

Talking about organisations

Can dialogue reveal hidden truths? This is what prompted Bronwen Rees and Andrew Armitage to experiment with the dialogical process to explore how realities and knowledge about our organisations are created. We see this as the beginning of an inclusive dialogue, and welcome further reflections from readers.

Introduction

Most traditional organisational theory is concerned with how to make organisations more efficient, rather than on listening to the experience and voices of those that work within them. The last five years has seen a growing interest by researchers in inclusive organisational practices which give space to more individuals whose voices are rarely heard in organisational literature. These researchers are concerned particularly with how the rhetoric of management excludes organisational voices, and thereby acts as an anonymous agent of power.

In this research and practice section, we carried out an experiment in the 'dialogical process'. This is a conversation that is based upon building a relationship of respect, honesty and trust between participants. This was a small-scale experiment but we can see quite clearly that by opening up a discourse, something emerged which helped humanise the conversations between us as organisational participants, and set us on a process of first of all embracing the difference between us, exploring the possibilities of change, and then opening up to how this may happen. Our interest here was in the transformational possibilities of dialogue, and how by sharing meanings and understandings of phenomena, we could move forward our actions in a positive way.

Other articles in this issue of *Interconnections* have argued for finding more ways in which we can become either accountable or activist in moving towards positive change. This experiment showed us how, by setting up a series of internal

'dialogical processes' an organisation could move towards positive and conscious communication.

We reproduce below some of the transcript of our conversation which took place for an hour. Some has been cut and some amplified for the sake of clarity. We had no agenda, simply a time to spend reflecting on our different organisational experiences and how dialogue may help us work together.

Doing dialogue

- B.** We come from different perspectives, don't we, in a way.
- A.** *In a way, but in a way we don't because we're both coming from a critical perspective where we're challenging norms, challenging existing structures.*
- B.** Yes, but we've got a different body of experience. Although I think there's a mutual recognition that dialogue is important. I understand it as relationship, and so my experience does come from this sort of therapeutic understanding, [which is] that a meeting takes place at different levels.
- A.** *Absolutely, yes.*
- B.** I think that you mentioned just before I switched [the recorder] on, maybe the most important obstacle to real dialogue are issues of power.
- A.** *Yes, I call it the 'discourses of power' in terms of Foucault's work. It's about knowledge.*
- B.** Of course, this has been an underlying sociological critique for 50 years or so, but the nature of it has changed. Now we can see very much more easily what Foucault was saying.¹

¹ Michel Foucault was a French philosopher who made several critical studies of institutions, with a particular focus on the micro-politics of power. His work has been used much over the past ten years or so to critique managerial systems, making connections between how knowledge systems such as, for example, performance management systems, become centres of power.

It is absolutely remarkable how prescient he was: in how the micropolitics of power invades our very being. Actually that's what makes it so difficult to express our natural values.

- A.** Yes. So, do we want to explore some of the different levels of where dialogue can be done, how it might be used at the levels of change of the individual and then change in the organisation? We could begin the conversation at any level we want. It doesn't really matter because I think dialogue always brings us round in a circle.
- B.** That's right, or perhaps rather a spiral. There's no opportunity for that in management educational establishments.
- A.** No, we rarely question in management education who is creating the discourse, who is choosing the language that we use. If we did so, it might lead us to ask what is not being said, and how things become suppressed.
- B.** Well, according to Foucault, and the mechanics of power, we suppress ourselves don't we?
- A.** In what way? Could we call it learned helplessness? Where we think we can't do anything about our situation and accept it?
- B.** Why don't we ask the questions that need to be asked? I suppose I look at it personally as a sort of soul weariness really. Often, when one does ask what feel like straightforward questions, then you get a fear response in others which is very uncomfortable.
- A.** Is that because people don't want to confront what's in front of them or within them because it goes against their presupposition of how the world is?
- B.** I think that when you say something that challenges an internal structure, an internal way of thinking about the world, then that's challenging to the ego and the ego is a defense mechanism against the world. It is actually necessary to be there, but it's become very rigid rather than flexible.
- A.** Is that because it's been shaped by the external world around it and it doesn't want to go counter to the external world?
- B.** I think it's because there's been a movement towards the homogenisation of organisations so they look the same all over the world. The forces that are needed to keep it homogenous are very strong and they're also supported by the external structures of economics and vested interests. As those forces have come together they've shut down peoples' experience in that sort of way. Their way of perceiving the world is shaped by homogeneity.
- A.** Do you think people are frightened of actually speaking out?
- B.** Yes. I think underneath there's a real sense of sensibility and ethics, which is a natural human capacity.
- A.** Would you put that down to greed and materialism in Western society; people just have to go along and don't ask questions and feel it's better to keep quiet. We'll stick to the corporate message as long as everything is going fine?
- B.** Yes. And of course challenging does bring discomfort and so, often people don't do it. But it's not one or the other, I don't see this from a revolutionary perspective. What real dialogue can be like is a sort of evolution so that you come from a point of difference and explore this difference. This creates a sort of transition, dialectically. But with a homogenising force, there's no tension, there's no dialectic, there's no possibility for change and that's why it becomes so rigid ... it really is the emperor's new clothes. You can see with the banking crisis; if one thing goes, then the whole lot goes. We've had a real shock – but the problem is that we haven't asked what we are doing about this, how did we create this? Part of what we are doing in a way here in this dialogue, personally and collectively, is to ask how we stop recreating this.

A. *So do you think it's because we've become uncritical?*

B. Yes, we don't ask questions. We've become quite, *sedated*. Imagine an alien looking at us taking money out of a cash machine. What would they think? We are like children weaning at the breast actually, at the breast of a materialistic God.

A. *If we are to become critical this can only be done through the dialogical process. You say that it's not necessarily about revolution but to me dialogue is about revolution. It's about the revolution of the ego moving from rigidity to fluidity. It's also about openness. I won't say flexible because flexible could mean bent into another shape, someone else's shape.*

B. So, that's quite an interesting distinction between flexibility and openness. It's quite key, because as you say, the flexibility is what may be a sort of collusion, Whereas an openness means that there's a space within oneself [Interruption from Andy] *to be persuaded...* No, – I think persuaded is a word of power, let's see, but for a meeting to take place.

A. Yes, indeed. *I think perhaps persuaded is quite a power-driven word in that sense. It's open to possibilities. I think that's probably what I'm saying. Open to possibilities.*

B. Your interruption takes us back to this whole area of language.

A. *Indeed, powerful discourse.*

B. Even though 'persuaded' feels like a relatively benign word.

A. *It's got powerful connotations.*

B. Yes, it actually means: 'I'd like you to have my view. My view's right.' And from the ego's perspective this is normal. So actually even as a speaker we have to try and discover an openness that's very difficult to achieve actually.

A. *If then we think of organisations which consist of people, there are certain people who set the agenda, set the discourse if you put it like that;*

how do we move from what I call the didactical position, down to the dialectical and yet further down, as I see it, towards more of a dialogical? How do we get that dialogical process engendered within educational and business practices?

B. I've always said we have to create the conditions for this to be possible, and this is still, or perhaps even less, possible than before. First of all we have powerful organisations, powerful vested interests. And so you have hierarchical organisational structures and channels of communication and non-communication that go up and down and then, as we've said, we have our own psyches which have been internally shaped. It's just as Foucault predicted: we've internalised as would a child, systems of power...

A. *'I accept these norms'.*

B. Yes, even if people actually think differently, they still want to be part of a group so they suppress what they think. And in the end, because they think differently, they conclude there must be something wrong with them. So that begins a process of isolation and even shame.

A. *Which is an irrational response?*

B. It's not actually, because it's quite a clear process.

A. *That's interesting.*

B. It's a process, there's an emotion of shame, which in psychological terms is how the shadow of organisations, any group, becomes 'projected out' onto people. I think there's rather an artificial distinction between rational and emotional. As soon as you act with any sort of passion or emotion (and this is a gender issue too), then there's a sort of habitual response that this is irrational: 'we don't want this here'. Actually it is that response which is totally irrational.

A. *I would say it's not only gendered, I would say it's also cultural. What is actually accepted in one culture is not acceptable in another.*

- B.** The whole of our language is peppered with war-like metaphors. Even at the level of dialogue we need to question the actual language we use.
- A.** *So when we are actually talking about breaking down, changing, we are talking at very fundamental levels.*
- B.** We are, yes, definitely.
- A.** *How do we get agents of change to dialogue? I mean, to me, agents of change, individuals coming together, are not necessarily dependent upon hierarchical structures in organisations, or even society. It's more the coming together of mutual points of contact or mutual sets of issues that need to be addressed or solved. But I think it goes further than that, it's more as you mention, an emotional issue. The issue is not as important as the relationship and the trust that is then engendered as a result of the connection. I see the dialogical process actually as not just the cement but the instigator of that set of relationships and trust formation.*
- B.** Well, the first thing in therapeutic terms is that the people dialoguing have to feel safe. It would be quite interesting to look at what that means. What would it actually mean for you to be safe? To feel safe in the dialogue.
- A.** *To be safe in the dialogue? This would mean that I could actually be candid and open and that no-one would come out of that dialogical situation back into the normal discourse of the organisation and then take retribution. It means that they would take the respect [of the dialogical situation] with them. Dialogue to me is an ethic; it's an ethic of living. It's not someone going into a room, having a meeting, saying we've dialogued, and then shutting the door and moving on and then carrying on in the same way.*
- B.** That's actually a first condition, which is the same as you have for a therapeutic relationship. You need to know that this is confidential, and that the material is going to be used ethically outside.
- A.** *Yes, but to me it goes further. Whether its therapeutic or not, those people that have dialogued know that once they've left that situation the dialogical process still carries on in their absence because you still have a relationship with another person even though they're not there. It's a bit like the 'Waiting for Godot' syndrome. Although they're talking about some else there's still a dialogical relationship with the other, so it's the absent other. Crapenzano talks about shadow dialogues, and the shadow dialogues are not necessarily the primary ones we are trying to have this morning. It's the dialogue that takes place from an observer's point of view or for somebody who may be not in the primary dialogue – it becomes secondary dialogue in that sense.*
- B.** I work with a model of relationships which is about being present. Shadow... dialogue is quite an interesting idea. So, after this dialogue, when you leave how would that secondary process carry on?
- A.** *Well, in what I call the secondary dialogue at the moment, we could be talking about other colleagues. But because we live in the dialogue as an ethic, it means that we actually treat people, talk about people, in the same way that we would expect them to do with us. They're the shadow dialogue, they're not there, and they're the other. We're not going to actually say well, we've dialogued and go into work tomorrow morning and stab a knife in their back. It's almost a Socratic way of living. It's a way of living through the speech act. This is an extension of the thought act, because dialogue can actually be thought as well as spoken, and it can be written. It's the whole being, it's the ethic of being as dialogue. That's how I see it. It's a totality. It's not just here and now, it's the past, now and the future. That's what dialogue is. It's very existential if you want to put it like that.*

- B.** It's also pre-Socratic and ethical in the Greek sense, but also actually in the Buddhist sense as well. Ethics is about the ethics of intention. It's not a list of things. Although there is a loose list – it's interesting that three of the list are speech acts. So that is like a shadow dialogue. I mean part of this is that you don't gossip, talk frivolously and you try and talk with grace.
- A.** *And also talk with honesty and transparency, and also be candid as well.*
- B.** Yes, it doesn't mean being nice necessarily.
- A.** *To me dialogue is an ethic of being and because it's an ethic of being it's never whole. It's something we all strive for. Perhaps we should more rightly talk about it as the dialogical process where the dialogical process is about getting to the wholeness of being because dialogue is sort of an end point in that sense. People do talk about dialogue, people say that we've had a dialogue this afternoon. World leaders are having dialogues in Copenhagen – but having conversations perhaps rather than dialogue. Perhaps if we had dialogue everyone would be in harmony and we could totally share meaning... It's about hope, looking at the past as well as the totality.*
- B.** Well then, I suppose if you take it back to psychological terms we are all good and bad. We all have the capacity to...
- A.** *Capacity to do bad deeds as well as good deeds, however they might be defined.*
- B.** I would define them from my perspective by looking at the mental state behind that. If you were saying something that was really challenging, I would ask, was it because you wanted to score points, punish or put down somebody, or was it because you really wanted to clarify something.
- A.** *Or it could be a deep passion or belief. Or, it could be that you are defending somebody's honour, or defending maybe a particular word that's being used like when people use the word 'education' and you have a deep sense of what you know and feel that education is.*
- B.** We are faced daily with ethical dilemmas. From moment to moment we are faced by ethical questions. But that's hard work to try and find your way through that. For me that takes daily, hourly practice. But our organisation says this is good and bad, this is right or wrong, this makes the organisation neater, doesn't it? So, to get back to something you said a quite a time ago, we need to find ways of encouraging dialogue, rather than trying to change. Otherwise, change is imposed rather than encouraging a spirit of dialogical process. I think it is really important. This is dialogue we've set up in a fairly formal way today and the most important thing is then how do we take the results of this further? How do we embody what it is we've said?
- A.** *Yes. The dialogue has moved into different places. We're talking at a deeper level than perhaps we envisaged. I still see it as connecting with business and management education because it's about questioning our true identity and actions as business and management educators.*
- B.** I would dearly like dialogue to be part of the culture.
- A.** *Do you think we've answered some questions by just doing the dialogue?*
- B.** Yes, it's a start. It will have an effect somehow. And it's mysterious as to how this happens. So you'll go away, and I'll go away...
- A.** *But the dialogue will still go on...*