1993) article appears, refers to dialogue as a "communications technology." Our concern about hard method is that it leads to the objectivication of others where facilitator or interventionist actions and words are privileged by virtue of technological expertise over other participants in the conversation. We prefer to view conversation as an intersubjective process where all participants are viewed as equally-potent centers of consciousness. To paraphrase Gadamer (1989), the conversation is larger than the consciousness of any single participant, including the leader.

In sum, we prefer the word conversation because it emphasizes the primacy of ontological experience within which epistemological discourses are embedded, as in William James (1988) radical empiricism. To paraphrase Wittgenstein (1961), the real mystery is not *how* the world is (as described in epistemological discourse ), *but that* it is. Being precedes doing. Conversation is not something created by a method but is an experience in which people participate. (1)

Now moving forward with this understanding of conversation, it seems appropriate that we highlight some of the varied, and quite different, bodies of literature and conversational paradigms that have inspired and influenced us, including linguistic analysis, information processing, group dynamics, moral philosophy, feminist, natural and spiritual perspectives. They can themselves be seen as textual conversations about conversation involving different authors, differing conceptual frameworks and methods of inquiry. In this article, the

proposed dialectical framework for understanding conversational learning integrates insights from these varied perspectives with the social, interactive dimensions of experiential learning theory.

Since Kurt Lewin (1951), one of the originators of experiential learning theory, is a central figure in the group dynamics literature, it is not surprising that this field should influence this work. What is most striking about this perspective is the emphasis placed on the primacy of direct experience in conversation. From this vantage point, conversation is determined by needs and emotions in the "interpersonal underworld" and is shaped by the process of group development. Indeed, most of this literature seeks to understand conversation with very little attention given to what is said with a focus instead on the meaning that is made during and after the conversation - in sharp contrast to linguistic and information processing approaches that appear to assume that all meaning lies in language or in content.

The literature on conversation as moral dialogue, be it the communicative ethics of Habermas (1991), Gadamer's (1989) hermeneutics, or Charles Taylor's (1991) ethics of authenticity, focuses on the process of naming experience with concepts like the ideal speech situation and the fusion of horizons of understanding. For Paulo Freire, one of the foremost experiential learning theorists, the process of naming the world through speaking and listening is a central concept. While Freire's work is cast more in political than moral terms, his politics have a clear moral dimension, just as barriers to the creation of the ideal speech situation have a



political aspect. The interplay between morality and power differentials inherent within conversation is evident throughout the literature on moral dialogue as well as the dialectical dual knowledge theory of learning that strives to reconcile direct experience (apprehensions) and linguistic description (comprehensions).

Likewise, the “conversation as communion” literature places deep value on direct experience introducing spiritual and ontological meaning beyond the epistemological realm of description. The importance of silence and deep listening in the Quaker meeting, for example, suggests *understanding conversation by what is heard more than by what is said*. While this literature is especially attuned to *listening*, much of the moral dialogue literature emphasizes *speaking* in conversation. Yet, it is in the dialectical tension between the two extremes that the greatest potential for learning resides (Baker, 1995).

## THE FIVE DIALECTICS OF LEARNING CONVERSATIONS

We are suggesting that conversational learning is enhanced through the simultaneous engagement across five dialectical dimensions. For each of the dialectics that we identify and explore here, the tension between the opposing ends of each dialectic can be approached as a dualistic phenomena or embraced as an integrative resource. While a dualistic position would create an adversarial orientation where determining right and wrong becomes the focus of the conversation, the integrative perspective creates a profoundly different interaction making the full range of possibilities within the dialectic available to inform the conversation. The integrative approach involves *living with the tension* across the

dialectical continuum, allowing for the possibility of learning from the dialectical extremes. While this *living with the tension* may be expressed in a variety of ways, we will offer what we think of as a hopeful perspective of engagement with the dialectical tension.

To promote learning, these five dialectical opposites define the boundaries of the conversational space. The dialectical extremes open a space that can be widened by the very extremity of the differing perspectives. Yet, the wider the space created and the more diverse the perspectives that are expressed in the conversation, the more attention must be given to supporting the space so that the learning can grow as multiple dialectics are confronted within the conversation - thus, the paradox of similarity and difference. Without attention to creating a receptive space that fosters common ground in the midst of this dialectical tension, the differences often will not be expressed at all or they will be expressed in ways that lead to alienation and rejection. Either alternative interferes with, rather than catalyzes, learning.

Yet, what are the dialectics that fundamentally undergird learning conversations? Our elaboration of these dialectics begins with the dialectic of the knowing dimensions of experiential learning theory - apprehension and comprehension. Next, the dialectic of praxis that incorporates the integration of intention/reflection and of extension/action is explored followed by an examination of the dialectical tension between epistemological, discursive processes and ontological, recursive processes. The fourth dimension is the dialectic of

individuality and relationality that contrasts conversation as inside-out and outside-in interpersonal experiences. Finally, the dialectic of status and solidarity describes power and intimacy dimensions by showing the value inherent within the simultaneous ranking and linking dynamics in the social realm of conversation.

After naming and describing these dialectics, we will conceptually explore the creation of conversational space for inquiry across these dialectics. The article ends with a summation of the dialectical understanding of conversation.

### ***Integrated Knowing***

#### **Apprehension and Comprehension: Experience and Knowing**

The dialectic of the knowing dimensions, apprehension and comprehension, might best be expressed as ***integrated knowing***. *Experiential Learning* (Kolb, 1984) describes the philosophical, psychological and physiological bases of the dual knowledge theory. Knowing through concrete experience is called apprehension - an immediate, feeling-oriented, tacit, subjective process largely based in older regions of the human brain that have ensured human survival for millions of years. The process of knowing through abstract concepts is called comprehension - a linguistic, conceptual, interpretative process based in the relatively "new" left cerebral cortex that is only thousands of years old. How we learn in conversation is based on the complex interrelationship of these two knowing processes. Yet, experiential learning theory emphasizes the primary role of experience in the learning process. It suggests that conversational learning is first and foremost an experience.

This view is articulated by William James, another major contributor to the theory of experiential learning, in his philosophy of radical empiricism (Hickcox, 1990).(2) James posed radical empiricism as a new theory of reality and mind which resolved the conflicts between 19th century rationalism and empiricism, the philosophies of idealism and materialism. For James, everything begins and ends in the continuous flux and flow of experience.

His philosophy of radical empiricism was based on two co-equal and dialectically related ways of knowing the world - "knowledge of acquaintance" based on direct perception and "knowledge about" based on mediating conception. Giving *co-equal* value to these two ways of knowing is indeed radical and is a relationship that we want to emphasize here. In radical empiricism, direct perception has primacy since all concepts derive their validity from connection to sense experience. Concepts, however, have priority in controlling human action because they often enable us to predict the future and achieve our desires. James (1977) draws attention to the importance of this co-equal relationship when he says,

We thus see clearly what is gained and what is lost when percepts are translated into concepts. Perception is solely of the here and now; conception is of the like and unlike, of the future, and of the past, and of the far away. But this map of what surrounds the present, like all maps, is only a surface; its features are but abstract signs and symbols of things that in themselves are concrete bits of sensible experience. We have but to weigh extent against content, thickness against spread,

and we see that for some purposes the one, for other purposes the other, has the higher value. Who can decide off hand which is absolutely better to live and to understand life? We must do both alternately, and a man can no more limit himself to either than a pair of scissors can cut with a single one of its blades. (p. 243)

So for James, conversation is more than an exchange of concepts; it is a perceptual process as well. That is to say that conversation is a sensual experience. Conversation is typically thought of as speaking and listening, but James would enlarge the realm of conversation to conceiving and perceiving. Conversation involves all the senses and, indeed, the more intimate the conversation, the more likely it is to include all the senses, including emotions and feelings, the more primitive senses of touch, taste, and smell and the more mysterious senses such as intuition. His observation that rationalism and discursive thought are intrusive on the conversational experience is a warning to those who would study conversation as a solely discursive process that is unaffected by the experiential context in which it occurs. A dinner table conversation, an Internet chat room, or a telephone call are different conversational experiences in highly varied contexts that enhance and restrict different senses and hence affect what is *heard* and *perceived* in the conversation. As many communication theorists have said, most of the meaning in communication is nonverbal. From the speakers' perspective, this means that conversation is as much about showing as it is about telling. From the listeners'

perspective, this means that conversation is as much about perceiving as it is about hearing.

In our research (3) where individuals recalled conversations that stood out for them, one man spoke directly to this notion of holding the dialectical tension between apprehension and comprehension, to the importance of *integrated knowing*, saying,

*the intertwining of the affective and cognitive relating, that is, something which becomes more and more important. An issue I am most sensitive about ... that [it] is not good I think to have that either/or option. I think having such a conversation [which included the affective] as we had is worthwhile to create a fertile ground to talk about this [more cognitive topic]. (Baker, 1995, p. 196)*

Especially in western cultures, there is a strong tendency to overemphasize in both quantity and in value the comprehensive contributions to conversation, and yet at such a cost. A woman we talked with in our research made a distinction between the "analytical versus non-analytical" saying that

*if you are too analytical, you just break... conversation into pieces ... takes out..the heart of it, maybe the dessert or ... taste ... [on the other hand] sharing some real personal thing, I think that is a wonderful way of growing the conversation because it gives meaning to it. (Baker, 1995, p. 195)*

The dual knowledge, radical empiricism of experiential learning is a primary reason we have chosen to use the term *conversation* as opposed to *dialogue* in our work as it is more fully inclusive of both apprehension and comprehension as co-equal essentials among people making meaning interactively, more fully descriptive of what we mean by *integrated knowing*. Like the two blades of William James' scissors, apprehension and comprehension, are dialectically related and define each other.

### ***Praxis***

#### **Reflection and Action: Intention and Extension**

The transforming dialectic of intension and extension is most dynamic when reflection and action come together in a kind of *praxis* that gives integrity to expressive work. The dialectical embracing of *praxis* then expresses itself as reflection that offers vision that gives rise to action that in turn instills even newer vision that can lead to more profound action...thus, a transformation of life experience takes place.

Learning is like breathing, it follows a rhythm of taking in and putting out, of incorporating ideas and experiences to find meaning and expressing that meaning in thought, speech and action. Using a somewhat different metaphor, Peter Elbow (1986) identifies two sources for what he calls real learning: applying concepts widely and inventing new concepts.

These two root cognitive processes are complementary and the basis of real learning from the most primitive to the most sophisticated. The

reason they are so crucial is that they represent the two directions of traffic across the border between verbal and nonverbal experience.

Where the first consists of constructing new experience from words, the second, sensing functionally, consists ... of constructing new words from experience: searching for felt relationships among experiences in order to bring to birth new implied concepts ... These two processes, applying concepts widely and inventing new ones, also correspond to Piaget's two basic processes of assimilation and accommodation: as it were, eating the environment and being eaten by the environment. (p. 33) (4)

His concept of verbal and non-verbal experience corresponds to the comprehension and apprehension modes of "grasping" experience, while the two modes of traffic between them represent the transformative dimensions of extension (action) and intention (reflection).

Paulo Freire (1992) and other critical theorists refer to the transformative dialectic between reflection and action as praxis - reflection informed by action and action informed by reflection. He writes powerfully about the dynamics of this dialectic in conversation:

As we attempt to analyze dialogue as a human phenomenon...Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed - even in part - the other immediately suffers....When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter,



into verbalism, into an alienated and alienating 'blah'....On the other hand, if action is emphasized exclusively, to the detriment of reflection, the word is converted into activism. The latter action for action's sake negates the true praxis and makes dialogue impossible. (pp. 75, 78)

In our research, when asked in what ways a specific conversation had been a good conversation, this interplay of the active and reflective can be seen when one person responded with

*When you are speaking, you speak with the other person as a consideration in mind...And listening, you have to listen to hear what is said, rather than having a preformed opinion which does not allow change...I thought this conversation had both of those pieces present for the entire conversation.* (Baker, 1995, p. 206)

Another example was expressed as

*The more I am able to actually hear what is being said, the easier it is to find my own voice. The more I tend to be reacting to what is being said, the more I tend to be just making noise.* (Baker, 1995, p.206)

For this person, there seems to be the creative tension of the dialectic present when they find their voice to speak through the hearing from others. Yet, when they react (as with a preformed opinion), they are just "making noise," rather than being receptive to hearing something new.

Freire's (1992) metaphor for traditional education, the "banking concept of education," where ideas are deposited in the heads of students describes a relationship between teacher and student that could scarcely be called a conversation. The dialectic is so polarized toward the student only taking in, that very little emphasis is given to expressing accrued meanings toward intentional action. Too many courses spend 15 weeks in-putting information to students and then asking them to express themselves by answering "A, B, C, D, or none of the above" in an examination. Experiential learning approaches to education, on the other hand, seek to develop a conversational space where the *praxis* between reflection and action can occur (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 1997).

### ***Spiral***

#### **Epistemological Discourse and Ontological Recourse: Doing and Being**

The dialectical tension between epistemological, discursive processes and ontological, recursive processes is most fully expressed when these approaches weave themselves together in a vibrant and creative approach to the knowing process. This weaving together can be expressed by a *spiral*, wherein a person's cognitive knowledge and tacit ways of knowing and being are dynamically and continuously informing each other.

Conversational learning follows a rhythm of discursive and recursive processes that is portrayed in a simplified way by the experiential learning cycle. The cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualization and action returning again to experience depicts learning as a recursive process within which discourses are

embedded. As Freire (1992) put it, "To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming" (p. 76). Barry Sheckley, George Allen and Morris Keeton (1994) in their study of recursive processes in adult learning put it this way, "Within the constructed knowledge system recursive relationships exist between experience and the mental processes used to make sense of experience. Simply stated, what learners 'know' influences what they 'experience' and conversely, what they 'experience' influences what they 'know'" (pp. 60-61). (5)

Discourse is epistemological; it is a linear process of naming and describing experience in order to transcend the now and extend into the future. James Hans's (1989) *The Question of Value* is a study of Heiddger's last work, *What is Called Thinking*, which explores Nietzsche's idea that epistemological discourse is driven by a revulsion against time. According to Hans (1989), "Discursivity is the opportunity to transcend time and so escape revulsion from it. Sequentiality assures that one thing comes after without repetition" (p. 27). Discursivity is driven by the fear of recursivity, the fear of *the return of the same*.

Discourses begin from a set of assumptions, a process of *framing*, and proceed to elucidate the implications of those assumptions, a process of *naming*. The framing of a discourse is a tacit, apprehensional process while naming is a verbal, comprehensional process. Thus, the assumptions that make up the frame are often unconscious. As Donald Schon and Martin Rein (1994) say in *Frame Reflection*,

"The frames that shape policies are usually tacit, which means that we tend to argue *from* our tacit frames to our explicit policy positions" (p. 34). (6) Robert McNamara's (1995) *In Retrospect* gives a tragic example of how difficult frame reflection is. He points out that while there were many policy debates during the Vietnam war, the basic assumptions which framed these debates - the domino theory, that this was a war to contain Communism that could be won with the use of European warfare tactics, rather than a civil war - were never seriously questioned.

Discourses in conversation have precursors in previous conversations which often set up the assumptive frame of the discourse. This *precourse* was called fore-structures of knowledge by Heidegger (Hans, 1989) and prejudice by Gadamer (1989) . The end of a conversational discourse leads to *post-course*. Here there is a process of sorting what to keep from the conversation and what to throw away. The resulting story of the conversation becomes recourse for future conversations, thus transporting the discourse into other contexts and the future. Thus, any conversational discourse is embedded in a complex network of previous and future conversations.

Recourse is ontological, a continuing spiral of return to *being*. Hans (1989) suggested that "We have forgotten 'Being' because we have chosen to, for value free inquiry can only occur extrinsic of questions of 'Being' in as much as these questions involve us in the passing of time through which Being manifests itself" (p.

73). Heidegger called this recursive process the hermeneutic circle of understanding.

Recursivity, the regular return with a difference, is the inherent principle in all understanding. The difference in the return is always that which is understood and it is always that which increases our understanding of the whole through which the difference returns. (Hans, 1989, p. 31)

One of the stories we were told in an interview was a rich example of this recursive network of previous and future conversations. The story was about a private conversation between two people (here we will refer to them as Greta and Sarah) who discovered they were sharing similar relocation adjustments in moving to a new city and entering graduate school. Yet, there were some strong differences in their situations and perceptions as well. Following a private conversation between them, Greta brought up these experiences again in another conversation in a group setting. As Sarah listened to Greta talk in the group, she describes the impact on her of the recursivity or returning once again to these topics saying,

*"because I think hearing it the second time, I heard Greta saying something that I did not hear the first time. (Baker, 1995, p. 215)*

As Sarah listened, at first it was hard to hear again in the more public context, but then she realized she was hearing Greta in a new way

*I heard in Greta's tone. Maybe that is what allowed me to listen to Greta's tone more....I did not have to listen to her words any more. I*

*heard her words before. So this time, I was listening to how, she said it .... I think that is what enabled me to hear the levels or layers of what I think she was trying to say ... allowed me to hear what was really going on, instead of just the words. (Baker, 1995, p. 215)*

During this group conversation, these two people were sitting next to each other, and Sarah began to hear multiple levels of meaning being expressed. When we later asked her what stood out about the conversation, Sarah said,

*sitting next to Greta and not seeing her face, and not focusing on her words so much... that was a real interesting experience, because as I am reliving it with you, [I'm] realizing that that made it possible ... perhaps if I had not had the conversation before, if I had not heard her use the words before. I might not have come out at the same place. (Baker, 1995, p. 215)*

Recourse in conversation can take many forms. As in this example, it can deepen our understanding. Or it can be a reaffirmation of the basic thrust of the discourse, perhaps even bringing others into agreement with the line of thinking. Or it can challenge the prevailing discourse with other lines of thought and maybe even make explicit or challenge the assumptive frame. One of the many forms of this recourse is found in this metaphor for good conversation that one person in our research offered saying,

*Good conversation is mutual, it is interactive ... there is a dynamic happening.. There is something happening back and forth, and it is building up and up and up... When my point is affirmed, and someone picks it up, it reaffirms me to say, okay, I'm giving this a shot and I will throw a different angle on it. And it just feels good.* (Baker, 1995, p. 219-20)

In *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Richard Rorty (1980) calls this recursive challenging of the dominant discourse edifying discourse saying, "For edifying discourse is *supposed* to be abnormal, to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings" (p. 360). He compares Kuhn's normal science and normal discourse to this abnormal discourse.

"Abnormal discourse is what happens when someone joins in the discourse who is ignorant of these conventions or who sets them aside...The product of abnormal discourse can be anything from nonsense to intellectual revolution" ( p. 320).

Repetitive recursivity in conversation can deepen the conversation and make it more memorable. (7) For example, music and ritual are highly recursive discourses. A song will play itself over and over in your head and a ritual can be so habitual that it recurs automatically.

Rorty (1980) differentiates between epistemological discourses which seek commensurability and the recursive hermeneutic circle.

By 'commensurable' I mean able to be brought under a set of rules which will tell us how rational agreement can be reached on what would settle the issue on every point where statements seem to conflict...For hermeneutics, to be rational is to be willing to refrain from epistemology, from thinking that there is a special set of terms in which all contributions to the conversation should be put and to be willing to pick up the jargon of the interlocutor rather than translating it into one's own. For epistemology, to be rational is to find the proper set of terms into which all the contributions should be translated if agreement is to become possible. For epistemology, conversation is implicit inquiry. For hermeneutics, inquiry is routine conversation. We will be epistemological where we understand perfectly well what is happening but want to extend, or strengthen, or teach, or 'ground' it. We must be hermeneutical where we do not understand what is happening but are honest enough to admit it..." (p. 316, 318, 321)

In *Reclaiming Reality*, Roy Bhaskar (1989) describes what he calls the epistemic fallacy, the definition of Being in terms of our knowledge of it, the failure to make a clear distinction between epistemology and ontology. While our knowledge of the world is a social product, produced by transformational social activity from previously existing knowledge, the Being of the world must be conceived of as existing independently of our thoughts about it (Shotter, 1993, p.



66). Yet, when these two complementary ways of knowing are ever informing each other through the *spiraling* together, new possibilities for learning emerge.

### ***Intersubjectivity***

#### **Individuality and Relationality: Inside-out and Outside-in**

The tension between individuality, where a person takes in life experience as an individual process, and relationality, where life is an experience of connection and integration with others, finds its integrity best expressed as *intersubjectivity*. When *intersubjectivity* comes into the interpersonal relationship, the individual maintains a sense of self while at the same time is aware, influenced by, and expressive of the vitality of the connectedness to others.

Unique individuality is one of the most predominate characteristics of life from the western, cultural perspective. At the same time, evolutionary biology documents the importance of cooperation, altruism and communalism in social animal species. Humans have two biological prime directives - to preserve the self as an individual and to preserve the species as a whole. Guisinger and Blatt (1994) argue that these two orientations are dialectically related, "...individuality (or sense of self) and the sense of relatedness to others develop in a transactional, interrelated, and dialectical manner, with higher levels of self-development making possible higher levels of interpersonal relatedness and vice-versa" (p. 111).

Related work comes from the psychologists, psychiatrists, and other scholars who have been working collaboratively through the Stone Center to better understand human development by including more fully the experience of women.

As Janet Surrey (1991) notes, "inquiry into the nature of women's development is a step in the evolution of understanding human development" (p. 52). In contrast to the traditional notion of the development of a separate self as the primary goal of human development, Surrey proposes a self-in-relationship. She describes this when she says,

The notion of the self-in-relation involves an important shift in emphasis from separation to relationship as the basis for self-experience and development. Further, relationship is seen as the basic goal of development: that is, the deepening capacity for relationship and relational competence. The self-in-relation model assumes that other aspects of self (e.g., creativity, autonomy, assertion) develop within this primary context. That is, other aspects of self-development emerge in the context of relationship, and there is no inherent need to disconnect or to sacrifice relationship for self-development. This formulation implies that we must develop an adequate description of relational development in order to understand self-development. ( p. 53)

Judith Jordan (1991), also from the Stone Center, further describes this self-in-relation as mutual intersubjectivity involving a highly interactive exchange in a relationship of mutuality where each person allows themselves to be open to the possibility of being influenced by the other.

Prior to this more recent feminist work, Martin Buber's (1958) *I/Thou* relationship offered an exemplary image of relationality. The *I/Thou* relationship

is one of directness and mutuality as when Buber says, "My *Thou* affects me, as I affect it" (p. 15). It is a relationship which comes through grace and cannot be found through the seeking for it. While the *I/It* relationship is one of natural separation, the *I/Thou* is one of natural connection. Through a more relational orientation of mutuality and connection, norms which are more like this image of the *I/Thou* relationship might be possible. In the eyes of Buber, the

aim of relation is relation's own being, that is, contact with the *Thou*...He who takes his stand in relation shares in a reality, that is, in a being that neither merely belongs to him nor merely lies outside him... The more direct the contact with the *Thou*, the fuller is the sharing. (p. 63)

Buber suggests that conversation is the essence of the contact among persons as the,

*I* and *Thou* take their stand not merely in relation, but also in the solid give-and-take of talk. The moments of relation are here, and only here, bound together by means of the element of the speech in which they are immersed. Here what confronts us has blossomed into the full reality of the *Thou*. (p. 103)

In *Womens Ways of Knowing*, Mary Belenky and her colleagues (1986) developed related concepts of separate and connected knowing. They found that separate knowers operate in a primarily comprehensive mode assuming autonomy, reciprocity, extrication of self, and doubt whereas connected knowers assume

relatedness, empathy, use of self, and connection, a more apprehensive process and more closely related to the kind of relation that Buber names as the *I/Thou*. They went on to describe another way of knowing as constructed knowing where learning is a process of

...weaving together the strands of rational and emotive thought and of integrating objective and subjective knowing. Rather than extricating the self in the acquisition of knowledge, these women used themselves in rising to a new way of thinking. As Adele described it, 'You let the inside out and the outside in.'" (p.134-5)

Through a constructed approach to knowing, each person in the conversation can value the reason, intuition, and expertise of the self and of others to come to a socially constructed way of knowing.

### ***Hospitality***

#### **Status and Solidarity: Ranking and Linking**

The dialectical tension of status and solidarity finds its creativity when power is rooted in community in ways that form a receptive space of ***hospitality***. The receptive space of ***hospitality*** helps those engaged in conversation to come together with respect and fairness for each person. Status and solidarity give shape to the ways individuals relate to one another in the social realm.

Relationships among human beings, as well as other social animals, can be portrayed on a two dimensional interpersonal space of status and solidarity (Schwizgabel & Kolb, (1974). Status here describes one's positioning or ranking in

the group while solidarity refers to the extent to which one is linked interpersonally with others in a network or community of relationships. Yet, critical to the understanding of the dialectical tension being suggested here is the constant fluctuation that allows for fluidity and variability, not only in the linking but especially in the ranking dynamics, to promote conversational learning. In other words, through the incorporation of infinitesimal combinations and forms for ranking and linking connections that change rapidly throughout the conversation, the terrain of conversation is thus partially shaped by the relative influence of ranking versus linking and by the flexibility for shifting positions and alliances. Rather than the status and attention given to an individual in a conversation being assumed positionally (such as to a leader), the status and attention flows among people in the conversation naturally according to the variations in conversational content, energy, and expertise among the participants in the conversation.

In a group where hierarchical ranking predominates, communication becomes one way, moving from the top to the bottom. When linking predominates in the group, communication occurs more among equals and is multidirectional. With emphasis on ranking, issues of power and competition are more pervasive, while when linking is underscored, intimacy and collaboration are more present.

Some measure of both ranking and status and intimate linking and solidarity are usually necessary to sustain conversation. Without status where one or more participants takes some initiative or lead, conversation can lose direction. Without solidarity where participants are building upon and linking to each other,

conversation can lose connection and relevance and not benefit from the multiple perspectives and diverse expertise of each person. When one dialectical pole dominates to the exclusion of the other, conversational learning is diminished. When one conversant dominates rather than strong voices shifting dynamically with changes in content, passion, and spontaneity, conversational learning is diminished. At the extreme, ranking leads to an unanswered monologue from the top. With total intimacy and solidarity, talk can be aimless and primarily recursive. While the appropriateness of emphasis on ranking and linking in a conversation is contextually determined, attention to the relative value of each pole is integral to conversational learning.

The relative influence of ranking and linking speak to the nature of power within the conversation. Underlying assumptions about power and the intentions that are brought into the conversation are intricately related to this relative influence of ranking and linking and to the capacity for fluidity and flexibility. Jean Baker Miller (1986) identifies two fundamentally different types of inequality - temporary and permanent inequality. *Temporary inequality* she refers to as relationships in which the *lesser party* is socially defined as unequal, and by definition, this type of inequality is bounded by time and is a status that is readily changeable. The *superior party* presumably has some combination of qualities that they will assist the *lesser party* to develop. This development, from unequal to equal, is the primary purpose of the relationship. For example, parents assist children to become adults, teachers assist students to become capable graduates

and colleagues. The ultimate goal of this type of relationship is to end the inequality. Although Miller does seem to be describing more long-term relationships, in fact, we are suggesting here that this change in status can occur in an instant in conversation as the very topic or needs of the moment change. For the ranking and linking to serve the conversational learning interaction, this more spontaneous and adaptable flow is preferable, opening the possibility for each participant in a conversation to take the lead at times.

In the second type of unequal relationship, referred to by Miller as *permanent inequality*, the goal is to enforce the inequality and is not time bound. Here, individuals or groups are defined as unequal by ascription into categories such as race, sex, class, religion and by positional power. In an ironic sense, the nature and range of this unequal relationship are seen as being a "birthright" and is implicitly assumed by the *dominants* to be permanent. However, as Miller points out, in this second type of unequal relationship, the effects are kept extremely vague, if not denied. She concludes that difficulties in relationships of temporary inequality may occur because they exist within the context of permanently unequal relationships. Miller states that permanent inequality "has determined and still determines the only way we can think and feel" (p. 6) even when people are in relationships of temporary inequality - an influence that directly impacts the relative influence of ranking and linking in conversations.

Paulo Freire has made it the center-piece of his life's work to redress the injustices of oppressive hierarchy by promoting the solidarity of what he calls

dialogue among equals in naming the world. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1992)

he says:

But while to say the true word...is to transform the world, saying that word is not the privilege of some few men, but the right of every man.

Consequently, no one can say a true word alone - nor can he say it for another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words. (p. 76) (8)

Certainly, his own life experience in a totalitarian state which exiled him has focused his attention on the extremes of poverty and wealth, powerlessness and oppressive control, which characterize Brazilian society. Like Freire's emphasis on the right of individuals to participate fully in the naming of experience, the feminist literature gives considerable attention to the promotion of voice in conversation. In fact, both the Freire inspired literature and the feminist literatures can be read as previously silenced voices speaking out against the oppressive voices of authority.

Indeed, the voice of all revolutionary movements is liberty, equality, fraternity, and more recently sisterhood. In true dialectical fashion, by raising the pole of solidarity to give voice, the fervor can appear to deny any place for status and ranking in conversation. Yet, holding the dialectical tension that encompasses the full political dynamic requires considerable attention to assuring a receptive space of *hospitality* to support the fluid status and spontaneous solidarity needed to promote conversational learning. We will shift now to elaborate on that space.





## CREATING THE CONVERSATIONAL LEARNING SPACE

Making space for conversation can occur in many dimensions - making physical space as when a manager gets up from behind the desk to join colleagues around a table, making temporal space as when a family sets aside weekly time for family conversation, making emotional space through receptive active listening, even making cyberspace in an internet chat room. It is easy to get so focused on the structure of conversation, on what is said and how speech flows from one participant to another, that one fails to notice the bounded space that holds the conversation and allows it to occur. So too, when we stand in awe at the vastness of the structures that make up the universe, we lose sight of the more awesome space that contains the structures - the emptiness that makes room for things to exist, the receptive space that allows conversation to emerge dynamically and creatively.

By staying with the tension embedded within the dialectical framework described above, a receptive space that holds the conversation is created. The extreme poles of these five dialectic dimensions define the boundaries of the space within which conversational learning occurs. When one pole of any of the dialectics dominates, learning within conversations is impeded and can cease to exist. Some semblance of boundaries is necessary to preserve and make space for structures just as the process of structuring creates boundaries. The dual knowledge dialectic opens a space where speaking and listening (or conceiving and perceiving) create conversation. Speaking without listening or listening without speaking is futile. Similarly, as Freire points out, reflection without action turns talk into "idle

chatter" and activism by itself becomes action for action's sake. Discourse without recourse is brute force. Recourse without discourse - of course. Extreme individualism, "I touch no one and no one touches me," can result in alienation while total relatedness can lead to conversations that go nowhere. Totalitarian authority crushes other voices, while laissez faire egalitarianism can produce aimless talk.

Even the conversational learning space can be viewed as a dialectic of boundary and structure - between boundaries that define and protect a space where conversation can occur and the internal structures and norms that shape the conversational interaction. Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (1987) in *The Tree of Knowledge* describe just such a dialectic with their concept of autopoiesis. According to Maturana and Varela, living systems whether physical, mental, or social are distinguished by their autopoietic, self creating nature. Body, mind, and culture all follow the laws of autopoietic organization. Thus, conversational learning can be seen as a life form following the same principles of self-creation as biological life forms. Maturana and Varela see the process of learning as identical with the process of living. Cognition is not a representation of an independently existing world, but a continual bringing forth of a world through the process of living and learning.

A cognitive or biological autopoietic system is a unitary system organized as a structured network of processes producing components through their interactions and transformations that continuously regenerate and realize the network of

processes that produced them. At the same time, this system is recursively constituted as a concrete entity in the space where the structural components exist by specifying boundaries of the network. Boundaries are created by the continuous regeneration of the system's components, while the system's autonomy is preserved by the boundary. These are not separate processes but two sides of the same coin.

The experiential conversational learning as its own self-organizing entity cannot exist without a receptive space to hold it. The conversation can be killed from within, as when for example, an authoritarian monologue crushes the spirit of other participants. Or it can be destroyed from without by strong rhetorical precourse, prejudice, or prejudgement as Gadamer would say.

In conversation, the autopoietic process can be seen in the development of norms. As conversations progress, a normative value core that structures the conversation develops and at the same time creates boundaries that define a conversational learning space. These norms may arise out of the struggle for power and control in the conversation. Habermas's (1991) definition of the ideal speech situation as one in which participants influence the norms of the conversation recognizes the centrality of this value core. These norms determine what can be said and not said, who has voice and who does not have voice in the conversation. At the same time, these norms create boundaries that define who is in and out of the conversation. Those who do not know or refuse to either abide by or participate in changing the normative rules of the game are excluded from the conversation.

There is a paradoxical quality to conversational boundaries. Initially, it seems that boundaries inhibit or block conversation, and indeed conversation across boundaries is often difficult. However, the space created by the boundaries can create a space that is safe and hospitable enough for the conversational exploration of differences across various dialectical continua. "From this perspective, boundaries are not confines but 'shape-givers' that can provide us with healthy space to grow...boundaries are not our prisons, rather, they serve an essential function to make our existence more alive and vibrant" (Wyss, 1997, p. 4).

Perhaps the most revealing metaphor to describe this tenuous and vital dialectic of space and structure comes from the work of quantum physics and the Santa Fe Institute. This scientific revolution and paradigm shift points to the *edge of chaos* as the transitional regime between order and chaos where thresholds of complexity become forces for self-organization and order. Waldrop (1992) says that between the two extremes of order and chaos is

...a kind of abstract phase transition called 'the edge of chaos,' [where] you also find complexity: a class of behaviors in which the components of the system never quite lock into place, yet never quite dissolve into turbulence either...systems that are both stable enough to store information, and yet evanescent enough to transmit it. These are the systems that can be organized to perform complex computations, to react to the world, to be spontaneous, adaptive, and alive. ( p. 293)

Perhaps conversational learning emerging out of this dialectical tension between space and structure is a form of the kind of living system that is very close to the edge-of-chaos phase transition, “where things are much looser and more fluid...[where] natural selection...[is] a force that is constantly pushing emergent, self-organizing systems toward the edge of chaos (Waldrop, 1992, p. 303). In his recent work, Stuart Kauffman (1995) is exploring the hypothesis that

Life evolves toward a regime that is poised between order and chaos  
...Water exists in three phases: solid ice, liquid water, and gaseous  
steam...[it] appears that similar ideas might apply to complex adapting  
systems...that the genomic networks that control development from  
zygote to adult can exist in three major regimes: a frozen ordered regime,  
a gaseous chaotic regime, and a kind of liquid regime located in the  
region between order and chaos. Were such systems too deeply into the  
frozen ordered regime, they would be too rigid to coordinate the complex  
sequences of genetic activities necessary for development. Were they too  
far into the gaseous chaotic regime, they would not be orderly enough.  
Networks in the regime near the edge of chaos - this compromise between  
order and surprise - appear best able to coordinate complex activities and  
best able to evolve as well. (p. 26)

For conversation to provoke learning and discovery, perhaps the challenge is to stay in that *transition phase between order and surprise* - between structure that in its extreme is as solid as ice and open space that can be as chaotic as gas. When

safety, mutual respect, and trust are present, perhaps enough order is provided to allow for confrontation with differences to provoke new learning and discovery without dissension into chaos.

Now this article concludes with a revisiting to and summation of our understanding of conversational dialectics.

### **THE DIALECTICS OF CONVERSATION**

To more fully understand the dialectics of conversation, it is important to reiterate the ancient origins of dialectic, meaning the use of dialogue in the search for truth. It involves stating a point of view and questioning from other points of view, perhaps eventually seeking consensual agreement which in turn is ultimately questioned from still other perspectives. Truth thus lies in this journey, not in an ultimate destination or having the final word. Therefore, first of all, dialectical inquiry is a *process*. As Parker Palmer (1990) put it,

Truth [is] being involved in an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline...truth is not in the conclusions so much as in the process of conversation itself...if you want to be in truth you must be in the conversation. (p. 12)

This idea that truth lies in the process of inquiry, not in the idea or the conclusions, is contrary to traditional epistemology where knowledge is more important than the processes that generate it. The dialectical approach to truth can be contrasted to the modern scientific approach which aspires to establish a ruling discourse about reality based on the principles of logical empiricism. Jerome

Bruner (1990) terms this mode of discourse paradigmatic, contrasting it with narrative discourse which is more conversational. The foundation of logical empiricism is the scientific identity principle, the rational principle of noncontradiction that a statement cannot be both true and false. The contextual, processural nature of the dialectics of conversation is thus inimical to modern science since everything changes with time, context, and the acknowledgment of multiple perspectives.

Thus, inquiry into the dialectics of conversation is *contextual and relational*. The discourses of modern science aspire to knowledge that is universal, transcending time, context, and the relationships through which it is developed. It is a universal discourse from no one in particular to no one in particular, a "view from nowhere" to quote the title of a famous book on the topic. (9) On the other hand, inquiry into the dialectics of conversation proceeds from the assumption that all things are interrelated. Everything exists within a context with connection or relationship to other things, including speaking in a conversation. Thus,

What we have to study is *not* the sentence but the issuing of an utterance in a speech situation...It is essential to realize that 'true' and 'false' like 'free' and 'unfree' do not stand for anything simple at all; but only for a general dimension of being a right or proper thing to say as opposed to a wrong thing, in these circumstances, to this audience, for these purposes and with these intentions...The truth or falsity of a statement depend not



merely on the meaning of words but on what act you were performing in what circumstances. (Austin, 1965, p.138, 144)

Proceeding from the assumption that everything is interrelated, dialectical inquiry seeks to understand the interrelationships that make up the whole and aspires to *holism through the embracing of differences and contradictions*. Dialectic begins with contradictions, or literally opposing speeches. By taking the most opposite imaginable point of view, one increases the chance of encompassing the whole situation. Peter Elbow (1986) describes this process of movement toward holism,

My claim is that many important insights or breakthroughs end up as a movement of thought from one frame of reference originally taken as the whole frame of reference or the most universal way to conceive the matter to a larger one. There appears to be a contradiction...But the original one can finally be understood as a subset of the larger one, a special case that does not really contradict it if correctly restricted. (p. 251)

Thus, inquiry into the dialectics of conversation is a means of *uncovering the assumptions and frames* that cause a "tunnel vision" of the whole (Mitroff, 1979). An inviting attitude about differences in opinion and perception is key to the process. The embracing of difference - staying with the contradiction - is essential for learning. Again Peter Elbow,

Since perception and cognition are processes in which the organism 'constructs' what it sees or thinks according to models already there, the organism tends to throw away or distort material that does not fit this model. The surest way to get hold of what your present frame blinds you to is to try to adopt the opposite frame, that is, to reverse your model. A person who can live with contradiction and exploit it, who can use conflicting models can simply see and think *more*. (p. 241)

John Van Mannen (1995) in "Style as Theory" critiques paradigmatic organizational science as closed and exclusionary aiming to establish a ruling discourse that obliterates or subsumes opposing ideas. He offers conversation as an alternative approach,

Finally, I think it is possible that if we were to move away from our apparent fascination with tidy and relatively closed intellectual systems, we might be able to develop our organizational theories in a less contentious and defensive fashion. Debate, not conversation, now rules the day. Yet there are examples, Karl Weick being one, of arranging and explicating theory in what comes close to a conversational and open fashion. It is a way of doing theory that is I think sensitive to the speaking-hearing process and when brought into the writing-reading process, represents an inviting brand of theorizing. The object of debate is of course to overwhelm or obliterate one's opponent: to prune, pare and discard. The object of conversation is to keep it going: to plant, nurture

and cultivate. In the most uncertain domain of organization theory, the latter objective seems preferable. (p. 140)

Inquiry into the dialectics of conversation can also be contrasted with monologic rhetoric. Rhetoric, invented by the Sophists much to the dismay of Plato who preferred Socratic dialogue, is defined as the art of persuasion, the conscious intent to change others. Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin (1995) in proposing a feminist invitational rhetoric characterizes the traditional concept of rhetoric as efforts to change others and thus gain control over them, self-worth derived from and measured by the power exerted over others, and a devaluation of the life world of others. This is a rhetoric of patriarchy, reflecting its values of change, competition and domination. (p.4)

Thus, inquiry into the dialectics of conversation is a contextual and relational process that aspires toward a holistic making of meaning from multiple perspectives, rather than aspiring toward finding a universal truth. This approach embraces differences and contradictions to uncover the assumptions and blinding frames that so often limit the capacity for learning.

## **SUMMARY**

This article offers a dialectical framework within which to understand learning that can emerge through conversation. While learning can be a solitary process, our socially constructed reality through conversations with others gives shape to our personal and cultural ways of knowing. In this article, we are offering an expansion of existing experiential learning theory to conceptualize and better

understand the interactive experience of learning collaboratively through conversation.

The deliberate choice of the word conversation is intended to convey the essential nature of an ontological way of knowing that focuses on tacit knowledge and human understanding as it informs and is informed by the epistemological orientation of abstract knowledge and cognitive understanding. For conversation to promote learning that fully encompasses the ontological and epistemological dimensions, we are proposing an inquiry into five dialectics that keeps open the possibility of learning from the entire range of each dialectic continuum. We are proposing here that creating the space for engagement across the dialectical continua of apprehension and comprehension, of reflection and action, of epistemological discourse and ontological recourse, of individuality and relationality, and of status and solidarity can promote conversational learning at the social, interactive level of experiential learning.

As the differences of these five continua are concurrently embraced - staying with the contradictions they offer - the dialectical extremes open a space widened by the very span of the differing perspectives. The conversational encompassing of these dialectics is a delicate experience that cannot be reduced to imposing a method. It requires a new way of being in relationship with others in conversation. As these differences are encountered, the conversational context needs attention to enable those in the conversation to stay engaged with each other in ways that catalyze their collaborative learning experientially. The learning potential then is

much more than the passing on of existing knowledge. Perspectives are offered, questioned, new perspectives eventually are created that would not have been possible without the interaction in the conversational experience that Parker Palmer describes as seeking truth by being in and staying “in an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline (p. 12).

## Footnotes

1 Having drawn this distinction, we should say that as one looks at the literatures on conversation, talk, discussion, communication, and dialogue, the picture is muddled by many varying usages of the two words. We have learned much from the dialogue literature.

2 In "Radical Empiricism and the Conduct of Research," Eugene Taylor proposes radical empiricism as a "new " epistemological framework for psychological research. In New Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science by Willis Harman and Jane Clark (eds.) [Sausalito, CA: Institute of Noetic Sciences, 1994], Francisco Varela, the Chilean cognitive scientist who along with Humberto Maturana created the concept of autopoiesis gives another contemporary version of radical empiricism in his integration of Buddhist epistemology and psychology (The Embodied Mind). "The only real way to do a science of mind is to accept the hard and solid fact that the realm of experience is ontologically irreducible - it is what it is. The realm of explanation is also irreducible - it is what it is. I cannot do away with explanations. The whole point here is to make these two things not just co-exist as two separate drawers in the huge chest of drawers of the universe, but actually to affect each other."( Shambala Sun, September, 1995, p. 31)

3 A thorough description of the methodology is beyond the scope of this paper. In summary, we conducted qualitative studies with adults who recalled conversations that stood out for them. Excerpts from transcribed interviews are used in this article to illustrate ways individuals reflected upon and described their experience

in conversation as related to the dialectical tensions presented in this article.

Pseudonyms are used to protect confidentiality.

4 We prefer Elbow's breathing metaphor as it aptly describes the flow that can vary considerably with the situation. In addition, it offers an explanation for why highly educated people often appear so puffed up.

5 See also Allen, G. & Shechley, B. (1992). Lineal and Recursive Perspectives on Change: An Ecological Model Describing the Development and Amelioration of Agoraphobia. In Klar, Y., Fisher, J., Chinsky, J. & Nadler, A. (Eds.), Self Change: Social, Psychological, and Clinical Perspectives, (pp. 115-136). NY: Springer Verlag.

6 See also Frame Analysis by Deborah Tannen The Art of Framing

7 See Chapter 6.

8 Freire emphasized after the publication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* that his use of the masculine gender (man, men, he) in his earlier work was inappropriate and definitely was intended to include both men and women.

9 The View From Nowhere Many have doubts about the feasibility of this project. Maranhos, for example, says "The inconclusiveness of the descriptive project of the empirical disciplines makes one wonder whether the endeavor is merely unfinished or in fact impossible" (p 6).

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