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Introducing Dialogue to Graduate Students

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Abstract Scholars and practitioners in adult education commonly agree on the importance of communication and interaction in the adult classroom. Frequently, however, learners are not provided with guidelines on how to interact and communicate with others in such settings. This paper reports on an experiential orientation to the practice of dialogue for adults in a graduate program.

Introduction

An environment that supports learner-centered instruction, which views learners as partners in the learning endeavor while addressing their needs and interests, is regularly championed as the most effective way to teach adults. An ideal adult learning climate has a non-threatening, nonjudgmental atmosphere in which adults have permission to, and are expected to, share in the responsibility for their learning (Imel, 1994). In particular, a core element of a successful and supportive adult classroom is meaningful and effective communication among learners and between learners and instructor. Nevertheless, such meaningful communication is often absent or much less effective than it might be. Some researchers believe that problems in classroom communication are due to an educational system that promotes teacher-centered instruction versus learner-centered instruction (Bransford et al, 2000). Other researchers maintain that instructor practices often lessen the likelihood of meaningful communication in classrooms. For example, Gibbs (1992) posits that instructors' questions are often not about drawing out a learner's opinions on a specific topic, nor in general about negotiating an understanding with a learner, but rather to check whether the learner has taken on board the understanding that is prescribed by the instructor or the curriculum. Such practices encourage learners to expect to be told more than they expect to discuss, and to seek only definitive answers to those questions that they do raise.

Given such conditioning, and the accompanying lack of communication skills, it is necessary to provide learners (and instructors) with principles and strategies for classroom communication and discussion. Numerous writers (Knowles, 1998, Merriam and Cafarella, 1991, Vella, 1994) have prescribed principles and approaches for promoting communication and interaction among adult learners. Others have focused on prescribing detailed prescriptions to develop such skills. For example, Ngeow and Kong (2003) describe four discussion strategies (guided, inquiry-based, reflective, exploratory) to generate meaningful and effective interaction among learners. This paper reports on an intervention where one particular approach to communication--dialogue as defined by Peter Senge--developed primarily for use by workplace teams, was introduced to a diverse group of learners in a graduate program. Research on team communication and performance has indicated that the experience of "sharing" (defined as taking part in discussion) is a significant predictor of team performance (Fisher, Macrosson & Yusuff, 1996). It was hoped that education in the skills of dialogue would similarly enhance individual and group performance and satisfaction among a group of graduate students.

Purpose

What began as a class assignment, evolved into an intervention whose purpose was to improve communication among students and between students and instructor in a graduate course. More specifically, the goal was to allow learners to experience one particular approach to communication--dialogue as defined by Peter Senge--and to encourage learners to use this approach subsequently as needed in the course.

Setting

The setting was a graduate course in human performance technology (HPT), a field of endeavor which attempts to bring about changes in performance in a system by changing the performances of individuals within the system (Stolovitch & Keeps, 1992). Human Performance Technologists take a systemic approach to performance analysis and change, looking not only at the effects of the performances of individual members but also how individual performances interact within a system. Human Performance Technology is based on the principles and practices of psychologists, instructional technologists, training designers, organizational developers, and various human resource specialists.

Participants

There were 18 participants enrolled in the course, including African American and Caucasian men and women, with ages ranging from early 20's to late 50's. All students held full-time positions and were attending graduate school at night. Some students were enrolled in a masters program and were new to graduate education. Others were enrolled in a doctoral program and had already completed a masters program. However, at the time the course was offered, human performance technology was an emerging field of practice and all students came to the course with little prior knowledge in this content area.

The Practice of Dialogue

Senge describes dialogue as "the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine 'thinking together'" (p. 10). He further goes on to define dialogue as "the free and creative exploration of complex and subtle issues, a deep 'listening' to one another and suspending of one's own views" (p. 237). A dialogue experience allows a free-flowing of ideas among members of a group, allowing the group to discover insights not attainable individually. Dialogue differs from discussion in that in discussion one is presenting ideas back and forth with the goal of coming to agreement or conclusion, while in dialogue the goal is to experience the process of deep listening and communicating rather than the outcome of a decision.

Introducing Dialogue

A 90 minute experiential session was used to introduce participants to the skill of dialogue. Prior to the beginning of the session, an open physical environment was created: tables and chairs were moved aside and blankets placed on the floor for participants to sit in a circle where everyone could see each other. In addition, lights were dimmed, soothing music was played, and aromatherapy candles were used to promote a relaxed setting. Large posters with words such as "relax", "slow down", "enjoy", and "take it easy", were placed around the room for everyone to see. A few toys such as jacks, cars and "silly putty" were placed in the middle of the circle for people to play with, to promote relaxation, and to shift participants away from their usual task-oriented mindsets. The overall goal was to create a relaxed, peaceful setting, one in which participants would feel comfortable and calm, and open to participating in the dialogue experience.

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At the beginning of the session, participants were welcomed and presented with the following set of behaviors (adapted from [Senge, 1994](#)) which each individual was asked to follow in order to increase the chances of an enhanced dialogue experience for themselves and the others in the group:

1. Speak to the "center" of the group. Do not focus your eyes or words on one person, but to the entire group when speaking.
2. Speak from the "I". Use words like "My experience is ..." or "The thought that comes to me is ..."
3. Allow silence of at least five seconds between speakers.
4. Allow other people's words to sit without rebuttal or judgment or embellishment.
5. Receive and digest the observations and feelings of others without analyzing or judging (negatively or positively) or fixing.
6. Speak only when you feel compelled. If it has been said, it does not need to be said again. You can state "I feel the same way ..." or "I agree with what was said ..." instead of repeating the words.

In addition, given the crucial role that listening plays during a dialogue session, the group was also presented with the following nine steps on how to listen during dialogue (adapted from [Senge, 1994](#)):

1. Stop talking, to others and to yourself. You can't listen if you are talking.
2. Imagine the other person's viewpoint. Picture yourself in her position, doing her work, facing her problems, using her language, and having her values.
3. Look, act, and be interested.
4. Observe nonverbal behavior, like body language, to glean meanings beyond what is said to you.
5. Don't interrupt. Sit still past your tolerance level.
6. Listen between the lines, for implicit meanings as well as explicit ones.
7. When speaking during dialogue, speak respectfully regardless of whether you agree or not. Resist the temptation to jump in with an evaluative, critical, or disparaging comment at the moment a remark is uttered.
8. If there is lack of understanding of what was said, rephrase ideas at key points in the dialogue.
9. Stop talking. This is first and last, because all other techniques of listening depend on it.

These guidelines and steps were printed on two large tent cards and placed in the middle of the circle so that they were visible to all participants throughout the dialogue process. In addition, the two facilitators deliberately chose to read out the guidelines and steps slowly and carefully. In addition to having the group become familiar with these guidelines and steps, the intent was to have each group member begin to slow their minds and bodies down in preparation for the upcoming dialogue session. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and gain clarification before moving on.

"Checking-in" and Introducing the Dialogue Topic

The dialogue experience began with "checking-in", a process where each participant beginning with the facilitators was given the opportunity (but was not required) to express their thoughts and feelings regarding the dialogue session in which they were about to participate. A "koosh" ball (a soft, small ball used indoors) was used to facilitate the checking in process: participants held the "koosh" ball while they were checking in and, during that time, no one else was permitted to speak. When a participant had finished speaking, the "koosh" ball was passed to the next person in the circle, who could then speak, or if they chose not to express their thoughts, could pass the "koosh" ball to the person next to them. The "koosh" ball circled the room until each participant had the opportunity to

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share their thoughts out loud. The facilitators then provided the group with the topic about which they would use to conduct the dialogue session. The following scenario was presented to the group:

Imagine you work for an urban university and sit on a committee who has to make a decision about hiring a Caucasian woman, an African-American man or a Caucasian man who all hold equal credentials for the position. Your department head decides that before a decision could be made, everyone has to put his/her ideas about affirmative action "on the table." We will begin with the statement: "My thoughts and feelings about affirmative action are...."

The facilitators reiterated to the group that the goal of the dialogue process was neither to make a decision nor for participants to attempt to convince others of their opinions. Rather, the goal was to listen to each other, to learn what others' points of view were, and to reflect both on what was said and on what was not said. Participants were informed that they would have 45 minutes for the dialogue activity, and that the facilitators would serve as timekeepers. A stop watch was set for 45 minutes with a warning beep to go off when 5 minutes left in the session to let the group know that the dialogue session was coming to an end. The facilitators once again asked if there were any questions of need for clarification and upon answering all questions, moved on to the dialogue activity.

The Dialogue Activity

The facilitators were the first ones to complete the "My thoughts and feelings about affirmative action are ..." statement. One facilitator spoke first, finishing the sentence and communicating his thoughts and feelings on affirmative action. When finished, the other silently waited five seconds, then held up her hands indicating she wanted the "koosh" ball. Once she had it in her hands, she affirmed what he said and then expressed her thoughts. When the second facilitator was finished, the group had an opportunity to speak, and the facilitators waited for someone to indicate they wanted the "koosh" ball and the floor. Once the first member of the group, other than the two facilitators, took the "koosh" ball to speak, the session began. Approximately five minutes into the dialogue session, a rhythm of communication developed. As the dialogue session continued, there were times when the desire to participate was so great that the "koosh" ball was flying around the room. At other times, there was complete silence in the group. There were moments when participants pointed to the guidelines and steps on the tent cards in the middle of the room, silently reminding others of what was needed to be done in order to continue the dialogue process. The facilitators adopted the role of observers while the rest of the group experienced dialogue.

Ending the Dialogue Activity and "Checking-out"

With five minutes left in the session, the facilitators indicated that it was time to wrap up the dialogue session and proceed to "checking out." Those who wanted to speak one last time motioned for the "koosh" ball, but for the most part, the group sat in quiet reflection of what they had just experienced. When the five minutes were up, a facilitator motioned for the "koosh" ball, and reminded the participants that "checking out" followed the same rules as "checking in": Those who chose to speak could, while those who chose not to could simply pass the "koosh" ball to the person next to them. Each person was reminded to speak only about his or her experience of the dialogue session. All participants chose to participate in the checking-out activity.

Recommendations for Implementing Dialogue

By the end of the session, everyone in the circle had participated at least once, some speaking in the class for the very first time. During the remainder of the semester, a significant shift appeared to take place in the group while it worked on the rest of the course requirements. Behavioral changes, such as deeper listening, inquiry and reflection were observed. Based on their experience implementing the dialogue experience, the authors suggest the following recommendations to others wishing to implement this experience:

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1. Choose a topic that will promote thinking and feeling among the participants. The ideal topic is one that cannot be answered with a "yes" or "no" response and about which there are many viewpoints.
2. "Checking-in" and "checking-out" are imperative for the success of the dialogue session. Taking the pulse to see where all are in the beginning is important, but the "checking-out" process allows participants an opportunity to reflect on the experience before leaving the room. These cannot be omitted and facilitators must add at least 4 minutes total per participant for these activities to the total time of the dialogue session. Note that we allowed 90 minutes, only 45 of which was actual "dialoging".
3. Have a note taker for the "checking-in" and "checking out" process. After this initial session, a note taker has subsequently been used to capture on flipchart paper where the participants are in the beginning of the session and where they are at the end. Participants are often amazed to see the emotional shifts that have taken place during these dialogue sessions.
4. Time keeping is essential. Have a stopwatch keeping time for the entire session and use it to give a five minute warning for when the session is over.
5. To allow enough time for all to speak, no more than 20 participants in a group is recommended for a 90 minute session.
6. The room set-up described is recommended. Providing a welcoming, calm environment encourages participants to take risks in participating in dialogue.
7. Two facilitators are recommended due to the nature of the depth of the dialogue session and for modeling the desired behavior.
8. Take the time to explain the guidelines for dialogue and steps to listening. Never assume they are self explanatory.
9. The use of a "koosh" ball is imperative. This tool forces an unspoken control and respect for others to be heard in the room.

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