

Mediated Dialogue in Action Research

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The term dialogue indicates special kinds of conversations in which a deeper level of meaning and shared understanding is intended. In this chapter, we offer an approach to the facilitation of group dialogue, which we call *mediated dialogue*. This approach is complementary to other approaches and does not replace them. Mediated dialogue is a good way for beginners to learn the basics of dialogue, and provides useful options for more advanced practitioners including those using dialogue as a part of action research.

Consider the notion of dialogue as articulated by David Bohm (originator of ‘Bohmian dialogue’):

[I]t is proposed that a form of free dialogue may well be one of the most effective ways of investigating the crisis which faces society, and indeed the whole of human nature and consciousness today. Moreover, it may turn out that such a form of free exchange of ideas and information is of fundamental relevance for transforming culture and freeing it of destructive misinformation, so that creativity can be liberated ... [W]hat follows is ... an invitation to the reader to begin to investigate and explore in the spirit of free play of ideas

and without the restriction of the absolute necessity of any final goal or aim. (Bohm and Peat, 1987)

David Bohm was a groundbreaking quantum physicist whose ideas emerged through scientific dialogue. Yet Bohm suffered a lifelong disappointment that his mentors Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr failed in their dialogue with each other. Each man energetically defended his key assumptions as if his very being was at stake. These great men, famous for their creativity, were stuck in their world-views. Bohm was onto something important in identifying dialogue as essential to human inquiry in the face of societal challenges.

The philosopher Martin Buber understood dialogue specifically as part of an ‘I–Thou’ encounter involving the whole being of each participant. Educator Paulo Friere saw dialogue among oppressed people as a key to higher consciousness and social justice. Organizational theorist Chris Argyris and his colleagues describe dialogue as a way of thinking and relating in group settings that enables transformative learning and change

(Argyris and Schön, 1996; Senge et al., 1994; Isaacs, 1999, 2001). In our present era of pluralistic societies, the need for dialogue across boundaries is great indeed (Ernst and Chrobot-Mason, 2010; Kahane, 2004).

In our practice at the Center for Creative Leadership over the past several decades, we have recognized dialogue as a key element in interdependent forms of leadership (Drath, Palus, and McGuire, 2010; Drath, 2001). The resultant clarity and coherence of thought within a collective can become the source of alignment and effective action. We often facilitate dialogue for leadership development and organizational transformation within a context of action inquiry (Palus, McGuire, and Ernst, 2011; Torbert and Associates, 2004).

We have been testing mediated dialogue as a means of introducing and enhancing the process of dialogue in a wide variety of contexts. This approach is familiarly known as *putting something in the middle*.

In this chapter, we define mediated dialogue as a specific approach to dialogue. We look at the theory and practice of mediated dialogue and how it addresses some of the typical difficulties encountered in putting dialogue into practice. We also share a tool for facilitating mediated dialogue and offer guidance for practice in the context of action research, including an example of its use with a regional hospital undergoing transformation. Our closing thoughts are on mediated dialogue as an artistically grounded practice.

THE USE OF MEDIA FOR GROUP DIALOGUE

Much of ordinary conversation is driven by explicit or implicit advocacy for a particular point of view. Dialogue is a kind of conversation that balances advocacy of one's opinions, with inquiry into these opinions and their underlying assumptions, all while building shared meaning. In this way, greater clarity can be realized by individual members as well as the group as a whole. Dialogue can support

action research by revealing hidden data (both objective facts and subjective beliefs) and by creating, testing, and revising shared understandings about research findings and insights.

The guidance for successful dialogue offered in the *Fifth Discipline Fieldbook* (Senge et al., 1994) is very good, and provides a starting point for the complementary approach of mediated dialogue. In that volume, William Isaacs offers four basic components of a facilitated dialogue session (which we paraphrase for clarity as):

- Creating a safe and inviting space
- Generative listening
- Observing the observers
- Exploring assumptions.

The beginner in dialogue facilitation will do well to start with these basic components. In action research contexts, we add an additional component to this list: *creating artifacts* (i.e. representing and preserving data).

Each of these components can pose difficulties, and each – we have found – can be enhanced by ‘putting something in the middle’. This is where we differ with the ‘Bohmian’ idea of dialogue. In his classic paper *On Dialogue*, David Bohm (1990) repeatedly insists that dialogue must be ‘an empty space where we don’t have an object’. He provides a metaphor: ‘The cup has to be empty to hold something’. The typical result of this guidance has been a space empty of physical objects, in which people sit in a circle and talk. This kind of empty space can easily become intimidating rather than inviting and safe.

We propose that the space of dialogue should be empty in the sense of being free and open in thought, but not necessarily empty of objects. In our experience, dialogue can prosper with the use of interesting, tangible, and aesthetically grounded media. We understand the term ‘media’ as both ‘the intervening substances through which impressions are conveyed to the senses’, and ‘the materials or forms used by an artist’ (OED, 2014).

We first discovered the power of media for enabling dialogue during an action research

project with leaders facing complex challenges (Palus and Horth, 2002). We found that images of various kinds can enhance and focus ('mediate') otherwise difficult conversations. At that time, we were using fine-art posters and postcards with interesting images as props for lateral thinking and creative problem solving and as a way of 'learning to think while looking at art' (Perkins, 1994).

Using images provides a variety of benefits to intentional conversations:

- Images become screens onto which can be cast many different perspectives and points of view.
- Images provide a wealth of metaphors to the conversation that serve as tools and content of thought.
- Images help to integrate left- and right-brain cognition. They require eye-hand engagement. This leads to whole-person attention and generative listening.
- Images 'put something in the middle' of the dialogue that enables mutual exploration and shared meaning making.

The technique of mediation involves inviting people to place tangible objects into the middle of a conversation. These objects may be photos, works of art, mementos, souvenirs, videos, drawings, collages, and so on. They may be self-made, or made by others, depending on context. Self-made art has a particular power, which we'll touch on later. As facilitators, we usually provide a set of images. Specific images or objects are then chosen by participants for their literal, narrative, or metaphorical resonance, as a way to help explore, construct, and express their views on the topic.

Mediated dialogue is often used as a beginners' approach to dialogue since it is easy to facilitate and psychologically safe for participants. After people experience and understand the basics of mediated dialogue, they are better prepared to participate in dialogue in other contexts. Then, almost anything can be placed in the middle, eventually including abstract ideas, challenges, or dilemmas, which are handled in the same spirit as a tangible object. Mediated dialogue can thus be practiced spontaneously and implicitly.

When an action research project or an evaluation process has a need to surface and

collect subjective data, mediated dialogue can be a useful tool. It helps uncover assumptions, engage emotions, spur reflection, and create shared and personal meaning – all in service of answering key research questions. The resultant artifacts are also useful for collectively making a long-term narrative.

PRECEDENTS FOR THE USE OF IMAGERY IN ACTION RESEARCH RELATED DIALOGUE

Researcher-practitioners in psychology, sociology, ethnography, and anthropology have found that sets of images can mediate insightful conversations and provide a source of data for action research and related methodologies (Schwartz, 1989; Brace-Govan, 2007).

The Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), inspired by Carl Jung's ideas about projection and imagination, is a projective test designed to assess personality (Murray, 1943). The roots of the TAT are in drawn illustrations of ambiguous human interactions that were originally collected from popular magazines, circa 1930–50 (Douglas, 1993). Although the TAT has shown limited validity as an objective measure, it has been successfully adapted to promote narrative inquiry and therapeutic conversations in a variety of contexts (Cramer, 1996).

A process called photovoice uses photography to enable dialogue during participatory action research in social justice contexts (Lykes, 2001, 2010; Wang, 1999). Participants learn to use cameras to take pictures representing their experiences. They use the photos and related narratives as inspiration for action. For example, Guatemalan women seek to improve the quality of life in their community while facing war and poverty. Brinton Lykes describes the use of photovoice in this community – and nicely encapsulates the idea of mediated dialogue in action research:

The process of taking pictures within one's local community became an opportunity to develop individual and collective stories that had heretofore

been silenced or spoken only privately to outside researchers or human rights workers. The photograph creates its own story and became a site for wider participatory storytelling and analysis. It re-presents the photographer's perspective or point of view but then becomes a stimulus for the group's reflections, discussions, analyses and re-presentations. The fixed image serves as a catalyst for an ever-widening discussion of the differing realities that are present within these Mayan communities. (Lykes, 2001, p 379)

A tool called Photolanguage was developed to create dialogue in the context of social activism in the Australia/Pacific region (Bessell, 2007; Belisle, 1986). Photolanguage provides a preselected set of photographs as 'a means of communication designed to facilitate personal expression and interaction in small groups'. The developers of Photolanguage were among the first to identify the aesthetic qualities of the image set as a basis for interest and engagement.

A process for dialogue based on dream imagery is described by Montague Ullman (1996). Group members temporarily 'borrow' each other's dreams, exploring it from their own point of view, starting with the phrase, 'If this were my dream I ...'. At the end, the dreamer 'takes back' the dream, now with new insights which he or she is free to use or ignore.

A process for dialogue and personal insight using images from an ordinary collection of postcards was originally developed by Signe Schaefer and her colleagues. This exercise was an initial prototype for Visual Explorer, the tool we developed for introducing mediated dialogue (Schaefer, 1993; Rosinski, 2003; Palus and Drath, 2001; Palus and Horth, 2007; Horth and Palus, 2012). Elements of Ullman's dream dialogue process were also adapted for Visual Explorer.

USING VISUAL EXPLORER

Visual Explorer is a good way practice mediated dialogue and is a good introduction to dialogue more generally. It helps groups 'go

deep, fast' in exploring thoughts and feelings, making it a useful tool for action research. Visual Explorer is also useful for collecting data from the dialogue, as visual-verbal artifacts.

Visual Explorer consists of more than 200 photographs and art prints. These have been selected along a variety of dimensions including diversity in ethnicity, gender, geography, genre, and subject matter. The images are chosen to be potentially interesting to people of all ages, from every walk of life, around the globe.

The objective for groups using Visual Explorer is to enable members to understand a complex topic from a variety of perspectives.

Conducting a dialogue session using Visual Explorer is fairly simple. It does not require a lot of upfront explanation. Almost everyone becomes engaged when they realize that the images are the means to an insightful conversation about a topic that matters to them.

The topic of the dialogue is typically posed in terms of one or more related questions. The topic can be almost anything of interest to the group. For action research purposes, the topic is related to the research questions. In our work, we typically use Visual Explorer to explore topics related to leadership development and organizational culture.

Often, we pose two focal questions at the same time, in the form of present/future, problem/solutions, strengths/weaknesses, and so on. Pairs of questions like this provide helpful contrast and narrative tension, and build a sense of direction into the dialogue.

Examples of questions in various leadership development contexts are:

What does leadership look like NOW in our organization?

What will leadership need to look like in the FUTURE to enact our mission/vision/strategy?

What is our greatest challenge?

What will it look like to solve this challenge?

What OUTCOMES did you experience as the result of [this initiative]?

What worked well?

What did not work as well?

AU: please insert web address here.

Each person chooses two images, one for each question. Individual reflection and group dialogue flow from the images, as they relate to the focal questions. The case below describes the process and the full instructions for using Visual Explorer are contained in the Facilitator's Guide (Palus and Horth, 2010), and as well as on the [Action Research resource site](#). Many options and creative uses are possible. The process can be adapted for a wide variety of contexts.

THE CASE OF MEMORIAL HOSPITAL

Memorial Hospital, a regional health care center in the US, was under stress to transform itself in the face of competition and changing demographics. We (the authors of this chapter, as CCL faculty) were engaged to help the management team create and implement a leadership strategy for the organization. The work was framed as a form of action research called *developmental action inquiry* (McGuire, Palus and Torbert, 2007), including leadership development cycles of discovery, strategy, solutions, and reflection.

The work began as a management team of executives and 25 directors met for a multi-day retreat. Much of this retreat was about discovery: that is, baseline data gathering and interpretation in support of long-term strategic thinking. In our facilitation, we alternated data feedback and analysis (climate surveys, interview data, and business operations data) with sense-making and dialogue.

We used Visual Explorer to move the conversation from analysis to dialogue.

We asked each person to think about a simple set of focal questions and write in their journals: What stands out for me in all the data? Where does the data suggest we need to pay more attention as a leadership group?

Next, they browsed the Visual Explorer images spread around the room. We asked each person to choose one image (privately,

silently) that represents what they have just been writing and thinking about: *The image might be a symbol or a metaphor, or it might remind you of something you just wrote in your journal. It might also be that the image selects you – you are not sure why you chose it, but you did.* They returned to their journals and wrote about what they literally see in the image (a key step), as well as what the image means to them and why they chose it.

The dialogue began in groups of four or five. At first, the groups were tentative. They looked over at other groups and checked to see if they were 'doing the right thing'. The facilitator answered questions and clarified steps but otherwise let the groups flow in their interactions. The person who went first in each group described the image itself, then how it related to the focal question. Each person in the group responded to that image, exploring both the content and possible meanings, emotions, and metaphors. When the first person was done, including any closing thoughts, the next person repeated the process, until everyone in the group had shared their image. The dialogue continued in free form, and we ended the session with brief reports from each of the small groups.

An important theme emerged: *fear*. Many were afraid of the consequences of not achieving key objectives. Many were afraid of the effects of rapid change and the challenges of increased market competition. Their level of anxiety and defensiveness was high.

The use of the Visual Explorer images helped the topic of fear to be introduced and explored through the mediation of visual imagery and metaphors. For example, one group saw fear in the eyes of an image of a young boy and related this to fear they feel at work. Another group found rows of empty numbered seats in a stadium to be an ominous metaphor of the possibility for empty numbered beds in their hospital.

Afterward, we created a slide show with each person's selected image, overlaid with a sample or two of related text from the dialogue. These slides were played back to the same group during our next meeting.

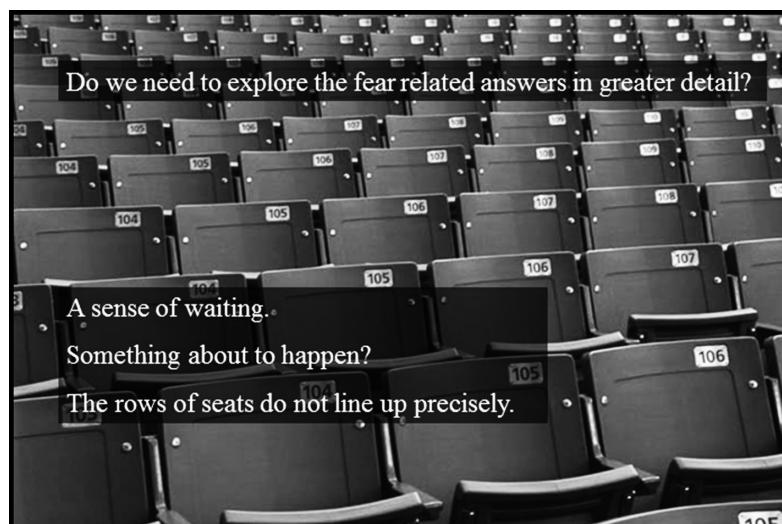


Figure 72.1 A Visual Explorer image with related text from the dialogue

This reminder re-centered the group around key thoughts from the dialogue as they moved into further reflection and action planning. Figure 72.1 shows one of these slides.

DEFENSES AND DEVELOPMENT

People easily become defensive. At Memorial Hospital, many of the senior staff were afraid of each other and afraid of change. A defensive, self-protective mood prevailed.

Personal defenses are active blocks to feedback and learning, yet they are scripted into individual's routines.

Freud theorized that defense mechanisms and their routines are developed to protect the individual from external forces perceived as threats to psychological safety. Often those threats are other people and their threatening perspectives. The possibility for 'I-Thou' dialogue is blocked.

Personal defenses combine with organization-level defense routines which create the undiscussables that block learning and development. Argyris (1990, 1995) explores this phenomenon where organizational practices superficially accepted as

correct are in actuality antithetical to learning and productive operations. Defensive routines in social systems use skillful reasoning to avoid embarrassment or threat of exposure. Argyris insists on the necessity of engaging in deeper inquiry into not only the reasons errors are accepted, but also why systems would allow such serial errors to occur. This is the movement from single loop learning into double loop learning.

Developmental learning requires people to rise above their defensive routines. Mediated dialogue can help lower their personal defenses against fear and anxiety while enhancing the opportunity for growth and development. The practice of *putting something in the middle* can reduce perceived threats by temporarily shifting the focus from the people involved to the 'object' in the middle. By engaging a series of such objects as a group, undiscussables can become more discussable, and individuals can begin to risk deeper engagement with each other. By attending to how others relate to *objects* we can begin to appreciate others as *subjects*. The conversation becomes more objective (3rd person) while at the same time enhancing the subjective contributions of each person (1st person)

and the inter-subjectivity of the group as a whole (2nd person perspective in action science).

THE ADVANTAGES OF USING MEDIA TO SUPPORT DIALOGUE

Mediated dialogue does not replace other forms of dialogue. It should be considered a complement to the toolset of those who wish to facilitate reflective conversations. The judicious and creative use of media can often enhance these conversations.

Table 72.1 summarizes how mediated dialogue enhances the five components of dialogue in action research contexts. As mentioned previously, the first four components are adapted from William Isaacs, in Senge et al., 1994. We recognize the fifth component as necessary for action research contexts.

CONCLUSION

Art [is] the attempt to wrest coherence and meaning out of more reality than we ordinarily try to deal with. (Peter Vaill, 1989)

A tangible, aesthetically charged object placed in the middle of a dialogue engages the senses, invites prolonged exploration, suggests metaphors, and involves the participants in creative acts of meaning-making. Viewed in this way, mediated dialogue is an art form (Ladkin and Taylor, 2010; Palus, 2006; Schein, 2013). Not in the sense of fine art; rather, mediated dialogue is related to ‘everyday art’ in practical settings, since acts of social meaning-making are potentially creative processes of perception and construction (Dewey, 1958; Perkins, 1994). The intentional and thoughtful engagement of art-infused, mediated dialogue is a powerful way to communicate and a useful approach for action research and inquiry of all types.

Table 72.1 The advantages of using media to support dialogue

<i>Component of dialogue in action research settings</i>	<i>Purpose of the component</i>	<i>Advantage of using media</i>
Creating a safe and inviting space	Providing a ‘container’ that is psychologically and emotionally safe. Participation is chosen rather than coerced.	The experience of looking at art/images/artifacts is safe and inviting, and lowers defenses. Emotions and attributions are projected onto the object rather than onto each other.
Generative listening	Paying attention in a complete and sympathetic way, not only to the words being said, but also to the meaning underneath the words (such as the identity and essence of the speaker).	Paying attention becomes multi-sensory and thus more adequate to the complexities at hand. The object ‘holds still’ as a focus of attention and sense-making in a way that speech alone does not.
Observing the observers	Paying attention to the thought processes of self and others. The processes as well as the content of thought become open to transformation.	Media help us observe our own and each other’s thought processes. Metaphors, narratives, and images are part of the deep structure of thought (Bruner, 1969; Jaynes, 1976; Hofstadter and Sander, 2013; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), which becomes more present and more observable through the exploration of rich media.
Exploring assumptions	Making one’s own and other’s assumptions explicit and available for reflection and inquiry rather than being embedded in one’s assumption and imposing them on others.	Media can be thought of as surfaces onto (and into) which we project our assumptions, thus ‘suspending’ them in front of others to see, examine, engage and explore. The media support the meaning-making of new assumptions and beliefs.
Creating artifacts	Tangible artifacts of various kinds serve as records and reminders of the dialogue, so that it may resume in the future, and/or so that the insights can be intentionally analyzed and applied (Selvin et al., 2001).	The same media that enhance the dialogue can be used to preserve it for further dialogue, analysis, and application. For example, text from the dialogue can be combined with mediating images to provide a visual-verbal artifact.

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