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Robert Arnkil. Work Reserch Centre, Tampere University

Remembering the future: Future dialogue and the future of dialogising

1. Beginnings of a dialogical method

Together with the network-team of Stakes (Finnish National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health) and other colleagues I have experimented with dialogue methods for several years in different countries and contexts, mainly in the public sector, ranging from front line customer work to management and governance on the strategic level (Arnkil et. al. 2000, Seikkula and Arnkil 2006).¹

One of the most exciting lines of our experimenting has to do with developing a hypothesis-building way of working in the work process, by making a “prediction” or an anticipation of what will happen, if one does a certain act, like an intervention in client work. By making such an anticipation I would of course use my best knowledge of the situation and the actors, trying to think what might happen. If and when I do this, then I’m in a better position –better focussed and motivated - to make real observations about what really happens. If a set of actors reveal each other their anticipations in a given situation, the learning experience becomes powerful. In everyday practice, we make these anticipations routinely, in an abbreviated form, hardly or not at all aware of them (Vygotsky, see Wertsch 1985). If and when we articulate them, speak them aloud, “pass our thoughts through our vocal chords” (Bakhtin 2002), we are often surprised about what we actually think, and talking helps us acquaint ourselves with our own thoughts. When a group of people articulate their hypothesis about what might happen if they made a certain intervention, the surprises and learning points multiply. In fact, one of the most powerful experiments was asking people in a multi-professional client-work team to anticipate, what would happen if they did *nothing* (i.e. no intervention was made to the clients’s life). Often, to the surprise of the team the anticipations ranged from assuming the client would be in danger, to assuming his/her life would improve, s(he) would take hold of her life herself. This would then provide a platform for a dialogue exploring the differences and similarities of actually understanding the situation.

This was more or less the beginnings of our experimentation with “anticipations” in psycho-social client work almost two decades ago. Since then we have moved on to broader contexts, too, all the way to management teams, governance and comprehensive evaluations of programmes and networks of projects. We have called the set of methods we have developed *Anticipation Dialogues*, and one variant of them, *Future Dialogue* will be presented here.

The distinctive feature of Future Dialogues is that instead of making an anticipation from now – to the future, in an ordinary linear fashion, a “leap” to the future is made by imagining that in some strange we have transported, say, two years ahead. We “really” are there.

¹ I especially recognise my indebtedness to my good colleagues Tom Arnkil, Esa Eriksson and Timo Spangar for the cooperation over the years in this development

Further, we assume that considerable progress in the matter at hand has been made from each and every ones' distinctive viewpoint. Then the task, in the dialogue, is just to "remember" what has happened, and to start reconstructing the steps towards the solutions. When a set of people reveal to each other what they remember about the future, it becomes a powerful learning and border spanning experience.

But let us start upfront with an example to get your imagination running:

2. A story from Tampere

In Tampere region (the second largest city of Finland in an industrialised area) several actors had over the years developed collaboration to promote employment and to combat social exclusion. A multitude of projects over the years had addressed the issue. In this context a comprehensive workshop was arranged in November 2002. The workshop took place in the City Council Hall. About a hundred people were present, representing public services (like public employment services) from the local, regional and central level, entrepreneurs, social partners, volunteers, employment projects, even a few real unemployed citizens were present. I (the author of this article) was invited to run the workshop. The method used was a Future Dialogue. We made a trip to the future. Everybody was asked to imagine that in some "strange" way we move to the future, two years from the present, to November 2004, and that positive things in employment and combating social exclusion had happened from each and every ones' viewpoint. Then I invited groups of 5-6 people in front, and interviewed them, while others listened. The groups were chosen to represent different basic viewpoints, or "voices" to the issue at hand, promoting employment. "Voices" like the business community, public services, volunteers, projects, etc. I asked the people in the group, individually, what made him/her particularly happy now that two years have passed and positive things have happened from his/her viewpoint. I continued by asking what (s)he had contributed personally to this positive outcome, and who were his/her key partners in achieving this. I also asked was he/she worried about something, when we "last met two years ago" (i.e. in fact today...), and what helped to alleviate that anxiety. The entrepreneurs, the "business voice" would, first through the group representing them, tell what made them happy about employment, what they had done and with whom, and what had worried them beforehand as entrepreneurs. They would, in other words, "remember the future", tell a story about what they regarded as important in the future. Then another "voice" was heard, etc. In between the "voice interviews" the floor was opened for the listening audience, still remaining in the future, giving them an opportunity to share what they remembered from the positive future or anxieties,, either building on what was already "remembered", or making new contributions.

*The day goes well, people "live" in the future, and are somewhat astonished and amused. Sometimes, when somebody struggles with "remembering the future", benevolent laughter is heard. The participants feed into each other's stories, invent more, improvise. They are surprised themselves about what they say aloud, and about the role given to them in the stories by others. The atmosphere warms up. Then, at one point, when I give the floor to the audience, suddenly a man in his fifties stands up and says: "Well.. a lot of good things have been said about what has happened during these two years. But when I attended this workshop two years ago, I had been unemployed for two years, and now I have been unemployed for a **further** two years". And sat down. The hall grows silent. My head goes silent, too. Just as thing were going so well! I'm perplexed for a moment, but decide to*

wait. After a moment a man stands up from behind the first one, and says: "But John, now you don't remember quite right. Two years ago in this hall I offered you a job, and you have been employed for two years!" A relieved buzz and laughter passes in the hall. The temperature starts warming up again. And the job offer is genuine!

After a year and two years similar kinds of workshops were arranged to explore the "real future", to assess to what extent the imagined future has been realised, and new leaps to the future were made.

Let us now deconstruct what happened, and what kinds of aspects, themes and methods can be distinguished.

The event/ episode	Dimensions, themes and methods
..In Tampere...collaboration to promote employment	Complex theme
...in the City Hall...	The "space", "arena" where the dialogue takes place
... several actors had developed collaboration... ... from the local, regional and central levels...	Complexity of the actor(s)
...over the years...	Complex time
...through a multitude of projects...	Complexity of activities (projects)
...facilitator...	Mediation was used
...Future Dialogue...	Dialogue is promoted by a special method
... "voices" ...	Viewpoints are articulated
...while others listen...	Speaking and listening are separated
... what made him/her happy...	Emphasising positive solutions
...what he/she contributed personally...	Subjectivity, personal commitment
...with whom...	Key network
...were they worried...	Exploring obstacles and anxieties
...were surprised...amused... laughter... feeding into each others' stories...inventing more...	Creative atmosphere
...suddenly a man stands up..."I'm still unemployed..."..."You remember wrong"....	Surprises
...new workshops after one and two years...	Sustainability in time, from dialogues to dialogising action

3. Exploring the example

On the basis of this deconstruction I will further explore this example by identifying five key themes in the day:

- 1) A **complex matter** is being solved
- 2) ... by bringing in a **multi-agent** composition of people
- 3) ... to a **space** where dialogue is promoted
- 4) ...by a **facilitator using dialogue methods treating "three-fold present time"** (Future Dialogue)
- 5) ...aiming at **sustainable dialogising action**

3.1. A complex matter is being solved...

Future Dialogue is on offer to solve, or to contribute to solving multi-actor, complex problems. What is complex is of course relative. The concept is used in chaos theory whence it has been adopted into social sciences as a heuristic concept, trying to capture new perspectives to human activity, organisations and society. The concept tries to capture something of the multi-faceted and non-linear mutual dependence of matters, organisations and networks, often chaotic and surprising (Tsoukas 2005, Stacey 2003, Shaw 2001).

On the basis of Rittel (1973), Conklin (2006) has described complexity with a formula: Fragmentation = wickedness x social complexity. By wickedness Rittel and Conklin mean problems which have no clear boundaries, or “stopping rules”, no “right or wrong” solutions, but rather “better” or “good enough”. Wicked problems tend to backfire, especially if you underestimate their wickedness. When a complex social assembly is solving wicked problems, we have strong “centrifugal” and fragmenting forces in operation. We try to compensate, to counterbalance this by boundary-crossing collaboration, facilitated by dialogue.

In Tampere the topic - promoting collaboration in employment and combating social exclusion – is a case in point of a “wicked” problem. You have no clear boundaries or a stopping point in employment. The situations change surprisingly, often even chaotically. There are no “right or wrong” solutions, but rather solutions that are deemed –from different standpoints – as “good enough” (...for the time being..). Typically, employment is a problem area which calls for complex multi-actor collaboration. Typically, also, there is a multitude of projects addressing employment problems, to the point of chronic oversupply of projects, resulting in “project chaos”, further increasing the complexity of the social actor.

One could argue that one watershed in developmental concepts and tools today is their relation to complexity, uncertainty, open future and continual change. Traditional development and management concepts aim for clarity and permanence. Uncertainty is like an unwanted and intruding alien, who should be deported.

Concepts which embrace complexity and uncertainty are looking for means to reach better level of coping in complex networks. Uncertainty is not an intrusive stranger to be expelled, but the unfamiliar other, whose behaviour needs to be understood. In the face of complexity one has to “become more complex” (Tsoukas 2005). This means enriching your views, and first and foremost it means enriching the teams, organisations and networks dealing with the situation. It means getting to know, and being open to, different perspectives to the problem, and exploring possibilities to joint action.

3.2. ... bringing in a multi-actor composition

Becoming more complex puts pressure on being able to see the forest from the trees. In order to “counterbalance” the complexity of the social actor, dialogue – listening and sharing perspectives – is brought in. One needs to identify potential actors and “voices” in relation to the topic, and invite them to share their ideas. Often, like in the Tampere case, the complex social actor barely “knows itself”, despite a rather long history of joint action. In using dialogues, like the Future Dialogue, a recurrent phenomenon is the surprise among the participants, when the different viewpoints are revealed and articulated. So the social actor is “getting to know itself”, potentially becoming a subject of action on a new level, or

as “social capital”, to use a term from another discourse. Potentially, a new “community of action” is in the making (Wenger 2002). To what degree, and how sustainable, depends on many factors – not the least on the ability of managers to realise this potential and translate it into new action and action structures –but nevertheless, a dialogue workshop contains an “offer” for a new subject of action.

Who and how many are invited to a Future Dialogue of course depends, again, on several factors. Our experiments have ranged from a small group to around 200. In the case of Tampere around 100 people were invited, representing five basic perspectives to the employment issue (public services, private business, third sector, projects, citizens). In the particular design, double the amount of people could have been rather easily accommodated. This puts pressure on the space and technique used.

3.3. ...to a space

Dialogues are always arranged in some space. In the knowledge management discourse special emphasis is put on “space”, mental, physical, emotional and time (Takeuchi and Nonaka 2004). Similarly Isaacs (1999) and Bohm (1996) speak of dialogue as stepping into a stream of meaning.

It is one of the paradoxes of our times that at the same time as there is a boom of digitalisation and telework, all “gurus” of information society emphasise the importance of face to face meeting and communication, and positioning oneself in the oversupply of information. The reality is “weakened” (Baudrillard 1995, Vattimo1992), and we need to be able to sense the genuineness of the communication – a basic element of building trust, which, again, is a basic element of communication. We need to be able to sense not only the verbal, but also the non-verbal communication, and have events and methods to provide the space for this.

Future dialogue is thus at offer in complex situations for complex agents to “sense” each other and to come to know “itself” as a potential subject of action – and to explore possibilities of better cooperation.

Events like the Tampere workshop are always a part of a developmental path, and are thus situated in a more or less complicated time-space. Employment problems typically have been tackled before, and there is often a great degree of redundancy. In this case, a continuum of efforts, building partnerships for employment promotion, can be identified over a decade. Development is often realised through projects, as in this case, too. The problem with projects often is, however, that what has been done before, is rather poorly transmitted to the present, resulting in the “reinvention of the wheel”. Further, in the present, with the oversupply of projects, there is fragmentation and ignorance of what is actually going on. And finally, projects often have a rather poor record in sustainability, in being able to transform the activities of the regular actors. So there are problems with the past, present and the future.

Future Dialogue is a situation where the *presence of the past* (remembering), the *present of the present* (becoming aware) and the *present of the future* (anticipating) are operated with. Following Augustine’s *distensio anami*, Ricoeur (1984) calls this the “three-fold present”.

In the Future Dialogue this three-fold present is conjured up, and explored together. It is an attempt to break the traditional linear time-concept, and to move more freely in time, in order to induce creativity and to become sensitised to the time-dimension. Engaging in the Future Dialogue is exploring the “meaningful time” of each other, because the different actors have different “times”. For example, typically, the time of entrepreneurs, politicians and managers is faster, more impetuous, than the time of a front line civil servant, or an unemployed person. The time of project people is different from those in the parent organisations.

It is also curious to note that in terms of providing a physical space for natural face-to-face communication, the spaces, rooms often available, lend themselves rather poorly for dialogue. The spaces seem to reflect an era of monologue *ex cathedra*, someone speaking over the heads of a crowd. Due attention needs to be paid to the physical arrangement of a dialogue workshop, so that it is supportive of natural and creative communication. In this sense, the old Greek theatre, where people could see each other in a semi-circle, and even a whisper could be heard (without crackling loudspeakers), easily beats the spaces available today. Perhaps a leap *back* in time is due here!

3.4.with dialogical methods - practical execution of the Future Dialogue

Facilitators are often used in dialogues. This is because polyphony, listening and democratic use of time are sought after. The use of an outside facilitator brings in a neutral, calming, suspending element, which is important in the face of complexity of the issue, actor and time.

We have favoured the use of two or three facilitators, where one concentrates in the running of the workshop, and the other, in a kind of a reflective “*memento mori*” –role (the slave who whispered in the ear of the triumphator, “remember you’re mortal”), and a third takes notes. The second role is to help the first facilitator stay in his role. In the Future Dialogues the facilitator *only* asks questions, never gives advice. This is a difficult role to maintain, especially in the face of complex and potentially conflict-laden topics. Dialogue is not debate, as many promoters of dialogue point out (Bohm, Isaacs), and the task here is to maintain the workshop in a dialogue mode.

What is a dialogical mode? I think Osho puts it quite nicely:

The first thing to be understood is that only friends can discuss life. Whenever a discussion becomes antagonistic, whenever discussion becomes a debate, the dialogue is broken. Life cannot be discussed that way....Dialogue is not just talking, it is not discussing, it is not arguing, it is not a debate. A dialogue has a different quality. A dialogue is a meeting of two beings, meeting in love, trying to understand each other. Not trying to argue, not trying to discuss – just a very sympathetic attitude. Dialogue is participating in the being of each other.. two friends talking with no antagonism inside, with no effort to prove yourself right and the other wrong (Osho, quoted by Roman 2005)

As mentioned before, the event is arranged around listening to “voices”, which are important in relation to the topic. 3 -7 persons are chosen to represent the voice and the facilitator interviews them individually while the audience listens. So talking and listening is separated in order to enhance listening and inner dialogue, following the ideas of Bakhtin (2002

) and Andersen (1991). The task of the facilitator is to help the voice articulate itself, to be heard, and to take care that allocation of time is democratic, following the idea emphasised by Gustavsen (2002, 2003) in Democratic Dialogue.

The facilitator tells that in some strange way we are transported to the future, say, two years ahead, and positive things have happened in the issue at hand, employment. How far the leap is made in time, depends on the issue and many other factors. The Future Dialogue does not attempt to be futuristic, or utopic, so a leap of ten years might be too much. The dialogue would loose reality, and probably much of its power. A leap of one year in an employment issue in a network context might again be too short to induce creativity. In Tampere it was two years.

Three questions are asked by the facilitator from the representatives of the “voice”

- Now that we are in the future, and things in employment have, from your viewpoint, progressed positively, *what are you particularly happy about?*
- What did you *personally do* to help this positive outcome materialise, and who were your *key partners* in achieving this?
- Were you *worried* about something two years ago, and what helped to *alleviate* those worries?

The questions explore the perception of the future, the subjective commitment and position, the network (partners) and worries (obstacles) of the interviewee.

Let me just note, that it took us several years and a lot of thought to boil down the basic questions to these three “sets”. On the face of it, they seem very simple, but they are by no means simplistic! The simplicity on them has turned out to be powerful.

The task of the facilitator is *only* to ask. S(he) only makes small follow-up questions, and sometimes slightly rephrases the words of the respondent, trying to get an as concrete answer as possible, using questions like “could you be more specific?”, “what did you actually do?”, “when did this happen?”. Interviewing a voice with around 5 representatives in this manner easily takes about an hour, so in a day, with reactions from the audience, and with breaks, maximum of about 5 voices can be heard in one day. Endless variations are of course possible from this basic design.

The facilitator asks, the voices respond, others listen. The listeners are having an inner dialogue with the respondent and with themselves. Instead of preparing for a comment (and not listening) they are free to reflect. They are suspending their judgement, an important factor to facilitate dialogue emphasised in the dialogue discourse. In remembering the future, the respondents are telling miniature stories about the(ir) future. Telling and listening stories is a natural, resonating way for people to communicate, and can be helpful in dealing with complexity, as pointed out by Denning (2001) and Weick (1995). In between the voices the floor is opened for the audience to share what they “remember about the future”. So “dialogicity” is realised in the overall running and structure of the workshop.

The dialogue starts with an assumption that good things have happened. This is following the cue of solution oriented and family therapy (de Schazer 1988) that starting from a (positive) solution and optimism helps to tackle the obstacles and anxieties later. In the face of complex, and controversial challenges, like employment, there is a definite danger

of regressing into a “problem-mode”, or “blaming-mode”, which would stifle communication and creativity. The aim in the Future Dialogue is to reach a positive and creative platform in the dialogue, so that the inevitable problems and obstacles in reaching the positive outcome could be better negotiated and tolerated. The make-believe of moving into the future elicits creativity and imagination. It also invariably elicits humour, when people struggle to “remember” what they have done, and help each other in doing this. This creates a friendly ambience, reinforcing dialogue.

After establishing a positive solution platform, questions about the worries, i.e. the pessimistic perspective are asked. The loop is completed by asking the respondent to tell what helped to alleviate the worries.

Surprises belong to creative events, like the episode in the Tampere example, where the long-term unemployed person challenges the good future and to his and everybody’s surprise gets a job-offer, there and then. Talking about a three-fold present!

Notes are taken from the dialogue, and, with identification of voices and themes, given to all participants as feedback, and used in the (possible) succession of workshops, to provide a backdrop for reflection.

3.5. ...aiming at sustainable dialogising action

To some extent Future Dialogue resembles “futuring” (Cornish 2005) but it is not “predicting” the future, and certainly not as extrapolation from well known facts and knowing exactly how to deal with the situation. As Tsoukas (2005) points out, in situations where there is a high level of knowledge for anticipating events, and a ready “stock of knowledge” to draw on for undertaking action, we can use forecasting, and then make a plan to realise it. Future Dialogue is more useful in diffuse and open situations. The emphasis is not on forecasting, but building social capital and exploring possibilities for joint action.

I have here described the Future Dialogue as a single event. In fact it was the first one of a succession of three Future Dialogue workshops, another held after a year, and the third after two years (at the time of the two year future jump of the first one). The notes of the first workshop were used as a backdrop of the discussions. This gave the possibility to explore to what extent the anticipated future had been realised, what surprises, new things, for the good or bad had been encountered, and in all, what was there to learn about the whole exercise? Was the network of people in the Tampere region becoming smarter and mutually better related in solving employment problems over time? In other words, was there a possibility of moving from a stand-alone dialogue to more sustainable dialogising action, a new dialogue culture? The composition of people in the workshops was somewhat different, but for the most part the same, and basically the same “voices” were used. Working in the other two workshops was somewhat different than in the first one, but using Future Dialogues in an abbreviated form was an important part of them. The second one was an “intermediary” workshop, looking at the “degree” of progress so far, and the third looked at the whole process in a critical and reflective way, and made a new jump to the future. I have not studied the sustainability of the Tampere experience, I only know that the response during and in between the workshops was positive, so I can not make any strong claims about the degree it has promoted dialogising action on a sustainable basis.

Future Dialogue, as any workshop or project, is an “offer”, an affordance (Spangar 1998, building on Gibson 1998) to change things – to change action, structures, rhythm. To what extent this offer is realised, depends of course on many factors, not the least on the ability of managers and decision makers to seize the opportunity. We have noted an important intervening factor which is helpful for sustainability, which is training good dialogue facilitators, who are able to act as a resource for complicated networks. In fact, we would argue that a new dialogue promotion expertise is needed in the future on a permanent basis, together with a better generic level of dialogue skills.

Certainly, dialogue, or any of its variants, is no panacea for the ills of our times, like fragmentation, miscommunication and failure to cooperate. What is understood by dialogue, differs, too. Burbules (1993) argues that dialogicity is a continuum from debate to inquisitive exploration, and within the same event one in fact moves more into a dialogical mode and drifts away from it and back, a point validated in our experience. The result of the dialogue can also differ from mutual understanding to “agreeing that we disagree”, and in the disagreement there are different degrees, from better understanding of each others positions and opinions, to irreconcilable multiplicity.

The method also needs further elaboration, especially in the realms of non-verbal communication and facilitation, tapping into the underused resources of play and non-verbal artistic expression. But in all, one of the biggest surprises of our work experience has been the enthusiastic response to dialogical methods in a multitude of contexts, which seems to reflect something important of our times.

And is John at work now? Wouldn't I like to know!

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