

Combining Passions and Abilities: Toward Dialogic Virtuosity

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ABSTRACT

After three years of a city-wide public dialogue process, things were happening that the participants felt could not have happened earlier. As we explored what had changed since the inception of the process, we developed the concept of "dialogic virtuosity." This concept sensitized us to differences among ways that other scholars and practitioners use the term "dialogue". While they had made sharp distinctions between dialogue and other forms of communication (debate, discussion, and deliberation), we had to invent a vocabulary for distinguishing among various flavors of dialogue. Using a conceptualization of virtuosity, we explored the "grand passions" that motivate dialogic practitioners, made "perspicacious distinctions" among these flavors of dialogue, and described the "abilities needed" to engage in dialogue. We conclude by suggesting that dialogic practitioners need the abilities to create and maintain a charmed loop among one's self, the interpersonal relationships among members of the group, and the unfolding episode. This concept of a charmed loop offers a way of understanding some of the differences among the various flavors of dialogic practice and descriptions.

"Virtuoso: A person who excels in the technique of doing something, especially singing or playing music" -- Oxford American Dictionary (1980)

"Virtuosity" is what results when people follow their passions to know something well and to perform skillfully. Although it is typically associated with the performing arts, there are virtuosos in every form of human endeavor. Take, for example, seasoned mariners who read tide tables and weather reports with an intensity that those who have never reefed a mainsail in a storm might fail to appreciate. Being able to read the water to prepare for a header, interpret symbols on a navigation chart and follow the guidance of buoys and lights are aspects of a sailor's virtuosity that one would want with white water ahead.

Virtuosity in any field combines at least three things: (a) a "grand passion" for what you are doing, whether sailing, cooking, enjoying fine wines, learning the etymology of a word, playing chess or bridge; (b) an ability to make perspicacious

distinctions (e.g., when sailing, knowing the differences among tacking, jibing, falling off, and heading up); and (c) the ability to engage in skilled performance (e.g., actually being able to tack, jibe, fall off, head up, stand on course, chart a course, and pick up a mooring).

We became interested in the metaphor of virtuosity as practitioners involved in a multiyear action research project enabling a city to deal more effectively with sensitive and controversial issues. While debriefing a very successful public dialogue meeting on October 15, 1998 (see Spano, 2001, for details), several of the residents of the city who had worked as small group facilitators noted that what had occurred on this night could not have happened earlier in the project. They spoke both of their own skills and of the "readiness" of the community. As we explored our curiosity about what had changed that enabled this remarkable event, we began to use the term "dialogic virtuosity" as a way of naming what these facilitators and the community had now that they did not have three years previously.

We ran into unexpected difficulty as we tried to develop this concept. "Dialogue" has been a very fertile concept in both the academic and the management literatures, and we found that we resonate more with some parts of these literatures than with others. Our perception is that there are important and insufficiently described differences in the concepts and practices currently named as "dialogue." Some of the differences are intellectual, owing to different conceptual groundings; while others are practical, responding to the differences in the contexts in which various people work and their positions within those contexts. Because they are inadequately inscribed, we find it difficult to discern whether these distinctions constitute different forms of practice or result from adaptations to specific contexts. In an attempt to enhance our own virtuosity in dialogue, we set ourselves to give a close reading of some texts that practitioners would agree are examples or descriptions of dialogue.

As we reflected on our own work, we realized that we have acted on a set of assumptions that many other practitioners and theorists would not affirm or would want to qualify in important ways. The assumptions that guided our work can be stated like this: (a) Dialogue is a form of communication with specific "rules" that distinguish it from other forms. (b) Among the effects of these rules are communication patterns that enable people to speak so that others can and will listen, and to listen so that others can and will speak. (c) Participating in this form of communication requires a set of abilities, the most important of which is remaining in the tension between holding your own perspective, being profoundly open to others who are unlike you, and enabling others to act similarly. (d) These abilities are learnable, teachable, and contagious. (e) There are at least three levels of these abilities, including the abilities to respond to another's invitation to engage in dialogue, to extend an invitation to another to engage in dialogue, and to construct contexts that are conducive to dialogue. (f) Skilled facilitators can construct contexts sufficiently conducive to dialogue so that participants are enabled to engage in dialogue in ways they would not without the work of the facilitator.

Our most troubling initial "finding" was that we did not have an adequate vocabulary for naming how beliefs and practices in dialogue are similar to and different from others. We noted that the writings of Martin Buber figured more prominently in our work than in that of some other people, and that some of the things that others said and did fell jarringly on our ears. We suspected that our talk and actions might seem equally

off-key to other dialogic practitioners. Just as we would doubt the virtuosity of a sailor who cannot distinguish a sloop from a dingy or a musician who cannot differentiate jazz from classical, our inability to name and distinguish among the various traditions of practice in dialogue signaled our lack of virtuosity.

Our own passions about dialogue prompted us to ask questions such as these. What vocabulary helps us identify and differentiate dialogue from other forms of communication, and to distinguish some forms of dialogue from others? How do we name the skills that distinguish competent practitioners from those who are clumsy or unsophisticated? What are the similarities and differences among various theorists, practitioners, and traditions of practice? What are the effects of these differences? We explored these questions using the metaphor of a dialogic virtuoso who combines grand passions, makes perspicacious distinctions, and engages in skilled performance.

Grand Passions for Dialogue

Practitioners tell many stories about their affinity for dialogue. Some expound a grand vision of life as it should be; others refer to a particularly captivating experience that pulls them again and again; and still others tell of having developed an aversion to nondialogic forms of communication and seeking to explore alternatives. Like all virtuosos, there is something both of compulsion and fascination in what we call the grand passions of dialogic virtuosity.

The descriptions of these passions are often powerful and sometimes poetic. Over thirty years ago, Matson and Montague (1967, p. 5) described "dialogue" as the "unfinished third revolution" in communication theory. Those promoting this revolution, whatever their primary professional discourse, are motivated by a vision that "the end of human communication is not to *command* but to *commune*; and that knowledge of the highest order (whether of the world, of oneself, or of the other) is to be sought and found not through detachment but through connection, not by objectivity but by intersubjectivity, not in a state of estranged aloofness but in something resembling an act of love" (Matson & Montague, 1967, p. 6).

For Martin Buber, dialogue is a primary form of relationship, without which human life is incomplete. The primary words of our being in the world -- "I-thou" and "I-it" -- are "combined" words in which neither component is complete without the other. These primary words "do not signify things, but they intimate relations" (Buber, 1958, p. 4). The "I" of "I-thou" is different from the "I" of "I-it." Buber thought that social life was distorted toward a preponderance of I-it relations and emphasized what is involved in a "genuine meeting" with the "other" to whom we relate as a "thou." He said that "all real living is in meeting" (Buber, 1958, p. 11).

Others see dialogue as a means of bringing about social change. Yankelovich is quoted on the Public Agenda website (www.publicagenda.org) as saying that when done "skillfully," dialogue produces extraordinarily important things: "mistrust overcome, mutual understanding achieved, visions shaped and grounded in shared purpose...new common ground discovered...bonds of community strengthened." However, one of the "most serious vulnerabilities" of "our American culture," he added, is "a surprising amateurishness in doing dialogue." We need both will and skill to overcome the "dialogue deficit" (Yankelovich, 1999). Saunders (1999) reported successes in using "sustained dialogue" as the way to transform relationships and thus deal with racial and ethnic conflicts. Pearce (1993, pp. 62, 71) claimed that dialogue should be the form, not

the content, of the "meta-narrative in postmodern society" in which we can engage with each other as "others" -- not only other-than-us but others who are not like us.

Other dialogic virtuosos are compelled by the memory and/or anticipation of what Cissna and Anderson (1998, p. 74) called "dialogic moments." In these moments, the "dialogic partners" share an experience of "inventive surprise...as each "turns toward" the other and both mutually perceive the impact of each other's turning. It is a brief interlude of focused awareness and acceptance of otherness and difference that somehow simultaneously transcends the perception of difference itself." In a presentation at the International Communication Association convention in May, 1999, John Stewart described teaching experiences in which he and his colleague Karen Zediker experienced moments of "letting the other happen to me while holding my own ground." The quality of these moments compels specific directions in the development of both theory and curriculum.¹ "Dialogic process," according to McNamee and Gergen (1999, p. 5) has "two transformative functions: first, in transforming the interlocutors' understanding of the action in question...and second, in altering the relations among the interlocutors themselves."

Making Perspicacious Distinctions

Just as musicians can listen to a few bars of music and immediately discern whether it is rap, swing, rhythm and blues, classical, or jazz, many of us have been trying to learn how to discern among various kinds of conversations. In a letter (undated) enclosed with the first issue of Global Dialogue, editor Paul Theodoulou said that this new journal will "strive to initiate dialogue, presenting both sides of a given topic by setting up a debate between thinkers of differing or opposed views." Many of us would want to distinguish between dialogue and debate and would think that creating a context in which issues have two sides and thinkers are identified by their mutual oppositions is more likely to create debate rather than dialogue (Roth et al., 1992). Contrasting it with "discussion," Ellinor and Gerard (1998, p. 21), described dialogue as "seeing the whole rather than breaking it into parts; seeing connections rather than distinctions; inquiring into assumptions rather than justifying or defending them; learning through inquiry and disclosure rather than persuading, selling or telling; and creating shared meanings rather than gaining agreement on one meaning."

One move toward dialogic virtuosity is that of distinguishing dialogue from its counterparts (e.g., debate, discussion, deliberation). However, a second move requires the development of a more sophisticated language in which the differences among the various flavors or forms of dialogue itself can be described. Three things have hindered the development of such a vocabulary for those of us pursuing our passion for dialogue: the fluidity of communication; the rapidity with which traditions of practice have developed; and the disconnect between theorists and practitioners.

Stewart (1994, p. xiii) described the essential fluidity of communication, noting that we "still lack a simple vocabulary in which to discuss this collaborative, negotiated, transactional, relational set of realities." Every proposed vocabulary, including our suggestion of "dialogic virtuosity," carries with it unwanted connotations and imprisons an emergent, fluid, shape-changing process in too-rigid cases. Those of us who struggle to describe communication clearly find ourselves wanting to add the phrase "...and that's not quite it" as a universal suffix to our statements (see the discussion of "mystery" in Pearce, 1989, pp. 77-87).

The disconnect between practitioners and theorists is partly a function of differences in the pace of events in their forms of life. The lag-time between completion of an article or book and its publication often spans several important developments in a tradition of practice. As a result, practitioners seldom find scholarly publications current and scholars are frustrated by the fluidity of traditions of practice. Over thirty years ago, Matson and Montague (1967, p. 5) noted that "The concept of 'dialogue' ... has already begun to suffer the inevitable fate of fashionable acceptance -- that of dilution and distortion." Even if we call it "inventiveness and development" rather than "dilution and distortion," it is clear that practitioners (who seldom cite scholarly references in their work) adapt their practices with far more alacrity than theorists (for whom scholarly references are their work) adapt their theories.

We are confronted by a profound conundrum. The more accurately we represent the current state of practice, the more we have produced a description with a short lifespan. Usually, an attempt to describe "current" practices is obsolete before it is published.

As a result, our efforts to interpret various texts should not be seen as an accurate description so much as the development of a language permitting description and differentiation of various forms of dialogic practice. In what follows, we make a number of comparisons and contrasts. Of course, we are not neutral in this process, but our purpose is to contribute to a language capable of perspicacious contrasts, not simply sorting out what we like or agree with from what we do not.

Distinctions among Concepts of Dialogue

Because the texts are more readily available, there has been more work focusing on describing academic concepts of dialogue than traditions of dialogic practice. Concepts have been compared on four characteristics: descriptive vs. prescriptive stances, instrumentality, time, and agency.

In his comments at the 1999 ICA convention, Stewart distinguished between descriptive accounts of all communication that show it to be dialogical and prescriptive accounts that point to particular and desirable qualities that set "dialogue" off from other forms of communication. Stewart cited Bakhtin and various proponents of social constructionism as exemplars of the descriptive stance because they argue that all communication, whether it acknowledges it or not, is contingent, emergent, and responsive. Exemplars of the prescriptive stance are Martin Buber and David Bohm, both of whom describe characteristics of communication that are not always present and towards which we should strive.

Dialogic practitioners are sharply divided about the instrumentality of dialogue. Some see dialogue as an autonomous goal in itself while others see it as a means to other ends. A contributor to an organizational development listserv who said "NO kind of decision-making is appropriate for dialogic treatment, since when the purpose is decision-making, the communication is not dialogue" expressed the end-in-itself position forcefully. Isaacs (1999) seems to have a more instrumental goal in mind. Other practitioners focus on dialogue as a practical means of transforming relationships. Even though it is not itself a means of decision-making or negotiation, good things happen when relationships are improved (Yankelovich, 1999; Saunders, 1999). In our work in a city, we found that many of our collaborators want to see specific outcomes rather than, as they put it, "just talk," and we are intentionally "using" dialogue as a way of increasing

the city's capability to deal productively with difficult issues. Bruce Hyde captured both of these concepts when, on another dialogue-oriented listserv, he distinguished between dialogue¹, which he defined as technique-driven forms of active listening and decision-making, and dialogue², in which dialogue itself -- deliberate, reflexively-aware collective thinking -- is the goal.²

Cissna and Anderson (1998, p. 67) called attention to temporal duration of dialogue. They asked, "Is dialogue an unattainable ideal that never occurs, as some skeptics fear, or is it a common or regular state of relationships, an occasional transcendent quality, or a technique available as often as one wants or needs it?" For the most part, they answer, scholarly "treatments of dialogue as other than an unattainable ideal tend to assume that it is a relatively ongoing state." In contrast to this view, Cissna and Anderson (1998, p. 67) suggest that "occasions of dialogue are often quite ephemeral and fleeting... dialogue exists in moments."

We applaud Cissna and Anderson's attention to the temporal dimension of dialogue, and want to posit another point on the continuum. Drawing from our own theoretical work (Pearce, 1994, chapter 4), we would add "episodes" as a temporal unit longer than an "ephemeral and fleeting... moment" and shorter than an "ongoing state." The concept of dialogic episodes intersects somewhat differently with the characteristics of agency and of instrumentality than does the concept of dialogue as momentary. Examples of dialogic episodes include the work of practitioners in the tradition of the MIT school who will "do a dialogue," by which they mean a relatively short (perhaps a couple of hours) communication event that is described as a "container" for a certain quality of communication. Our own work features public and private meetings that last for several hours as part of a multiyear project whose dominant characteristic is dialogic communication.

We are using the term "agency" to mark the differences between thinking of dialogue as something that happens to us or as something that we make happen. Every theorist and practitioner that we know would recoil from the notion that any one of us can make dialogue happen. Whatever else dialogue is, it is emergent, relational, and contingent. But this only sharpens the question of to what extent we, individually and/or collectively, can deliberately call dialogue into being or whether we have to wait and hope for it to happen. Clearly, there is general agreement that dialogue occurs between extremes of an all-powerful and a powerless agent. This carefully nuanced description might stand as a consensual statement:

Human dialogue does not just happen...but neither can dialogue be planned, pronounced, or willed. Where we find dialogue, we find people who are open to it, people who do not renounce it cynically, but no expert technicians can merchandise or guarantee this relational quality.

Therefore, dialogue thrives at the margins of human agency--those ill-defined situations in which we imagine we are somewhat in control but in which our plans surprisingly can blend into the unexpected...Dialogue, which cannot be mandated, rarely happens accidentally either. (Anderson, Cissna, & Arnett, 1994, p. xxi)

We believe that there are some important and yet-to-be articulated differences within this general consensus. For example, in our perception, practitioners are generally more confident of their ability to call dialogue into being in specific situations than are

theorists. (Of course they are! How else could practitioners do their work!) In addition, those who believe that dialogue is episodic or ongoing are generally more attentive to specific aspects of skillful performance than those who see dialogue as occurring in fleeting moments or as a culture-wide ideal.

Distinctions Among Traditions of Practice in Dialogue

Three conversational fragments are listed below. In each, we have italicized phrases used by a dialogic practitioner that some other practitioners will find inconsistent with their deep grammar about dialogue.

The director of a county's homelessness agency told us of a phone call.

"I'm coming to the area for a conference, and I want to do some *pro bono* work. If you'd like, *I'll do a dialogue for you.*" Puzzled by the phrase "do a dialogue," our colleague asked, "What do you want me to do?" "Just arrange a room and bring the people together," came the reply, "I'll do the rest."

A lively conversation on a listserv of organizational development practitioners interested in dialogue focused for many days and many turns over the question of whether expressing disagreement causes us to *fall out of dialogue and into discussion or even debate.*

In the same listserv, one person wrote (names deleted): "The approach X described in response to Y's inquiry sounds terrific and yet previously he said he was frustrated with the results he was getting. I'm wondering why the results are not yet as he envisions. (Sorry if this inquiry sounds indirect but *I was trying to ask the question dialogically rather than as a direct question to X.* But X please answer if inspired.)"

The italicized phrases mark as yet unnamed disjunctures between traditions of practice in dialogue. Within one or some traditions of practice, asking a direct question or expressing disagreement are considered things that one should not or cannot do "in" dialogue. However, in other traditions of practice, disagreement and direct questions are central features and the emphasis is on how to do them dialogically.

We believe that the three conversational excerpts above are consistent with the deep grammar of the largest and best-known tradition of practice, that stemming from the MIT Dialogue Project. The Project founder and director, William Isaacs (1994, p. 353), said that the origin of "dialogue" is "two Greek roots, *dia* (meaning "through" or "with each other") and *logos* (meaning "the word"). It has been suggested that this word carries a sense of 'meaning flowing through.'" For Isaacs, dialogue is "the art of thinking together" (this phrase is from the title of Isaacs' 1999 book). In this tradition, dialogue is defined as "a sustained collective inquiry into everyday experience and what we take for granted" (Isaacs, 1994, p. 353). The problem to be overcome is fragmentation. The Project, according to Isaacs (1994, p. 358) has learned how to nurture a process in which people come to think together "not just in the sense of analyzing a shared problem or creating new pieces of shared knowledge, but in the sense of occupying a collective sensibility, in which the thoughts, emotions, and resulting actions belong not to one individual, but to all of them together." The process moves through four stages in which the facilitator creates a "container" for dialogue: (a) instability of the container; (b) instability in the container; (c) inquiry in the container; and (d) creativity in the container (Isaacs, 1994, p. 361). Dialogue occurs in the third phase.

There have been only a few examinations of actual texts of dialogue, in part because few such texts have been available (see Cissna & Anderson, 1996). Recently, Ellinor and Gerard (1998, pp. 308-325) published what they described as "a real-life example of dialogue" (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998, p. 307). There are historical links between Ellinor and Gerard's "Dialogue Group" and Isaacs' MIT Dialogue Project, but knowledgeable observers note differences among them. In fact, one characterized Ellinor and Gerard as the "West Coast" variation of MIT's "East Coast" version of doing dialogue. However, the transcript is an example of what some experienced practitioners point to as dialogue and thus aids us in the development of a language of perspicacious description.

The transcript of Ellinor and Gerard's "Partnership Dialogue" contains 39 conversational turns. The editors provided marginal notations of what they think is happening in each turn, but did not identify the participants either by name or pseudonym. The participants were part of an electronic (email) conversation on partnership before being involved in a three-day seminar about dialogue; the dialogue occurred just after the end of the seminar. The process by which these participants were selected or invited to participate was not described.

The dialogue itself was started by an "initializing inquiry" (the term provided in the margin by Ellinor and Gerard). This inquiry is 19 lines long in the text and includes an "assumption" and "inquiry" (marginal terms in the text). The turn begins with a suggestion that the speaker will provide a history of the conversation. The history includes a reference to the speaker's partner ("T") who joins in asking the general question ("How do we expand our work through partnering with others?") and alludes to the email conversation, the fortuitous gathering of "many of us" at the conference. The speaker identifies his/her assumption ("let's get to the essence of partnership first and then all this other stuff about how you do 'this and that' will come out in the wash") and then states what s/he is curious about today: "What are the stories about partnership? What are the questions? What are the things that we are discovering? What are the things that we still have no idea about?"

We were struck by the sameness of the turns that followed. With only two exceptions, each turn could be described as having four parts: (a) a reference to what was said by a previous speaker; (b) a claim that what had been said raised a question for the speaker or prompted an insight or learning; (c) a description of the insight or answer to one's own question; and, (d) an expression of "where one is now" on the issue.

The participants seemed to have learned a particular pattern of speaking and with few exceptions (at least in the edited transcript) held themselves to it. One feature of this pattern is a careful protection of each other's "openness." Statements were not challenged; there were few of what conversational analysts call aligning actions that express agreement, disagreement, changes of subject, etc.; and speakers were not asked to expand upon their comments. This seems similar to one of Isaacs' (1994, p. 380) "general guidelines for dialogue session" in which he advised: "Speak to the center, not to each other" in order to create "a pool of common meaning, not interpersonal dynamics."

We were particularly struck by the function of questions in this conversational form. Speakers frequently named the question that drew their curiosity but only twice did one person pose a question to be answered by someone else. This reminds us of the italicized

phrase in the third conversational excerpt above, in which a direct question was seen inappropriate for dialogue.

From our perspective as observers, the participants in this dialogue seemed to follow a set of rules for producing a particular speech act that is identified as "dialogue." On the positive side, these rules *obligate* suspending judgments and identifying assumptions. One acts this way *in order to* (in their terms) experience "powerful learnings," have "stuff brought up," and be "struck by" insights. The rules for co-constructing the episode of dialogue also imply that one *should* express these new ideas *as a way of participating in* a communal process in which other participants will experience insights as well. Based on their reflections afterward, the participants of this dialogue felt that they had been a part of an episode of thinking together.³

We were also struck by the role of interpersonal relationships. Dialogic practice informed by the work of Martin Buber foregrounds interpersonal relationships. Our own work describes remaining in the tension between holding one's own position and listening while being profoundly open to the other. In his 1999 ICA presentation, John Stewart described Buberian dialogue as occurring in multiple tensions, including "letting the other happen to us."⁴ Intensely relational, this description seems in sharp contrast to Isaacs' suggestion about speaking to the center in order to avoid interpersonal dynamics.

The notion that it is the other person who, as Stewart said, "happens to us" structures a different dialogic practice than the idea that we are first and foremost to suspend our own assumptions. In the MIT description of dialogue, other people are there to help "you" join in the common meaning pool or come to grips with your own assumptions. Or at least that how it seems from Isaacs' (1994, p. 378) description of "suspending assumptions." "Dialogue encourages people to 'suspend' their assumptions -- to refrain from imposing their views on others and to avoid suppressing or holding back what they think. ... Hanging your assumptions in front of you so that you and others can reflect on them... It means exploring your assumptions from new angles: bringing them forward, making them explicit, giving them considerable weight, and trying to understand where they came from."

Below is a fourth, somewhat longer excerpt from a conversation that occurred during a single day on a listserv devoted to dialogue for organizational development practitioners. There were two participants; the numbers below indicate consecutive "turns" in the conversation.

1. "To preface my response, I think it is import to note that in marketing communications today, the emphasis is on relationships -- custom crafted, one-to-one messages. Yet at the same time, surveys indicate that consumers have never been more cynical and distrustful (?) of advertising and marketing than they are today. There is a profound yearning for honesty, respect and authenticity in the marketing conversation today that is desperately lacking...I think Dialogue can be used to shift the marketing executive's mental model from fragmentation to one that embraces the systems-based, interconnected nature of today's marketplace..." (*followed by about 300 words describing his use of dialogue in marketing*).
2. (Having quoted most of the preceding.) "I just have to point out the incongruity here. Can you evaluate work predicated on relationships with a method that denies relationships? That is, how can dialogic approaches be evaluated with surveys? This is what I mean by incongruity? (*Sic*) What would a dialogic assessment look like?"

3. "I consider myself a fairly intelligent guy, yet I have no idea what you are saying here. Maybe you misunderstood me. I do know this: there are a lot of people like myself out in the real world putting our careers on the line to develop practical applications of these wonderful ideas that will help others communicate more successfully and to build collective visions. We're not teaching classes, writing papers or authoring books. We're putting it on the line in the arena of real life. All I get on this list and others, it seems, is a lot of academic doubletalk. I'm frustrated!!!!!!!!!"
4. "I am certainly sorry I put you on the defensive. I meant my comment to be thought-provoking, not a personal attack. You have very articulately described on this list a move from 'traditional' to 'dialogic' marketing... Then you expressed the concern that, despite this change, surveys report that customers are still dissatisfied with marketing efforts. What I meant to point out is that surveys are 'traditional' ... So what I was asking was what if you tried to get feedback on your marketing efforts in a way where the 'emphasis' is on relationships -- custom-crafted, one-to-one messages. Essentially I was saying, if you are not marketing in a traditional way, perhaps you should not seek feedback about your marketing in a traditional way... *(followed by about 50 words elaborating this idea)*. As for 'putting it on the line' every day, *(name deleted)*, let me tell you how I have been putting it on the line. I just came back from an academic conference. While there I talked with many of my colleagues about my efforts to make my scholarship relevant to communities, individuals and business... In short, I urged them to be socially responsible. Many of them already are and many others listen to me and others like me with sympathy and interest. Nonetheless, some dismiss me as a charlatan when I make these arguments. I go into the job market next year. Some of these people will remember me and will not invite me for an interview (I was told as much by one department chair). I tell my colleagues that they are fools if they dismiss people like you... And I will tell you that you are a fool if you dismiss the academics ... *(followed by 50 words on the complementarity of scholars and practitioners)*. What 'we' do is real. What 'you' do is intelligent. Dialogue is about finding these meeting points rather than reinforcing the polarities with mutual criticism. Peace. Let's talk. Our survival depends on it."
5. "First, allow me to apologize. I agree with everything you say *[in the preceding turn]*. My response earlier this afternoon reflects more of the frustration I'm feeling in my quest to get anyone in the business world to listen to me, than anything you or others on this list have said, or not said. I have taken a great risk in moving my business model away from the traditional approach. It's been nine months in development and I've got very little to show for my efforts except a pile of bills and an evaporating cash flow. I know in my heart that what I'm saying makes sense, but I just can't get a handle on how to best articulate it in a way that executives will listen. ... Peace. I love you for taking the time to get back to me, when you could just as easily have 'blown me off' as a fool.... THANKS"
6. "I am relieved to say the least that this cooled down rather than blew up. My first reaction of course was to blow up and defend myself. But as I calmed down I asked myself how I could practice what I preach. Perhaps we are fortunate to be on email which slows everything down. It sounds like we have a common concern...
One way to test our hypothesis that there are different traditions of dialogue is to see if different practitioners would interpret this example differently. We believe that some

would not see it as dialogic at all while others would see dialogue starting at different places (e.g., in the fourth, fifth or sixth statement). For example, Isaacs might see the whole conversation as a way of stabilizing the container so that dialogue could happen, but not "as" dialogue. Others would see it as an instance in which the participants "fell out of" dialogue and "into" discussion or debate.

We understand this fourth conversational excerpt as an example of those in the Buberian tradition would cite as dialogue, while the first three excerpts and the "Partnership Dialogue" are examples more consistent with the Dialogue Group's concept of dialogue. If these distinctions work, then we can make some perspicacious contrasts.

Start with the way the noun "dialogue" is used. We think it fair to say that those in the Buberian tradition use the noun "dialogue" to apply to a particular quality of relationships while Ellinor and Gerard use it to name episodes comprised of a sequence of a particular kind of conversational turns. Continuing the comparison, Isaacs (see his diagram in 1994, p. 361) might name the "flow of meaning" that occurs at a particular moment in a process. Perhaps the most striking difference is highlighted by Isaacs' (1994, p. 380) advice to "speak to the center" to create a "pool of meanings" and avoid "interpersonal dynamics." We cannot imagine practitioners working from Buber's concept of dialogue seeking to avoid interpersonal dynamics, or even imagining that it is possible. In fact, the fourth conversational fragment is all about interpersonal dynamics as a way of transforming both participants and the conversation of which they were a part.

In addition to using nouns differently, we think that the MIT Project and the Dialogue Group tends to prefer the noun form ("dialogues," "dialogue sessions") while those in the Buberian tradition prefer the adjective ("dialogic communication") and adverbial ("communicate dialogically"). These preferences, we believe, are markers for differences in the deep grammar.

The use of verbs and prepositions also indicate some interesting differences in the deep grammar. Following Buber, it would make sense for Cissna and Anderson (1998) to say that we are or were, briefly, "in" dialogue, while for Ellinor and Gerard, the phrase "we will do a dialogue" makes more sense. Isaacs (1994, p. 379) speaks of dialogue "sessions" and of moving people in a group "toward" dialogue (1994, p. 362).

Further, from a communication standpoint, there is the sense that the Dialogue Project and the Dialogue Group wants to get the messiness and contingency of communication out of the way so that the participants can experience a communal movement of meaning through the group. In a strange way, this seems to express an Enlightenment concept of communication in which "good" communication is an odorless, colorless, tasteless vehicle of thought. Our own work is more explicitly grounded in social constructionist understandings of communication and focuses on what is made by the patterns of communication in which we participate.

Abilities for Engaging in Skilled Performance

"While dialogue can't be forced, it can be nurtured" (Isaacs, 1994, p. 376). There is a broad consensus among theorists and practitioners that no one can make dialogue happen, but there are some different flavors to the descriptions of the abilities that make dialogue more likely. We suspect that the descriptions offered as reconstructions of practice differ more sharply than the practices themselves.

Let us start by noting that the dominant language practices in our culture embody assumptions about individualism (possessive), causality (linear), communication

(transmission), and knowledge (intrapsychic) that contradict all concepts of dialogue with which we are familiar. Shotter and Gergen (1994, p. 5, italics in the original) refer to this as the "I-it epistemological paradigm, the *passive-individualistic* paradigm." One challenge to all of us is to choose whether to find ways of using this language to say something that does not fit it, or to use unusual linguistic practices with the consequent costs of confusion. Let us also note the caution that practitioners use as they respond to the need to identify abilities without appearing to provide a simplistic list or recipe for dialogue. Isaacs (1994, p. 374) described some of the "paradoxes of dialogic design," including "techniques that leave technique behind." "You need the techniques of dialogue," he said, "to help you build a container -- an environment that promotes collective inquiry -- and to learn to pay careful attention to what is happening within it and within yourself. At the same time, technique in itself cannot get you to your goal."

This having been said, those whose practice is grounded in the MIT Dialogue Project often describe abilities for dialogue in ways that sound like the dominant language. Ellinor and Gerard (1998, pp. 60-61) identified four skills: suspending judgments, identifying and suspending assumptions, listening, and inquiry and reflection. These are to be understood as part of a "living technology" involving "a combination of skill, craft, and art" rather than a set of techniques. The application of this technology produces "artful conversation crafted through the focusing of attention, attitudes, and behaviors that support open authentic inquiry."

The "descriptive" view of dialogue that Stewart described implies that all communication involves to-and-froing. That is, the substance or work of communication is in the connections between sequential turns in conversation (that is, how person B responds to person A, and so on). If so, then the abilities that enable us to achieve the qualities of communication celebrated by what Stewart described as the "prescriptive" views of dialogue are located in a rhetorically-responsive process of acting into and out of contexts (Shotter, 1993, p 178).

As the tortured syntax of the preceding paragraph attests, it is hard to describe such a fluid, co-creating and co-created, unfinished and unfinalizable process and the skills that shape it in one direction or another, but it is possible to illustrate those skills and to reflect on them. In this way of thinking, none of the turns in the fourth conversational fragment are in themselves dialogue; that which makes them dialogic is found in the quality of the connections among them. Every turn is a crucial link in the conversational architecture; the "next" act both shapes the preceding one and elicits what will follow. In our analysis, there were two pivotal exchanges: the connection between the third and fourth turn and the connection between the fourth and fifth. Had the fourth turn been less sophisticated, the conversation would likely have terminated quickly and acrimoniously and both participants would have been demeaned by it. In the same way, had the speaker in the fifth turn not been so "present," acknowledging the existence of previously untold stories and attending to the needs of the relationship, the conversation would have become something much less than it was.

To tease out some of the abilities for participating in and facilitating Buberian dialogue, we turn to a sixth example, the "Diversity Forum" held in the City of Cupertino on October 15, 1998 (for a fuller description, see Spano, 2001). The 5Cs ("Citizens of Cupertino Cross Cultural Consortium") sponsored the Forum in order, as they wrote in the packet of materials given to all participants, "to give community members an

opportunity to discuss the way Cupertino handled recent, controversial topics." The Forum focused on the three hottest topics that occurred during the previous year. The choice of topics was not difficult; each had absorbed the community in sometimes bitter controversy during 1998: a Mandarin Immersion program in the schools, anger at public signs written (only) in Chinese, and a Multicultural Fourth of July Celebration. Rather than revisit the outcomes of these controversies, the group framed them as case studies about how the city dealt with them and how it might treat similar issues in the future.

The centerpiece of the Forum consisted of small group discussions facilitated by a member of the 5Cs. Each facilitator had received (at least) 10 hours of training by the Public Dialogue Consortium. These facilitators faced a daunting challenge: participation in the Forum was by open invitation and once the meeting began, participants could choose a group discussing the issue of their choice. The facilitators met groups including people who were neither skilled in nor necessarily proponents of dialogic communication, who represented all sides of the issue, and some of whom were the primary spokespersons of contending sides during the controversy. Their task was to lead the group in a one-hour discussion that would address three questions about the issue: What did the city do well? What could it have done better? And, how can we handle issues like this more productively in the future?

The challenge to the facilitators was to enable the participants to communicate dialogically beyond their abilities. Among the work that they did were: (a) framing the Forum as a special event in which unusual forms of communication would occur; (b) negotiating ground rules before the discussions began; (c) segmenting the event so that specific parts of the process would be done at different times; (d) modeling dialogic communication; and (e) providing "in-the-moment" coaching and interventions.

When we began trying to articulate the abilities these facilitators needed to accomplish their purpose, two concepts helped us. The first is Buber's metaphor of "the narrow ridge." For Buber, dialogue involves remaining in the tension between holding your own perspective while being profoundly open to the other. This means maintaining a delicate balance between one's own and the other's positions and needs. This creates an unknowable quality to the communicative exchange: "I have occasionally described my standpoint to my friends as the 'narrow ridge,'" Buber wrote. "I wanted by this to express that I did not rest on the broad upland of a system that includes a series of sure statements about the absolute, but on a narrow rocky ridge between the gulfs where there is no sureness of expressible knowledge but the certainty of meeting what remains undisclosed" (quoted in Friedman, 1993, p. x).

The second useful concept was that of a "charmed loop" (Cronen, Johnson, & Lannamann, 1982) in which at least two different but compatible definitions of the context or frame for the conversation are kept in a balance. For example, the concept of "self" (the answer to the question "in this conversation, who am I?") and the concept of "relationship" (the answer to the question "in this conversation, who are we?") both function as contexts for a given conversation.

Usually, one of these concepts will be in a stable hierarchical structure as the context for the other. For example, a teenager invited by a trusted mentor to participate in a community service activity is in a different social world if her relationship with the mentor contextualizes her self-concept or whether her self-concept contextualizes her relationship with her mentor. What seems to be "good reasons" for acting, and even her

concept of how much freedom she has to act as a responsible moral agent, depend on the pattern of contextualization.

Sometimes, however, it is not clear which story contextualizes and which is contextualized by the other. Recognizing that such pragmatic paradoxes are common in social realities, Cronen, Johnson and Lannamann (1982) described the structure of "strange loops" in which first one and then the other story becomes the higher-level context. For example, the teenager might move between two incompatible concepts of self ("independent thinker" and "trusting mentee") and two incompatible concepts of relationship ("mentor as resource for decision-making" and "mentor as authority to be obeyed") The "strange loop" might go like this. Starting with the concept of self as an independent thinker, the teenager might decide to accept her mentor's advice. Subsequently finding herself deeply involved in the project, she might ask "why am I doing this" and remember her mentor's advice in such a way that she acted more as "trusting mentee" rather than "independent thinker." As a result, her story about the relationship with her mentee shifts to that of "mentor as authority." But, let's assume, another part of her mentor's advice is for her to think for herself, so as a "trusting mentee" she tells a story about herself as an "independent thinker" ... and can keep going around this loop for as many cycles as she can stand.

But not all loops are "strange." A charmed loop occurs when two mutually consistent contexts are in a reciprocal relationship in which each is both the context for and in the context of the other. For example, Buber's description of the tension between holding one's position and being open to the other can be understood as doing the work to keep both the concepts of self ("I am holding my own position") and relationship ("We are both profoundly open to the other") in a reciprocal relationship in which neither becomes fixed as the context for the other.

If we look at the fourth conversational fragment from this perspective, we might say that the third turn strongly imbalanced the contexts by putting "self" ("I put it on the line every day and all you do is write articles and books!") as the "higher" context. By apologizing, explaining, asserting the speaker's own self, and finally offering a new frame in which both participants were honored, the fourth turn re-achieved the balance between "self" and "relationship." A more conventional response, in which the speaker would have disagreed with the negative characterization of his self would, paradoxically, have "joined" the speaker of the third turn in putting self as the highest context and, to borrow Buber's metaphor, fallen off the narrow ridge on the "self" side. The fifth turn stabilized the conversation as dialogic, with a charmed loop between self and relationship.

We like the notion of being in dialogue as involving the work of maintaining a charmed loop among contexts. However, this retelling of Buber's description of dialogue does not seem sufficient to describe what the facilitators were doing in the Diversity Forum. In addition to "self" and "relationship," they were keenly focused on the concept of the "episode" itself as it unfolded in the interaction among the participants and as a part of the larger event. They were, among other things, time keepers, agenda-setters, and coaches.

This leads us to the hypothesis that facilitating public dialogue requires the ability to maintain a three-sided or three-leveled charmed loop among stories of self, of relationship, and of episode. If any one of these becomes the context for the other, the group will have fallen off the "narrow ridge" of dialogue and unwanted patterns of

communication occur. This requires both a "mindfulness" of the process of communication as it is occurring and the kind of "gamemastery" (Pearce, 1994, p. 84-86) to be able to take a turn in the conversation that keeps the various contexts in the relationship of a charmed loop. In one moment, that might require a comment or question that would enhance the story of "self"; in the next moment, a response to one of the participants that would enhance the story of "relationship"; and all the while with a keen eye on the co-evolution of the "episode."

CONCLUSION

Our research reinforces our perception that there are important and under-described differences among those who practice and describe dialogue. We believe that two concepts developed in this paper -- dialogic virtuosity and the charmed loop of dialogue -- facilitate useful ways of acting into this situation.

Those who deal professionally with dialogue should strive toward virtuosity. Among other things, this means that we should be able to make perspicacious distinctions among forms of dialogue as well as differentiations between dialogue and other, non-dialogic forms of communication.

As noted earlier, forms of practice are (and must be) mutable, and often change rapidly when compared to the lag-time of scholarly publication. For this reason, any attempt to offer finished descriptions of various schools of dialogic practice are certain to be outdated as well as wrongheaded in other ways. Rather than a list of attributes, a language for making comparisons and distinctions will serve us well. A start toward that language was made when we noted that practitioners mean somewhat different things when they refer to "dialogue." For some, it is the name of a particular kind of communication episode in which people can think together; for others, it is a particular quality of relationship among communicators. In addition, some practitioners prefer to use the noun "dialogue" while others gravitate toward use of the adjective or adverb "dialogic." Some important differences in the deep grammars of dialogue are marked by those who would speak of a container "for" dialogue while others would describe themselves as being "in" a dialogue. Another contribution to the language for making perspicacious comparisons was the identification of four characteristics on which concepts of dialogue can be compared: descriptive vs prescriptive stances, instrumentality, time, and agency.

Since coming up with the concept of the charmed loop among self, relationship, and episode as a way of describing the work done by a participant in or facilitator of dialogue, we have found ourselves using it quite a lot. Not only does it speak to our understanding of the abilities required to "do" dialogue, it provides a way for us to compare the different approaches to dialogue. Those in the MIT tradition may be seen as focusing on the episode, asking "how can we create a context or 'container' in which dialogue can occur?" while those in the Buberian tradition may be seen as focusing on the relationship, asking "how can we be in a dialogic relationship?"

While it is useful to discern these differences, the importance of the concept of the charmed loop is that it shows that both of these -- and the notion of being as good to your self as to other selves -- are all integral parts of dialogue. There is a good bit of work involved in maintaining a charmed loop among three levels, any one of which might slip out as the context for the others. In any given moment in any given situation, dialogue may require attention to any one of these elements. Part of the work that constitutes

dialogic virtuosity consists of making a responsible judgment about what needs to be done in the moment (rather than being a one-trick pony and only knowing one thing to do); another part of the work consists of knowing what to do and being able to pull it off.

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Footnotes

¹ See John Stewart and Karen Zediker, "Dialogue as Tensional, Ethical Practice" in this issue of the Southern Communication Journal.

² See Bruce Hyde and Jeffery L. Bineham, "From Debate to Dialogue: Toward a Pedagogy of Nonpolarized Public Discourse" in this issue of the Southern Communication Journal.

³ Readers familiar with the theory of the coordinated management of meaning or "CMM" (Pearce, 1994; Pearce and Cronen, 1980) will recognize the concepts of regulative and constitutive rules and logical force in this paragraph.

⁴ See John Stewart and Karen Zediker, "Dialogue as Tensional, Ethical Practice" in this issue of the Southern Communication Journal