

Collective Dialogue (CD): Examining the Intersection of Personal and Professional

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Abstract

A Collective Dialogue group (CD) offers a place for interpreters to come together for input, guidance, learning, and scaffolding on challenges interpreters face both in the work place and in their lives, acknowledging that these have an impact on each other. A CD develops over time, as its members commit to a long-term analysis of their own and each other's perspectives on self-identified problems and struggles. The building of trust is necessary for the dialogue to generate new thinking and understanding, therefore the members of the group remain consistent throughout the life of the CD. It is essential as a CD is formed to have confidence in both individual and group commitment, because the time spent together builds greater capacity and strength for the group to function as a container able to hold and carry them in their exploration to frame problems and discover insights.

Passion for excellence in their own work and a desire to ensure that their profession grows in knowledge and wisdom are necessary foundations to engage in this type of dialogue. How individuals in the group talk about these things impacts their ability to understand and learn what others are thinking, what they think about each other's thinking, and what they might learn about their own thinking. CD offers an approach to dialogue that engages interpreters to fully participate in developing a deeper understanding of self and one another.

Keywords: dialogue

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History and Origins of CD

I first engaged as part of *the Master Class* workshop series with over two dozen experienced colleagues, a nine-month long series in Boston in 1996-97 facilitated by Betty Colonomos. We were all riding high on the excitement and energy driven by the activities and discussions of what it means to have mastery and how that compels us to be willing to examine issues in our own interpreting processes. Though all of us had been working as interpreters at least a decade, it was clear that each of us possessed unique strengths and weaknesses regarding the multiple tasks required in the process of interpreting. We had grappled with identifying approaches and strategies that would help us most effectively analyze the potential impact of these on our work, along with our own ability to learn more about tasks beyond our level of mastery. Most useful among the strategies used was the tool of Process Mediation, incorporating dialogic inquiry and reflection with a learner-centric process for self-discovery. This approach, developed by Betty Colonomos, emphasizes a Vygotskian approach that offers scaffolding opportunities to move a person through her 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD). In concept, a 'more knowledgeable other' provides 'other regulation' to the learner through inquiry and reflection of a self-identified cognitive task that she is ready to explore. Potentially, this may lead to greater awareness (and eventually mastery) of the task.

When the Master Class series ended, we hungered for more. Our own learning had stimulated a great deal of excitement. Approximately a dozen of us gathered for several more meetings, *Continuing the Conversation*. The group later convened with 6 of us, then again with 5, and finally a group of 4. For several years, we met approximately every six weeks, roughly

eight times a year. As our lives changed and members of our CD moved, we created alternate approaches to meeting together. More than a decade later, we four continue making time to travel to each others' homes to engage in talking about our challenges and experience as interpreters in an effort to discover and learn more about our own interpreting processes.

This group of four meets to engage in the practice of *Collective Dialogue* (CD) several times each year. The meetings typically start on a Friday night and continue until Sunday noon, with necessary breaks for eating and sleeping. Sharing meals and space with one another contributes greatly to the connections we've made individually and as a group. Over the past fifteen years, we have incorporated varying philosophies and theories into our meetings, influencing the group dynamic and creating agreements as to how we have these conversations together. We've searched for input, guidance, and scaffolding on challenges faced in the work place and in our lives, acknowledging that they do indeed have an impact each other. Our passion for excellence in our own work, in each other's work, and our desire to ensure that our profession grows in knowledge and wisdom, have all been pivotal guides to our dialogue. CD provides a container for defining how we talk about these things, which impacts our capacity to understand and learn more about what and how we and others think. That most essential piece of understanding- to know and articulate what we are thinking- allows us to help one another.

Bringing together the thoughts and values of four unique individuals and allowing us all to be supported in this process means that our dialogue must function within parameters that are ideal for fostering both group dynamics and individual transformation. In our search for resources to guide our dialogue, we made liberal application of William Isaacs' theories in his book, *Dialogue: the Art of Thinking Together*. Incorporating his work into CD proved to be an

essential tool for our dialogue sessions. We often witnessed and experienced transformations in understanding as individuals, yet we also saw frequent group-thinking shift to generative dialogue with the four of us co-creating an entirely new understanding of an issue. This creative energy would flow through our meetings until we were spent, exhausted, and yet renewed with excitement at the simple joy of learning and understanding for ourselves and one another.

As you read through this chapter, consider adopting the principles and values contained herein, incorporating them into meetings with a group of your fellow interpreters who are equally invested in their professional growth and understanding of the work we perform and the communities we serve. By participating in this process, you make yourself part of a Community of Practice ready to create positive change as we move our profession forward together.

Elements of Collective Dialogue

Guidelines and principles create the basis for building a ‘container’ that allow us to bring into dialogue our thoughts and the reasoning that lies behind them. Essential to a sustainable container are four skills; listening, suspending, voicing, and respecting.

Listening

The definition of *listening* here includes more than merely hearing or paying attention to what is being said. Listening includes quieting the responses in our heads that repeatedly put us in alignment or in conflict with the person speaking. Rather than give attention to such thoughts, a participant in CD listens in order to comprehend the ideas and flow of their colleague’s expressions. This may mean reflecting back what you think you’ve understood, or asking clarifying questions in your effort to understand, followed by continued listening. The task here is to listen in a way that builds understanding.

Suspending

When we listen to another describe a challenge being faced, we may identify with what is being said. But there are times we identify with a position that opposes what is presented. Listening in this context requires that we dis-identify with any position on the subject, instead listening without either resistance or support. Most of us have been trained throughout our education to listen with an intent to defend, which often leads to debate. The process of defensive posturing may include presenting factual rationale or advocacy of specific points of view, but rarely does this lead to a reframing of the problem, which could generate insights for all participants. Not knowing what another actually thinks is often where ignorance resides. This is why as we listen, we also need to *suspend* our point of view and instead explore the framework of the other's thinking. In order to gain perspective, insight, and understanding of another, we must essentially put our own perspectives on hold. When a person states something that we identify with or not, key to understanding that person's perspective is our willingness and ability to suspend what we believe to be obvious truth or fact.

Voicing

The act of expressing our own perspective on a matter also contributes to dialogue. Key to *voicing* our perspective is the reason for doing so, as well as when and how it is done. For example, in a discussion where someone has presented a point of view that awakens an oppositional response, suspending that response may be difficult. Listening to the rationale behind it may even be disturbing. Since the aim of listening is to understand the other, we may find ourselves no longer listening to their words but instead attending to our own thoughts as they compete for our attention. What to consider before voicing is how our thoughts and words

might contribute to an enhanced quality of meaning and understanding that we are creating together through collective dialogue. If we speak what is true for us, we may discover that genuine expressions have the power to create a greater potential to bring forth unfolding of thought, allowing for shared creation of understanding. Expressing our authentic voice on a subject may seem risky, especially when an opposing point of view has been shared. But incorporating the next element into CD ensures that voicing our expressions is done with each perspective being valued and honored.

Respecting

Respecting what another brings to CD drives us to listen so we can see the other as a whole person, wanting to comprehend how their experience has led them to their understanding. Listening with respect as another expresses opposing thoughts and beliefs requires we suspend our opposition in order to honor their learning and experience as legitimate, real, and unique to them. To respect others in dialogue means accepting that their experience and understanding are one part of the whole, which is true for us all. Knowing that such respect is a marked element of CD ensures that others will be mindful of responding to each other with the aim of understanding the entire person, be it you or me.

Building a Strong Container

The group of people participating in the practice of collective dialogue form a container that holds expressed collective thoughts. Each brings their full self to the container, though not necessarily sharing all of what is going on for them. Developing trust for this container to hold some of these unexpressed elements is dependent on all participants exercising the four major elements essential to the practice of dialogue. Beyond that, an expectation of confidentiality

resides as a cover to the container. What is shared here is done in the context of personal and professional growth with a group of peers. When something is offered, it is with the aim of finding enhanced meaning and understanding together. We are speaking to a common pool of meaning that we are creating together. The container is strengthened by these practices, but only to the extent that they are truly applied to the dialogue process.

There is a predictable cycle for the development of this container. It begins with an engaged politeness, listening to one another share. At some point in the course of meeting together over a period of time there is breakdown, as evidenced by defensive postures or even debate among participants. Through persistent application of the essential elements of dialogue, they have the opportunity to practice a more self-reflective approach to sharing. This in turn leads to a period of greater inquiry and reflective dialogue. As the container has endured some challenges, the eventual transition gives way to flow and generative dialogue. This ultimately is a transformation to acceptance and value of the whole, where the authenticity of what each participant brings to the collective dialogue is valued and honored.

Identifying the parameters of a group's dialogue sessions is an essential task that warrants repeated review and agreement. These parameters line the container in which members of the group deposit their goals and aspirations, struggles and achievements, failures and successes, both professional and personal. Sharing these intimate parts of our lives can be done safely within the confines of this container when it is recognized as a place to share without judgment. While participant application of the elements are the essential ingredients to creating the structure of the container, agreements function as the glue that holds it together. CD may include these types of agreements:

- Following a schedule (arrival, meal times, down time, and departure)
- Appreciation and support of host (food, lodging, contributions)
- Attention to check-ins (each sharing salient happenings, both personal and professional)
- Attention to specific agenda items documented and scheduled for discussion
- Observations collected about the group's process

Having an agenda adds structure to the time spent together, though balancing that structure with the flow of dialogue may require revision of agenda items' priority. Agenda items may include, but are certainly not limited to:

- Professional decisions faced or made, self-reflection
- Personal and professional struggles or conflicts
- Requests for scaffolding
- Group projects; workshop presentations, research, proposals
- Ideas generated about ways to create positive change in the field
- Recurring redefinition of the purpose of coming together
- Personal connection and history, follow-up on previous CD topics
- Ritual of coming together (observations about how the group talks together and requests for doing so differently)
- Practicing dialogue as a way to dialogue with others (role-play talking with a client, colleague, agency, etc)

It is the group, the collective part of Collective Dialogue, that determines the agreements and agenda items, bringing to one another a request to voice and a readiness to listen. They reach these agreements and talk about their agenda items through the dialogue part of Collective

Dialogue, doing so with respect and a willingness to suspend their own views to understand another and perhaps provide scaffolding along the way.

Summary

Bringing together the thoughts and values of several unique individuals and allowing for each to be supported in this process warrants participants recognize that the dialogue must function within parameters that are ideal for group relations as well as individual transformation. William Isaacs' book, *Dialogue: the Art of Thinking Together*, emphasizes the use of four essential tools; listening, respecting, voicing, and suspending. Understanding and applying these four elements begins with their theoretical exploration and continues with practical application through the practice of dialogue. What follows is a deepening of the practice may lead to greater awareness, continued reflection, and further dialogue.

Individual and group transformations may occur as understanding of perspectives is held collectively in the container of CD, strengthened by dialogic practices that result in full participation in the wholeness of conversations. At times that means facing differences in values or perspectives within the container. Learning the art of holding the container together as a group, speaking to its center, with individuals participating in its creation and sustainability, allows us to forge the capacity for deep and transformative listening as we talk about our work and where it intersects or collides with our personal lives.

This organic process relies on the history of interactions between the members of a CD. The existing openness between people is further enabled as we heighten awareness of our own and each other's thinking, fostering a space of inquiry where we can develop practices and

capabilities, continually challenging and reflecting upon the patterns of interaction where interpreters get stuck, react, or breakdown in the dialogue process. Learning to suspend the certainties and assumptions of self and others is essential in making collective dialogue a natural process of reflection and learning. In the end, the practice of dialogue is a way of being. Once the concepts are understood, the method becomes an experience of exploration and discovery.

References

Isaacs, W. (1999). *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*. New York: Doubleday

Appendix A

Betty Colonomos

Betty M. Colonomos, CSC, has provided extensive direction and support by adopting a Vygotskian approach to facilitating learning in workshops like The Master Class (Boston, MA 1996-97), The Etna Project (Etna, NH starting in 2002; Knoxville, MD starting in 2009), and her well-known workshop series, Foundations of Interpreting Series I-VIII (since the 1980's). There has been no research on the effectiveness of this approach with sign language interpreters, however the testimonials of participants in these workshops may provide a basis for qualitative research on the subject. Samples of comments from participants in the series can be found in the banners on the Foundations of Interpreting website, or in the Etna Project Yearbook.

- *Foundations of Interpreting* banners. Retrievable today, from <http://www.foundationsofinterpreting.com>
- *The Etna Project Yearbook* (2012). Retrievable today, from <http://www.etna-project.com/index.php/etna-series/about-us/yearbook>

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Appendix A

Application of Vygotsky

Based on the works of [L. S. Vygotsky](#) and others applying his theories to education,

Colonomos' approach is informed by these principles:

- learning occurs through productive activity
- mastery is achieved through guided dialogue (scaffolding)
- collaboration with peers and mentors in a safe environment facilitates this process
- cognition, emotion, and culture are interrelated and significantly impact learning

Our goal is to foster interpreting communities that wish to discuss their work and value growth, that respect each learner's zone of development, and that seek to provide the highest quality services to consumers.

To this end, a variety of holistic training approaches and formats are incorporated into the retreat schedule that recognize and honor the diversity of our communities.