

Puzzlements and Re-Framings: Theoretical Implications of Contemporary Approaches to Practical Dialogue

In an earlier paper "Listening for Aliveness: Dynamic Facilitation and the Re-Design of Conversational Systems" (Zubizarreta, 2004) I explored one example of a "conversational system" designed to more fully support the listening process, both for participants in a dialogue as well as for facilitators of dialogue. Drawing on extensive quotes from qualitative interviews with practitioners of Dynamic Facilitation, a contemporary dialogical approach to helping groups address practical issues (Atlee, 2003; Rough, 2002), I invited readers to question conventional assumptions about meetings, about the nature of dialogue, and about facilitation.

I also explored how the emphasis on relationship that is present in Burbules' theory of dialogue (1993) was echoed in the interviews with practitioners, and how this theory could help deepen our understanding of the highly active listening work on the part of the facilitator ('listening to build relationship') that is a hallmark of this method. The interviews also emphasized the risks and benefits involved in the principled refusal to "manage convergence". While distinct, this concept bears some relation to Burbules' emphasis on the need to be willing to 'fail' at convergence, in order to ensure the integrity of the dialogue process.

I ended that paper by mentioning that there are areas of significant difference between current theories of dialogue and the practice of Dynamic Facilitation. In this paper, I want to explore one particular area in which the data from the interviews does not easily square with Burbules' theory, nor with other prevalent theoretical models of dialogue. To further understand this area of divergence, I have played around a bit with the current models, in a way that may be of relevance to those interested in a theory of dialogue.

A. Something that "doesn't fit"

Burbules describes empathic relationship ("an inclusive orientation") and confrontation ("a critical orientation") as one of the central polarities that generate the creative tension of dialogue. By "critical", Burbules seems to mean both a questioning quality in the conversation, as well as an explicit effort by the facilitator of dialogue to 'confront' or pose critical questions to participants in the dialogue.

Burbules sees maintaining the balance between these two orientations, inclusive and critical, as one of the central challenges of the facilitator's role:

"Unless dialogue is to become the mere exchange of sedimented and complacent beliefs and casual first impressions, at some point the relation must be able to tolerate a dynamic in which interlocutors can pose skeptical questions and be willing to be questioned themselves, in turn. Working to create and maintain a relation in which such questions can be asked and answered undefensively, without jeopardizing the fabric of the relation itself, is one of the central challenges of dialogue." (p. 89)

Burbules is of course not alone in viewing dialogue this way. For example, while Brookfield and Preskill (1999) do not use the same terminology, they too describe the facilitator's role as balancing two kinds of postures.

In some ways, the challenge involved in finding a balance between these two elements may be reflective of our larger cultural process. As we search for ways to move beyond the still-prevalent “argument as battle” metaphor (Lakoff, 1980), we are all learning a variety of ways to honor the need to be “inclusive and empathic” as well as the need to be “critical and analytical”.

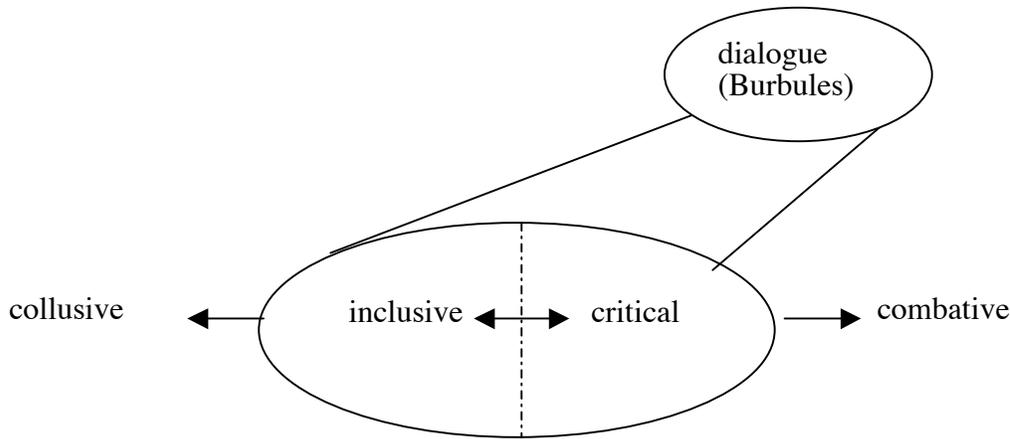
Yet what appears as central challenge in the facilitator's role for Burbules and others, simply did not appear as such in the interviews I conducted (Zubizarreta, 2002). The facilitators I interviewed mentioned a variety of challenges they encounter in the course of their professional work, yet the difficulty of "striking a balance" between two very different postures was not one of them. In fact, they did not describe as having to 'balance' their role in any way, with regard to the participants. For example, whenever facilitators speak of questioning participants, the questions seem designed to “draw out” participants further, rather than to challenge them in any way.

In some ways, this was no surprise at all, since Dynamic Facilitation encourages facilitators to take a straightforwardly “inclusive” role toward participants. At the same time, a larger "puzzlement" remains. Facilitator accounts of the outcomes of their work described a process that is indeed "critical" in the best sense of the word, evoking broad divergence, radical questioning, and major re-thinking in the process of generating creative approaches to practical challenges. Yet the role of the facilitator is quite unambiguous, and clearly different from what is described in most of the literature on dialogue. How might one make sense of this, in relation to the theory that Burbules elaborates?

B. Playing with theory...

As I sat with Burbules' description of the creative tension between the “inclusive” and “critical” orientations as key to dialogue, I began to wonder what might happen if we applied a gestalt perspective to Burbules' theory. For example, we might posit that, for dialogue to be such, *both* orientations (inclusive and critical) need to be present at all times, though one may be “figure” and the other “ground” at any particular moment.

It is a simple corollary of Burbules' theory to point out that, whenever the natural wholeness that includes *both* inclusiveness and critical inquiry is severed, we no longer have dialogue. But there is a further step. Whenever one half of the polarity is present without the other, the isolated half is no longer itself, but becomes its shadow instead: “collusive” instead of “inclusive,” “combative” instead of “critical.” I have created the following diagram to illustrate this insight:



The area *within* the ellipse is the area of dialogue, resulting from the creative tension between the two polarities of "inclusive" and "critical". The area *OUTSIDE* the ellipse, is the area where those polarities have "split off" from one another. In Burbules' model, it is the facilitator's responsibility to balance their own posture between an inclusive and a critical stance, in order to further the dialogue.

While I will only mention it briefly here, this 'gestalt' perspective could be extended to the whole of Burbules' four-quadrant model. Burbules creates a four-quadrant model of the different varieties of dialogue through the use of using two dimensions: the "inclusive / critical" spectrum and the "convergent / divergent" spectrum. This results in four types of dialogue: inclusive-divergent, or dialogue as conversation; inclusive-convergent, or dialogue as inquiry; critical-divergent, or dialogue as debate; and critical-convergent, or dialogue as instruction. Burbules understands dialogue as moving in phases through all four quadrants. By means of this sequential (albeit not necessarily linear) movement, the larger dialogue contains the full spectrum of orientations.

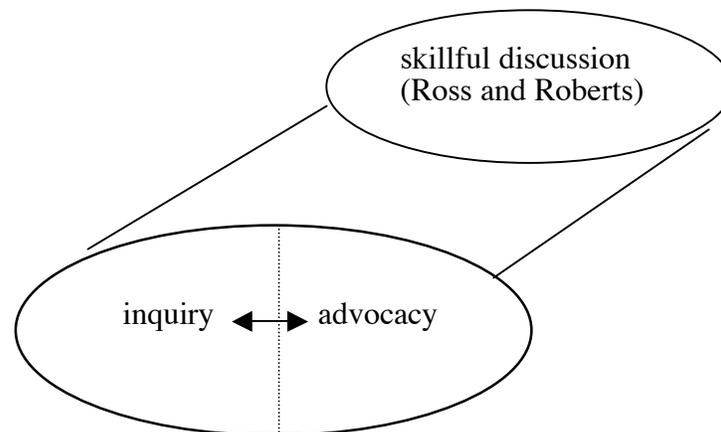
While I find this model helpful, I believe it might benefit from the recognition that within *each* quadrant, *all* of four of the orientations are simultaneously present. Of course, each quadrant's defining characteristics (inclusive-convergent, inclusive-divergent, critical-convergent, critical-divergent) will be the "foreground" characteristics, with the other pair present as "background." Yet this would be true only for the "functional" forms of dialogue. Burbules states that each quadrant also contains "dysfunctional" forms of dialogue. I am suggesting here that the dysfunctional forms are such precisely because they do not contain the full spectrum within themselves, but only the split-off, isolated "shadow" halves of each polarity.

Still, this insight does not address the original question: HOW is the balance between "inclusive" and "critical" achieved in the process of Dynamic Facilitation? To begin sketching a response, I need to introduce a related, though different, challenge posed by "skillful discussion," an offspring of Bohmian dialogue.

C. The challenge of "skillful discussion" ...

There are a few parallels between Dynamic Facilitation and Bohmian Dialogue process, in that no external “agenda” is used to structure the conversation, and the process proceeds in a non-linear way. Yet in other ways, the two processes are quite different. One significant difference between the two approaches to dialogue has to do with purpose: the originators of Bohmian dialogue did not envision it as a tool to be used for addressing practical problems, but instead as an exploration into the nature of thought itself (Brown, 2001).

While Bohmian dialogue is by definition not designed to evoke practical outcomes, some practitioners have developed a related form, “skillful discussion,” for situations that call for practical solutions. In “skillful discussion,” the role of the facilitator is de-emphasized even further than in traditional Bohmian dialogue. Instead, the members of the team are trained in a variety of communication tools and protocols. One of the main tools is “balancing inquiry and advocacy.” To help participants do so, protocols are offered to help them learn to explain their assumptions, make their reasoning explicit, and lead each other through the ladder of inference (Ross and Roberts, 1994).



In this model, the facilitator's role seems to be to provide participants with the instructional tools so that they themselves can learn how to balance their role as participants between inquiry and advocacy, and thus evoke the dialogic field of "skillful discussion".

To participate in Bohmian dialogue, participants are encouraged to learn and practice difficult skills such as suspending judgement, listening internally to your own listening, and observing the thought process in yourself and others (Brown, 2001). To participate in “skillful discussion”, even further training is needed. This contrast greatly with Dynamic Facilitation’s “come as you are” approach towards participants. How, then, does the “balance between inquiry and advocacy” occur?

D. An attempt at triangulation...

To better conceptualize how creative tension is evoked and sustained in Dynamic Facilitation, I experimented with juxtaposing certain elements from Burbules' model with elements from Ross and Roberts'. There is a slight initial difficulty, as both of these models use the same term to mean different things. Burbules uses the term "inquiry" to describe a specific kind of convergent dialogue that lives within one of the quadrants of his four-quadrant model. On the other hand, Ross and Roberts use "inquiry" to describe a kind of open-minded questioning that is contrasted with advocacy.

For my present purposes, I will simply suggest that Burbules' "critical" dimension is similar in some significant ways to the "inquiry" dimension of "skillful discussion," as both involve a "questioning" attitude toward one's own initial positions. If we agree with this, at least provisionally, we could create a category called "critical inquiry toward one's own initial position" to refer to that "questioning" attitude.

Now we can see what happens if we combine Burbules' and Ross and Robert's models. The initial terms describing each set of creative tensions,

inclusive ↔ critical inquiry ↔ advocacy

become, through the above substitution,

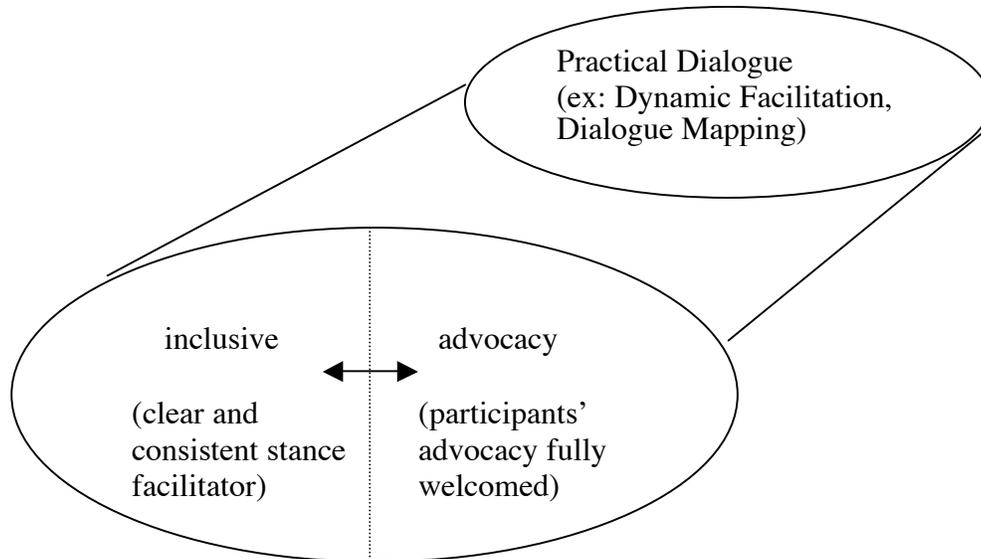
inclusive ↔ critical inquiry toward one's own initial position critical inquiry toward one's own initial position ↔ advocacy

which lead us to the following new creative tension:

Inclusivity ↔ Advocacy

In the practice of Dynamic Facilitation, we see that this creative tension is, at least initially, apportioned by role: the facilitator is the one who is holding the pole of inclusivity, while participants' advocacy is welcomed in a process that has few if any "ground rules" and requires no "prior training" in order for individuals to participate. This is also true of Dialogue Mapping, another approach to "practical dialogue" that bears strong underlying similarities to Dynamic Facilitation (Zubizarreta, 2006).

This alternative way of framing the “creative tension” at the heart of dialogue is depicted in the following diagram:



In this model, it is the creative tension between the facilitator's stance of unconditional inclusivity, on the one hand, and the fullness of participants' advocacy, on the other, that supports the emergence of participant's critical inquiry toward their own initial positions.

I initially created this model to depict more clearly the role of the facilitator in Dynamic Facilitation. He or she is standing unwaveringly in the position of inclusiveness, welcoming fully and listening deeply to each participant's advocacy, in order for the spirit of critical inquiry to emerge. This stance, while evidenced in the facilitator interviews (Zubizarreta 2004, 2002) was not reflected in any of the existing theory of dialogue.

As described earlier, Burbules sees the facilitator of dialogue as needing to skillfully shift between the roles of inclusiveness and critical inquiry, in order to challenge participants without destroying the context of the relationship. His recommendation is somewhat sequential. He suggests that teachers wanting to facilitate dialogue focus more on inclusiveness at the beginning of a relationship, waiting to shift to a more critical stance until they sense that the timing is right for the relationship to be able to bear the weight of a “critical lens.”

Similarly, in Bohmian dialogue, the facilitator's role includes a balance between inclusiveness and encouraging participants to question their own assumptions. Critical inquiry emerges as participants are encouraged to suspend judgement and observe their own thought processes. In the related-yet-different process of skillful discussion, advocacy plays a greater role. The facilitator offers protocols designed to help participants learn to balance their own advocacy with inquiry, through the practices of

explaining their assumptions and using ladders of inference to make their reasoning explicit.

In contrast, in the Dynamic Facilitation approach facilitators do not shift from a position of radical inclusiveness at any point in the process, nor do they ask participants to do anything other than “be themselves”. Instead, the facilitator actively maintains an inclusive stance, empathizing with each participant, eliciting divergence by “protecting” each participant’s contribution and “creating space” for each divergent perspective to receive a full hearing.

The lack of models in the existing theory that “fit” this aspect of Dynamic Facilitation offered the creative impetus for the construction of the model described above. Still, what I have offered thus far is more descriptive than explanatory. The question remains: if the facilitator is not “balancing inclusiveness and critique”, and if he or she is not encouraging participants to balance “advocacy and inquiry”, how IS it that critical inquiry emerges? What is it that leads participant to re-examine their initial positions and arrive at greater shared understandings and practical, creative breakthroughs?

E. A 'natural approach' to language learning...

The breakthrough in my own conceptual understanding came as I read Pearce and Littlejohn’s work on the challenge of public discourse in situations of moral incommensurability (1997). Pearce and Littlejohn analyze the challenges encountered when participants’ world views are so different from one another that traditional forms of discourse only generate further animosity. They describe how difficult it can be to hear another person’s moral language when it differs from one’s own.

Pearce and Littlejohn posit the need for what they term “transcendent eloquence,” and use the metaphor of grammar to describe both the difficulty and the needed response:

“Moral conflict occurs when disputants are acting within incommensurate grammars.... In moral conflicts, new types of abilities are required... not just the ability to act skillfully within the context of one’s own grammar, but the ability to transcend one’s own grammar, to join the grammars of others, and to weave these grammars together.” (1997, p.55)

Pearce and Littlejohn’s use of grammar metaphor catalyzed the insight for which I was searching. From experience earlier in life as a language teacher, I know that humans do NOT need to be “taught” a grammar in order to learn a language. Even though, for many years, teaching grammar was the conventional approach for helping people learn a foreign language, we now know that there are other approaches that are at least equally effective, if not superior.

We know today that it is quite possible for humans to acquire a second language in the same way in which we acquire our first language – that is to say, by simply participating in a meaningful process, where we encounter new information in a friendly and

meaningful context (Krashen, 1989). This is in keeping with a larger constructivist perspective on learning, which recognizes an intrinsic "forward movement" in the human organism that naturally notices patterns, seeks to create meaning, and to question and make sense of conflicting information (Vygotsky, 1978)

Of course, our own schooling has conditioned us to believe that humans need to be "taught" in order to learn. Yet many educators question that approach, seeing their role as one of creating the conditions to support learning, including the creation of an atmosphere of safety and trust.

In a different arena, organization development practitioners may recognize these two distinct approaches to human learning as similar in many ways to the "Theory X" and "Theory Y" model of human behavior (McGregor, 1962). "Theory X" sees human beings as in need of external control, while "Theory Y" recognizes the potential for designing systems that support intrinsic motivation. Eisen (1985) offers one example of how McGregor's theories can be applied within an educational context.

Here, then, is a possible response to the question I posed earlier: How does the role of the facilitator in Dynamic Facilitation, a role that could be described as one of 'radical inclusivity' with regard to the participants, serve to evoke critical inquiry in the group?

It is the innate human capacity and desire for learning that allows participants to engage in questioning, re-evaluation of fixed beliefs, and creativity, while they struggle to make meaning out of the wide range of information which the facilitator has allowed to surface in the group context. The facilitator remains steadfast in his or her role of empathic inclusivity. He or she works hard to welcome and elicit divergence by listening to all advocates, faithfully recording all of their contributions in order to create an ongoing "mind map" of the various perspectives that are present in the room.

It is the wide diversity of perspectives present in the information itself, along with the open-ended nature of the process, which serves to challenge participants, stimulating the natural process of meaning-making. The facilitator need only trust the participants, and trust the process.

This not a blind trust, but a trust based on experience. The facilitator knows that, if the right conditions are created, the social construction of meaning will naturally emerge in a self-organizing manner. He or she works very hard to create that climate -- listening actively and passionately in order to create a climate of safety and respect; inviting and welcoming a full range of diverse perspectives to unfold; supporting and protecting the 'green shoots' of each participant's creative process.¹

¹ In some situations, significant perspectives may be missing in the room, and the facilitator may need to take on the role of inviting participants to bring those perspectives into the conversation, in order to support a dialogue. Still, this does not detract from the facilitator's supportive position vis-à-vis each individual participant.

It follows logically that in this approach, no “rules of grammar” need be “taught”, nor even made explicit. As participants witness the facilitator listening deeply to each participant, as they experience being heard deeply themselves, participants naturally begin to listen more to one another. As participants “overhear” the facilitator drawing out each participant, they have the opportunity to safely experience the value of hearing an unfamiliar perspective in greater depth. Soon, they themselves are spontaneously beginning to extend an invitation to one another, saying “tell me more,” upon encountering a challenging idea. Having experienced the generative potential of the creative tension inherent in divergent perspectives, they themselves begin to naturally welcome differences with curiosity and excitement rather than dread...

F. Revisiting our history: the work of Carl Rogers

When I initially began researching Dynamic Facilitation, I wondered if there might be a relevant connection between this approach to dialogue, and the work of Carl Rogers. After all, Rogers is renowned for his faith in the self-organizing process of the human organism (for example, 1977, 1983). Also, there seemed to be significant parallels between the role of the therapist in client-centered therapy (who offers primarily if not exclusively reflections back to the client), and the role of the facilitator in Dynamic Facilitation.

In reviewing the literature, I was initially excited to encounter references to work that Rogers did with large groups that were dealing with cross-cultural issues or seeking practical solutions to real-life problems.² However, reading some accounts of these gatherings, I was initially confused to find that there were significant differences between Rogers’ work and Dynamic Facilitation. Some of the differences may be due to the influences of the Tavistock and T-group traditions on Roger’s work with groups, since in these traditions the facilitator’s role is often quite reserved. Much like Bohmian dialogue, these approaches also assume an extended initial stage characterized by chaos and conflict. In Rogers’ work with groups, it seemed to be a “given” that the entire first day or so might be filled with unmodulated acrimony and frustration. Of course, by the end of the three-day gathering, the results often seemed well-worth it.

Yet on the basis of my own experience as well as the facilitator narratives, I found myself seriously questioning whether this initial assumption was indeed necessary. I wondered whether this long, extended period of frustration was due, at least in part, to the reserved role the facilitator generally plays in the encounter group tradition, especially in the beginning of the process. In turn, the way this role is conceptualized appears to be

² Rogers worked in Northern Ireland (Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1987, pp. 440-444) and South Africa. He also facilitated a meeting of the National Health Council (Rogers, 1977, pp.110-114) and the Rust conference of the conflict in Central America (Kirschenbaum and Henderson, 1989, pp. 257-277).

connected to the assumption that anxiety needs to be generated in the group in order for self-defeating patterns to emerge and be addressed (Shepard, 1965).³

It was not until I reviewed Rogers' work on facilitating learning environments that I found a closer resonance to the experiences described by the facilitators I interviewed. In "Freedom to Learn for the 80's" (1983), Rogers describes the role of the facilitative teacher in a way that fits both the relational emphasis of Burbules' work, as well as the themes in the facilitator narratives. Rogers' discussion of how to facilitate learning includes sections on "Realness in the Facilitator of Learning"; "Prizing, Acceptance, Trust"; "Empathic Understanding"; "A 'Puzzlement'"; "A Trust in the Human Organism"; and "Living The Uncertainty of Discovery" (pp. 121-145). The following quote from Rogers was originally intended for classroom teachers:

"When a facilitator creates, to an even modest degree, a classroom climate characterized by all that she can achieve of realness, prizing, and empathy; when she trusts the constructive tendency of the individual and the group; then she discovers that she has inaugurated an educational revolution. Learning of a different quality, proceeding at a different pace, with a greater degree of pervasiveness, occurs. Feelings –positive, negative, confused--- become a part of the classroom experience. Learning becomes life, and a very vital life at that. The student is on the way, sometimes excitedly, sometimes reluctantly, to becoming a learning, changing being." (1983, p. 128)

Here is the same quote, only substituting "group" instead of "classroom", "participant" instead of "student", and "organizational" instead of "educational":

"When a facilitator creates, to an even modest degree, a *group* climate characterized by all that she can achieve of realness, prizing, and empathy; when she trusts the constructive tendency of the individual and the group; then she discovers that she has inaugurated an *organizational* revolution. Learning of a different quality, proceeding at a different pace, with a greater degree of pervasiveness, occurs. Feelings –positive, negative, confused--- become a part of the *group* experience. Learning becomes life, and a very vital life at that. The *participant* is on the way, sometimes excitedly, sometimes reluctantly, to becoming a learning, changing being." (1983, p. 128)

³ There are both similarities and differences between the T-group tradition and Dynamic Facilitation. Briefly, the goal of "task group therapy" as defined by Clark (1970 a, p. 268) is "to help groups to construct and maintain social and technical *systems* which support their members' right to express their *individual* authentic being." This goal might be seen as very similar to the goal of Dynamic Facilitation, especially when used over time with a stable group as when first developed by Rough (1992). However, the means for achieving that goal appear to be significantly different: Dynamic Facilitation seems to utilize more of a "coaching" than a "therapy" model, although of course "coaching" does have therapeutic effects.

Rogers goes on to offer a quote from Sylvia Ashton Warner (Ashton-Warner, 1963, p. 93; as quoted in Rogers, 1983, p.129), which I have also paraphrased below, substituting “teacher” with “facilitator” and “student” with “participant”:

“the drive is no longer the *facilitator’s*, but the *participants’*; the *facilitator* is at last with the stream, and not against it, the stream of *participants’* inexorable creativeness.”

The narratives I gathered appear to confirm that it is not just children in a classroom who thrive on attentive and genuine caring (empathy), radical trust (unconditional positive regard), and congruence. Indeed, members of any group may benefit from active application of these conditions, regardless of their age. Furthermore, it may well be that Rogers’ classic “three conditions” for facilitating growth in the human organism (Kirschenbaum & Henderson, 1989), are quite sufficient for the emergence of creativity, understanding, and practical outcomes in a wide variety of group situations,⁴ including task groups and public participation projects. It appears that an active effort to offer empathy, unconditional positive regard, and authenticity from the beginning, in each interaction and with each participant, is not only doable but highly valuable, especially in situations of high conflict.

Interestingly, a few of the facilitators interviewed spontaneously offered comments explicitly highlighting the parallels between group facilitation and the facilitation of learning, including their own previous or current experiences as teachers. In response to the question “What are some of your successes as a facilitator?” one facilitator offered:

“I feel successful when I’ve been able to create a backdrop that people can use to make decisions. I used to be a teacher, and a teacher is always facilitating. I feel that I use facilitation even in one-on-one meetings with people. I try to get a person to reflect on what they really want, help them to get it out, to take their own ideas and turn it into something that they can actually use. I do this just by listening and asking pertinent questions, and I find that this helps the other person think through the problem on their own.”

In a way, I was relieved to find that the greatest parallels between Rogers’ work with groups and Dynamic Facilitation seem to be in the area of Rogers’ work on facilitating learning. While acknowledging feelings is a significant part of both learning and of group facilitation, it is clear that Dynamic Facilitation is NOT “group therapy,” but instead an effective way to help people learn how to engage creatively with difference.

⁴ Interestingly, Clark (1970 a) adds “confrontation” to Rogers’ three system conditions, which may be representative of the larger T-group tradition. Clark’s goal in task group therapy is to help a work group shift from “ineffective” and/or “routine” to “exciting and creative” (Clark 1970 b). In Dynamic Facilitation, it appears that this shift occurs as a result of the natural diversity present in a group, as surfaced through third-party listening, without any “confrontation” as such on the part of the facilitator nor the complex and delicately balanced therapeutic interventions described by Clark.

G. Where to from here...

There are many situations in life where a formal command of a 'communications grammar' may be quite desirable or indeed necessary. For example, it is certainly valuable for all of us to learn how to engage in 'skillful discussion' with one another. In most situations, where there is no "designated listener" present to hold the space, it is up to each one of us to skillfully balance our own advocacy with inquiry.

At the same time, it can be extremely valuable to have a dialogue process that welcomes participants to 'come as they are', with no previous training in communication skills, nor need to agree upon a particular set of communicative norms. It is particularly valuable when such an approach is designed to evoke creative solutions to practical problems, especially in situations of high conflict.

Dynamic Facilitation is one of a small handful of processes that I have found that are designed to serve this kind of purpose. Elsewhere, I have offered several illustrations of the approach in action, drawn from interviews with various practitioners of the method (Zubizarreta, 2004). In this paper, I have intentionally focused on more theoretical concerns. It is my hope that, by offering some grounds for understanding how this approach works, it can become more widely accessible to others.

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