

Brief Encounter with the Taos Institute

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Speaking, Listening, Responding, Hearing & Understanding: An Orientation to the Intra-actions of Dialogue



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One summer I visited the ancient 12th century Court Chancellery in the small Italian town of Lucignano. The Chancellery was where justices made decisions about the town and people's lives. Upon entering through an arched doorway, I noticed it was a special place, with a stunning vaulted ceiling and frescos on the walls. I walked across the room to where the justices would have been seated and turned to look back at the arched entrance. My eyes immediately went to above the arch where on each side was a wall sculpture of two white angels blowing a trumpet, with Latin words flowing from them. The words were intended to remind the justices of their role,¹: on one side, "*Speak little, listen to much and keep your aims in mind*" and on the other, "*Listen to the other side.*" I thought 'wow', these historical references to dialogue are very relevant today—they called attention to speaking, listening, and intention. The words fit with my experiences of dialogic process.

Here, I focus on the generative aspect of dialogic process: the *intra*-related actions of speaking, listening, responding, hearing and understanding (Anderson,2016).



I speak to invite the other person to speak so I can listen to their story and respond to what I think I heard, and to understand what they want me to understand as *best* I can since I can never fully understand another person.

These intra-actions of dialogic process partly provide people the opportunity to speak and to listen to themselves--uninterrupted, without judgment--perhaps as they haven't been able to do before. Nowhere is dialogue and acceptance of the other is more important than today in this incredibly sensitive and uncertain time--with the intense visibility of the tragic stories of inhumane racism and violence.

Dialogue refers to any means by which we communicate, express, articulate our meanings—in words or actions--to understand our conversation partners and ourselves (Anderson, 2007). I want to engage *with* others in a mutual inquiry--carefully and thoughtfully inquiring with them into their story about a subject matter that is important for them. In mutual inquiry, I want to be spontaneously responsive to them as they tell their story, and not ask pre-structured questions, nor deliberately search for a solution or resolution, but together develop something for consideration that they have participated in creating, for instance, a satisfactory new meaning or a possible next step. Participation in the creation of newness, whether dramatic or barely noticeable leads to a sense of ownership.

Our *ways of being* and *becoming* are critical to inviting dialogue that is more rather than less generative. This requires attention to presence, attitude, tone, timing, patience, carefulness, spontaneity, flexibility, not-knowing, uncertainty, mutuality, openness, relatedness, and appreciating and valuing difference.

The five (5) intra-actions--speaking, listening, responding, hearing, and understanding intra-weave to support an *ethical position of participation* with the other person. As John Shotter suggested, intra emphasizes that nothing (no thing) exists in separation from anything else, but exists in relation to. Everything is connected.

As I said earlier: I speak to invite the other person to speak so I can listen to their story and respond to what I think I've heard and to understand as best I can. This is the way I participate in their storytelling and re-telling, and it is the process from which "newness" emerges. In other words, I must be an attentive, receptive conversation or dialogue partner. Combined, these intra-actions invite the other's presence, a sense of their feeling respected, and worthy of telling their story, and being listened to and heard. This begins to create a sense of *we-with*.



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Listening).pdf

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