

The Evolutionary Activist

A Series

Dialogue: The Key

DRAFT

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About the Series

The opportunity for inclusive, conscious participation in the evolution of our culture and society is still fairly new to humanity. Beginning about a century and a half ago, a growing wave has been visible, taking the form of individuals thinking in new ways, people challenging status quos, and progressive movements of many kinds. However, few people have recognized the deeper wave: a new stage of evolution on our planet. Even fewer have considered how we can learn to get ahead of the wave, to ride it, and even to help steer it in a direction more supportive of human development and a sustainable relationship with the environment.

The Evolutionary Activist is a series of booklets intended to help open a bit more widely the door to this opportunity for conscious evolution at the personal and community level. Each booklet in the series focuses on something we need to know, or be able to do, in order to actively and constructively participate in this process.

We don't know whether it is inevitable that we will make the shift from unconscious to conscious evolution, or whether it is something that depends entirely on some combination of effort and "luck." In either case, we do appear to have a choice.

Introduction

chat: from *chatter*, from Middle English *chateren, chiteren* (“to twitter, chatter, jabber,” probably echoing noises made by birds).

discussion: from *dis* + *cussion* (“to shake apart”); shares a root word with “percussion” and “concussion.”

deliberation: from the Latin *de* + *libere* (“to weigh out”); considering, weighing alternatives, negotiating.

debate: from the French *de* + *batir* (“to fight over”).

dialogue: from the Greek *dias* (through or flow) + *logos* (meaning or reason); “flow of meaning.”

Why start out with this root words exercise? Because it really helps to create a meaningful distinction between different forms of conversation. This booklet focuses on **dialogue** because while it is the most important kind of conversation to add to our experience if we are to move toward inclusive, conscious evolution of our culture and society. I do not mean to say that it is *more important* than chat or gossip, discussion, deliberation, or debate, all of which are vital:

- **Chat** (and **gossip**) keeps us woven together as social beings, in our families and our groups.
- **Discussion** brings things to our attention, things that need to be reflected upon or acted upon.
- **Deliberation** is something most of us have done as we consider different alternatives, although it may not have been formal or involved a lot of other people.
- **Debate** helps us surface different perspectives and learn together, ideally using conflict productively (but sometimes not).

Dialogue is the most glaringly absent form of conversation, particularly today. It has yet to really take its rightful and necessary place in the lives of most people, and that has to be addressed.

Defining Dialogue

For purposes of this booklet, I define dialogue as **meaningful conversation about important things**. This definition is not absolute, and it is certainly debatable. But it captures a lot of what's missing in the interaction among people in our society.

What is "meaningful conversation"?

What one person thinks is meaningful, another might consider meaningless. However, since meaning comes from context—the relationships that something has with things around it—it makes sense to define "meaningful conversation" as *conversation that creates relationship and builds understanding*. We all have a sense of what that kind of conversation feels like, even if we haven't consciously thought about it.

What are "important things"?

This is another subjective call, but I think we can probably agree that "important things" include things which have lasting consequences for our lives, and—when it comes to dialogue about common concerns and public issues—consequences for many aspects of many people's lives. That's the working definition I'm using.

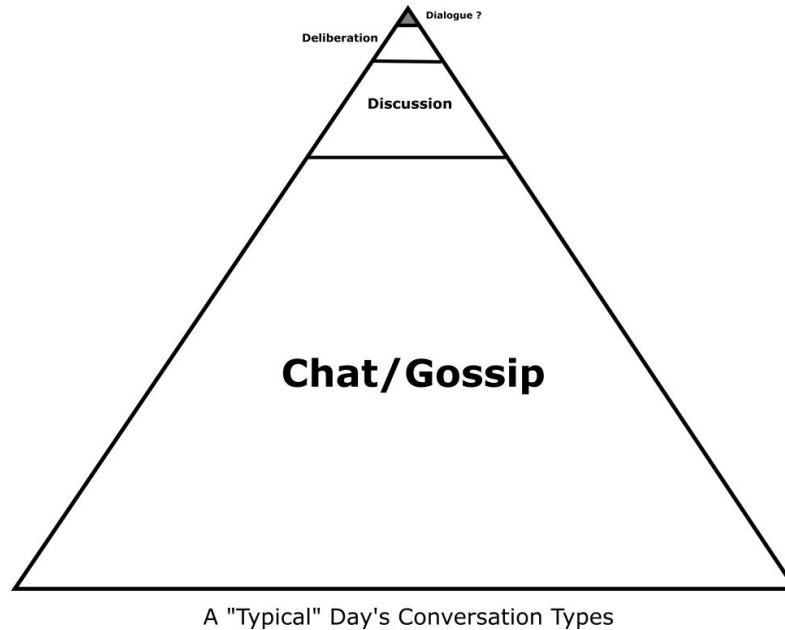
If we put the two parts together, then, **dialogue is conversation that creates relationship and builds understanding about things that have lasting consequences for many aspects of many people's lives.**

Dialogue: The Key to Everything Else

Since you chosen to read this booklet, you probably have some inkling of why a lack of dialogue in our lives and in our society is a problem. The following may seem obvious, but it needs to be said: if we can't engage in meaningful conversation about important things (i.e., engage in dialogue), we can't make a lot of progress. Without dialogue, we can't get to the roots of issues, we can't speak from and to the heart, we can't bring together diverse perspectives, nor fulfill the promise of democracy, nor design systems together, nor engage in conscious evolution together.

Generally speaking, it doesn't seem like we typically spend much of our conversation time on dialogue. To put it in visual terms, the image below is a hypothetical (and probably stereotypical) breakdown of the amount of time most

of us might spend on each type of conversation in a day. We obviously chat and gossip quite a lot. We do *discuss* things every day, which includes things like “did you do your homework?” and “those politicians on TV are all saying the same thing” etc. We *deliberate* a bit every day (sometimes with ourselves), from “what clothes should I wear” to “what should (or could) we have for dinner?” The portion that’s probably most exaggerated here is the fraction dedicated to dialogue.



Perhaps we don't *need* to engage in dialogue that often. But when we do need to—and as a society, we certainly need to—are we ready?

What is Dialogue Like?

How do you know if you're in dialogue, or a *dialogical* phase of a conversation, rather than other forms of conversation? Here are some indicators.

Intention

- The intention, at least for the moment, is to *understand* other people, gain a more shared understanding of issues of common interest, and to become aware of the assumptions behind things, including our own thinking.

Sound

- Quieter: One person is speaking at a time, and they're not yelling.

- More listening, less speaking.
- More asking, less telling.

Feel

- Initially a feeling of urgency to get an idea or opinion across, then more relaxed, less hurried, and without the pressure to convince.
- At different times, feelings could include discomfort, frustration, confusion, curiosity, excitement, satisfaction, elation, and more.
- Risky: Dialogue might involve risking ego and ideology, and feeling vulnerable.
- Reflective: People are asking themselves where a thought came from, or why they are reacting to something the way they are.

Look

- Circular: With more “equality” to the conversation, and given the need for people to see each other (assuming it is an in-person conversation), people in dialogue will tend to be organized as a circle rather than as an audience facing one direction.
- Size: Dialogue can take place in groups of any size. Some advocates of dialogue have observed that groups of 18-40 people are ideal for dialogue that straddles the boundary between the personal and the societal/cultural.

Different Kinds of Dialogue

Dialogue advocate Bela H. Banathy distinguished between two kinds of dialogue: **generative** dialogue and **strategic** dialogue. Generative dialogue is the kind that creates shared meaning around a topic, understanding of each other, perhaps increasing trust. It doesn't necessarily depend on or aim for agreement, other than agreement to listen. It sets the stage for the other kind of dialogue—the “strategic” kind—which does involve planning, strategizing, and coming to agreement on action.

Since people in our culture like to skip to the action part when it comes to serious issues, we see a lot more strategic dialogue than generative dialogue. “Enough jabbering – what are we going to *do*?” Perhaps men are more guilty of this than are women. Perhaps “Type A” personalities are more prone to this than “Type B”. In any event, skipping over generative dialogue is bad because it skips over the

questions Who are you? Why should I trust you? What is our relationship? What will it be? Why are we here talking? Why is this issue important to me, to you? What do we have in common? Why should we create in common? Generative dialogue creates the “glue” of community—even a temporary, situationally-specific community.

In practicality, these two broad kinds of dialogue would often be interwoven, and people don’t usually go “Okay, we’ve been in generative dialogue, and we’re going to switch to strategic dialogue.” But they could learn how to do that, and it might not be a bad thing to practice.

Obstacles to Dialogue

There are many things that have probably played a role in keeping dialogue an all-too-rare experience for most people. The following are some of the obstacles:

- **Our culture.** We have a culture that fails to recognize (implicitly or explicitly) that dialogue is not the same as other forms of conversation, that fails to recognize the need for and value of authentic dialogue, and that regards talk as inferior to “action”. This obstacle sets the stage for the other obstacles. But it can be overcome, which is really the point of this booklet and the point of evolutionary activism.
- **A culture that celebrates skills in debate but not skills in dialogue.** Schools have debate clubs, but not dialogue clubs. Candidates for office engage in debates to show who is better, but do not engage in dialogue to present and integrate different perspectives on issues.
- **Lack of opportunity.** If we don’t have opportunity, we can’t gain experience and practice, getting comfortable with and competent with something. Opportunity for dialogue can be rare in the home, in neighborhoods, in schools, in workplaces, places of worship, and other social circles—including the online social spaces that many of us use.
- **The absence of role models modeling dialogue.** This is also related to culture. If it is rare that we witness our “role models”—people whose behavior we learn from and copy—engaging in dialogue, then it is less likely we’ll pick up on it.
- **Negative or unsatisfying experiences with “dialogue.”** People who’ve experienced or attempted some form of “meaningful conversation about

important things” may have had negative experiences with it, such as “dialogue” that was actually debate; people who dominate group discussions; discussion that was supposed to lead to something and which led nowhere; too much of one mode of communication (usually too much verbal, not enough visual or movement); and dialogue in which not enough time was allowed to get to a satisfying step forward.

- **Fear of conflict.** Dialogue invites speaking perspectives that may differ from those of others. When we expect quick agreement on things, or are used to seeing people of different viewpoints just stick with their own “camps”, we see the difference as a problem rather than as fuel for learning and possibly for creating. Conflict is thus feared, and we like to just quit early and say “let’s agree to disagree.” Our culture confuses conflict (the confronting of differences with some need to reconcile them) with violence (the attempt to destroy difference). Ironically, the best way to overcome that confusion is through experience with dialogue.
- **Self-images** that make the thought of engaging in dialogue uncomfortable. For example, if someone thinks they’re not good at expressing themselves, or not assertive enough, or not smart enough, or too impatient, or too shy, or too sensitive, they might feel like avoiding dialogue. Some people might think that they are so smart and well-informed that they wouldn’t benefit from dialogue. People can recognize and move beyond these self-images through good experiences with dialogue.
- **Inaccurate or unreasonable images or expectations** about dialogue. It might be confused with debate. People might expect it to be immediately rewarding, when it takes time. Some may believe that it is a purely intellectual exercise, when it can be emotional as well. Some might assume, incorrectly, that they are expected required to speak in group dialogue.
- **Lack of integration of dialogue into formal decision-making, at every level.** From neighborhood associations and city halls to corporate board rooms, from statehouses to Congress and all the way up to the United Nations, little emphasis is placed on dialogue of the kind described here.
- **Social media.** Our reliance on social media tools for communication can be an obstacle to dialogue, in at least two ways:

- These tools are designed for convenience and for quick rewards to the brain, so they favor short and shallow messaging, not deep-dives into things, nor listening. When “important things” are discussed through through social media, the medium itself seems to limit the “Social I.Q.” of the interaction, often dragging it down to a low-quality “debate” or worse.
- Social media also tends to promote “silos” —clusters of “like-minded” people. That limits the opportunity that can be afforded by bringing diverse viewpoints together.

Getting Comfortable with, then Competent in, Dialogue

Getting comfortable with any kind of social practice requires experience, preferably positive experience. This is true of learning how to play with others, learning how to work with others in a job, learning how to solve conflicts, and learning how to be civically or politically engaged. Learning social practices often begins with just watching others. Then it might involve playing and rehearsing (this is a common way for children to learn, less so for adults).

Even before getting into any kind of real dialogue with other people, and in between opportunities for dialogue, people might start practicing a few key things, including:

- “Active listening,” which basically means listening to really understand, and showing that you’re listening by asking questions and putting things in your own words as a way of confirming understanding, rather than pretending to listen while waiting for a turn to say something.
- Practicing being aware of your initial reactions and asking yourself why you’re reacting that way.
- Practicing being aware of the sense of urgency to say something, and getting comfortable with having faith that your thought will find its place.
- Asking yourself what assumptions are behind an opinion that you hold.
- Imagining what it’s like to be someone else, someone with a different perspective.

Finding & Making Opportunities for Dialogue

Where can we find and make opportunities for dialogue for ourselves and for others?

- We could start by looking for opportunities in the **home**, where built-in diversity can be found between generations, genders, or just individuals. There is a need for sharing and for some kind of decision-making, and hopefully enough trust to set the stage. Meals are good opportunities—provided that a family eats together and takes the time. With busy lives, school, friends, and the pull of social media, it may require special efforts to carve out time for dialogue.
- **Schools** are an obvious place to create opportunities for dialogue. After all, they're supposed to be about learning, and schooling is usually a group experience. Dialogue should start with the youngest and continue all the way up through high school and college, taking different forms appropriate to each developmental level. Dialogue can be focused on anything from classroom management to students' reactions to fiction and art to understanding history, social issues, and scientific thought. For this to happen, however, teachers, schools, districts and entire school systems must recognize the need and the benefit, and they must be inclined to support critical thinking and communication skills vs. focusing solely on easily measurable "subject matter" knowledge.
- **Neighborhood** varies in its relevance to people. Sometimes it's little more than a place they reside in, and sometimes it's the center of their social life. Where neighborhood groups are active, their activity is often in response to a particular ultra-local problem like crime or traffic rather than on issues of culture and society. But the fact is that issues of common concern do arise at the neighborhood level, and these can be opportunities for dialogue. If it catches on, it could help make neighborhood more relevant to residents as a social context of greater possibility, enriching their lives.
- **Workplaces** can present opportunities for dialogue. The bigger they are, the more policies need to be made, and the more the need for problem-solving that could benefit from broad participation. Company or organization leaders and managers who want to arrive at better decisions could encourage dialogue as a way to really understand how employees see

things, help employees connect to (and even improve) the organization's mission, and solve problems. This, of course, assumes an open-mindedness and wisdom on the part of business owners. Where labor unions are active, dialogue between union leaders and ownership has been promoted for a long time, although in many cases, it may have been "bargaining" rather than dialogue that characterized the conversations.

- **Local government** can always do better in terms of sponsoring dialogue about issues and policies. Public engagement processes often take the form of surveys or brainstorming sessions rather than genuine dialogue. The bar that local officials need to meet is to provide for authentic, inclusive dialogue, and to really connect the dialogue to decision-making. (Too often, people are led to believe that their time and effort will make a difference, when the government has only been going through the motions of public engagement.)
- **Places of worship** that are based purely on "doctrine" might not encourage dialogue, but more progressive denominations, churches, synagogues, and mosques might be willing to go with more circular, questioning, "dialogical" approaches. "Sunday schools" could foster the attitudes and skills associated with dialogue for youth as well.
- **Issue study groups** like "Study Circles" have been organized for many years. Such groups start with background information sources and shared readings or guides prepared by an ostensibly unbiased source. This can be helpful where dialogue is oriented around a particular theme or issue that participants are not all equally familiar with.
- **Conflict resolution** is a major opportunity for dialogue. Some approaches to mediation, for example, focus on letting the parties to the conflict work out solutions themselves. This, in turn, usually requires some time spent in genuine dialogue as well as in negotiation. This kind of mediation is very different from "arbitration", where a third party listens to each side and then just renders a decision. Taking dialogue in conflict resolution to a higher level are projects like the Public Conversations Project, which brought together people over many meetings people holding opposing views on very polarized issues like abortion rights.

- **Social media** could be adapted to better support dialogue. Right now, social media are notoriously absent of quality dialogue. Unless the group is very close-knit, there is a lack of accountability and responsibility, so there is a lot of “trolling” activity in open groups. Social media also have a format that makes dialogue challenging:
 - Asynchronous (separated in time) comments makes turn-taking difficult.
 - Multiple threads can erupt, making it hard to following a single stream of exploration.
 - Being based mostly on the written word (augmented by “emoticons” and pictures), the absence of non-verbal cues (like facial expressions and body language) that we get in person reduces the richness and clarity of communication.

All of that said, social media *could* be adapted to raise the level of conversation to more closely approximate the spirit of dialogue. For example, if the participants in a given group, page, or thread were willing to adopt certain ground-rules, like (a) focusing on one thread at a time, (b) asking for clarification before responding, (c) pausing for thought, (d) taking turns, (e) avoiding personal criticisms and judgements, and (f) agreeing to ask themselves “Does what I’m about to type offer something new or constructive?”, then we could use social media in a more *dialogical* way.

“Pure” Dialogue

Worth special mention are **groups created specifically for the practice of dialogue**. The “gold standard” for dialogue might be what the physicist David Bohm advocated: groups of 18-40 who meet regularly to engage in purely generative dialogue—that is, without a particular agenda or topic other than dialogue itself and the practice of becoming aware of our own thoughts and assumptions, while at the same time creating a mirror into the wider culture. The recommended group size is based on the experience of psychologists—most notably Patrick de Mare—who observed that small groups get stuck with interpersonal dynamics, while the medium-sized group (what they called a *median group*) has a kind of critical mass that helps break free of that.

Another thing observed about the “median dialogue group” is that it often begins with a painful period of adjustment to the lack of structure. When people get through that stage, they really get into the flow of dialogue, and a kind of “impersonal fellowship” emerges. From that point on, the group can explore a wide variety of topics, learn to reflect on assumptions, etc. with greater ease.

While this type of dialogue group has been talked about for several decades, it doesn’t appear that many have been organized and sustained. Clearly it could be challenging to get them going and keep them going, for many of the reasons that dialogue is too rare in our society. That said, it seems definitely worth trying, and some thought might be put into how to attract and keep participants. For example, a less strictly generative form of dialogue might attract more participation and be more sustainable. The group could focus on themes or issues and consciously alternative between more generative-style dialogue and more strategic dialogue, aimed at exploring solutions to problems, or creating shared visions.

Another thing that a dialogue group could do to remain relevant and attractive is to make sure that different forms of expression are invited, so that it isn’t just people in a circle talking. These alternative forms might include story-telling, art, photography, film, music, poetry, and drama.

Summary

- Conversation comes in different forms, the most common being informal chat and gossip, followed by discussion, debate, deliberation, and dialogue. It is helpful to distinguish dialogue as a special kind of conversation that builds reflectiveness, insight, shared understanding, and trust.
- It is helpful to think of dialogue as being of two general types: *generative*, which is more about understanding and reflection, and *strategic*, which is more about agreement, planning, and decision-making.
- The practice of dialogue—particularly the generative type—is relatively rare in our society compared to other forms of conversation.
- Dialogue is critical if we are to learn from each other, solve problems together, create shared visions, live democratically, understand existing systems and design new ones, and engage in the conscious evolution of culture and society in a participatory way.

- Our culture presently does not encourage dialogue or cultivate comfort with and competence in dialogue; in fact, our culture presents many obstacles to dialogue.
- We need to encourage dialogue and help people of all ages gain experience with and competence in dialogue. This can happen in many contexts, including homes, schools, neighborhoods, local government, workplaces and places of worship, and via social media.

Reflection Activities

- Over the course of a few days in your life, for each time you are in some kind of conversation (whether live, face-to-face, or in writing or online), ask yourself, “what kind of conversation is this?” Write the answer down.
- Think of a real-life example where people skipping over “generative” dialogue and going straight to the “strategic” kind might be a mistake.

Connection to Other Booklets in the Series

- Surfacing Assumptions (Booklet #)
- Fostering Readiness for Participatory Design (Booklet #)
- Fostering Readiness for Democracy (Booklet #)
- Vision and Idealization (Booklet #)