

Book Review: Chris Blanter

Dialogic Organization Development: The Theory and Practice of Transformational Change

Gervase R. Bushe & Robert J. Marshak
editors.

Introduction and overview:

This substantial book examines the developments in the theory and practice of 'Dialogue' in the context of Organization Development and change. Overall it serves as a useful collation of the kinds of thinking and practice of organizational change predicated on the relatively recent stance that views organisations not so much as entities – like machines or organisms – or, in some cases, even systems – but rather as clusters of social interactions. Most of the contributors to this book interpret these interactions in the form of conversations – sometimes with broader perspective of 'discourse', often in the form of [dominant]'narratives' and often assisted with that 'multitool' of conversational devices - 'inquiry'. In other words, Dialogic OD, as illuminated here, focuses on how language-in-use in organisations gives rise to, sustains or changes possible co-ordinated meanings and possible co-operated actions.

As we shall see, it is important to grasp that the thinking supporting Dialogic OD is not about seeing interaction as communicating for 'discovering', 'explaining', 'understanding' or 'describing' the pre-existing 'laws' of organization; not about *the* organization existing as some separate backdrop to the every-day politics of getting things done – but rather as the fateful acts of organizing. Interaction – predominantly as conversation – is organizing; is the organization. It's not in the book but I often think about Richard Rorty's way of talking about this when I want to clarify the insight – either with others or with myself. Rorty said, when it comes to knowledge - 'We can never know what words nature would use to describe itself. We can only make distinctions in the world once we have programmed ourselves with a language' (Rorty, 1995). So knowledge of the world – including organisations – is brought about in our cultural, interactive goings-on. What proves consequential, legitimate, serviceable and durable is a matter of value-laden cultural-political encounters¹ of various kinds. This is a view that pulls the curtain on power in organisations – not only sharpening our traditional concerns for fairness and equality in work life – but revealing of our coactive parts in how power looms, is figured and sustained. There is no neutral place to stand (Blanter, 2010) outwith these political goings-on.

¹ proximal and distal

² The editors tend to use this term though I would prefer the 'post-structural' term.

Dialogic OD consciously recognises and promotes this shift from a straightforwardly observed, 'structured' view of organisation to one of continuous flows of conversation – that generates, conserves or constrains what can and does happen – from talking 'about' organising to talking 'for' organising.

The practice of Dialogic OD then shifts from using tools and devices to usher in idealized states and traits – to one of a highly self aware, or reflexive, appreciation that different forms of interaction – harnessed to people's aspirations can bring about and maintain more satisfying and transformational change. Of course the issue of 'whose aspirations?' and interests is one we will look at later in this review.

At the outset I should say that I do recommend this book. I believe it will be useful if you are interested in learning more about the assumptions we make about knowledge and if you want to get more of a feel for the sense of reflexivity and irony that positions language as action and tools for co-ordination in everyone's hands (so to speak) – rather than merely the means for conveying what experts say what we ought to know about nature's organizing rules.

It will be useful too, if you're interested in how to reconcile or develop your OD practice if you have a sense that this dialogic turn offers something more promising or worthwhile. There are many references to methods and devices for engaging people in processes of generative dialogic change – but, as the editors point out, this is not a handbook of tools. Rather it is a way of familiarising readers with the theoretical insights of 'post-modern'² organisational thinking [what the editors call a 'dialogic mind-set'] and how the practitioners here have worked with the principles to enrich their practice. So although you might find brief descriptions of methods inasmuch as they form part of a bigger story (there are lots of 'journeys' in this book) the value is in those wider ranging accounts of how people approach their practice – from how to position and introduce Dialogic OD in a particular engagement - through the clear importance of creating the conditions and moves for generative aspirations and images to emerge – to practical sketches like how to formulate engaging questions.

As Kevin Barge points out (Chapter 8) all OD is about collaborative dialogue – we can't do it without communicating with each other – so I was really intrigued to find out what these contributors are saying that a dialogic stance makes distinctive when it comes to helping organisations, or better – people performing organizing, when we are trying to help them to learn, develop and change.

The book does raise some issues for me though, particularly about the unchallenged dominance of conversation in contextual encounters as we account for meaning and action. There is, it seems to me, more to contextual meaning than inter-subjectivity. There is a need for some sort of account of what constitutes regularity of interaction in organisations. That is, what holds things in place and *seems like* structure. Perhaps

² The editors tend to use this term though I would prefer the 'post-structural' term.

most importantly, who benefits from this more collaborative and potentially emancipatory approach to making sense of OD? Who and what is it for?

Outline of the book:

The book is organised into 3 sections:-

The first section is untitled but consists of 4 introductory chapters – A ‘foreword’ [entitled ‘Forward’] by Edgar Schein – which purpose is presumably to add further gravitas or perhaps legitimacy by positioning Dialogic OD on the timeline of OD development. There are then 3 further introductory chapters from the editors *Introduction and Overview; Introduction to the Dialogic Organization Development Mindset; and Introduction to the Practice of Dialogic OD.*

....which introduce first - a significant distinction between what the editors call ‘diagnostic’ OD and ‘dialogic OD’ – a migration that forms the substance of the book.

Secondly, there’s an introduction to the 2 domains of theory deemed to provide the foundation for Dialogic OD. These are the insights of Social Constructionist sense-making and the propositions of Complex Adaptive Systems thinking and are interesting choices inasmuch as there are similarly supportive theoretical fields which are not referenced in the book.

The second section – ***Theoretical Bases of Dialogic Organizational Development*** Has 6 chapters offering more forensic explications of the theory (4 based on Social Constructionism and 2 on Complex Adaptive Systems.)

Section three - ***Practices of Dialogic Organization Development*** - offers 9 chapters in which ‘accomplished’ OD practitioners talk about what Dialogic OD means to them and how they apply it, together with, in most cases, stories or sketches of engagements they’ve been involved with. There’s a concluding chapter from the editors entitled *‘The Path Ahead’*.

A quick comment on the layout of the book: For me there is too much by the way of introduction and the book only begins to bite at Ch. 2 (p. 68 in my e-copy) which is, in fact, the 4th chapter in the book. However I’ve been practising what is being called ‘dialogic OD’ for many years so I do appreciate that others might need a more gradual introduction. Ch. 2 introduces ‘The Practice of Organization Development’ which, ironically for a book about organizing seems out of place and would be better introducing section 3 on practices of dialogic OD. Perhaps, in the spirit of a post-structural mind-set the book is designed to be read in any order (surely the reviewer is allowed even a poor joke?)? On a more serious note I can see that this may well serve as book, once read, to be pulled frequently from the shelf in response to

practical Dialogic OD questions like “what would I do if...?” or “what might Chris Corrigan or Nancy Southern³ have done here?”

The substantive content:

I have given more emphasis to sections 1 and 2 since they set the frame, significant orientation and tone of the book and its purposes.

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Dialogic Organization Development mindset

Gervase R. Bushe & Robert J. Marshak

This chapter establishes and reinforces the principal thrust of the book – to promote the importance of a different way of thinking about organisations and how they might change and develop.

The editors draw a distinction between a hitherto taken-for-granted lore of OD that they label ‘Diagnostic OD’ and the superseding approach of ‘Dialogic OD’. Diagnostic OD is predicated upon the unquestionable and idealised ‘healthy organisation’ as an open system that works best when its elements (mission, strategies, structures, systems, leadership, culture) are in alignment and responsive to prevailing environmental conditions and competitive threats or opportunities. However the Dialogic mindset *“assumes groups and organizations are self-organizing, socially constructed realities that are continuously created, sustained and changed through narratives, stories, images, symbols and conversations.”*

More, Bushe and Marshak make the point that ‘success’ isn’t just a matter of deploying the tools and devices forming the Dialogic repertoire (e.g. reflexive narrative/discourse and collaborative inquiry) because they can easily be used in the old diagnostic way – but that method (purpose, design and enactment?) are most useful when the dialogic way of thinking is behind it.

The authors list some key principles drawn from Social Constructionism and Complex Adaptive Theory and suggest 3 broad phases of dialogic process:

1. a disruption in the ongoing social construction of reality is stimulated or engaged in a way that leads to a more complex re-organization.
Organisations are viewed as natural complex systems stuck in patterns that need to be disrupted!
2. a change to one or more core narratives takes place
3. a generative image is introduced or surfaces that provides new and compelling alternatives for thinking and acting

³ Chris Corrigan and Nancy Southern are 2 of the contributors to the ‘practice’ section of the book

Comments:

This is an important shift when it comes to thinking about what makes organizations work. Migrating from the idealized notion of what we believe to be implicitly and unproblematically 'true' about organizing to a style which overtly acknowledges that organizing is a complex cultural negotiation is indeed challenging. Of course it is very challenging for people in organisations who hold or wield what we might know as institutional power and, because any dialogic practitioner needs to be sensitive to it, I wondered about the issues associated with the inevitable challenge to 'authority' that arises in making this shift.

Chapter 2: Introduction to the practice of Dialogic OD

Gervase R. Bushe & Robert J. Marshak

What kinds of things do Dialogic practitioners Do?

In this introductory chapter the editors map out three overlapping domains of activity:-

1. facilitating dialogic interactions (working in the moment to support, challenge or otherwise impact a person's or group's dialogic interactions - this is process facilitation from a dialogic perspective)
2. meeting and event design and facilitation (creating a dialogic structure and process to accomplish the purpose of a meeting)
3. strategic process design – SPD (creating a dialogic structure and processes for a series of meetings, and things that happen outside meetings, to support the purposes of change engagement)

So process consulting can be structured/episodic or immersive – each involving structured or opportunistic occasions primarily to displace existing limiting ways of talking (narratives, images, patterns etc.) with more promising imaginations (The 3rd section of the book includes examples of practice.)

There is a brief exploration of how organisations might be introduced to/engaged with Dialogic OD. The guiding theme is about creating processes for 'different' conversations which allow and promote different possibilities for action – whilst acknowledging the diversity of views, voices, interests, values, aspirations and purposes.

As a guide they offer a generic template for SPD – from helping sponsors to be clear about what they want to achieve (process not content) through how to nurture emergent change; identifying stakeholders (individual and groups), designing the process for the new conversations (self managed groups) to commitment to local actions

Comments:

This is a useful, orientating chapter in which the editors link styles of dialogic thinking to different potential ways of working with dialogic episodes, platforms and processes and where examples are provided in subsequent chapters.

I was struck by a sense emerging of the assumed exhaustive role of dialogue in meaning making and action. It seems to me that 'socially constructed' and 'meaning making' can be regarded as superficial references to much more complex cultural processes. Is the content of conversation the limit of social construction or what Dewey called acculturation? Here I started to wonder about functional forms of talk (Goffman, 1981) – like the different effects of commands or invitations or indeed forms of classification? I wondered too how cultural artefacts – physical and virtual - might fit in, how power is generated and enacted in interaction, how people are positioned (Harré, 1994; Fairclough, 1989) – and indeed social policing and expectations of performance/role/action arising in any social context (Goffman, 1982). In short it seems to me that there is more, a lot more, to meaning making and possibilities for action than is available in the frames of narrative and metaphor – important though they are. (see Chapter 17 Commentary on micro-practices).

THEORETICAL BASES FOR DIALOGIC ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT**Chapter 3: Social Constructionist Challenge to representational Knowledge: Implications for understanding Organization Change**

Frank J. Barrett

This is a useful and quite detailed view of the development of styles of thinking which led to positivism (objective realism) – in the Enlightenment through to Social Constructionism and the key role of seminal philosophers. It will be a familiar style of account for those who have followed the development of Social Constructionist thinking.

It traces the problems associated with assuming that creating knowledge was a matter of merely, properly observing phenomena – as if language and other cultural practices were simply not there – whilst relying on those same cultural practices to reason its validity and generality.

Barrett's account highlights the contribution of philosophers like Heidegger, Gadamer and Wittgenstein who have helped us to be more socially reflexive – that is, to come to see that the language we inherit and use produces knowledge; that knowledge production – and here it is knowledge in and of organizations - is both communal and holistic. We are busy inheriting, recreating and changing the world through interaction. Power, rather than truth, is central to fixing meaning.

The chapter is somewhat academic in style – for a book on OD – but for anyone wanting to have a substantive account of the 'linguistic' or 'post-structural' turn it is very helpful.

Comments:

Barret includes an appraisal of the role of Talcot Parsons⁴ in promoting ways of talking about organisations known as 'structural functionalism' – which held that although individuals could make decisions and make changes – these are always within the 'laws' of given systemic structures – which tend to prevail. Post-structuralism reinterprets those phenomena that generate regularity as collective cultural performances – rather than characteristics of 'the nature of things'. However there is an argument to suggest that the Social Constructionist 'school' sees no structural performance outside the conversation.

Chapter 4: Discourse and Dialogic Organizational Development

Robert J. Marshak, David Grant & Maurizio Floris

This is an important chapter in that, having been familiarised with the style of thinking that informs the Dialogic approach, it explores some of the implications for how we might think about organisational life. Hence it forms a platform for taking on the Dialogic OD approach.

The concept of 'discourse' is explored in a broad sense – the daily language used, organizational artefacts, conferences, books, narratives, metaphors, images, stories and routines are seen as 'texts' which characterise what some might call organisational culture. Texts are co-constructed in daily interactions – replete with their power relations. [see table 4.1]. Crucially, awareness of 'discourse', which of course would include that of OD, is extremely important for the OD practitioner⁵ in working with the insight and confidence to sustain the train of activities that helps people to generate new talk and texts – and their attendant new possibilities for action and relationship.

Comments:

There's an interesting and compelling comparison of the fundamental orientations of OD depending on our ontological discourses of organizing and the organization. If the organisation is a 'machine' – its parts are knowable and if broken – we fix it! If it's an 'organism' we can assess its stage of development, its wellness, diagnose ill-health and, with proper patient care, prescribe remedies. If it's like an unfolding conversation (in the broad discourse sense) we can migrate to more 'promising' (according to whom?) 'conversations', meaning and action. It's the Dialogic OD specialist's job to help generate and support this.

There is here, though, a further example of the struggle with inter-subjectivity and 'objectivity':-

"If an organization, however, is like an on-going conversation that

⁴ American sociologist who was influential in the early part of the 20th century

⁵ An OD practitioner might just as easily be a CEO or manager as an OD specialist or consultant.

continuously creates social reality for the participants then there are only dialogic processes and no independent, objective reality or material objects to diagnose.”

It might be argued that even though our grasp of our worlds is socially constructed there are, nevertheless, relatively durable states. Some-thing is at work that holds order, such as it is, in place from day to day – that even omnificent inter-subjective reflexivity does not easily shift.

People have different interests, turkey’s don’t vote for Christmas, our discourse communities police our conformity, there are huge differentials in power and resources, objects ‘expect’ to be used in certain ways, face-maintenance operates sub-cognitively, conversational utterances expect co-operation (e.g. it’s really difficult not to formulate some sort of ‘answer’ to a question), different forms of talk – commands, invitations judgements – have fairly predictable effects and responses, conversation positions people as significant/competent or marginal/incompetent in the ebb and flow of talk etc., etc.

All of these phenomena are arguably socially reproduced – but, importantly they endure long enough to create a ‘sense of structure’⁶(Giddens, 1998). There is something to be said then, for inquiry and analysis – perhaps enacted collaboratively – turned towards these facets of contexts. Indeed isn’t the relatively generalised preference for appreciative rather than judgemental forms of talk born of diagnosis?

Although this chapter does provide a springboard for a more diverse approach to Dialogic OD – i.e. beyond the ‘conversation’ I don’t think this diversity is thoroughly explored in the remainder of the book.

Chapter 5: Generative Imaging: Sourcing Novelty

Gervase R. Bushe and Jacob Storch

This chapter focuses on the totemic power of the generative and affirmative vision, image or aspiration. For example the metaphor of ‘sickness’ to account for 10-15% absenteeism – whereas more productive metaphors might be those associated with why people come to work (amplifies the positive and attractive).

Many OD practitioners have alighted upon the importance of this and indeed the propagation of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) says something of the power and arguably the value in shifting inquiry, conversation and possible action to interactions which value each others activity rather than negate it. Organisations have developed many sophisticated mechanisms for achieving the latter.

The chapter includes a brief discussion of the bifurcating schools of thought around AI – particularly in the USA. There are those who adhere to a pragmatic view of the world – consistent with David Cooperrider’s original thesis which acknowledges the richness of human expression and situatedness. It doesn’t shy away from that which

⁶ A socially constructed sense of structure – what Giddens named ‘structuration’

is challenging but seeks to uncover the generative and the value of what people do. This is compared with those who have a tendency to police AI as a manifesto for eschewing anything deemed problematic - akin to the acolytes of the infamous Positive Mental Attitude. I am aware, for example, of one organisation where AI was used by the CEO as a ready-made set of rules to inhibit discussion of concerns on his watch.

Comments:

Clearly it is important in the world of the discursive organisation to develop opportunities and encounters for making 'realistic' images of attractive futures possible. Of course what is 'realistic' is not a historical judgement – the more we talk about the attractive futures we want to achieve the more realistic they become.

Chapter 6: Complexity, Self Organization and Emergence

Peggy Holman

This chapter introduces the second strand of theory, in this book, into the Dialogic OD domain – that of Complexity, Chaos and the concepts of 'emergence' and 'self organization'. These approaches gave rise, in Holman's view, to an increasing confidence in self-organization in human systems and a realisation that it was possible to work with large groups of people without constantly having to preach and do order and control – that is order would emerge from within groups contrary to the prevailing wisdom that the job of leaders, managers and authoritarian figures is to impose order. Holman cites the birth of Future Search (Weisbord) and Open Space technology (Owen) as arising in this patterned stream of development.

The chapter also traces the work of Ralph Stacey and his recognition – closer to that of the Social Constructionists – that "human futures are under perpetual construction through interaction between human bodies in the living present".

Comments:

Although Holman is concerned to point out that theoreticians like Ralph Stacey⁷ have moved away from the concept of complex systems when it comes to accounting for social behaviour - seeing complex systems as a useful analogy, the chapter does conflate this view with that of renowned authors like Margaret Wheatley who still see the idea of some 'intent' in the system and a direct parallel between systemic notions in the natural sciences with human societies....

"There is, even among simple cells, an unerring recognition of the intent of the system, a deep relationship between individual activity and the whole."
(Wheatley, 1992, p.146)

To me this approach to making sense of organisational order is unnecessarily abstract and neither do I see it as a requirement for the development of a Dialogic mind-set predicated upon the use of language and the concepts of discourse. I prefer the 'local interactions' approach taken by Stacey in Chapter 7. Having said that I can

⁷ together with colleagues Patricia Shaw and Douglas Griffin.

appreciate that some people will find the route from Complexity and self-organisation – to Dialogue to be a useful one.

Chapter 7: Understanding Organisations as Complex Responsive Processes of Relating.

Ralph Stacey

Stacey leaves behind the appeal to the complexity of responsive processes of natural sciences when it comes to human interaction – save for seeing them as an analogy.

He talks about ‘patterns without design’ and refutes the idea that this the result of some special force that through self organisation will bring about ‘natural’ order. Rather he asserts...

“All of these interpretations completely miss the point. Self-organization simply means local interaction between agents. So there is no special force to unleash or harness and there is no free-for-all because all of the agents are constrained and enabled by the actions of the other agents. Instead of using this misunderstood term I will use the term local interaction”

Similarly ‘emergence’ - that things happen by chance is not so. Rather it is the idea that local inter-actions have effects and patterns emerge on a broader scale – but not because there is a blueprint or a plan.

These turn traditional OD on its head – from control and planning as central tenets to a recognition that organisations are webs of relationships. More - meaning is context dependent – all the details of which cannot be controlled or even known, certainly in advance.

For Stacey mind and society are different but inseparable domains of interaction...

“There are no autonomous human beings; individuals are quite obviously dependent on each other in an essential and fundamental way – society is the society of interdependent individuals.”

Comments:

Stacey’s contribution not only complements those who have come to dialogue through the linguistic route – but he also refers to power inasmuch as it arises in relationship. ‘We can achieve nothing on our own’ and we need others to enact what it is to be human – good and bad. He talks about power as facets of need, inclusion and exclusion. Stacey cites Foucault and the role of discipline or policing in society and organisations. How people are positioned in social relationships plays an important role in meaning-making, and how people account for their own experience and possible action. He points out that the development of the concept of leadership⁸ is merely a way of legitimising acts of institutional control. To be generative then - means moving beyond the [dialogic] norms, rituals and daily

⁸ A question for all OD practitioners is to consider “to what extent do we re-produce and reinforce the discourse of conventional ‘leadership’ – unknowingly?”

cultural expectations and must, in my view, involve facing up to and collaboratively inquiring into how power works in any given context.

Chapter 8: Consulting as Collaborative Inquiry

Kevin Barge

Kevin Barge begins looks at OD consulting from the point of view of collaborative inquiry. Taking a pragmatic view Barge recognises that all organizing acts are collaborative – in as much as people cooperate with expectations and required patterns of behaviour – whether with a sense of willingness or under duress. The issue is what kinds of collaboration can we hope to create. He highlights 4 modes of productive, collaborative conversations:-

Co-missioning – exploring different interests and sharing some sense of processes that will help us move forward.

Co-design – how can we move to something different? We own what we create.

Co-reflection – sharing in stepping back and asking ‘ what have we made?’ in two ways – ‘is the process working?’ and ‘what are we creating?’

Co-action – conversations designed to generate the possibility of new actions

Comments:

Barge looks in more detail at how communication can be designed and consciously appraised for the actions it performs and enables in the world. Refreshingly he attends to more conversational micro-practices like turn-taking and ‘face’ issues which can help to illuminate conversational restraints and anxieties. I would contend that Dialogic practice would benefit greatly from further development of such practices – like forms of talk, marginalisation, positioning etc.

PRACTICES OF DIALOGIC ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT

9. Enabling Change: The Skills of Dialogic OD – Jacob Storch

The author shares an example of a ‘strategic design process’ (see Ch. 2) of – where a cohort of legal consultants were helped through a process designed to shift their awareness and practice from being [legal] content led consultants to being more experience and process aware and skilful. The overall process took this form:- Coaching > Training > action learning projects in client organisations – all modelling Dialogic OD.

Interestingly one of the very few references to Action Learning is included here – as populating the strategy. There is no discussion anywhere in the book of what might distinguish ‘Dialogic’ Action Learning. (Boydell & Blanter, 2007)

10. Entering, Readiness and Contracting for Dialogic Organization

Development - Tova Averbuch

This is a story of an Open Space intervention. And the author asserts that system-large group interventions are most appropriate when there are urgent, complex challenges and 'a need for whole system alignment'. "Is there a burning question no-one has a good answer to?" In my view it may be easier to position Dialogic OD in these circumstances but this is not to be confused with 'when it might be most useful'. There is often fragmentation and marginalisation in organisations and Dialogic OD can be deployed to enable communities to blossom without the prerequisite for uniformity-through-control but rather allows variegated alignment.

11. Transformative Learning During Dialogic OD - Yabome Gilpin-Jackson

Yabome makes a link between Dialogic OD and Transformative Learning Theory which draws upon Constructivism and Humanistic Psychology. I maybe doing Yabome a disservice – but I did see this chapter as focussing primarily on the aggregation of individual psyches (collective constructivism rather than social constructionism). The chapter brings methodologies from Transformational Learning theory (not a bad thing) but I was left wondering what difference the linguistic and social contribution make.

"It [transformative learning] identifies the depth of personal work and development required of the Dialogic OD practitioner, as well as the client system, to journey through transformation. Dialogic transformation of thinking, being, and doing/acting through transformative learning processes has to occur in individuals and groups; only then, can the desired outcome of an organization-wide transformational change be attained."

12. Framing Inquiry: The Art of Engaging Great Questions - Nancy Southern

Nancy draws upon Social Constructionism and is interested in an 'appreciative' approach. She explores 5 domains of inquiry when working with groups

1. Informative – what's going on? What precipitates need for change?
2. Affirmative – what's our success? What makes us distinctive? How do we support each other to achieve this?
3. Critical – what indicates need for change?
4. Generative – what opportunities do we see, what useful metaphors embrace this. What conversations about the future excite us?
5. Strategic – what conditions will support change? What scenarios should we consider?

I like the way Nancy talks of encouraging people to 'carry questions around' rather than rushing to quick solutions. Making space for Dialogue that wouldn't otherwise happen is a key Dialogical insight.

13. Hosting and Holding Containers - Chris Corrigan

The metaphorical notion of the 'container' for dialogue after the work of William Isaacs, can be used to create a focus for the conditions for participation, trust, commitment and change and there is an exposition of the skills and devices a

facilitator or 'host' may develop and use to support this. Although the 'container' is reified in Chris's chapter he goes on to describe ways in which acting as if a container exists is helpful to mark off conversational territories, contexts and which help to protect expectations of different action.

14. From Them to Us: Working with Multiple Constituents in Dialogic OD - Ray Gordezky

This chapter focuses on the considerable value of 'convening multi-group dialogue'. Ray refers to Future Search, Open Space and World Café as examples of well known methods. The advantage of these forms of dialogue are, he asserts, that they broaden decision-making, help people to recognise the diversity of interests and views, as well as legitimising that diversity and helping to speed up the ways in which new Dialogic activity can make a difference.

"sustainable, transformative change is more likely to take place when a cross-section of constituents are engaged in learning, working and meaning making together"

Given the increasing potential for change initiative fatigue in organizations my own experience is that large group activities, managed with sensitivity, generate a lot of energy for trying new things. Gordezky unfolds his own approach to entering and managing multi-constituent engagements.

15. Amplifying Change: A 3-Phase Approach to Model, Nurture and Embed Ideas for Change - Michael Roehrig, Joachim Schwendenwein and Gervase R. Bushe

The authors "look at the follow-on steps for sustaining momentum for change generated by large group dialogic events like those described in the previous chapters. Sponsors, design teams and consultants have a tendency to focus so much on the events themselves that the necessary follow-on structures and processes often don't get the proper attention. "

There is a focus, as the title suggests, on a 3 phase approach in which appropriate 'activities', 'patterns of acceptance' and 'integration' are explored.

This is a very useful chapter for deriving a sense of the flow of any engagement and perhaps, developing the confidence to feel that any engagement is thorough enough.

16. Coaching From a Dialogic OD Paradigm - Chené Swart

This chapter focuses on the role of 'narrative' in realising the aspirations, identity and possibilities for action of the 'client'.

"Why do narratives matter? What is coaching within this understanding? How does narrative coaching work? How does narrative coaching fit in Dialogic OD? What are the outcomes of these collaborative coaching journeys? How is the world of the client or the client's relationship with the organisation influenced by these practices of coaching?"

This reflects a person-centred approach to coaching which I could not say differs greatly from a constructivist or radical humanist approach. However I very much liked the attention given to tuning into context and to allow the local cultural practices (including language-in-use) to form the ground of any questioning offered by the coach.

I did find the notion of an 'invitation to deconstruct power' in order to promote some sort of assured equality of exchange, although well intended, to be a little contrived and idealistic. The chapter is written from the perspective of very considerable conscientiousness and psychological and affective intimacy with the needs and aspirations of the client. Although Swart does talk about the relationship between the narrative journey of the individual and the disjuncture this can create with prevailing organization narratives – I was left wondering quite how this might be addressed.

17. Dialogic Process Consultation: Working Live - Joan Goppelt and Keith W. Ray
Commentary on Dialogic Process Consultation - Patricia Shaw

This is a very interesting chapter and unique in style in this book. The authors draw us into how they are working with a 'dialogic sensibility' by reproducing a dialogue – as in the script for a play. They and their clients are all players in the dialogue which is punctuated with reflexive passages on what they were trying to achieve, what they thought they were doing and why, what they noticed and what they thought other players, including their chief sponsor, were doing. This form of presentation enables the authors to point more specifically to turns in the conversation and to highlight 'micro-practices' of conversational moves – like recognising when utterances can have different possible meanings and consequences and exploring them, or letting go of responsibility to keep the conversation within controls of tidiness and pace, or deliberately slowing the conversation to 'explode' the meaning of abstract terms.

Then Patricia Shaw offers a commentary on the whole piece from the point of view of allowing spontaneity to live and reducing the temptation to try to control talk for more anticipated effects. She invokes the philosopher Hanna Arendt to highlight the fragility and unpredictability of the rippling effects of our actions.

It occurred to me that the function of 'discourse and narrative' is to act like a self sustaining, trawling net – causing us to notice or care about some effects more than others whilst providing the implicit, cohering rationale that invites and warrants 'congruent' actions. Narratives are essential pathways for participating in and generating social life – but we need to find ways of changing or making new paths, new narratives if we want to be in a different place.

Conclusion: The Path Ahead

Gervase R. Bushe & Robert J. Marshak

The editors final chapter attempts to draw together many of the books concepts, approaches and processes insights with a view to understanding their similarities and differences. The chapter also outlines the key considerations of process, situational conditions and practitioner skills for proceeding with Dialogic OD engagements. In a sense the chapter serves a warrant, in the eyes of the editors, for embarking upon Dialogic Organization Development. If you want a quick way to grasp what's involved then this chapter will help. Of course you would need to explore the fields of theory and practice it draws upon in the rest of the book to be satisfied.

Concluding Comments:

I think this is an important book and well worth the read. It makes a useful contribution to the aggregation of work that is beginning to help us unlearn what seem like hitherto limited and limiting ways of making sense of organizations. Nevertheless it left me with a few issues.

- First, the title of the book endorses that view of Social Constructionism which tends to see conversation as exhaustive of all notions of relational meaning.

"If an organization, however, is like an on-going conversation that continuously creates social reality for the participants then there are only dialogic processes and no independent, objective reality or material object to diagnose." (Ch. 4, Marshak, Grant & Floris)

"The important point to note is that in their relating to each other, people are not creating a 'thing' outside of their own interactions. All they are doing is forming further patterns of relating between themselves. There are no levels and there is no external position outside of ongoing interaction". (Ch. 7, Stacey)

Whilst I appreciate the purpose of emphasising the interaction as the generative source of meaning and knowledge, rather than objective entities like selves or worlds, this way of talking, this narrative, leaves one with the idea that there is nothing outside the interaction, nothing pre-existing that acts into the possible meanings and action in any particular context. We might take phenomena like time or economics; beauty or even free will or for that matter Dialogic OD to be socially constructed but they and constructions like them (including the organic and machine metaphors of organisation) still 'act into' (Latour, 1995) any given context. The legacy of Friedman's 'monetarism' still informs the UK Government's fiscal policies – affecting many organisations and individuals. The doctrine of racism has had terrible and tragic affects on the people of Charlestown (S.C.) as I write. The

very notions of narrative and discourse transcend ‘the situation’ but, of course, do not exhaust it.

Similarly objects, like words, develop meaning from the way they are used (Latour, Wittgenstein). We wouldn’t try to make sense of road traffic without taking into account the effect of traffic lights or road markings or architecture. Objects create expectations of performance (Blanter, 2014) and, in use, constitute context. Erving Goffman says something very similar about social rituals⁹ – the kinds of interactions that elicit expected performances. Once we know what kind of conversation we are in – we know how to go on often without thinking about it at all¹⁰. “Not so much every man (sic) has his moment – more – every moment has it’s man.” (Goffman, 1982). Embarrassment, ‘face’ (maintenance/saving) and stigmatisation too, play an important part in filtering what people will risk making public and what is kept private or for more intimate contexts ..and so on.

All of these notions and more have some sort of effect on the shape and direction of local interactions and, we might say constitute context. Whether we see these ‘actors’ as, in a sense external, yet temporary, performed objectivity – or as extensions of recursive subjectivity they offer something by way of accounting for ‘regularity’ of interaction in organisations as well as realising power. They have the effect of *seeming like* structure. So although there is some reference to the relevance of these micro practices¹¹ (Ch. 8, Barge; Ch. 17 Shaw) I would have liked to have seen them given more attention in the book. What, for example, would Action Learning look like if attention was a little less focussed on individual knowing and we could offer more by way of helping people to characterise real interactions?

- A great deal of organisational communication and meaning-making in today’s organisations occurs through the medium of telematic communications technology – conventional web or smart phone apps. Discourses and narratives inform both the design and process of applications, particularly functional example like project management and HR systems and E-Learning – many of which are predicated on traditional, expert driven, structural approaches. It would be useful to know of practice developments that are tackling these developments. Does the function of OD get involved in the design or procurement of such systems. In what ways can dialogic practices have an effect in these domains.

⁹ The ‘traffic rules of interaction’

¹⁰ most people who have acquired English as a first language know when to use ‘some’ and when to use ‘any’ in spoken sentences. Most of us have no idea of the rule! Use is determined in the ebb and flow of conversation invoked from a repertoire of historical practice.

¹¹ What Randall Collins calls micro-sociology.

- Regardless of the main premise of a Dialogic mind-set - that there are “no independent, objective reality or material objects to diagnose.” the book is, in the main, written in the style of an alternative or superseding truth – the truth about Dialogue. This may be OK – since we need to programme ourselves with certain forms of practical languages (discourses and narratives) in order to make distinctions in the world. However this may well leave the door open for other more positivistic notions of organisation – those that the book is saying are largely anachronistic and associated with the ‘diagnostic’ style of OD. This is how Ken Gergen addresses the issue in *Realities and Relationships* (1994)

“For the social epistemologist, in contrast, accounts of the world are embedded in social practices. Each account will render support to certain social practices and threaten others with extinction. Thus a critical question to be put to various accounts of the world is what kind of practices do they support. Do they enable us to live in ways we hold valuable or do they threaten these patterns. For the social epistemologist, a major question to be asked of, let us say, Skinnerian behavior theory, is not whether it is objectively valid; it is, rather if we adopt the theoretical language proposed in this domain, in what ways are our lives enriched or impoverished?”
(Gergen, 1994, p.130)

So this brings me to my final comment in the aura cast by Gergen’s last sentence. If we are to take on the Dialogic mantel then we must be concerned to face up to a rationale for doing so which does not invoke that which is being rejected – the structural, positivist view of the world. The relational, post-structural or constructionist approach reflexively asks of us something else. Whose lives are we trying to enrich and why? I do think a book of such importance which may well help to influence the direction of Organization Development could/should have asked some questions about why we want to make OD better. The editors remark on the democratic and humanistic ideals of OD’s origins and it would have been fitting for this book to have included some thought provoking insights and challenges to how those discourses and narratives which shape corporate social responsibility might be addressed. The book, by its own accounts, cannot be apolitical but it stops short of discussing the ways in which organisations might enrich our ordinary lives.

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