

**CONVERSATIONAL LEARNING:
AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO
KNOWLEDGE CREATION**

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Chapter 5

The Evolution of a Conversational Learning Space

Alice Y. Kolb

The more genuine conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus, a genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct ...more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it...a conversation has a spirit of its own, and the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it - i.e., that it allows something to 'emerge' which hence forth exists.

Hans Georg Gadamer

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is a case history of knowledge creation through conversational learning. It describes the journey from tacit, intuitively felt notions of conversational learning to the explicit development of theory and practice of conversational learning reported in this book. The purpose of the case study is to show the evolution of conversational learning from the traditional discourse model of education to a conversational approach to education. To understand the emerging process of such a learning space, this study will explore the evolution of a conversational learning space and the emergence of principles of conversational learning. The context of the conversational learning space was a required first-year Ph.D. seminar on learning and

development in the Organizational Behavior Department at Case Western Reserve University. This study traces the evolution of the conversational space by examining the process and content of the conversations among participants over twelve years from 1988 to 1999. The concept of conversational learning grew out of David Kolb's aspiration to explore a new approach to teaching and learning based on the theory and practice of experiential learning.

Unlike a traditional method of learning that places primary emphasis on abstract and conceptual dimensions of knowledge, conversational learning equally values the learner's emotional, sensual, and physical engagement in the learning process. While there have been many studies conducted on a particular course within a period of one semester (e.g. Mazen, Jones, & Sergenian, 2000), there is no study that traces the evolution of conversational learning longitudinally across multiple years of a course.

This evolutionary process can be seen as experiential learning in conversation as learners in a given class move through the learning process of experiencing, reflecting, conceptualizing, and acting to create new experiences. Through this process each class became a self-organizing system by focusing on certain ideas and trends and turning away from others. The way each group organized itself was passed onto future generations of the course through several means: through modifications of readings in the syllabus to reflect and accommodate changes in participants' interests as well as the instructor's need to introduce new ideas and concepts; through conversation starters, a one-page summary of thoughts and reflections voluntarily written and shared by participants in the class on a rich array of topics and experiences of a particular interest to them; through introduction of various artifacts in the class that served as reminders of

previously discussed topics and ideas; and, finally, through Kolb's position as transmitter of previous ideas, perspectives, and experiences over the course of twelve years in the life of the seminar.

Thus, one can distinguish between the personal knowledge that grew out of participants' personal experience and the social knowledge that grew out of explicit ideas generated through texts and experiences shared in conversations. This process can be equated with Nonaka's (1994) concept of explicit and tacit dimensions of knowledge creation and transmission. Hence, we can trace the evolution of the larger conversation by the analysis of the explicit records of participants' conversation starters. We can also see how the experience of a given class session was shaped by the social knowledge of the preceding years. As the personal knowledge and the social knowledge continued to influence and shape each other through conversations, we can witness Gadamer's (1994) idea of "the conversation as larger than the consciousness of any single player"(p.104). The conversation generated by a group of individuals in a given year is passed onto the next generation of players, perpetuating a dynamic flow of conversations over time. As the personal and social knowledge continued to be integrated and externalized through conversations, participants' deep interests also gained clarity and focus. Participants' pursuit of their personal interests led ultimately to substantial knowledge creation, as a significant number of doctoral dissertations were produced over the years as offspring of the multiple conversations conducted over time (e.g., Baker, 1995; Banaga, 2000; Fambrough, 2000; Hazelwood, 1999; Jensen, 1995; Kaczmariski, 1999; Kayes, 2001; Kolb, 2000; Mainemelis, 2001; Park, 1996; Steingard, 1997; Sullivan, 1997; White, 1993).

The twelve yearly course sessions can be describe in three broad phases: phase I (1988 to1989), phase II (1990 to1996) and phase III (1997 to1999). Phase I can be described as the exploratory period, in which both content and process of conversational learning were yet to be created and defined. A seven-year phase of a rapid growth in which the scholarly conversations explored by the readings increased in breadth and depth began in1990. Phase III can be characterized as a stable phase as, the scholarly readings and ideas remained relatively unchanged but gained further depth and elaboration in conversation. These phases can be illustrated by the growth of the syllabus over time, as shown in figure 1.

Insert figure 1 about here

The overall characteristics of phases will be described within the five process dialectics discussed in Chapter 4: the dialectics of concrete and abstract, inside out and outside in, status and solidarity, discursive and recursive mode and action and reflection. Overall, the learning space transitioned from a traditional discourse mode of learning to a conversational mode of learning. This transition will be described by analysis of the conversation starters voluntarily written by participants in each year. The analysis will focus on how explicit principles of conversational learning emerged through conversations, and not on the specific content topics covered and discussed in the seminar.

The analysis of the conversation starters will be conducted within the frame of hermeneutic text interpretation, a critical and intersubjective approach to understanding

“the familiar world in which we stand and the strange meaning that resists assimilation into the horizons of our world.” (Gadamer, 1976, p.xx). According to Gadamer, “like all genuine dialogue, the hermeneutical conversation between the interpreter and the text involves equality and active reciprocity. It presupposes that both conversational partners are concerned with a common subject matter - about which they converse, for dialogue is always about something.” (p. xx)

By critically reflecting on the individual text at hand, and recursively coming back to the experience afresh, I will attempt to elucidate how knowledge is created through conversations and how the five process dialectics open up a conversational learning space.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The seminar on learning and development was created in 1988 to introduce Ph.D. students to experiential learning and adult development perspectives on organizational behavior. The course description of the seminar is as follows:

This course provides an exploration of the learning and development paradigm underlying the human potential development approach to human resource development. The origins of this approach in the naturalist epistemologies--John Dewey's pragmatism, Kurt Lewin's gestalt psychology, the works of James, Follett, Emerson, Piaget, Maslow, Rogers, and others-- and the current research in adult development, in biology and brain/mind research, artificial intelligence, epistemology, and adult learning will be considered. The course will focus on

applications of these ideas to current issues in human resource development such as adult learning in higher education, advanced professional development and organizational learning and development. (Kolb & Kolb, 2001)

Participants in the seminar were adult learners with diverse professional backgrounds, nationalities and life experiences, between twenty five and sixty years of age. Prior to joining the organizationa-behavior department, many of the participants had held leadership and managerial positions at various for profit and not-for-profit organizations, as well as at several educational institutions nationally and internationally, with an extensive knowledge and expertise in their professional areas. The diverse and unique composition of the seminar participants mirror the long-held Organizational Behavior Department tradition and philosophy grounded on life-long learning and fostering of the unique human potential of the individual learners.

In the first year, the course was designed as a typical doctoral seminar covering interdisciplinary topics related to learning and development in psychology, philosophy, biology, neuroscience, and education. The primary text, *Experiential Learning* (Kolb, 1984), provided an intellectual backbone for the course with readings selected to explore current developments in topics covered in the book. The other text, *The Tree of Knowledge* (Maturana & Varela, 1998), described the biological roots of human understanding and the essence of life. In addition, there were readings specifically related to the topic of each week.

Only two components of the seminar were explicitly related to conversational learning. The first was a classic book, The Tao of Conversation by Michael Kahn (1995) that described four dysfunctional metaphors for exploring ideas in a seminar: the free-for-

all, the beauty contest, the distinguished house tour, and the barn-raising, a fourth metaphor that served as a guide for functional intellectual conversation. The concept of the cooperative Amish barn raising was to become a normative ideal for the seminar process. The second component was the one-page conversation starter, an idea borrowed from Ronald Reagan, who insisted on one-page summaries of major issues, stating that no idea was so complex that it could not be summarized in one page. Seminar participants prepared a one-page conversation starter on the readings, their personal reflections, summaries of related topics, comments on the group's process, or anything else on their mind. On average, five to six conversation starters were voluntarily turned in during each seminar session. Copies of the conversation starters were passed around at the beginning of each seminar session and were discussed one by one during the course of conversation.

THE DIALECTIC OF CONCRETE AND ABSTRACT

The dialectical relationship between concrete knowing and abstract knowing in the learning process is one of the central concepts of the experiential learning theory. Concrete knowing involves experiencing the world primarily through feelings in an immediate, tacit, and subjective way, whereas abstract knowing is centered in a conceptual, linguistic, and objective interpretation of the world. Integrated knowing is achieved when learners equally engage in both dimensions of knowing in a given learning context. Individual learning as well as conversational learning are based on the complex dialectical interrelationship between these two knowing dimensions. In

conversational learning, concrete knowing manifest itself as learners engage emotionally in conversation, whereas abstract knowing is the manifestation of the learners' abstract and conceptual mode of engagement in conversation.

The gradual unfolding of a conversational space was largely dependent upon how safe participants felt in fully engaging their physical, intellectual, emotional, and sensual experiences in conversation. For the most part, participants' past experiences in the classroom were shaped by the traditional model of learning, where the primary emphasis was placed on the intellectual and abstract dimensions of learning.

Common to all conversation starters of phase I, is a strong sense of commitment to produce a detailed, well-thought-out analysis and reflection on the assigned reading materials. A typical conversation starter would begin with a definition or a brief description of the main concept of the reading, followed by a summary of propositions and ending with several questions drawn from personal reflections. The preferred writing style tended to be very conceptual and abstract, taking up the full length of a page and, in many instances, far exceeding the one-page norm established early in the semester.

Participants tended to emphasize the reflective and abstract dimensions of the experiential learning cycle, for the most part shying away from the emotional and active side of the learning cycle. One participant expressed his struggle to engage his emotions in his intellectual endeavor, as his former socialization processes prevented him from doing so:

I thought how a formal education process constantly reminded me of the importance of separating emotional or personal aspects from the rational thought

process. Especially in an intellectual setting, we were told time and time again that there would be no room for emotionalizing or personalizing. In this respect, experiential learning seemed to me anti-intellectual. (1989)

One of the marked characteristics of phase I was the acknowledgment of the importance of emotions and feelings in learning, and yet there is reluctance to embrace them fully at the personal as well as the group levels. In many instances the attempt to express emotions and feelings tended to be disguised in the form of a vague questions, as if they were addressed to an unknown audience:

How do (1) sharing subjective observations and reflections of concrete experiences and (2) fitting subjective experiences into conceptual generalizations aid the learning process?

Often during the process of reflection, we often become emotional (smiling, crying, etc.). Does this mean reflection involves something more than a cognitive process of languaging? (1989)

In the early years others are rarely mentioned in the conversation starters. The reflections are primarily drawn from individual readings and rarely from unique experiences of others or from interaction with other participants. The experience with others takes place in a somewhat unique way. In several instances over the course of the semester, several participants wrote a joint conversation starter on a particular topic of interest. The composition of the group varied from mixed-gender groups, to male groups, to female group. The end product was generally a high-quality-in-depth critique and discussion drawn from a particular reading assignment that supposedly had generated strong interest among participants. An example is a conversation starter jointly written

by four female participants based on Women's ways of Knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). One can immediately sense from their writing how serious and close to their heart this topic was. The questions raised at the end of the conversation starter in many ways symbolize what came to play a substantial role in opening up a space for feminist voices to be explored and heard in the subsequent years:

I sometimes wonder what it would be like to have more women role models in our field. I'll never "live up to" the male role models; what does that do to my self-esteem? I like being female. I don't want to be pushed into acting like "men" in order to survive. It scares me to think that women may be tempted to give up femininity to compete in a more masculine environment - like the woman Gloria works with who is only having a child to please her husband, has her C-section date all planned and knew in her third month what date she would be returning to work. What kind of monster are we creating? (1989)

It is clear from the questions that an intense conversation was exchanged among four women with unique views and perspectives on this topic. However, although the name of the contributors appears at the top of the page, the identity of each individual contributor in the conversation starter is unknown. The entire conversation starter is written in the first person, making it impossible to recognize the uniqueness of individual voices. As an indication of great sensitivity and effort exerted to keep the anonymity of the participants' identities, in one particular instance the name of a participant is carefully disguised by means of pseudonym. The feminist perspective was the first of several emotion-laden, controversial topics introduced in the seminar that came to play a

significant role in expanding the conversation from a primarily abstract and intellectual mode to an emotional, personal, and passionate mode of conversation.

As the conversational learning space entered phase II there was a marked increase in the number of topics and reference materials discussed in the seminar. In addition, a significant change was witnessed in the language style of the conversation starters. During this phase the carefully measured words wrapped in highly abstract language of phase I gradually receded into the background and were replaced by emotional, highly charged tone of voices of men and women who were unafraid of being known for who they are. The conversation starters were no longer without a face. Participants' willingness to bring their diverse personal experiences and styles into the public life of the classroom further added to the richness and diversity of the conversation. The language became increasingly informal and personal, as an indication of participants' willingness to move from the realm of the cognitive and the abstract to the realm of emotions and feelings. Graphics, drawings, and poetry became an integral part of the writing, and the overall length of the conversation starters saw a substantial reduction during the growth period.

Kohlberg was great. Love the man. Though Marcus Aurelius misses the boat on the universe, Spinoza is sixties groovy. (1992)

In his conversation starter entitled *I am what I am -Popeye the Sailor (among others)*,

one participant expressed his confusion and discomfort as he delved into the readings:

I sit here at my desk having finished most of the reading - particularly on individuality (i.e. the 'self contained' self vs. the 'enssembled' self or the 'eco'

self) and I realize that I am still having a quite visceral reaction to what I have read! I am upset, disturbed, no more than that. I am angered by what I have been reading! As I read it, it challenges most of the basic foundations that I have built my life upon. Where do I start?!? (1993)

Similarly, a female participant opened her conversation starter in a somewhat defiant tone as she struggled with the unfamiliarity of the newly acquired knowledge:

STAND BACK! It's a (yes it is, for real) CONVERSATION STARTER

Bill Cosby once spoke at length about where a thought goes when it's forgotten. His logic, impeccably punctuated with cigar jabs into the air, confirmed a deep-seated suspicion of mine-forgotten thoughts end up in your butt. Now all this talk about experiential learning has got me wondering - where does what I have learned go when it disappears? How is it that one moment I can understand (Grok) something only to lose that understanding in the next moment? Do you know what I mean? (1994).

The collaborative effort to create a safe and welcoming learning space had a significant impact on the manner in which participants opened themselves up to different ways of being in conversation. As participants grew more comfortable in engaging their feelings and emotions in conversation, the learning space was enriched in a way that thought alone could not have achieved.

It is important to mention at this point a number of initiatives taken by the instructor and participants that contributed to the significant shift in the tone of the conversation starters from an abstract to emotional mode of expression. To enumerate a

few, in 1993 the instructor introduced music in the seminar as an acknowledgment of the sensual dimension of the learning space. In the same year, a Korean student brought flowers and placed them in the center of the circle as a way to honor nature. On another occasion the instructor distributed shells to the seminar participants as gifts from his winter retreat in the Pacific Islands, a practice that became ritualized in the seminar during subsequent years. This invited a host of initiatives by students, who at different times brought various artifacts that symbolized concrete manifestations of seminar topics. One student brought a small doll as a souvenir from her trip, whereas on a different occasion a Turkish student brought a small tapestry from his home country. As a part of an ongoing effort to create a hospitable space for learning, the instructor placed the books, articles, handouts, and reading materials on the floor to allow participants to easily walk in the circle and reach out for the readings of their own choosing.

In 1995 the instructor introduced the Amish wagon in the circle. The strong communal bond embedded in the Amish tradition was a reminder to all participants of the value of the equality and solidarity in the conversational space. In addition, the books, artifacts, and various objects stacked in the colorful wood wagon were an invitation for the participants to adopt a spontaneous and playful stance toward learning. Participants shared their experiences of the learning space in many ways:

In reflecting on the sessions, I am aware that much that “stuck” in my mind, has to do with the presence of flowers, plants, feathers, talking stick, puka shells, music, bell, prayer wheel, and animal images... What a wonderful rich learning environment! Is there a way to make learning about symbols and sound more explicit in the classrooms? (1995)

In a letter to the instructor, a participant shared her experience with the physical space of the seminar as follows:

I love flowers and books, and it made me feel warm and comfortable to have them around. It also gave me something to look at while I was deep in thought so the rest of the class did not know how far gone I was. The various objects that you passed around were interesting, and continued to remind me how little time I take to physically feel things. They allowed me to get in touch (no pun intended) with senses that are underutilized. I would always think to myself, I have to take more time to really explore things in depth. I see shells all over the beach but never really studied them, or pick them up. It's like taking time to really to get to know something. I realize that I know a little about a lot of things, but I miss out on the richness of knowing something really deeply. (1995).

As the conversational learning space entered phase III, the physical, sensual, emotional, and intellectual dimensions of knowing were more integrated as learners grew more comfortable in moving across the concrete-abstract continuum in a more flexible way. Learners' highly abstract and conceptual orientations of phase I, or the emotional and affect orientation that dominated phase II is replaced by a dynamic blend of these two dimensions of knowing. The atmosphere of the learning space as depicted in the conversation starters of phase III is dynamic, receptive to diversity of experiences and views, with attention and care devoted to the integration of the intellectual, sensual, and emotional dimensions of the learning process. The unique physical arrangement and design of the learning space that mirrored the multifaceted dimensions of the learning

process encouraged learners to be adventurous, playful, and multidimensional in pursuit of their deeply held interests.

In the center of our human circle there stood the wagon (fire?), a symbol of the mobilization and dynamism that learning involves. The flowers were there to remind us of the nature, its diversity, and its ability to (re) create life, harmony, and beauty. The feather and the stick were the metaphors for the mystery of life, whereas the books on the floor created an atmosphere of play - the Lila [free play] path to our original nature. (1997)

At the end of the semester a participant summarized her memorable experiences of the conversational learning space as follows:

Sharing David's coffee and drinking it from a wagon mug. The consistency of the family room setting. The Tibetan bells (did we first ring then for Joanna's mother?) The grandfather spirit who joined us for the spirituality session. The support and encouragement to be honest and respectfully direct. David's books, being in the section of his library relating to the week's topic. Other people's conversation starters (people willing to trust me and others with their thoughts and opinions). (1999)

In stark contrast to the early phases, what emerged from the conversational starters of phase III was the profile of learners who are attracted to the idea of integration of opposites as they pursue their interests, balancing the dialectical tension between the objective and subjective, the conceptual and emotional dimensions of knowing.

The readings for the week, especially the reading from "Free Play", brought to mind many things. But what I immediately thought of was the musician Wynton

Marsalis. Wynton is an extraordinary musician. He freely flows between jazz and classical musings seemingly without much effort. The regimental approach of classical music and the freedom of expression found in jazz seem diametrically opposed, but yet he finds freedom and enjoyment in both. I believe that jazz provides the *temenos* (play space) for Wynton. The main thing that I notice about Wynton's music is the ability to cross the boundaries of jazz and classical and yet maintain the integrity of both styles. (1998)

Must we function with either /or choices? Why not, instead, chose to utilize the most positive aspects for a wider band of options? Qualitative and quantitative evaluations? The scientific approach coupled with a constructionist science? If there are questions, why not find answers in a variety of ways? (1998).

Each syllabus topic is a distinct facet of the social forces that influence me and other individuals...For example, I now see myself as being at a stage of moral development, in the conflict between women and men, of a style of learning and conversing, with multiple meanings of adulthood, and aboard the boat of spiritual self in the organizational world. I learned that I am of many things and all can be held simultaneously. (1999)

The evolutionary process of the dialectic of concrete and abstract illustrated thus far opened up yet another window of opportunity for participants to explore a new realm of learning experience that required significant shift in their previously held basic assumptions and beliefs: the balancing of the inside-out and outside-in approaches to learning.

THE DIALECTIC OF INSIDE OUT AND OUTSIDE IN

The inside-out learning mode challenges learners to return to their reservoirs of life experience and stand face to face with their own deeply held values, feelings, and thoughts, and make them the starting points of their learning process. The inside-out learning finds its roots in the ideas of humanists thinkers such as Maslow(1968), Rogers(1961), Freire(1962), and Hunt(1987) for whom the process of individuation toward becoming a whole person cannot be achieved without valuing or owning one's own experience as who we are, regardless of what others construe of what we are or should become. The path toward becoming an authentic individual, however, is met with a paradox along the way, the outside-in process to learning that challenges the very process of inside-out learning.

Outside-in learning refers to the external ideas and events that act upon us and shape our knowing. Often, we find ourselves caught between the conflicting demands of the external world and the need to follow our true voices from within. Nonetheless, how one integrates the paradoxes and conflicts generated by the tension between inside out and outside in ultimately determines one's success in becoming a whole person. If the journey toward becoming an authentic individual requires one to resist conformity to outward expectation and conceptions bestowed upon oneself, what is one to become at the end of the journey? As much as we may exert our own individuality and even claim the victory of having achieved it, the fully independent self will always remain one step ahead of us, for contrary to our perceptions our individuality is very much shaped in relationships with others. Paradoxically, the awakening of our own individuality or the

affirmation of who we are grounded in our own experiences is achieved by entering in conversation with others who in turn reinforce and acknowledge our freedom and existence as individuals. As participants venture into the new realm of learning experience holding the tension between individuality and relationality, inside out and outside in, the learning space continued to evolve and expand.

When the inside-out approach was first introduced in the seminar the idea was received with a mix of hesitation and anticipation. In one of the conversation starters of phase I a participant expressed her dilemma in integrating herself as a whole person to pursue her own growth as well as that of others:

What am I doing/thinking/feeling when I'm pursuing my own growth and that of my classmates? To what, to whom do I look to evaluate how I'm/we're developing skill in learning how to learn? Hunt suggests that we start with ourselves, that we take an inside-out approach. What do I/we know/think/feel/believe about learning? ...How am I/are we shaping ways of interacting with one another that respect individual differences, challenge growth and create an environment that invites participation by all? (1989)

In phase II the hesitation and tentativeness of phase I were replaced by a passionate gesture of full acceptance of the inside-out approach as participants eagerly share their experiences with the encounter with the newly found idea:

“Inside out Psychology” is most intriguing, and I should admit, a relatively new life value for me...I believe so strongly in the concept that I have come to believe that an inside out approach can arm one with the potential for overcoming any

difficulty if he or she chooses and is able to fully connect with his or her inner self. (1993)

When I read Rogers “A Modern Approach to Values”, I said, “Yes, here it is!!!” (Not the first, and I’m sure not the last time that that will happen). I was one those “usual adults” (slugs) running around corporate America in search of love, acceptance and esteem. I operated on a variety of introjected organizational values, which were in conflict, and which ultimately proved unsatisfactory and untenable...the “Is that all there is?” scene. (1996)

As liberating as the discovery of the inside-out approach was, this idea clashed with an apparently conflicting set of values that permeated the diverse topics introduced in the course over the semester. The course readings were structured and designed to introduce participants to a wide range of ideas and concepts beyond the confines of the Western concept of development. The broad reading assignments, which ranged from Eastern religion and spirituality to communal lifestyle of the primitive societies to the postmodern philosophy that questions the capitalist and individualist way of modern life, challenged participants to venture into the unfamiliar territory of a new learning experience and see their familiar world anew. These ideas stirred heated discussions and lively exchanges of diverse views and beliefs among participants. A male participant expressed his strong reactions and concerns as Western values come under intense scrutiny in conversation:

During last week’s class I felt that the class had a growing movement/willingness/need to attack “Western culture.” Whether it is capitalism, individualism, competition, rationality, functionalism, intellectualism, etc.... I

know that I tend to take all this personally (probably too personally), but my personal values and beliefs are very closely tied to some of these concepts, and I often feel as if others are trying to change those beliefs so that I will be more closely aligned with some status quo. (1993)

In a different voice, another participant expressed her longing for relational values as she found herself moving toward a community-oriented life philosophy:

For some time, I have been playing with the word “communitarian” as a descriptor for the lifestyle I tried to create for myself and encourage in others before coming to Case... Over the past few years, I have emerged from a career cocoon to become aware of, develop attitudes about (prize), and invest in the community around me... For me, that amorphous need for valuing, beauty, connectedness, however you wish to describe it, leads us to communitarianism. (1993)

As the inside-out learning rooted in the awakening of the individual values and beliefs met a host of concepts that redefine the conception of self, participants were challenged to reexamine their previously held conceptual frame. As the conversational learning space entered phase III, a shift was witnessed in the way learners approached the concepts of inside out and outside in. As learners delved into this dialectical dilemma with a deeper sense of reflection, the bipolar stance many participants exhibited in the early years toward diverse views gradually shifted to a more balanced conception of the self that coexists with one’s surrounding environment. The following conversation starters reflect the gradual shift that took place in conversation during phase III. The

conversation transitioned from a reflective stance toward deeply held issues to that of a desire to actively transform the ideas and concepts gained through reflections into a greater purpose in benefit of a larger community.

What I found most intriguing about the readings for today was the variety of different ways in which the concept of “self” was presented. What is the self? Am I really an individual with unique properties, an intrinsically valuable, self-contained, self-determined unit? ...Personally I think a concept of self that can encompass all of these thoughts makes the most sense. That is, I am unique, but my existence is intimately and inextricably tied to the people and world around me. Coming from a culture that stresses individualism, where we feel that if we can just get people to value themselves, everything will work out well, I find it very tough to avoid dwelling on the individual aspect of “self”. Which makes me wonder, do I really need more self-esteem training? Maybe what I need is to have more esteem for others! (1997)

I think there is more to be gained in “work” realms by taking in concepts from the outside...I’d like to explore the balance further, the balance between inside out and outside in. (1999)

The illustration of the conversational space thus far has focused on the process whereby conversations continued to evolve and transform as participants gravitated around the dialectical movement between feeling and thinking, inside out and outside in. It is important to emphasize, however, that the evolution of the conversational learning space did not follow a linear progression, as the descriptions seem to convey. Rather, it

evolved in an organic and recursive fashion as each year the learning space was influenced by the distinct composition of participants with multiplicity of views, interests, and unique life experiences. The focal point of the conversation would gravitate around topics and issues participants had strong energy and passion invested in reaching a deeper understanding and sharing their knowledge and experience with others. In a given year, feminism was the topic that gained prominence in conversation, whereas in the following years topics that ranged from postmodern philosophy, deep ecology, and spirituality were received with equal passion and interest as they gained central focus in the conversation. The impact of such topics was substantial in the life of the seminar. The more passionately participants engaged in conversation on a topic of great interest, the deeper they reached into their reservoir of feelings and emotions. The emotional turn of the conversation gradually changed the landscape of the conversational space. As participants delved into their deepest interests and passions, the dialectical horizons of feeling and thinking, inside out and outside in of the conversational space saw further expansion over the years.

STATUS AND SOLIDARITY

The equality of status between the instructor and participants was a pivotal, albeit controversial issue in the seminar. The idea of “conversation among equals” that is at the crux of conversational learning could not go unexamined if the conversational space was to strive and continue to flourish. Before proceeding to the illustration of the dialectical relationship between status and solidarity, it would be helpful to briefly recall the profile

of the seminar participants described early in the chapter. It is safe to say that the unique and diverse composition of the seminar participants played a significant role in creating and making the conversational learning space possible. Participants' rich lives and professional experiences further contributed to the richness and complexity of the learning process in the seminar. It is interesting to notice, however, how participants perceived themselves as learners upon entering the classroom setting. Regardless of their prior status as accomplished and autonomous individuals, lingering somewhere inside their minds was the idea Freire(1992) described as "internalized oppression," a process whereby learners relinquish the valuable experience and knowledge they already possess in the name of the expert knowledge of the teacher. By surrendering their power to the teacher, learners relegate themselves to the position of passive recipients of information and knowledge. Perhaps a typical classroom scene commonly shared by most of the traditional educational institutions is the one in which, in a classroom of thirty students, only one person, the teacher, does most of the talking while the rest are left in silence. In the conversational, learning space however, the status of the teacher as the sole authority had to be reconsidered as the instructor deliberately shifted his position as a power figure to that of an equal participant in the seminar. Although the instructor provided syllabus and reading assignments early in the semester, he set no learning agenda or specific direction in the class discussions throughout the semester. The stance he maintained over the course of the semester was that of an equal participant who encouraged learners to have their voices in stark contrast to the traditional lecture format, where the instructor dominates most of the airtime in the classroom. In a recent interview in a European journal, the instructor voiced his conversational learning philosophy as follows:

One of the key concepts behind the conversational model of learning is the idea of a learning process where teachers and students come together as equal learners. When learning is viewed as a dialogue among equals, the teacher is no longer viewed as the sole provider of the expert knowledge. The status of the expert is equally shared among learners who actively take responsibility in offering expert knowledge when needed...

Paulo Freire writes that you can't deny the fact that teachers know more in some regard. I think that it means that knowledge is a dynamic process which changes all the time. While I may know a lot about management, the others may happen to know a lot about engineering or some kind of expert knowledge. Dialogue among equals doesn't mean that in any single conversation there isn't a point in which one person is an expert and the other person is not. (Kolb, 1998, p.51)

Inevitably, participants faced a period of adjustment in order to become familiar with the new seminar concept and configuration. The lingering "internalized oppression" would resurface from time to time in the seminar, as participants looked to the instructor and asked for his voice and direction at crucial points during the conversation.

Particularly during phase I of the seminar, the shift in perspective from a lecture format to the conversational mode was met with hesitation. By and large, the instructor appears to have been viewed as the primary purveyor of knowledge, as evidenced in the way he is portrayed in the conversation starters:

Kolb defines learning as a holistic adaptation to the social and physical world. We would like to look further into the meaning of the word "social" in reflection.

(1989)

The first sentence of Kolb: Human beings are unique among all living organisms in that their primary adaptation lies... in identification with the process of adaptation itself.

The last sentence of Kolb: The dawn of integrity comes with the acceptance of responsibility for the course of one's own life. For in taking responsibility for the world, we are given back the power to change it. (1989)

David Kolb pointed out in his chapter on lifelong learning and integrative development that many people follow a life path of highly focused specialization. (1989)

The instructor is frequently personified as quotes, his physical presence far removed from the conversational space and for the most part clouded by an unspoken expectation participants attributed to him: the role of an ultimate knowledge provider.

In 1989, one event occurred several weeks into the seminar that was to give a new shape to the conversational learning space. An Asian student mentioned on several occasions that he was having trouble hearing and understanding what was being said. Finally someone suggested that the room be rearranged to bring the group closer together. However, eighteen people seated around a circle of tables placed people far away from each other. The tables were pushed away and the group sat in a circle inside the tables. This created a more informal and intimate conversational space. In addition, the group's action to improve members' ability to listen to and understand each other served to remind speakers that conversation is not just about speaking, but about being understood. Particularly in this larger group this required some effort and discipline. In

subsequent years this room arrangement was to become a norm and ultimately led to the physical arrangement and design of the learning space described in the previous section.

Coming together in circle not only brought the participants closer physically but also challenged the hierarchical mentality embedded in the traditional classroom setting. It is safe to say that the change in physical configuration of the room played a significant role in promoting an egalitarian atmosphere in the learning space. As the conversational learning entered phase II, participants began to openly voice the need for a learning environment where all voices were equally heard and valued:

A hierarchical approach to learning undermines the very concept of process and the prospect for dialogue among equals. It interferes with the spontaneous confrontation of different perspectives. (1990)

For the first time, the instructor is acknowledged and challenged as an equal member of the group:

Ok Dave...

How is this course a demonstration of experiential learning? (1990)

In 1990 the instructor introduced the Native American “talking stick” and the “feather” as a way to manage the flow of conversation in the group. The talking stick was used in tribal meetings as a form of parliamentary procedure, being passed from one speaker to the next as others listened and concentrated their attention on the holder of the stick. At the end of his speech, the speaker would hand the feather to a specific tribal member as an invitation to voice his opinion. A participant described her first encounter with the talking stick and the feather as follows:

As David passed around the Native American talking stick and the response feather I imagined the differences in the type of dialogue that our desks and the stick/feather allowed. The stick, with its jagged edges and short branches, looked at first glance to be a weapon. But then as David spoke of its use the stick began to look like a hand - each little branch represented the individual fingers that come together into the collective unit. I saw it as an outstretched hand that at one time may offer assistance in the dialogue, and another time may slam down on the desk to strengthen the authority of the speaker. The feather, in contrast, offered a gentler and freer expression. I saw the bearer of the feather bringing a delicate and soft touch to the act of listening. Yet by its very function, assisting in flight, I also saw the feather helping the respondent to hover with the discussion or to lead the group into heights beyond normal reach of the hand. (1993).

Although the practice of the talking stick and the feather generated a certain level of discomfort and awkwardness, it helped participants to shift their focus from speaking to attentive listening. Over the years the greater emphasis placed on deep listening further enhanced solidarity among participants who equally shared the privilege of speaking and being listened to. An example of such acknowledgment of the group solidarity is metaphorically expressed in the following conversation starter:

To make music (knowledge) beautiful and whole we need to understand the various positions that are out there and be able to appreciate them not just sing our verses and over. When we nurture and support each other a much more complete outcome is possible. We can't sing all the parts, and we have to

recognize that there are other parts. Solos can be beautiful, but their beauty is enhanced if they are a part of a greater group piece. (1992).

It is important to emphasize, however, that the awakening process of group solidarity did not happen overnight. To better understand this process it would be helpful to look into some patterns that kept resurfacing in the conversations starters over the years. Around the third to fifth weeks into the semester several participants began expressing frustration and discomfort as a reaction to their new experience of conversational learning. In a given year a participant expressed her growing frustrations and anger directed toward the process and content of the seminar:

I'm not sure whether I want to continue being part of this class. Maybe if I just do the readings, discuss these with one or two other people, and then space out during our Wednesday morning together...but then I can't really handle sitting in class anymore. I left class yesterday feeling emotional, followed by feeling increasingly angry at my fellow classmates, our professor, and most of all (inevitably) myself. I played with the idea of dramatically walking into David's office during break announcing my desire to be excused from the class...or just getting up and stomping out of our cooped up place on the 5th floor of Sears.

Drama...I wish I could convince myself that I wouldn't come across as too self-indulgent, egotistical, and morally superior by doing just that! Because a good kick in the butt may be just is needed... Why get so riled up? After all, it's only a class! But I have better ways of spending my time, I think, than watching us toy with ideas... I am accusing all of us flirting ...with very complex and meaningful concepts in a cursory self-indulgent way, leaving our comments to a level of

superficially befitting of a talk show, but not of a group of students committing themselves to questioning in depth. (1995)

During phase III the same frustration resurfaced in the seminar, as described in the following conversation starter:

I don't know about you, but I am really frustrated with this class. I have reflected on the experience and developed a theory for how to make it more interesting for me.

Experience: I've experienced frustration for 3 consecutive weeks during this class only.

Observations: We come together in a room for 3 hours each week. There is lots of commentary on personal experiences. Our content has fleeting references to the reading and even fewer insights drawn about the personal experiences that are shared. 80% of the talking is done by 20 % of the people. David has very little verbal involvement in the discussions. My experience of being in that circle is intensely frustrating for me; I feel like I'm missing out on the theoretical insights, the intellectual ah-ha's and David's experience for which I came to this doctoral program.

Concept/Theory: I've tried on several theories, and 2 emerge as useful for me.

1. Content - If we (*everyone!*) anchor our insights and discussions in the core concepts and theory of the readings, then the theoretical insights and intellectual "ah-ha's" will emerge. David's choices about how he shares his

experiences and insights are his decision, although I think more input would help my process.

2. Process - If we (*everyone!*) were conscious of being concise, of listening and thinking before speaking, and of being mindful of the thrust of the speaker's point (rather than their tangents), then I could more easily pay attention and more easily learn from everyone's ideas. (1999)

This insightful snapshot of the learning space offers a glimpse of critical moments in the life of the seminar as participants struggle to redefine and reexamine what is to be a self-organizing learning group and what it would take for a group of adult learners to create a learning space which is hospitable enough to welcome everyone's expectation, yet tight enough for a rigorous learning and deep thinking to occur. Here the self-organizing nature of the conversational learning space is put to an ultimate test, as its survival is dependent upon how well the group will steer the oars of status and solidarity in a balanced fashion if they are to guide the conversation to a right course. In this regard, participants were left with several conflicting issues. The welcoming of personal experiences creates a sense of belonging in the learning space, yet an overdose of those moments runs the risk of neglecting the readings by only touching them in a cursory and superficial way thus sacrificing the valuable learning one can gain from them. Enthusiasm and passion toward one's interest leads to powerful learning; however, too much of it will leave others powerless, sitting in silence.

Adding more frustration to an already complex situation, the instructor seemed as though he had totally surrendered his authority as the ultimate power figure and did not show any inkling in coming to the aid of the group and steering the course of the

conversation. The following comment by a student reflects the instructor's persistent attitude and stance in the seminar: "David wants us to be a self-organizing class - he doesn't want to be a typical lecturer." (1999). Such was the atmosphere of the seminar that the group seems to have been practically left with no choice other than discovering the way on their own if they were to make their learning experience valuable and meaningful.

It is worth mentioning here yet another revealing pattern that emerged over the years that sheds an important light on the group's self-organizing process. During phase I the crisislike outburst expressed in response to the uncertainty and ambiguity of the learning space did not surface in the conversation starters. During phase II a clear emotional outburst made its appearance in the conversation starters eight to nine weeks into the seminar, whereas in phase III its occurrence was evidenced as early as three weeks into the life of the seminar. During phase I participants' concerns seem to have been explicitly shared outside the seminar and only in an implicit way mentioned during the seminar. During phase II, however, participants seemed to have gained enough confidence to cast off any restraint and inhibition in voicing their concerns. As the learning space transitioned to phase III, not only did participants become more vocal in expressing their mounting frustrations, they also seemed to become keenly aware of the fact that it was up to them to make the learning space a productive and valuable place for all. As evidence of such awareness, participants began actively searching for ways to make the learning a meaningful experience to every member of the seminar by proposing detailed courses of action and inviting others to experiment with different processes and ways of being together in the classroom:

Whether we do it implicitly or explicitly, we are developing through experiential learning during our class. I suggest-regardless of what we choose (or don't choose) to do during each class - that we make our mode of learning more explicit. I suggest that we explicitly do the following- we actively reflect on what works and what doesn't. We actively theorize. We actively propose new experiments. At a macro level, this is the essence of experiential learning. (1999)

A final observation of the dialectic of status and solidarity points to the emergence of a rather unique phenomenon that surfaced over time in the conversational learning space: the awakening of the gift cycle of conversational learning. Recall for a moment how the dialectic of status and solidarity evolved over time from phase I to phase III. In the early phase, when the conversational learning space was skewed toward the status end of the dialectic, the learners' overall tendency was to be primarily recipients of knowledge generated in the seminar. Their primary focus was on receiving rather than giving. As the conversational learning space transitioned to phase II and phase III, giving and receiving became reciprocal processes as the balancing of the dialectic of status and solidarity became more apparent in conversations. Participants' increased awareness of their own unique expertise and knowledge encouraged them to actively influence the process as well as the content of the conversation by means of sharing new concepts and ideas in the group. Many ideas and concepts offered in the seminar were eventually incorporated in the syllabus over the years in a continuous gift cycle of new knowledge that was passed on to the next generation of learners. The gradual increase in the syllabus page numbers portrayed in Figure 1 is the manifestation of such a gift cycle in the conversational learning space.

We now turn to another key element that had a significant impact in the life of the conversational learning space: the combination of discursive and recursive processes embedded in the conversational mode of learning. In the next section we will uncover the meaning of discursive and recursive processes of learning and inquire into how they manifest themselves in conversations.

THE DIALECTIC OF DISCURSIVE AND RECURSIVE

The discursive and recursive processes are very much a part of the conversational learning process, where learning occurs simultaneously within two intertwined time dimensions: linear time and organic time, the former being connected to the discursive process and the latter to the recursive process of learning. As learners engage in conversation they situate themselves within two qualitatively distinct, though closely interconnected, experiences specific to each temporal dimension. The discursive process unfolds progressively from the past, present, to future in a continuous flow of activities. The weekly topic outlined in the course syllabus serves as the underlying structure that allows for these activities to unfold over time. Through the discursive process, learners become aware of what they know by explicitly voicing and sharing their thoughts and ideas related to their subject of interest to the larger group. What happens after the ideas and thoughts are voiced and heard is largely influenced and shaped by the recursive process of learning. During the conversation learners arrive at choice points where they are faced with the decision to move on to a new topic of discussion or return to the previous subject that continue to intrigue, disturb, or capture their attention.

Learners' choices to return to their topics of interest is largely dictated by the intrinsic interest as well as emotional investment they have in the subjects of their choice. In this sense the recursive process is closely related to the concrete and inside-out dimensions of the dialectics of concrete-abstract and inside-out-outside-in. The intrinsic as well as emotional engagements with the topic operate as primary motives for learners to go back in time and attend to the subject of their interest in a deeper way. In the absence of this recursive process, the discursive process would take over and drive the conversation in a predominantly linear fashion. In this sense the discursive process is closely related to the active dimension of the active-reflective dialectic of conversational learning. The discursive process is a manifestation of learners' desire to move on and drive the conversation forward in an active way. In order to clarify the relationship between the discursive and recursive dialectic of conversation, let's return for a moment to the dialectical manifestations of the concrete-abstract and inside-out-outside-in processes illustrated early on. Recall that as learners migrated from the abstract to the concrete and from outside-in to inside-out poles of the dialectics the conversational learning space was dominated by an emotional, personal, and passionate tone of conversations.

A similar phenomenon manifested itself in the discursive and recursive process of learning. During phase I, with some rare exceptions, conversations were predominantly discursive, as learners tended to stick to the agenda assigned to the particular class and methodically follow the topics of discussion outlined in the syllabus throughout the semester. This phase coincided with the strong abstract and outside-in approaches learners preferred during the early years. Learners tended to have an intense intellectual

engagement with the preassigned topics, come to closure at the end of the session, and moved on to the next subject of discussion. During phase II, as learners began to gravitate toward concrete and inside-out dimensions of the dialectical poles, the recursive process made its first appearance in the conversational learning space. Learners began frequently to regress in time and revisit the subjects discussed during the previous sessions:

Last week Paul related how his experiences made him angry with Habermas for using two-bit words too much. I agree, though I suspect it has to do with Germans semantics and word forms more than Habermas trying to show off. Although Emerson uses normal words and writes in English, my experiences make me mad at him. Emerson shows off by using ornate metaphors to make a mundane point sound richer than it is. (1992)

During last week's class, I realized a long-growing concern of mine. I sense that orthodoxy of thought seems to have crept into many of our class discussions. While this orthodoxy affects me in particular because I disagree with it, I hope that I would be concerned about it under any circumstances. (1993)

A closer look at individual conversation starters points to the rich array of trigger points, spontaneous and visceral reactions, that prompted learners to return to a particular topic or experience in a deeper way. Furthermore, learners' inquiry and interests were triggered not only by personal reflections on the reading materials, but from experiences largely drawn from class interactions. The urge to go back in time and revisit the subject

of the previous conversation can be attributed to the emotional impact learners experienced through assigned readings or through memorable group interactions. To a great extent what drives the recursive process during this phase is the learners' tendency to rely heavily on the concrete dimension rather than the abstract dimension of the dialectics and to engage an inside-out approach as opposed to outside in as their predominant modes of conversation. It is worth pointing out that learners' preference for frequently going back in time and revisiting their topics of interest or their tendency to digress the conversation based on their personal motives undermined the discursive process of learning during phase II. The accentuation of the recursive process of learning often kept learners from exploring new topics of discussion and moving the conversation forward in a timely manner.

Toward the end of phase II, however, the discursive and recursive processes of learning faced a significant turning point in the life of the conversational learning space. In a particular year the discursive and recursive processes of conversational learning were for the first time explicitly acknowledged and voiced in a conversation starter:

What about the act of coming back again and again to the same bench in the same park to feed the sparrows-can this be called experience? Is the repetition of the same act indicative of experience or the denial thereof? Does the comfort of knowing the park, the bench, and the sparrows cover up a fear of venturing further into deeper and perhaps "unsafe" knowledge areas (i.e. Maslow) and becoming "stuck" in a place where we end up denying our talents and creativity? Or, is the repetition of the same act (leading perhaps to new understanding of the behavior of sparrows in their park environment) an attempt to probe more deeply,

to deal head-on with the “shallowness that everyone threatens the true and the good” (Ken Wilber), an act of bravery, perseverance, and of appreciation of subtlety? I wonder... (1995)

In her metaphorical inquiry into the discursive and recursive processes of learning, the learner described her experience of tension and conflict as she inquired deep into the subject matter. The deeper one probes into the phenomenon at hand, the more heightened becomes one’s awareness of the back-and-forth movement of these two distinct temporal dimensions of learning. The recognition of the discursive and recursive processes of conversational learning marks the transition from phase II to phase III of the conversational learning space.

During phase III the acknowledgment of the discursive and recursive process of learning became more deliberate and explicit as learners actively sought to pause and return to the subject of their interest by consciously redirecting the course of the conversation. The following sample conversation starters illustrate the state of the discursive and recursive processes of learning in phase III:

This class is called Learning and Development and it is based on the Experiential Learning Theory. Last week, we had the chance to learn more about our Learning Styles but, somehow, we did not. Instead, we thought that the LSI was a generalization, a classification, a labelization, and, in general, anything else ending in -ation. Moreover, we found LSI to be “culturally insensitive.” Not everybody expressed such view, of course, but, as far as I recall, no one said anything different. In any case, the fact is this: We did not learn much about and

from the LSI, because we never gave it a chance. Why? I am taking advantage of today's topic to introduce the following questions:

1. How our values may paralyze our quest for scientific thought and knowledge?
2. How our values may create a barrier to any kind of learning experience?
3. How our values may assassinate any spark of creativity?
4. How our values may limit our opportunities for becoming better researchers and professionals? (1997)

Last week I learned several lessons while observing and reflecting both about class content and about class members. Forgive me for a moment while I digress with an excerpt from my class notes and reflections...

Lessons about others and myself:

- Joanna likes to experiment
- Paul likes to experiment and he likes to discuss ideas through pictures
- Jane likes to think before he talks
- Tina sees this “unstructured” time as a release from her more structured work environment
- Tangents take air time - sometimes inappropriately
- Its is good to take time to get in touch with one's inner self
- Sometimes its hard to tell when a tangent is a tangent or a good idea
- Carol & Helen feel like we need “something” more from class
- Sometimes we aren't always interested in the line of conversation and it is easy to tune out

- Its OK to let Joyce know when I've gotten the idea
- David wants us to be a self-organizing class - he doesn't want to be a typical lecturer.

Lessons about the process of experiential learning:

- Experiential learning is all about learning through processes
- If we are going to self-organize, we need to examine our PROCESS of learning.
- If we choose to focus on process, our approach needs to be loose enough to accommodate everyone's needs, yet tight enough to accomplish something of value to the members of the class. (1999)

The above two conversation starters highlight a distinct portrait of the conversational learning space of phase III. In contrast to the previous phases, much of the learners' deliberate attempt to return to past class experiences was geared toward actively redirecting the course of the conversation for the purpose of urging and often challenging the group to inquire deeper into the subject or dynamics that emerged during the conversation. It is also true of this phase that participants often expressed a sense of weariness and concern toward tangential discussions that might have diverted the course of the core subject of the conversation. From this perspective, learners were also operating under the pressure to move forward by stressing the discursive mode of learning, thus emphasizing their need to engage in conversation in a more focused and meaningful manner. In order to balance this tension, there is a concerted effort to balance the recursive and discursive processes in conversation. When learners chose to refer back

in time to a particular topic or group process, they consciously bridged the subject of their interest to the core topic of the ongoing conversation in the seminar.

As we turn to the last principle of conversational learning, the dialectic of action and reflection, the dynamic evolutionary trend described thus far becomes even more accentuated as the five dialectics diverge at times and converge at another in a highly organic manner.

THE DIALECTIC OF ACTION AND REFLECTION

Central to the theory of experiential learning is the idea that the creation of knowledge and meaning occurs through the active engagement in ideas and experiences in the external world and through internal reflection about the qualities of these experiences and ideas (Kolb, 1984). Thus, learning occurs through the dialectical movement of action and reflection as learners move outward into the external world and inward into themselves.

The same principle applies to conversational learning. Knowledge is created through conversation as learners actively voice their ideas and experiences in conversation and make meaning of the experiences and ideas through reflection. The balancing of action and reflection is crucial to conducting a meaningful conversation, since suppression of one dimension will automatically hurt the other. When learners engage in conversation primarily through the reflective mode, conversations are turned into frivolous chatter. Conversely, if action is overemphasized to the detriment of

reflection, conversation is turned into a mere activism, denying learners the possibility of engaging in a meaningful conversation (Freire, 1992).

This tenuous relationship between action and reflection is captured in one conversation starter written early in the life of the seminar:

Boud, Keogh and Walker emphasize reflection as necessary to formulating informed action. Emerson emphasizes action as liberation: “The preamble of thought, the transition through which it passes from the unconscious to the conscious, is action.” For BKW reflection precedes action, reflection implies action, for Emerson action precedes reflection but reflection is not in the drivers seat. What is the proper linkage between action and reflection? (1989)

The question posed by the learner, “What is the proper linkage between action and reflection,” marks the beginning of the twelve year exploration into what constitutes the nature of conversation and how it generates knowledge and shapes human understanding. The question regarding which comes first, reflection or action, or what connects the two was given focused attention during phase I of the seminar, as learners engaged in a series of reflective exploration into the evolutionary process of human consciousness and inquired into how language and the human’s innate desire to communicate and dialogue ultimately gave meaning to human existence.

What connects-in an admittedly sketchy fashion-for me at this point is that new perceptions enter our awareness, and create new knowledge, when there exists an

urge to know, and a capacity for empathy which allows dialogue, and there are others with whom we can engage in dialogue who can help us to “grasp, name and share” new ideas. In order to create new knowledge, it is necessary to overcome, not only the fear of knowing which Maslow discusses, but the active hatred of learning from experience which Bion suggests is present in most adults...Perhaps learning occurs when we are able to transcend that fear in a dialogue with others where we let empathic understanding have free reign. (1989)

What comes through the early writings is a highly reflective stance that dominates the conversation starters of phase I. Much of what emerges from their writings is the acknowledgment of the process of dialogue and communication that is grasped and named but shared only in a tacit way. For the most part, learners’ reflective tendencies and preferences appear to have kept the actual conversation within the confines of each individual’s internalized monologue.

It is important to pause for a moment and reassess why learners’ reflective and tacit tendencies became a predominant pattern in the early phase of the seminar. This phenomenon coincided with learners’ tendency to be conscious of the status of the instructor. The idea of solidarity between the instructor and the seminar participants was not readily embraced during phase I of the conversational learning space. Learners’ perceptions of the instructor as the primary purveyor of knowledge and thus the one who possibly would be the dominant voice in the conversation might have kept learners inclined toward the reflective side of the dialectic of action and reflection. As the instructor maintained his nondominant and nondirective posture over the years, the

conversational learning space transitioned to phase II, where the idea of solidarity was explicitly verbalized in the seminar.

This also marks the transition of the learning space from the reflective to the active mode of conversation as learners searched for the meaning of conversation among equals amidst their struggles and confusions to make sense of the process of the seminar, perceived at that time to be unclear, ambiguous, and without a specific goal. The following conversation starter illustrates the learners' awakening process to conversational learning as they slowly emerged out of the reflective, internalized mode of dialogue and transitioned to a collective mode of exploration into the meaning of learning through conversations.

Somehow education as learning needs to provide an environment where students and teachers both discover new realities that get beyond the current zero sum game between systems. Is the new curriculum doing this? Or is it just indoctrinating a different value set that makes the faculty feel better? How can we evaluate the dialogue about learning that we have here? Is this really a dialogue, or a multilogue, or a collection of monologues and dialogues? Is connectivity a multilogue, dialogue or a distributed monologue? How could we possibly tell the difference? (1992)

It is worth mentioning here yet another event that influenced the transition of the conversational learning space from a tacit and reflective mode to an active mode of conversation. In 1993 a significant event took place early in the semester that in many ways had a substantial impact in setting the course of future Learning and Development seminars on the path to conversational learning. During that year, Ann Baker and Patricia

Jensen had begun their dissertation work on the topic of conversational learning, and the entire class of 1993 was invited to participate in their studies as part of the data-collection process. Both Ann and Patricia were present in the seminar during the entire semester as participants in the conversation. As part of their data-collection, each conversation session was tape recorded in addition to all participants being asked to participate in individual interviews at the beginning and at the end of the semester. The purpose of the interviews was to understand how participants learned through conversations by inviting them to explore and reflect on their learning experiences gained through conversation with someone at some point in their lives.

The simultaneous experience of being in conversation with one another in the seminar and being a part of a larger study on conversation learning appears to have had a significant influence on the life of the group. The scenario described in the following conversation starter mirrors the atmosphere of the seminar of that particular year:

Last week I thought I saw a pattern emerging that seems very familiar to me from other classes, seminars, and workplace meetings: In class some people were very vocal and spoke often. Others spoke rather less often or almost never. I wondered about this recurring dynamic.... I am intrigued by the power of silence and of listening. The gift of silence and listening is a great gift to a group. For starters, quiet creates the possibility of conversation; otherwise there is merely a free-for-all of competing voices. In addition, when I am speaking and I realize that my words are not just vanishing into thin air, but are being listened to with care by another human being, I am deeply moved and feel increased connection to the listener and to myself. Also, when I'm able to still my interior monologue and

listen, truly listen to others, there is the pleasure of being taken outside my monologue and, paradoxically, I feel more centered. The gift of speaking is also a great gift to give to a group. Words are as fundamental to dialogue as quiet. However, as someone who tends to be pretty vocal, I wonder at my own need or tendency to be vocal. No doubt, my excitement and excitability play a part. I feel passionate about ideas and there is a pleasure to thinking out loud about them with others. Yet I sense there is another side to it: Am I afraid to be quiet? Am I afraid to give up control of the conversation for fear that my ideas will not be heard? Am I afraid to trust that my colleagues will take the conversation in promising directions? The gift of listening and the gift of speaking are necessary gifts for group function. But I wonder what will happen if we specialize in these gifts rather than each of us giving both to the group. Do we not run the risk of all specialization: lop-sided development, strong in one area, weak in another. Aren't we all tired to some extent of being specialists? (1993)

The clear articulation of the key elements and processes that ultimately would lead the group to conducting a meaningful conversation is the first indication that conversational learning left the realm of the tacit and reflective and entered the realm of the explicit and active side of the conversational dialectics. In this process conversation was acknowledged as a legitimate language and an active way to engage in learning. This trend continued through subsequent years during phase II as learners continued to explicitly articulate the meaning and values of different forms of conversations and how their learning experiences were impacted and shaped through conversation.

This is a conversation starter about...conversation starters, and some reflections about our semester together. We began many conversations with each other during the past several months - some were in written form, and most were begun verbally. There were calm conversations, rational conversations, emotional conversations, exciting conversations and more exciting conversations. There were long periods of silence, too. Yet isn't silence a form of communicating? We talked about epistemology, biology, naturalism, education, morality, spirituality, learning and development. And we received many gifts each week-flowers, seashells from Hawaii, books, learning and development. I anticipate that all those "unfinished" conversation starters will continue on and on...and they will evolve into many new conversation starters. Thanks for the new beginnings.

(1995)

The conversation starters reviewed thus far are illustrative of how the conversational learning space transitioned from a primarily reflective and tacit mode to an explicit and active mode of conversation over the years. It is important to note, however, that knowledge creation through conversation does not occur without simultaneous engagement in the active and reflective modes of the conversational dialectic. The movement from the tacit mode of phase I to the explicit mode of phase II was a substantial development in the seminar; however, it still left unfinished the integrative work of the dialectic of action and reflection that ultimately would result in generation of knowledge through conversations.

The following poem serves as the prelude to what marks the transition of the

conversational learning space to phase III, where learners engage in conversation with a clear sense of purpose and intention to integrate action and reflection and the tacit and the explicit dimensions of the dialectic:

Shared separate loneliness

Days left me

I sit alone in person

Sharing only a passive life

Filled with lonely ideas

That few apprehend

And none will know

Share my loneliness? !

Come and listen to my ravings? !

Take a seat by half cooked ideas

And the solitude of knowing

I too will listen to your loneliness

So that you will not remain,

Silently

Confined to ideas

We may not share love

Nor even resonation

But seldom do singing birds harmony

Always your children will cry

May we hear? Together different sounds

May we share? Separate loneliness

Born from the proposition that we are always infinitely alone, that others can never completely know what we feel, this poem asks what might be gained from the activity of conversation. What might be gained from sharing this loneliness? It is actually an optimistic piece, both extending an invitation and asking the questions. (1996)

The question, “What might be gained from the activity of conversation ” expressed in the poem continued to be articulated throughout phase III as conversation increasingly gained in complexity and richness. Learners chose to approach conversational learning from multiple perspectives and personal interests. For some participants conversation triggered in them a desire to act in the service of a cause they deeply cared about:

Many times I leave class wondering how we can translate these great conversations into some action that will make a change for the better in some way, whether it’s the academic world, the natural world, my world as a parent, or my world as a member of this department and this program. (1997)

Yet for different learners conversation is experienced as the manifestation of the gift cycle of the learning process as the selfless exchange of giving and receiving among learners promotes solidarity, understanding, and authenticity in the learning space:

Yet, what better way truly depict the exchange of miracles between two human beings; miracles, which ignite the mind, enliven the spirit and awaken, rejuvenate,

and touch the soul. You tell me something. I tell you something. Together we enrich our existence, our space and our “being” in that moment of space and time. The conversation starts, grows and unfolds. The gift (the conversation) takes on a life of its own. It spreads its wealth all around the universe. (1988)

Other times learners resorted to the exploration of the theoretical and conceptual side of conversation as they inquired into the connection of the theory and practice of conversational learning:

Conversational learning: Learning occurs in many ways for many situations and for many people. I wish that I felt confident with when and how conversational learning is a good idea. Short of that, I am confident that it is a powerful learning mode. Now seeing myself as a lifelong learner, I can probably find more opportunities than I ever expected to learn through conversation with others. In so doing, I am inherently valuing what others have to offer me short of books, empirical findings and codified “knowledge.” What actually is a conversation anyway? (1999)

The dynamic movement of the dialectic of action and reflection illustrated in the ebb and flow of the conversation starters reviewed thus far is indicative of how conversation evolved from the reflective to the active mode of learning during phases I and II and became more balanced during phase III. As the conversational learning space evolved, learners’ distinct perspectives, interests, and styles shaped their integrative effort to make sense of the idea and the act of learning through conversations. Action-oriented learners were drawn to the active side of the conversation as a potential source of influencing change in the world, whereas philosophically and ideologically oriented

learners chose to inquire into the meaning and impact of the conversation as they saw it manifest in life situations at large. Learners with a pragmatic orientation fell somewhere in the middle, as their interests were geared toward balancing the conceptual and theoretical framework of the conversational learning model against the practice of conversation.

SUMMARY

The evolution of the conversational learning space described thus far illustrates how the five process dialectics that make up the foundation of the conversational learning manifested themselves in the Learning and Development seminar over the course of twelve years. From phase I to phase III, the evolutionary process of the conversational learning space took a highly unpredictable and nonlinear path. The manifestations of these dialectics in each evolutionary phase were interdependent and organic, adding to the complexity and richness of the conversational learning space over time. At one time, conversations were highly abstract and discursive; other times, predominantly emotional and recursive. The five dialectical processes evolved in a highly interconnected manner, as one dialectic triggered another in an almost chain like reaction. An example of such movement can be seen in the dialectical process of feeling and thinking as it ultimately influenced the dialectic of inside out and outside in. As learners moved toward the feeling end of the dialectic, there was also a gradual awakening and movement toward the inside-out approach to learning.

The overall pattern identified throughout the three evolutionary phases within each of the five dialectics is the learners' tendency to move from one extreme of a

dialectic continuum to the other during phase I phase II, until finally they settled somewhere in the middle of the dialectic during phase III upon reconciling the two extreme ends in a flexible manner.

The overall processes and factors that ultimately guided the conversational learning space deserve a closer attention. From the perspective of the course content and structure, the syllabus served as a guide to the destination; however, learners made their own choices as to how to proceed and what to focus and attend to. The manifestation of such a process can be witnessed in the dynamic change in topics and subjects over time, as topics that gained prominence in one particular generation are overshadowed by others in the generation that followed. The feminist voice that had prominent place in conversation during one year receded in the background as postmodernism gained central focus in the following year. In another year, naturalism and spirituality were the learners' choices until they were replaced by deep ecology in the subsequent generation. Learners' self-organizing tendencies became more accentuated over the years as the instructor maintained his nondirective posture and stayed away from a discursive, lecture format of class delivery throughout these years. Another key factor that appears to have impacted the evolutionary process was the instructor's choice in including the conversation starters of the previous years in the syllabus as part of the weekly focus readings. The knowledge and experience passed on to the next generation of learners through conversation starters gained significant historical value in the seminar over the years. The content as well as the process may have gained clarity and focus in the seminar as a result of the accumulated past experience and knowledge.

The combination of processes and factors that guided the conversational learning space throughout the evolutionary process brings to focus yet another phenomenon that emerged during phase III of the learning space. Learners' increased awareness of the past appears to have contributed to their confidence in making conscious choices in regards to content and process of the class. What comes through in the conversation starters of the pioneering generations is a collective experience of frustration, confusion, punctuated with moments of breakthroughs and excitements amidst their struggles to make sense of the novel undertaking they have embarked on. Toward phase III, the novelty factor loses its power, as learners appear to have more or less gained control over the course of the conversation.

One may argue that the fusion of horizon, an ultimate state to be arrived by individuals engaged in conversation, also poses a significant challenge to the conversational learning space in that it may eventually stagnate the conversation as a result of the shared sense of understanding and agreement jointly achieved by the learners. The challenge therefore resides in keeping the dialectical tensions alive through ongoing conversations in a hospitable and safe manner. As such, the creation of a safe conversational learning space becomes pivotal to promote learning through conversations, a topic that will be covered in the next chapter.

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Figure 1 Growth of the syllabus over time



