

What We May Learn in a Dialogue?

Marja-Liisa Kakkuri-Knuuttila

PHOM 2018

Introduction

Learning is the pronounced main aim of the Bohm-Senge dialogue, by which I mean the dialogue form developed by the quantum physicist David Bohm and further pursued by Peter Senge together with his coworkers (Bohm 1996, Senge 1990/2006, Senge et al. 1994, Isaacs 1999). As these dialogue scholars emphasize, one of the learning goals is to improve one's understanding of one's own thinking and hidden mental models, those of the others, and about the world (Isaacs 2001, 140, Senge 2006, 230-231). They also underline the urgent need to improve our understanding of the system nature of reality, obviously including both natural and social reality (Bohm 1965, Senge 2006, 57-67, 221-232, 249-252). The aim of this paper is to analyse in more detail than usual the different types of learning that may take place during such dialogical encounters.

The emphasis on holism and systems is a clear departure from the empiricist philosophical heritage, however, I would like to push the departure a bit further towards the hermeneutic dimension. Meanings are not left aside, and yet, the focus of analysis appears to be on causal systems. This is evidenced, for instance, by Senge's elaboration of various kinds of systems in the appendix of his *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization* (Senge 2006). To give room for meanings, we may distinguish three kinds of systems, meaning systems, causal systems, and mixtures of both. To understand the social sphere, the mutual relations of the meaning systems and causal systems needs to be clarified.

To put it in simple terms, causal social relations are mediated by meanings, and causal systems are reproduced by meaning systems. As social constructivists emphasize, what people think and believe either explicitly or tacitly has an impact on how they act in particular situations.¹ This insight is, obviously, also implied in the dialogue authors' interest in generating shared meanings, expanding our limited mental models, and correcting false ones. We know, for instance, that two persons may use the same words and similar sentences to express their beliefs, but the agreement can be merely apparent if they attach different meanings to these words. Even though they share, for instance, the view that organizational culture has an important impact on the quality of the organization's products and services, this may lead them to support different action measures if their views on what organizational culture and quality vary to pertinent extent.² How shared meanings are brought about and how mental models become more sophisticated in an actual dialogue, I would like to dig into by analysing some cases drawn from actual dialogues.

The methodological approach of the empirical part of this study is explorative. The purpose is to analyse what kind of learning results the chosen dialogue cases exemplify. Since meanings are prior to causal relations, I'm particularly interested in the clarification of meanings and the creation of shared meanings. It is exciting to see how disagreement or agreement is expressed so that the researcher can identify them to sufficient extent. It would, of course, be naïve to expect complete agreement on meanings. But, clearly, there are situations where we can distinguish whether people attach different or similar meanings to certain words, and how these attachments change. I'm also interested in improvement of conceptions of causal relations that may arise during the dialogue encounters. These interests I find valid even though consensus need not be the aim of each dialogue session (Bohm 1996, Senge 2006).

The examples to be analysed will be drawn from my daily life, dialogue textbooks and (hopefully) from discussions with persons who have a long history of acting as facilitators in dialogue sessions of various kinds. The example cases need not be completely authentic, as such, but may be filtered by the memory of the person who participated in the situation and told the story, sometimes inspired by questions of the present researcher. No video material will be used, since the purpose of this study is not to reach ethnographic detail, but rather some initial logical classifications.

¹ In his classic work *The Ideal of Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (1958) Peter Winch argues that social reality is constituted by meaning relations. Relying on the (false) empiricist notion of causation he argues against the possibility of causal relations in social reality (Winch 1958, 72, 94-95, 110, Kakkuri-Knuuttila 2006, 69-77, Kakkuri-Knuuttila and Vaara 2005).

² This is one of the points Winch to argue against causal relations in the social reality (Winch 1958, Kakkuri-Knuuttila 2006).

The basic theoretical categories guiding the analysis are, as already described, meanings, change and clarification of meanings, views on causal relations and their specification and correction. The significance of emotions in dialogue will also be discussed. Agreement and disagreement will be guiding perspectives. It needs to be added that we can hardly expect the results of a dialogue to expose itself without following the discussion process itself, how the participants react to each other's utterances, and how they interpret them. As we are to seek after possible points of consensus and the lack of them, it may be useful to keep in mind the protocols for consensus searching dialogues offered in Senge et al. (1994, 256-259). To give more substance to the examples, these protocols will be augmented by further protocols to the facilitator to support consensus formation. These further protocols are based on the Aristotelian conception of theory generation by building synthesis on the basis of existing mutually conflicting views (Owen 1961, Nussbaum 1986, Kakkuri-Knuuttila and Vaara 2007, Mäkinen and Kakkuri-Knuuttila 2013).

Most of the examples will be analysed by two persons, the present author and Kai Alhanen who has more than ten years' experience in working with both theoretical and practical aspects of dialogue. Among his publications are the books *John Deweyn kokemusfilosofia (Philosophy of Experience in John Dewey)*, in Finnish, 2013) and *Dialogi demokratiassa (Dialogue in Democracy)*, in Finnish, 2016). The analysis will then be joint work by us two, instead of us working separately to test possible points of dissent. This method has been chosen not merely because it's more fun, but also because of the benefits such dialogical approach offers. Like in other dialogical situations, participants with different backgrounds and experiences inspire each other to observe more of the numerous details even a most simple piece of communication consists of. Joint work also enhances the identification of various perspectives the participants of the case dialogue may have. Final responsibility of the interpretations of the cases will be, as usual, with the present author. Those examples that are cited in full, though translated, offer the reader the possibility to challenge the given readings.

Since this is a pioneering work, there exist no ready theoretical frameworks to be tested for adequacy. It would be great to reach some classifications, but this is hardly possible in the room available in a scientific paper. At any rate the results of this investigation will be tentative. The cases to be analysed are chosen more or less on subjective ground, and represent situations which we find interesting and illustrative of some important aspect of dialogical encounters on the basis of our knowledge and experience.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section will offer a basic description of the Bohm-Senge understood as a social practice quidded by certain rules. I shall begin with three main rules discussed both by Bohm (1996) and Senge (2006), and augment them with another seven rules which I have identified as characteristic of the dialogue. These ten rules are not meant to yield a complete list of guidelines for the Bohm-Senge dialogue, neither are they meant to be the only way of describing activities and attitudes that define that kind of dialogue. To gain an insight into the complex ways that the term ‘meaning’ is used, I shall analyse the ways Isaacs talks about meanings in his *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together* (1999). To argue against the – what I find – over-optimism concerning the trustworthiness of our intuitions, I shall discuss two cases that reveal the importance of checking whether mutual understanding is reached about emotions. The underlying target of my criticism is the Platonic ideal of supreme knowledge as intuitive insight of the unity of truth, goodness, and beauty explicitly advocated by Isaacs (Isaacs 1999, 310-317). The next section will discuss Isaacs’ conception of three different ‘languages’ that may complicate mutual understanding in dialogue, namely, language of action/power, language of feeling, and language of meaning. While Isaacs offers no tools for creating a unified language, I shall discuss how these three languages can be conceptually tied together from the perspective of human action. I shall offer some examples to illustrate how this may happen in the dialogue practice. Some further examples will vindicate that Isaacs’ three languages is not the only division but, of equal practical importance, is the division of languages of everyday life and expertise. ...The final section offers some concluding remarks about what we may learn from this study for dialogue practice.