

## Dialogue as socially just communication

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### **Abstract:**

*Today's school leaders seemingly face an ever-increasing array of competing demands and challenges. They are expected to be innovative, transformational and expert while, at the same time, sharing many of the leadership processes, acting in ways that are ethical and socially just, and being highly consultative (Senge, 1994; Stoll, Fink, & Earl, 2003; West-Burnham & Coates, 2006). Together, these expectations place the building of effective interpersonal relationships at the heart of leadership and, thereby, raise the primacy of pervasive communication as an essential aspect of leadership. Thus, this article focuses on dialogue as a form of communication befitting the requirements of contemporary school leadership. It argues that dialogue contributes to a form of communal professionalism in which there is a reduction in barriers between school principals, other leaders, teaching staff, parents in schools, and students. It is in this respect, it is argued, that dialogue is able to automatically promote school leadership practices that effectively address equality and social justice concerns.*

**Keywords:** *Social justice; dialogue; communication for social justice; communication coaching and mentoring; communication for learning; effective communication for leading/leadership*

### **Introduction**

School leaders face an array of competing demands and challenges. They are expected to be innovative, transformational and expert (Senge, 1994; Stoll et al. 2003; West-Burnham & Coates, 2006). In addition, they are expected to share many of the leadership processes, act in ways that are ethical and socially just, and be highly consultative while maintaining a strong focus on student achievement. Moreover, their role is extraordinarily complex in terms of the range, depth and scope of activities (Kedian, 2002). They are frequently required to act immediately, with little time for reflection, perhaps because of some or other emergency or ministerial requirement. The nature of the role and institution requires them to perform multiple functions simultaneously, and they are frequently confronted by ambiguities – professional, human, ethical, legal and others. These characteristics are sometimes difficult to grasp as they can be somewhat intangible, yet ignoring them can lead to a dislocation in the processes of the organization.

In addition, within the educational leadership literature during the past 15 years, there has emerged a strong movement towards the concepts of shared or distributed leadership (Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012; Harris, 2009; Harris & Lambert, 2003; Pearce & Conger, 2002; Spillane, 2003; Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001). Here, shared or distributed leadership is regarded as an “emergent property of a group or network of interacting individuals” (Bennett, Wise & Woods, 2003, p. 7). Essentially, these forms of school leadership are characterized by leadership activities enacted within and by groups, rather than by individuals acting out prescribed hierarchical roles. Importantly, this emphasis upon shared or distributed school leadership, highlights the benefits of collaboration, reciprocity, shared purpose and shared ownership in leading educational change (Lefoe, Parish, Hart, Smigiel, & Pannan, 2008).

Both distributed and shared leadership reflect the emergent understanding that the nature and role of school leadership has evolved to a point where it is extraordinarily difficult for a single person to act effectively in the role. Consequently, there is a general move towards school leaders drawing on the

expertise and involvement of other staff in order to maximize the benefits for students and the school (Gronn, 2002a; Harris, 2004; Mayrowetz, 2008). This form of leadership resists representations of heroic leaders and passive followers, and implies that boundaries of leadership are inclusive rather than exclusive (Davison, Brown, Pharo, Warr, McGregor, Terkes, Boyd, & Abuodha, 2013). This suggests that different individuals, alone and collectively, are likely to lead the group at different times depending on the specific challenge being faced and the specific context in which it is to be addressed (Bennett et al., 2003; Gronn, 2002b). While this form of leadership has the potential for providing a powerful contribution to the functioning of the school, a number of assumptions are made about the nature and extent of the interpersonal relationships required to attain this potential. It is only when the knowledge, skills, expertise and interests of all are seen, acknowledged and appreciated that the full potential of shared or distributed leadership is able to be attained.

Hence, leading is essentially a relational activity (Dyer, 2001). Indeed, it would appear that 'effective' leaders are adept at developing interpersonal relationships in order to further the aims of the organization, to increase the nature and effectiveness of the leaders' impacts, and to promote the process of creating various communities of interest and practice within the organization. In other words, the building of effective interpersonal relationships is at the heart of leadership, which raises the primacy of pervasive communication (communication strategies or approaches that include and inform all members of an organization) as an essential aspect of leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011). More specifically, in the context of educational leadership as a relational phenomenon, the leader's ability to communicate is deemed to be fundamental (Harris, Day, Hadfield, Hopkins, Hargreaves & Chapman, 2003; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). This communicative ability is said to have the potential to inform professional practice, influence organizational culture, develop appropriate socio-cultural links, build a *learning-full* environment, and link schools with their communities. However, the nature of this communication is variable and culturally located. It can be exclusive, divisive and polarized, or inclusive, democratic and socially positive. Ideally, it should be socially just and agentic to meet the needs of the organization and the individuals within it.

While the literature supports the evolution of relational forms of leadership, there is a conspicuous absence of theorising around the format and nature of the communication required to facilitate and support such sharing. Hence, this article seeks to address this perceived theoretical deficiency by describing in detail a particular form of communication. Specifically, it describes dialogue as an ideal form of communication for supporting democratic, equal and emancipatory professional relationships that have the potential to develop and enhance collaboration in communities of practice (Kimble, Hodreth & Bourdon, 2008; Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2012). To this end, this article dwells on the intellectually rigorous and creative nature of dialogue and refers to a specific example of its use as a socially just form of communication. It illustrates how dialogue requires the development of different attitudes and abilities on the part of all participants. Moreover, I argue that the nature and practice of dialogue not only challenges traditional boundaries of oral communication but inherently promotes equity and social justice.

### **The nature of oral communication**

The way in which people communicate orally is a learned behaviour (Gergen, 1994, 2009; Richards & Schmidt, 2014) and, as such, it largely serves self needs and interests formed in response to a myriad of life experiences. Branson (2014) develops an erudite argument when describing the relationship between life experiences and the development of personal behaviour. He proposes that life experiences contribute to the way in which we encounter, perceive, interpret and respond to the world around us. From these life experiences emerge personal motives and values, which then inform and influence our beliefs and personal

behaviours. He notes further, however, that an inherent part of the human condition is the existence of emotions – the affective domain – to which all humans are subject. These emotions begin to colour the way in which our values and beliefs are manifested in our behaviours. Importantly, this understanding explains the genesis of each person’s idiosyncratic behaviour because it illustrates how human behaviour is founded upon a unique personal interpretation of different life experiences. Furthermore, it highlights how much of our behaviour is directed towards the service of self needs and interests.

Hence, oral communication, as a basic but important form of human behaviour, is also idiosyncratic and largely serves self needs and interests. Arguably, these self needs and interests can, at times, prevent people from communicating in the most effective manner. This may be the consequence of an inadequate or unfamiliar conceptual or linguistic lexicon, or be based upon personal biases or predispositions, or aligned with personal levels of comfort in participating in individual or group activities, or created from a lack of familiarity with specific contexts, or formed as an outcome of other influences associated with self needs or interests.

Various authors (see, for example, Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 2000) argue that productive communication for learning occurs most effectively when all group members are able to participate equitably. The existence of power relationships and hierarchical structures within many groups potentially creates a barrier to effective communication within the group. Contemporary organizational theory argues that power relations in a group have the potential to suppress the multiple voices required to produce better ideas and decisions that benefit the organization (Bohm, 1987; Gergen, 2009; Poulakos, 1974; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski & Flowers, 2008). Similarly, hierarchies have the potential to reduce relational activity and mitigate against this form of professional sharing (Page & Meerabeau, 2004). Any organizational attitude that perverts communication denies opportunities for the sharing of impressions and ideas, and this diminishes the ultimate benefits to the organization (Collarbone & West-Burnham, 2008).

Moreover, it is noteworthy that commonly regarded organizational structures and principles within schools actively mitigate against a collaborative approach to organizational leadership (West-Burnham, 2009; Bush, 2011). Frequently, the opinions of more established and experienced school personnel tend to reduce or negate the voices of the less experienced. This less experienced group could include staff, students, parents and other members of the school’s community. These negative outcomes may not be intentional but rather result from belief systems and emotions, or may simply be historical. Hence, the development and use of a form of communication that is socially just and equitable, that allows the voices of all participants to be heard and understood, that allows the principal to develop and sustain effective interpersonal relationships throughout the school community, and that maximizes the contribution of each person, is central to the success of school leadership. The key is in finding a form of communication that enables these outcomes to be achieved.

### **Understanding dialogue**

Developing alternative concepts and practices around oral communication requires different behaviours and a different conceptual lexicon (Matusov, 2009). As previously argued, oral communication is a personally constructed behavior since the manner in which we choose to communicate - our personalized form of oral communication - reflects our values and beliefs. If the intention is to develop inclusivity and equality that acknowledges the centrality and importance of each individual’s contributions, there is a need to develop a congruent form of oral communication. Indeed, for the practice of contemporary school leadership, an ideal form of oral communication is one that establishes the equality of the participants, encourages individuals to contribute, acknowledges and values their contributions equally, and seeks to hear all voices. In addition, it should create opportunities to understand, analyse, refine and share perceptions, insights and possible solutions in order to establish common understandings with a potential for innovation. Such a form

would be located in a social constructionist paradigm as it develops an opportunity for sharing insights and understanding (Arnett, 1997; Lock & Strong, 2010; Maranhao, 1990; Rogers, 1995). This is underpinned by an understanding of the dialogic process.

Dialogue as a modern term, is derived from two ancient Greek words *dia* and *logos*. *Dia* is usually translated as ‘through’ or ‘between’. *Logos* is generally translated as meaning ‘word’ (Cissna & Anderson, 1998; Isaacs, 2008; Stewart, 1978). Dialogue is also understood as a flow of meaning between people (Bohm, 2013) or relationship (Isaacs, 1993). It can be translated as space (‘between us’) and ‘the between’ (Buber, 1958). Shields and Edwards (2005) offer an interpretation by Heraclitus in which *logos* is understood to signify “an ordering principle of the world ... [that represents] the unity that exists in experience, the oneness in which all things participate” (p. 14). Clearly, there can be no single translation of *dia logos*. As dialogue is firmly located in a social constructionist paradigm, this is perhaps appropriate, as it is the participants in a dialogue who construct for themselves a contextually appropriate understanding of the process.

There is a substantial tradition of the dialogue first described by Socrates. In more modern times, various dialogicians have championed the power and value of dialogue as a form of communication that is both equitable and emancipatory (Buber, 2003; Gadamer, 1960; Gergen, 2009; Hirschkop & Shepherd, 2001; Poulakos, 1974; Wiercinski, 2011). Also, Sutton (as cited in Kedian, Giles, Morrison, & Fletcher, 2015) refers to the Bakhtinian use of the word ‘dialogic’. In this, he refers to three interrelated ways of perceiving it that are relevant to professional learning:

the first as a “process of shared enquiry that involves an endless posing and answering of questions”; the second as “a way of speaking and writing which is open, and which endeavours to cross the boundary, but not efface the difference between self and other”; and the third as “ways of knowing which recognize the contingency of all knowledge.” (p. 5)

Be all this as it may, it is perhaps curious that the literature abounds with descriptions of what dialogue is not – it is not debate, discussion or skillful conversation. Debate is essentially a process based on a fight or contention in words; an argument in which the purpose is to have another accept the proposed point of view (Buber, 2003; Gergen, 1991). There is little sense of compromise as the participants’ perspectives are often polarized and in contention. It is a contest. Discussion appears to represent an investigation and includes reasoning although, at its simplest level, it remains an argument in words - an attempt to persuade another. It is inherently contentious (Gergen, 1991). Whereas discussion focuses on persuasion, dialogue focuses on meaning. Isaacs (1993) defines dialogue as “a sustained, collective inquiry, into the processes, assumptions, and certainties that compose everyday experience. Yet the experience is of a special kind - the experience of the meaning embodied in a community of people” (p. 25). Moreover, Cissna and Anderson (1988) identify a number of characteristics of dialogue and suggest that these are perhaps more useful than a definition as they lead to a depth of understanding rather than a linear description. Some of the characteristics they identify include: immediacy of presence, emergent unanticipated consequences, recognition of strange otherness, collaborative orientation, vulnerability, mutual implication, temporal flow, genuineness, high trust and authenticity.

Dialogue can be thought of as an ordered, but semi-structured, approach to oral communication that occurs in a high trust environment that supports and facilitates communication and the sharing of ideas (Matusov, 2009). Importantly dialogue does not necessarily lead to a process of decision-making, nor is a decision a required outcome of a dialogue (Isaacs, 1999). Isaacs (1999) argues that moves towards decision-making tend to reduce sharing and questioning, whereas dialogue “seeks to open possibilities and see new options” (p. 45). A part of dialogue is the process of ‘bringing into being’ an opportunity to share the concepts, thoughts and ideas of participants in a group. This sharing process is inclusive and values equally the

contributions of participants. Buber (1958) refers to this as 'being in relation' to others in the group. He sees the potential for dialogue to create moments of inspiration as a consequence of the 'between space'.

Importantly, although dialogue is sometimes criticized for being indulgent, in that there are no prescribed outcomes, it is intentional (Bohm, 2013; Isaacs, 1993, 1999; Shields & Edwards, 2005). Indeed, a specific and intentional outcome of dialogue is inclusive sharing in order to grow understanding and innovation in the process of constructing knowledge. Dialogue, therefore, is generally perceived as a highly inclusive, democratic and egalitarian form of communication that empowers participants to express their thinking in an environment of respect, trust and positive sharing, and encourages mutual attempts at understanding the concepts and ideas expressed by others. It acknowledges personal feelings, biases and predispositions; the funds of knowledge that participants bring to the 'between space'; it encourages critique, intellectual rigour and true innovation, and is located within a social constructionist philosophy. This form of oral communication, I argue, is essentially emancipatory, and represents a socially just and highly inclusive milieu.

### **Dialogue as a socially just process**

As a socially just form of oral communication, dialogue allows the emergence of moral, personal and interpersonal development. Its practice encourages the development of relationships, the sharing of concepts, thoughts and ideas contributed by participants. Through these actions, it tends to reduce marginalization by acknowledging and welcoming diversity. Hence, Gergen (2009) suggests that dialogue acknowledges and values others to the point that the group becomes a community of learners in which each participant is valued as an individual and as a participant.

However, it would be wrong to presume that such an inclusive approach will lack purpose and direction. The power and observable benefits of the emerging relationship that develops in a dialogue facilitates a degree of rigour rarely observed in other forms of group communication. The social equity and collegiality within a group, and the higher level of interpersonal understanding, increases the participants' ability to eliminate deficit notions of difference. Consequently, it increases the opportunities for identifying the intrusion of external influences such as gender, age, ethnicity, language, physical or intellectual disadvantage, and other factors. In this way, it begins to create a socially just order and a new form of social coherence (Freire, 2000). The group is able to coalesce around the 'space between us' as it develops a new conceptual and linguistic lexicon. In doing so, participants encourage the contribution of specific ideas and thoughts and also embrace the multiple worldviews of participants. Importantly, the dialogical process recognizes and accepts ambiguity. It deals with contradiction by accepting the opportunity to sustain contending perspectives without the need to resolve any apparent tension. In this way, those who hold contending perspectives are not marginalized but rather seen as contributors of different views. This 'different-ness' is valued.

### **The key characteristics of dialogue**

Dialogue as a process can be initially problematic as it requires participants to relinquish habitual and programmed ways of participating in an exchange of views. It requires participants to listen in a far more profound, analytical, inclusive and accepting way than is common. It goes beyond the common description of 'active listening' and requires listeners to engage intellectually, emotionally, spiritually and collectively. It requires a rigour seldom associated with the process of listening. In this sense, there is a change of consciousness as participants devote their intellectual capacity to understanding a perspective being offered by the speaker.

In dialogue, silence is common. This is in stark contrast to most conversations or discussions in which there is seldom silence. This could be a consequence of all participants wishing to contribute as soon as

possible in order to lodge their idea with the group. An inevitable consequence of this is a reduced focus on what is being said by others in order both to prepare a personal response and find an opportunity in which to present it. This lack of silence reduces the opportunities for individual and group reflection. But this is not the case during a dialogue. It is entirely permissible for one or other participant to call for silence in order to reflect on an individual's statement, or to focus on personal thoughts that have been provoked or stimulated by the statement, or to reflect on how the statement may influence one's current understanding, thinking or way of being. Kedian et al. (2015) suggest that silence creates space for an internal dialogue within oneself and that it is this internal dialogue that can lead to clarity of thought and understanding. It is this silence that is the basis of the emancipatory nature of dialogue. It is this silence that allows us to look past the obvious and explore what is in 'the space between us' and beyond. Arnett (1981) supports this notion when suggesting that, "dialogue is found in neither one nor the other of the partners, nor in both added together, but in their interchange" (p. 203).

An essential element of dialogue is its capacity to enable participants to open themselves to new thinking. This is central to the dialogic process as it implies that the participants are able to move from what they already 'know' towards different insights they may develop as a consequence of the process of profound listening and analysing. Shields (2004) argues that this is the basis or beginning of transformational practice. Dialogue allows participants to focus on the 'here and now', and reflect on what the current focus might mean for the future. It allows participants to free their minds from preconceptions and prescriptions. Arguably, school leaders, because of the competing demands on their time, appear to respond frequently in somewhat traditional and stereotypically 'safe' ways to increasingly complex issues and contexts (Maxcy, 1994). Developing a dialogue around these complex demands allows the emergence of innovative, generative approaches.

Dialogue permits participants to wonder - to explore the 'untold', to interrogate the unspoken, to create opportunities for participants to identify and share their biases, predispositions and assumptions. By encouraging this aspect of the dialogue, participants are empowered to share their values, experiences, emotions and thinking. To this end, Rogers (2007) posits that this can only happen when one "is genuine and without 'front' or facade, openly being the feelings and attitudes which at the moment are flowing in him" (p. 242). Arnett (1981) adopts a contrary view based on the assertion that "in a dialogue, feelings and attitudes emerge *between* persons, not *in* them" (p. 204). Despite these contrasting views of how the outcome occurs, there remain two constructive consequences of it. First, the participants are empowered to be who they are by the legitimising influence of the dialogic process. Secondly, it promotes shared thinking by communicating in an environment that is honest, trusting and safe. This level of honesty allows participants to share their areas of competence in a manner that contributes to the growth of the group and acknowledges individual expertise. It acknowledges simultaneously that all participants have areas in which they may not have particularly high levels of competence. Nonetheless, these may be areas in which they need to develop. The dialogic environment allows participants to share areas of weakness and to become vulnerable in the learning and sharing process. This is empowering in the sense that it acknowledges individual worth and accepts the realities of each individual participant, eliminates (or at least minimizes) peripheral aspects, and allows participants to engage in substantive and highly focused collective thought.

Dialogue offers a powerful and creative opportunity to *wonder* by developing an environment in which all ideas are first valued then critiqued, analysed and refined. Many Western education systems are driven by a neo-liberal ideology (Thrupp, 2006; Thrupp & Willmott, 2003). An outcome of this is that many leaders are expected to 'know'. It is assumed that they, and other professional colleagues, have a level of knowledge that equips them appropriately for their roles. In some respects, of course, this is probably correct. However, this sense of *knowing* is often unhelpful when it impedes innovation in learning, leading, organizational

development or relationships. More powerful than *knowing* is the notion of *wondering*, a process whereby the participants can begin to engage in intelligent speculation and the co-construction of new knowledge. This process of wondering is a powerful initiating force for creativity (Argyris, 1990). It allows the participants to either ignore or build on current orthodoxies in creative ways in order to improve the current context. The process of ‘knowing’ is essentially one of being able to respond to a given context in a way that is appropriate for a given organization. Frequently, the response is to offer an acceptable answer, one that is congruent with current orthodoxy. Arguably, this is safe, but superficial. A more creative response, rather than offering answers, might be to respond with questions - questions regarding legitimacy, orthodoxy, creativity and structures. Dialogue encourages this questioning process and generates a dynamic rather than static organizational context.

In addition, dialogue empowers all voices to respond. When participants in a dialogue place a thought or concept in the ‘logos’ or ‘space between’, irrespective of how well constructed or erudite the statement, it immediately becomes the property of the group rather than the initiating participant. The paradox here is that the moment a participant offers their idea they immediately lose control of that idea. The initial contributor has little or no control over the consequent development of the final form of the concept, which may be entirely unintended. Ultimately, this has the potential for a powerful effect on the organization and its members’ contributions and learning. Cissna and Anderson (1998) refer to this particular characteristic of dialogue as being the source of “emergent unanticipated consequences” (p. 65) – the dynamics of the process influences the outcome and not the person who speaks or any one individual in the group. Thus these authors argue further that this loss of control is a central reason why some senior professionals prefer to engage in discussion rather than dialogue.

A valued element of dialogue is the capacity to move away from current orthodoxies - the journey from an expert mind to a beginner’s mind where professionals are able to view new situations in creative, generative ways. The notion of, or distinction between, novice and expert has been the subject of substantial reflection and writing (Schon, 1987). Commonly in the professional arena, there is an assumption that professionals are experts, and that length of experience can also be a significant indicator of expertise. This is not only a public perception but is perhaps inherent in the undergraduate and professional learning of many professionals, especially in education. A consequence of this assumption that professionals are experts is that they respond and react in ways that are based on current orthodoxies rather than innovation.

This notion of the ‘expert mind’ also introduces the idea of precedent as a touchstone or guiding influence. Dialogue allows participants to live in the here and now and to address issues based on emergent, generative thinking and innovation rather than precedent. Frequently leaders make decisions based on precedent. While this is generally useful, as it can speed up decision-making processes, it can be harmful in that innovation is frequently lost in the process. In a similar vein, the notion of expertise based on precedent frequently leads to a fragmentation of issues, where they are addressed by disassembling problem areas. This is a commonly used problem-solving strategy and allows precedent-orientated decision-making. Dialogue, on the other hand, tends to address issues in a more holistic way, allowing for more global perspectives. It both facilitates and legitimizes educational leaders opening themselves to new thinking in a way that common communication systems often do not.

### **In summary**

It is not the intention of this article to suggest that dialogue is the only powerful form of communication. Rather it is one form of communication that appears to be powerful in the sense that it is agentic, empowering and inclusive. An important underpinning of dialogue is recognition that it offers opportunities for semi-structured thinking in a group and acknowledges the importance of this to innovative leadership

and professional practice. Indeed, a vital consideration for Arnett, Grayson and McDowell (2008) is one that bears repeating:

dialogue *cannot be demanded*, and it is a companion to other forms of speech. Martin Buber outlined monologue, technical dialogue, and dialogue all as essential to human construction. Whenever people privilege dialogue as the only form of discourse, it fades from a relational gathering and something darker takes its place. Demand masquerading as dialogue is simply what it is: demand. (p. 3)

A dialogic approach to oral communication in professional contexts supersedes the more common, traditional forms of oral communication which are often characterized by transactional delivery and ‘expert to novice’ transmission modes. Dialogic approaches move away from deficit models frequently de-linked from individual contexts, social justice and ‘voice’, and involve the participant as teacher and learner. Dialogic approaches lead to practices that are increasingly experiential, grounded and contextual (Giles & Morrison, 2010; Lumby & English, 2009; Moxley & O’Connor, 1998; Temple & Ylitalo, 2009). They require “an intentional shift from an instrumental way of acquiring knowledge to the communicative and hopefully emancipatory forms of knowledge making” (Kedian et al., 2015, p. 3). This approach to inclusive professional learning formed out of this more holistic form of oral communication acknowledges that, “knowledge is uniquely personal, subjective and acquired through interaction with others. It recognizes that conversation is a basic mode of human interaction” (Kedian et al., 2015, p. 4). In addition, it is perceived as emancipatory in that it frees the individual to move in deliberate ways to direct their personal professional learning, acknowledges personal voice, and allows full participation.

Dialogue as a form of professional learning acknowledges the social constructionist context in which it occurs, recognizes the potential contributions of all participants in the learning process and creates professional learning activities that contribute to personal growth and transformational potential. In this sense it is both emancipatory and socially just. For example, Kedian et al. (2015) exemplify the advantages of dialogic practice in their analysis of a four-day biennial International Leadership Institute hosted by the University of Waikato’s Centre for Educational Leadership Research. The Institute has a declared focus and all participants are sent a series of readings prior to the start of the process. When meeting, the participants are divided into groups - usually 6 to 8 per group. After an introductory session outlining the nature and process of dialogue, participants begin the process. Importantly, the participants are usually teachers, middle leaders or school principals and senior leadership team members. The disparities in apparent levels of status and experience are soon eliminated as a significant influence on the dialogue. The experiences of facilitators of this Institute suggest that the vast majority of participants move from a discursive or conversational style into a dialogue within a relatively short space of time – approximately 2 hours which represents the first session.

More germane to this article than descriptions of the Institute are the responses of participants. Approximately 50% referred to the experience as life changing, as it has offered an opportunity to participate in a manner not experienced before. Experienced educators perceived it as not only life changing, but also an outstanding exercise in generative, creative participation leading to substantial changes in their ways of thinking and being. Similarly, less experienced educators appeared to revel in the experience of being heard. All participants referred to their appreciation of being accepted unconditionally into a group, being listened to irrespective of their level of experience, being valued as professionals, contributing as equals and being empowered to challenge current orthodoxies and the opinions of others in an intellectually rigorous way in a trusting environment. While listening to the contributions of others, participants reported that their own thinking led to a substantially more refined conceptualization of their roles and activities. In

addition, they believed that they developed a far greater sense of agency and also experienced social justice and social constructionism in action.

Thus, this article has outlined the nature, practice and utility of dialogue as a relevant form of oral communication. In addition to being effective as a form of oral communication, it is intentionally socially just. It is inclusive, emancipatory, encourages equality, values the contributions of all participants equally, and encourages the social construction of knowledge. Equally important, it is intellectually rigorous and creative, and legitimizes challenges to current orthodoxies. It both embodies and epitomizes social justice, and is entirely appropriate in the field of educational leadership and innovation.

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