

## On Dialogic Relations

### Transforming from Monologic to Dialogic\*

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#### Context

Though we live in a reality filled with opportunities to connect across continents and time zones, we are not guaranteed connectedness—an authentic and meaningful experience wherein new possibilities are co-generated for ourselves and others. However, our experience in a culture dominated by Western, individualist ethos is typically monologic, a Buberian I-It instrumental relational structure—unidirectional, subject-object relationship. A self relates to the other as secondary, less valuable. Relationships are fragmented, and always subject to suspicion. When cast as separate, bounded beings, people do not carry much responsibility toward one another, perpetuating transactional relationships with less caring, empathy or concern.

This formula between constructors, historically, white educated men, and those being constructed—people who are not included in the dominant group, as women, non-Western, people of color, people with different sexual orientation, or of a different perspective, preserves an adversarial, blaming discourse. In this context, the idea of dialogue has attracted many scholars and practitioners.

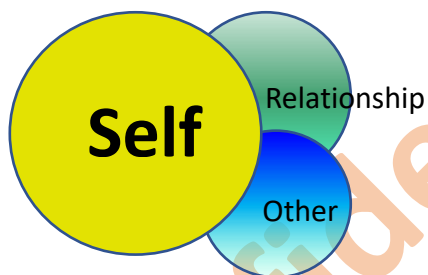


Figure 1: Positioning of *Self* & *Other* in Western Tradition

#### Aims

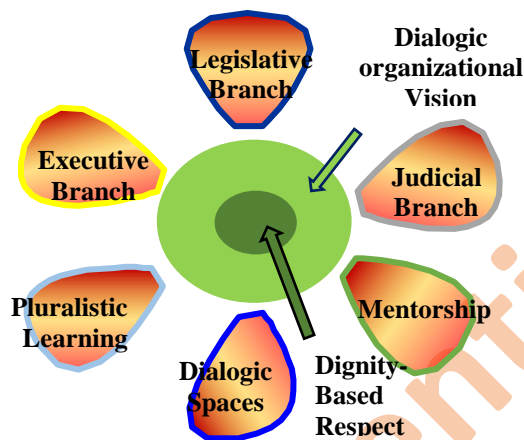
While presenting the theoretical and practical foundation of my dialogic perspective may be beyond the scope of this paper, I hope to trigger some thought. I set a goal to help people and organizations build alternative ways of being together to address social fragmentation.

#### Method

I began my dialogic journey in Israel two decades ago when I joined the Institute of Democratic Education. Our goal was to expand democratic education in two ways: building democratic schools and integrating democratic practices in public schools. We supported 20 new projects in the first five years. Children in democratic education are accorded the same human rights and freedom as adults. They *live by* democratic values rather than learning *about* them. All stakeholders—staff, students, and parents, make decisions jointly within participative practices,

such as a parliament, various committees, project teams and learning gatherings. These schools—more than 30 today—report significantly less violence than conventional schools. However, because we felt the culture was still adversarial, we increased our emphasis on relationships in the *Dialogic Experience* program, where we combined what I later termed *insight* and *action*.

*Insight* refers to reflective practice: deliberate consciousness-raising efforts about assumptions and perceptions of self, other, and relation. Using reflective models, participants reexamined their views and manifestation of relational notions, such as respect, power, inclusivity, freedom, or conflict. *Action* denotes participative practices to cement stakeholders' new relational understandings in daily life. For the new understandings to take seed, I have engaged organizational stakeholders, workshops participants, and students in questioning assumptions and practicing new insights in whatever they do with family, community, or at work while learning from each other's experiences.



**Figure 2:** Democratic Platforms in Dialogic Education

## Outcomes

Here are a couple of examples of the impact of the dialogic approach that I continue developing and applying in all projects, workshops, and classes. When Idit, a student of the *Dialogic Experience*, became the principal of a struggling school in a rough neighborhood in Israel, she applied her new skills for transforming a school where students dropped out and teachers, demotivated, were leaving. She led a dialogic organization for 16 years, engaging staff, students, and parents in both reflection and collaborative practices. Forming a dialogic vision, she emphasizes, helped rebuild trust and a sense of belonging, and set a safe container for legitimizing and addressing differences and conflicts. Vision was followed by strategy and a detailed plan for specific dialogic practices and programs to support stakeholders' daily dialogic actions. Idit: "Dialogic platforms turned the new understandings into a way of life. All actions were evaluated in light of the vision to ensure it is reflected in all school activities." Parents were encouraged to give feedback and were even involved in curriculum planning. Stakeholders

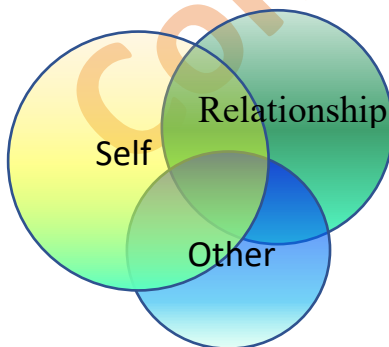
regularly convened in the parliament to make decisions on various issues from uniforms to trips to curriculum issues. Routine gatherings like *Hot Chocolate* morning dialogues introduced students to different perspectives and helped in embracing differences.

An MBA student in my conflict course offers another example: “Initially, I thought that the skills learned in this course will be necessary only for rare situations when there is contention, or for times when I’m negotiating a high-profile business deal...I began to see the value of what we learn for all daily interactions, from making a decision on which movie to go with my wife to managing a project with my co-worker or talking with my supervisor about a project. Every day, there are all these opportunities waiting for me to improve my relations with others and learn from them...if only I can see the value in others and our relations.”

### Learnings

My understanding of relational accountability has evolved over the years through my practice, combined with pursuing advanced degrees and studying social constructionists’ ideas. Improving our capabilities to form a more dialogic human experience is an uphill battle in an individualist culture. We must move beyond the default individual unit to a relational one—to the space we co-create. This challenge requires surfacing what is taken for granted and transforming stubborn confrontational patterns deeply ingrained in our culture. It takes a more complex, multidirectional outlook of social interactions. Combining *insight* and *action* seems necessary to ensure lasting relational forms of being.

*Dialogic relation* is rooted in recognizing that we construct one another; therefore, we share responsibility for the quality of our interactions and their individual and collective outcomes. Being dialogic is neither a single event nor a particular intervention. It is an alternative to the dominant monologic relational mode, recognizing our mutual embeddedness in each other’s lives. While the Western, monologic formulation separates us, encouraging us to avoid one another, the dialogic alternative defines our freedom not as being disconnected *from* others but being actively interconnected *with* one another. If we can deepen our understanding of the nature of our relations as we have been studying the individual mind to explain the human experience, we might be able to open new horizons for reducing hostility and paving innovative ways to connect.



**Figure 3:** Positioning of *Self* & *Other* in Dialogic Relation  
—Egalitarian, Inclusive Formula