

Developing Proprioceptive Body Awareness in a Dialogue Circle

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Abstract

Dialogue is a much debated, contested, and interpreted idea that can be understood as a constitutive element of human experience spanning the radically subjective and phenomenological to the social, historical, and political. This article explores dialogue from the perspective of individuals within a small dialogue practice group with a focus on their conscious learning of the skill of proprioceptive bodily awareness. The practice of purposeful dialogue discussed here offers practitioners a way of relating to each other and themselves that has the potential for significant transformation of normal patterns of communication and self-reflection. The overarching goal of this dialogue practice is to facilitate a creative, honest, and deeply engaged communication of perspectives. Postmodern and poststructuralist theorizing about identity, multiculturalism, and power; the rapid increase in global trade, migration, and outsourcing; and the explosive growth in social tools are creating conditions that both afford and require effective, sensitive, and open-minded human relations. Results of this qualitative study indicate that this type of focused dialogue practice can result in increased awareness of automatic body states which in turn inform relational dynamics in a positive way.

Dialogue is a much debated, contested, and interpreted idea that can be understood as a constitutive element of human experience spanning the radically subjective and phenomenological to the social, historical, and political (Anderson, Cissna, & Arnett, 1994; Arnett, 1986; Cissna & Anderson, 2004; Follett, 1998/1918; Hammond, Anderson, & Cissna, 2003; Stewart, Zediker, & Black, 2004). This article explores the constitutive nature of dialogue from the perspective of individuals within a small dialogue practice group with a focus on the development of the specific skill of proprioceptive bodily awareness through the suspension of habitual responses (Bohm, 1996, p. 75). Becoming conscious of unconscious embodied responses to language is a key factor in developing the listening and empathy skills necessary for complex social problem solving, negotiation, and collaboration (Bohm, pp. 73-83; Lipari, 2010). The practice of purposeful dialogue discussed here offers practitioners a way of relating to each other and themselves that has the potential for significant transformation of normal patterns of communication and self-reflection (Bohm, 1996; Isaacs, 1999; Lipari, 2010)¹. The overarching goal of this dialogue practice is to facilitate a creative, honest, respectful, and deeply engaged communication of perspectives. Postmodern and poststructuralist theorizing about identity, multiculturalism, and power; the rapid increase in global trade, migration, and outsourcing; and the explosive growth in social tools are creating conditions that both afford and require effective, sensitive, and open-minded human relations (Hawes, 2004). The achievement of this type of “communicative action” (Habermas, 1981) however has been elusive. A significant barrier to effective inter-relating in human communities is the development of both individual and group identities that gradually become habitual, impermeable to change, and exclusive (Bohm, 1980, 1992; Pickett & Leonardelli, 2006; Wenger, 1998). From an individual perspective there has also been significant work done on the practice of meditation as it relates to habitual behavior and neurological structure (Epstein, 1995; Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Lutz, et. al., 2004; Siegel, 1999, 2007). These processes are also felt to be implicated in the rigidity of identities and social groups. This boundary development makes incorporating new ideas, new practices, and new people into the sphere that identity inscribes difficult or impossible. It is argued here that specific dialogic practices can help mitigate this ubiquitous process through the transformation of habitual modes of reaction into an open awareness of the context within which utterances are made.

¹ The skills associated with the type of dialogue offered here are distinguished from general interpersonal communication skills in that they focus specifically on accessing phenomenological and embodied experiences of subjectivity while in the midst of a dialogic encounter.

As a practice dialogue is meant to cultivate communication skills based initially on enhanced awareness of one's own behavior and effect on others. This type of self-awareness is, following Bohm, primarily cultivated through the dialogic principle² of 'suspension'. Suspension involves the intentional bracketing of affective responses to verbal/social stimulus in a dialogue group setting.

Suspension

Suspension is understood here as a self-reflective technique used to isolate and identify habitual responses to ordinary speech. The question to answer in terms of using this technique in dialogue is: Why do I need to not present to the 'other' in the dialogue circle my natural or habitual responses? Aboulafia (1986) says:

I see myself as the other forces me to see myself. That the other can so force me is due to the fact that my development as an object-self has required that I learn how and when to respond to different attitudes of the other, attitudes that reveal and are revealed in the look of the other. (p. 54)

Implicit in Aboulafia's remarks is a Meadian (1932/2002; 1938) view of the social self that sees our learned response to the other as an ongoing dynamic process. When Aboulafia says that it is "required that I learn how and when to respond to different attitudes of the other" he is pointing out that when we learn how to respond appropriately we are defining ourselves through our responses and our gestures. Because my response to you is also a gesture I have a responsibility that goes beyond my 'feelings' or perceptions of what you have said. I am always also making a gesture that is affecting your tendency toward a patterned gesture/response in our interaction. Consequently we see ourselves sculpting both our own and our interlocutors' characters and identities through our culturally conditioned responses. We learn to behave just as we are treated.

The point of suspension is to gain insight into what we are actually doing. What part of our response to others is reflexive, habitual, and unconscious and what is the consequence of suspending this behavior on the discourse in the dialogue circle? Through the practice of suspension we can see how the self is reacting dynamically to regulate conversational stimulus.

² The dialogue practiced in this study consisted of *suspension* of automatic responses, the *respecting* of persons through efforts to continually encounter the other as a "novel" other, *listening* to the speech of others and not thinking about other things while attending to that speech, and speaking *authentically* when so moved. Space does not allow a full explication of the overall method.

The above quotation is saying that our responses to others are forcing them into a role and conditioned response. If I smile at you I am unconsciously (or consciously) asking you to smile too. If I frown I activate a particular response. Suspension is about both noticing and disrupting that pattern. The discipline we are engaging in here has us say:

Let's not ask of any one that they be any particular way. Let's see if we can let each other be. And then see what happens?

This research is primarily interested in looking at the principle of suspension as it was practiced in a summer doctoral dialogue seminar and whether or not participants evidenced any change in their understanding and behavior related to suspension.

Research Methods

The purpose of this study was to investigate the process and consequences of teaching dialogue skills through the development of proprioceptive self-awareness. This type of self-awareness is primarily cultivated, as mentioned above, through the dialogic principle of 'suspension'.

Suspension involves the intentional bracketing of affective responses to verbal stimulus in a dialogue group setting. Data for this study is comprised of participant reflections collected after each of 7 dialogue sessions. The two research questions guiding the study were: 1) How specifically did participant understanding and conception of dialogue, as reflected in their after class reflections, change over the course of their experience? and 2) Are participant texts indicating an increase in participant abilities to self-reflect through proprioceptively bracketing affective and physical response (suspension) to dialogue stimulus?

I used an ethnographic narrative approach (Boje, 2001; Wolcott, 1994) for data analysis and interpretation. This approach begins with the assumption that the statements or texts of participants are occurring or being inscribed in a natural and familiar context and that their interpretation by the researcher as narrative or story can capture a coherent instance of sense making indicative of a meaningful pattern. I also examined the coding of participant reflections from the first session through the final session in a time series analysis (Babbie, 2010).

Reflections, were stored, sorted, and coded using Nvivo 9 (2011).

Participants in this study were drawn from membership in a doctoral seminar on Dialogue conducted in the summer of 2008. 8 men and 5 women participated in the class. Data used in the

study were drawn from the reflection notes of 7 of the men and 3 of the women (other participants opted out of participation in the study).

The data for this study consisted of approximately 350 paragraphs over the period of the 7 dialogue sessions. I initially indexed³ the data by meeting number and participant name. This allowed me to compare the results of the open coding process to specific meetings tracking comments by time as well as to keep track of individual statements.

Data Analysis

The data was initially transcribed from participant emails, reformatted, and then imported into Nvivo 9. The first phase of analysis was simply the reading of the transcripts. Once I was familiar with the overall sense of the data I began an open coding method (Miles & Huberman, 1994) that resulted in 23 distinct nodes or categories. This coding process occurred over a period of months with multiple reads of the data.

Secondary analysis involved a pairwise reflection on the original categories and reduced the initial 23 categories to 19. These 19 nodes code 707 references to text (see Table One). Criteria and definitions of the themes emerged throughout the coding process with a progressive clarity emerging through multiple reads through the data.

The report on the analysis here is composed of three distinct stages. First the results of the coding are displayed with a more fine grained look at the clustering of coding similarity patterns. The second step concerns a time series analysis of the themes/codes by meeting. Finally the data and themes associated with suspension are looked at in greater detail. This analysis utilized both of the first two steps above with particular attention on the evolution of the two nodes Emotion & Physical Sensation and Suspension.

³ Nvivo affords (given the proper formatting of the raw text data) the ability to automatically sort elements of the text into predefined nodes. For this research I formatted reflections to indicate them according to participant and to the meeting numbers (e.g., 1st meeting, 2nd meeting, etc) .

Table One

Nodes in Rank Order	References
Meta Reflection	103
Emotion & Physical Sensation	69
Speaking	62
Reflection during Dialogue	49
The Rules ⁴	48
Silence Stillness	47
Suspension	42
Listening	37
Response to another's Speaking	36
Self Conscious	32
Expectations	25
Reference to Texts	23
Judgment	22
Pressure related to Speaking	22
Social Impulse	22
External Dialogue Reference	21
Reference to Life Events	19
Insight	16
Respect	12
Total Nodes	707

⁴ This node refers to the admonition during the dialogue circle that we practice suspension, respecting, listening, and authentic speech and further that we only speak when we have the dialogue “stick” and that we make an ongoing commitment to not develop “themes” during the dialogue.

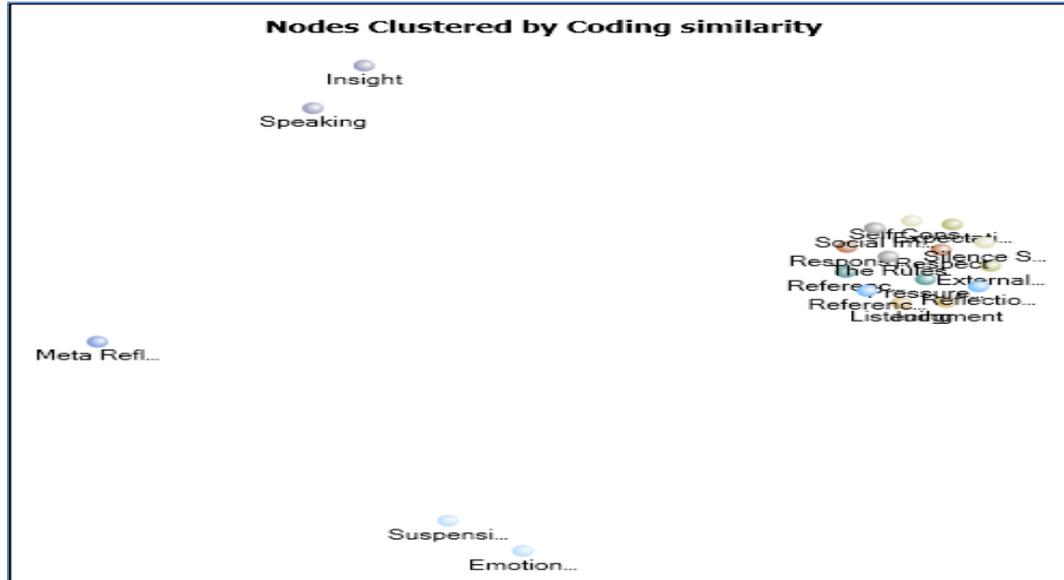
Of the final 19 coded themes the category 'Meta Reflection' was most salient representing approximately 15% of the coded data. This category generally captured participant reflections on the conceptual framework of the course. The Meta Reflection node intersected⁵ the four coded themes (nodes) of speaking, listening, suspending & emotion & physical sensation and represented over 40% of the intersecting coded themes.

Four major divisions emerged from the coded data (see Figure 1). Two sets of coded themes (aside from the Meta Reflection node) are significant outliers from the majority of the themes. Coding similarity between the nodes Emotion & Physical Sensation and Suspension and between Speaking and Insight suggested a deeper analysis of those themes.

Coding similarity reflects the interpreted organization of the text. Each node expresses a pattern of abstracted meanings and when nodes are said to code similarly it suggests that there is a co-patterning in the text's organization. This co-patterning implies either a similarity in the meanings of the coding categories or the presence of a third element not articulated in the individual nodes. In the first case where the themes/codes are similar they may require some rethinking with perhaps a consolidation of data into one theme (Which is how I consolidated the initial 23 themes into the final 19). This is similar to a factor analytic technique in a quantitative methodology where the goal is to minimize within category variation.

⁵ In using the Nvivo software one is able to find all instances where coded themes intersect or overlap in a particular text unit. When themes intersect it means that a text unit shares coding on those themes. This intersection can obviously reflect similarities in either themes or data or it can reflect the complexity of the data. Initial analysis of theme intersection is not sufficient to reflect the complexity.

Figure 1



On the other hand this could suggest a deeper complexity to the discourse that reveals nuances not otherwise apparent. In reviewing the relationship between Suspension and Emotion & Physical Sensation I found enough conceptual distinction in my coding criteria to suggest that they are different enough to indicate a more complex relationship rather than a categorical similarity. Similarly, in reviewing the themes Insight and Speaking I found enough distinction to foreclose any effort at consolidation. These themes will be discussed below.

Time Series

The time series analysis of the data was carried out after coding and consolidation of the themes. Each meeting was analyzed separately for distinct patterns or deviations from the overall structure of the data as described above. Participants tended to write shorter reflections as the meetings progressed and so the amount of coding likewise was proportionally reduced. Meta Reflection was the most frequently coded node across all meetings averaging between 15% and 20% of coding for each meeting. This category as mentioned above describes participants' mention or discussion of element of the course's conceptual framework and/or reflection on the purpose or meaning of dialogue in general. Emotion & Physical Sensation was the second most coded node for all meetings except the 3rd and the 7th meetings. Emotion & Physical Sensation coded under criteria involving specific reference to either a feeling, emotion, or subjective body state. This node generally captured between 8% and 11% of the coding over the seven meetings.

In the third meeting Speaking was coded more frequently and in the 7th meeting Silence & Stillness was the 2nd most coded node.

After Emotion & Physical Sensation, Speaking was the most frequently coded node across all seven meetings. This was followed in descending order by Silence/Stillness, Reflection During Dialogue, The Rules, Response to Others Speaking, Listening, Reference to Texts, and Suspension.

Emotion, Physical Sensation, and Suspension

Of primary interest in this study is whether or not Suspension was learned and/or improved throughout the dialogue sessions. The node 'Suspension' was coded under criteria that required explicit mention of suspension as a skill/concept as well as the participants' connecting this concept to their experience in the dialogue circle. Material coded at these nodes revealed a progressive movement from initial comments on and noticing of internal physical states to more elaborate and 'comfortable' reflections on the process. These were reported as "intense", "from the heart", "uncomfortable". "comfortable", "relaxed", and "at peace". Participants reported becoming conscious of body states that they didn't know they expressed.

Last night proved to me that the more self aware one is the more self reflection they need to do. As I concentrated on my body during times of silence I realized I raise my eyes and fold my hands. Once I realized that I made sure that I didn't do it anymore but then started to reflect on why I was doing something new. (MS, First Meeting)

As the dialogues progressed participants expressed an increased sense of both awareness and comfort associated with their bodies and the social context of the dialogue.

As we began the session, I felt a sense of relief. During the past few dialogue sessions I felt a bit conflicted about my role and what I was supposed to do during the dialogue. I was struggling to follow the rules, which took some effort to comply with, since my habit or inclination is to smile, nod, and encourage the speaker. Last night I felt more at ease. I suppose struggling through the first few sessions is just part of the process. I didn't feel so wiggly or tense. During the silence between comments, I found myself tracing my own thoughts – where they came from and where they ended up -- and I felt less judgmental about myself and others. I felt freer. (CK, Fourth Meeting)

Participants began to experience a full range of emotions and sensations related to sitting in the circle.

I noticed waves of comfort and discomfort in my body in the circle. (A little fidgety in the chair, but breath remained my anchor to stillness) I noticed the occasional looks of such intensity and even deep sadness on so many faces. Wondering what my face looks like to others I chose to turn the corners of my mouth upward and enjoy just how good that physiology feels. (MH, Fourth Meeting)

One participant commented on the process that resulted after a participant unexpectedly left the room.

Many of us returned or tried to return to the suspending process.... Some of us were more successful; however it is possibly evidence of the basis of some of our behaviors in groups of this nature are tied into reflexes. As we learn and accept this notion, it may become easier to 'manage' the reflexes. (IP, Fourth Meeting)

Along with these heightened body states there was also indication of increased sensitivity to the process we described as suspension.

I am very susceptible to the influence of emotions during our conversations (good or bad I think)... I could feel the emotional tug that pulled my face to a smile. It was like a reflex. I did not know the feelings or the physical response was there until after it made itself known. (BS, Fifth Meeting)

It appears there is always going to be differences in our experiences. However, we have a lot we share in common. Difference gives credence to varieties, and it does not mean deficiency. The class dialogue brings this to bear. In some cases we have similar experiences and in other cases we have different experiences. Mutual dialogue helps us to accept differences and build on similarities. It is a way of being, and I am getting better at listening, respecting, and suspending. (PA, Fifth Meeting)

One participant summed things up in the last meeting saying:

I reflected both during the dialogue and afterwards that my physiological response to the dialogue sessions changed over time. I found that I was relaxed, less fidgety, less anxious

about who was going to say what and how I would respond with each passing session.
(CK, Seventh Meeting)

Also apparent in the coding similarity analysis were the pairing of the codes Speaking and Insight. Review of these themes indicated a growing understanding of how speech and speaking is connected to our bodies and our habits.

Self-awareness is difficult. Self-awareness is a changing process. I think I have been under the assumption ... that one could look at one's self at a moment in time and fully understand that dimension of their self. (MS, First Meeting)

Hearing the words of others in the context of this type of dialogue practice evoked in participants a range of thoughts and feelings about what they were doing, what they were experiencing, and the ultimate meaning of what they were hearing.

What I learned tonight was that you don't always have to follow the script, and that it is okay to follow your emotions. I found this to be true when PA shared his story. I knew that we should suspend our response or reaction to what the speaker is saying but I never knew how hard it was to suspend laughter. It really is contagious. As I was listening to PA's story, a part of me wanted to sympathize with him about the language barrier. The other part wanted to laugh because it was a funny story. ... During his story, I focused on controlling my response by disengaging from what he was saying in order to control what my reaction [were]. I felt that I lost a part of what dialogue was about but at the same time, I also saw what dialogue could become. (SN, Fourth Meeting)

Discussion

This research was meant to inform a theoretical discussion of dialogue as a method mitigating the relatively automatic conditioning that occurs as part of being human and living in human communities. The research questions were focused on two areas. First, what changed in the experience of this group of graduate students as they practiced seven weeks of radical dialogue? What did this ultimately mean to them? And second, did the explicit articulation and theoretical grounding of the concept of suspension carry over into the dialogue itself and show any effects in the reflections of participants? Was there a developmental sequence to the skill of suspension?

Search for Meaning

As dialogue theorists and philosophers have observed human beings exhibit an apparently universal and constant appetite for making sense of the world (Gadamer, 1975; Mead, 1938) . Participants in this study engaged in this process wholeheartedly and with a high degree of trust and faith in the process. They took the practice very seriously and I think all participants did their best at trying to get to the bottom of their ‘conditioned’ response to social interaction (Bohm, 1996; Pickett & Leonardelli, 2006).

Early comments indicate a strong desire for understanding. As noted above there was a consistent thread of discourse around emotional and physical reactions to the process. This was followed by reflection on how “strange”, “surprising”, and “difficult” it was to speak into the dialogue circle given the awkward conditions that the principles of this type of dialogue impose. Consequently participant did much reflection during the dialogue sessions as they tried to make sense of the situation during prolonged silence. There was significant discussion of the “rules” and whether or not they were properly ‘obeying’ them. They realized that the principles were meant to guide the dialogue and not constrain it but there was nonetheless a strong enduring reaction to not being able to give non-verbal feedback or extend, elaborate, or add to a discussion. The silence and stillness of the sessions also emerged as a strong theme in helping participants make sense of the experience. Many reported an appreciation for the silence that they had not experienced before. It was into this silence that they listened and began to eagerly take up the speech of others. They also reported an acute sense of reciprocity to an others’ speech. This in turn seemed to be associated with in increased self consciousness and reflection on their own body states.

Suspension

As indicated above there is a significant literature on the necessity for human beings to learn how to get along better than we have been getting along (Anderson, Cissna & Arnett, 1994; Anderson, Baxter, & Cissna, 2004; Arnett & Arneson, 1999; Buber, 1970; 2002; Flick, 1998; Friedman, 1999; Grudin, 1996). Certainly a theme in all these theorist’s accounts is the often obdurate and intransigent nature of conditioned and habitual response. While many in communication studies approach this problem of conditioning directly through language and its conditioning effects (see Anderson, Baxter, & Cissna, 2004; Arnett & Arneson, 1999) others

look to building an empirical foundation through physiological, behavioral, and psychological inquiry (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Participants in this dialogue seminar worked directly with this conditioning (Siegel, 1999; 2007) as they attempted to disrupt habitual gestures and responses during the dialogue sessions. The salience of the coded category of Emotion and Physical Sensation throughout the sessions is evidence of this feature as constitutive of the dialogue experience. It is also interesting to note that both Suspension and Emotion and Physical Sensation were two coded categories that showed marked difference in coding similarity from all other nodes. Participants reported an enhanced sensitivity to proprioceptive (internal) physical sensations as they progressed through the seminar.

Limitations

This study was a limited inquiry into two aspects of a dialogue seminar that is built on a complex and interdisciplinary literature supporting doctoral work in leadership studies. The sample consisted of participants in an elective seminar that was advertised to explicitly deal with the issue of conditioning in human communication. Consequently participants were sensitive to the topic initially and any transformations that occurred from the beginning to the end of the course were obviously tangled up with participants' initial intentions.

Conclusions

It is hoped that this small empirical discussion of one instance of learning the practice of one type of dialogue will help further the conversation related to the importance of embodied practices in general and their effects on neurological, behavioral, and social phenomena associated with education, communication, leadership studies and studies around the phenomenon of consciousness. If meditation practices significantly alters both internal subjective states and observed behaviors (Epstein, 1995; Siegel, 2007) and, as claimed here, that intentional dialogue practice achieves a similar effect on group behavior (Bohm, 1996;1992) then it might be useful to compare these two practices in a systematic way. The research offered here is tentative and suggestive of a more carefully designed study. However it does set the stage for more carefully looking at this question of conditioned human response in dialogical settings.

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