

## **Meditative dialogue: A tool for engaging students in collaborative learning processes**

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This paper describes a teaching tool that uses meditation practices and postmodern practices to promote a sense of collaboration and mutual responsibility for learning in a final Master's in Social Work class at the University of New Hampshire. It outlines a process through which students and instructor aim to become equal partners in developing collective knowledges, and participate in the collaborative practices they are learning as they move from positions of inexperienced learners to expert colleagues. It includes a discussion of students' evaluation of the meditative dialogue process and its impact on their professional development.

### **Context**

Meditative dialogue is a tool I have used for the past few years in the final practice course of the Master's in Social Work (MSW) Program at the University of New Hampshire. This course serves as a launching pad for MSW students as they focus on consolidating their professional identities and prepare to graduate and enter the field. The course content emphasizes therapeutic positioning, use of self, embodied practice, deepening of listening and facilitation skills, critical thinking about the evolution of power and knowledge, and integration of prior coursework.

### **Rationale**

Meditative dialogue combines meditation practices of sitting in silence and listening to the space between the breaths with postmodern collaborative practices of 'not-knowing' (Goolishian and Anderson, 1992), and aims to promote a sense of mutual responsibility for learning processes. It is designed to provide students with an opportunity to move from the position of inexperienced learner to expert

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colleague through embodied interaction (Seikkula and Trimble, 2005).

Rather than approach teaching as a method of conveying knowledge, I approach it as a 'form of collaborative conversation' (McNamee, 2007, p. 314) in which the students and I aim to become equal partners in developing collective knowledges. Each class focuses on assigned readings; students are expected to come prepared to discuss what they have read. As an instructor I come prepared with handouts and am committed to promoting a process through which all are activated and engaged in learning and there is no hierarchy or locus of control. Students are encouraged to experience and participate in the collaborative practices they are learning.

### **Description**

Chairs are arranged in a circle and students are instructed to sit each week in a different place and with people they do not normally sit with. I also sit in a different place in the circle each week. Students are asked to interact with everyone when they participate, not only with me. We move our chairs forward and back to develop a sense of the space in the middle, using our distance and closeness as parts of a bellows to fan the flame of our collective knowledges. We focus on how we take up space in the room, whether we are quiet or talkative, and whether we speak to demonstrate our knowledge or to move the process along.

We follow a set of guidelines adapted from a handout contributed by a student from a workshop she had attended with John Wellwood at Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York, in 2001 (P. Bosinger, personal communication, 6 February 2001):

- 1 Weekly discussion is set by the course syllabus.
- 2 Listen deeply.
- 3 Reflect, contemplate, pause.
- 4 Allow speech to arise from silence.
- 5 Say only what needs/wants to be said.
- 6 Experience the silence and the space.
- 7 Notice assumptions, reactions, judgements.
- 8 Observe identities/roles.

9 Give the speech and the speaker full attention.

10 Listen to fully hear.

Using this outline, we sit together and engage in deep listening and speaking.

We begin each class in silence. Dialogue arises from the space in the middle, giving voice to inner and outer resonances. Like an improvisational drumming circle we co-create an integration through diverse contributions, attaining a whole larger than the sum of its parts. The facilitator's role is, paradoxically, to become a non-facilitator, to get out of the way as all assume responsibility for the dialogue. As in meditation, what occurs is perfect.

### **Evaluation**

Changing from the traditional hierarchical mode of education in which there is an expert professor imparting wisdom to students in the learning position, to a more collaborative mode in which all develop agency and take mutual responsibility for what occurs in the classroom is difficult at first. Most students report that they find it empowering and freeing. Here are a few representative responses that speak to themes of silence, safety, inside/outside attentiveness, and shared expertise:

- 'The use of meditative dialogue in the classroom setting has helped me to be more comfortable with silence in general but also with my clients. Allowing space and time for reflection creates a different kind of environment. It reduces competitiveness and out-doing of other students and allows for quieter students to emerge and contribute.'
- 'At first I felt nervous – getting closer meant giving something up. Once people began talking it seemed OK. I felt the process allowed for a different sense of safety as we had all been invited to participate, as opposed to just "being in class". There was no pressure to speak, but the format insisted everyone be present and involved.'
- 'Meditative dialogue gently guides the participant to a place of reflective silence. From this silence comes the need to really listen to what you are thinking and feeling within your own skin. While you are staying in tune with yourself, you are also listening to others. When you allow yourself to pay attention

to process and content (both internal and external), things shift . . . . It is a challenge in the best sense.'

- 'Many of the social confines that come from an expert-led learning experience seem diminished simply by moving the chairs in the classroom. I have learned so much in this course not by the education materials but from the mouths of my peers . . . . I have found our class to be intense because of this process and this has made the information that we share intense . . . . The meditative dialogue process feels nothing short of amazing and I only wish that I can take some of it and apply it to the rest of my life experiences.'

Students appear enlivened and moved by the process. They speak of the importance of having an *in vivo* experience of what they are learning about, saying that they gain a sense of competence and mastery. The meditative dialogue process completely changes the dynamic as we become collaborative participants in the generation and integration of knowledge.

## References

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