THE GENERATIVE DIALOGUE

Townsend & Adams, Updated 2016

True wisdom comes to each of us when we realize how little we understand about life, ourselves, and the world around us.

Socrates

Foundations of the Generative Dialogue

Introduction

Critical assumptions and guiding principles of the process we have come to call *The Generative Dialogue* have been derived from several different authors, including Alfred Adler, Lev Vygotsky, Donald Schon, Kurt Lewin, and Daniel Goleman. In addition, many of the communication skills we employ to help make conversations more meaningful have been thoroughly analyzed and explained in the work of authors such as Carl Rogers, Thomas Gordon, and John Wallen (whose *Method of Joint Inquiry* was first postulated in 1967).

Our understanding of the power of generative dialogue has evolved out of our experiences with leadership growth initiatives in more than 400 schools in Alberta, Canada and New South Wales, Australia. We have seen how the purposeful use of Professional Growth Plans, and a commitment to increased collaboration, manifested through frequent and focused conversations about shared goals, guiding questions, strategies, and evidence – *collaborative inquiry* – can lead directly to measurable growth in school improvement.

At the heart of the generative dialogue is a process of disarming simplicity. Trusted district office leaders commit to a regular schedule of meetings with school-based leadership teams, with a focus on Growth Plans. Ideally, such site visit meetings take place once per month. In turn, those meetings promote the need for further meetings between school leadership teams and other teams that have formed in individual schools, consistent with the concept of distributed leadership. Each team comprises men and women of good will working together towards the achievement of agreed-upon goals. All participants in the process are committed to using their Professional Growth Plan as a working document, referenced and shared at every meeting. All meetings seek answers to the following three questions:

What have you done towards the achievement of your goals?

What can we all learn from that?

What will you do between now and our next meeting?

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Elements of The Generative Dialogue

Through years of engagement with schools and districts, we have been able to identify some patterns of behavior that can affirm mutual respect, build trust, stimulate reflection, and strengthen professional partnerships. Alternately, we have identified other behaviors that are more likely to inhibit reflection, trigger discomfort, or promote disengagement as educators discuss their professional practice. It may be that some of our conclusions are at odds with conventional wisdom in education circles. Nevertheless, we present them here for the consideration of all our colleagues.

Praise Reconsidered

In our analysis of hundreds of video recordings, and even more direct observations, we have seen how the use of praise in response to a colleague's suggestion, or in describing a colleague's work, is equally likely to result in negative rather than positive outcomes. Consistently, we have noted that one very common effect of praise from a colleague is denial from the receiver of the praise. (A supervisor might say to a young teacher, "You are really great at asking the right questions at the right time." The teacher might respond, "I guess I was just lucky today.") Another common response is uncomfortable silence --- the person to whom praise has been directed does not seem to know how to respond, or shows embarrassment.

We have seen, too, how a lot of praise statements seem designed to soften people up so they will be more receptive to subsequent judgments, or even criticism. A typical pattern of such interactions might go like this: "It seemed to work well when you had the students using the whiteboards, and most of them got the answers correct the first time. BUT, did you notice the three boys drawing cartoon characters on their boards?"

Another common pattern might go as follows: "I liked the way you got the students ready for the video, and I really liked the way you elicited answers *and* questions from several of the boys. However, you weren't clear enough about the expectations for the short writing exercise that came next. I don't think the students got it." Even when offered in as kindly a way as possible, approaches such as these are probably more likely to induce defensiveness, denial, uncertainty, or fear than to stimulate positive thoughts and actions.

For us, there are some important differences between praise and feedback, as they are employed in the generative dialogue. As one example, praise is more likely to originate in the value system of the sender, potentially independent of any direct connection to the value system of the receiver (as in, "I really liked the way you greeted the children as they came into your classroom."). Feedback, on the other hand, is best based on descriptions of behavior or performance, the specifics of which are known and understood by both parties ("As we agreed, I

captured video of the first three minutes of the class. You've had a chance to look at it. What are your impressions?").

Similarly, praise is often seen to be serving the needs of the sender, while feedback is best presented for its benefit to the receiver. A further distinction can be made between praise in the form of a judgment about a person ("You're a master of classroom management!"), and feedback that provides direct observations of actions or outcomes ("On three separate occasions you used follow-up questions to help students extend their answers.")

Finally, so much praise is not necessarily directed toward any particular behavior or action. In effect, it is *gratuitous,* in the sense that it may even be unjustified or unwarranted, whether or not it is generously proffered. (" Sally is ready. Sally is always ready. Oh, Sally, you are such a sweet child, so kind and thoughtful!") Moreover, praise that is seen to be *insincere* by the person to whom it is directed, can impact the quality of relationships in a seriously negative way. (As an example, a long-time principal was in the habit of making comments about the appearance of younger staff members. One of his typical lines went as follows: "Good morning, Miss McArthur. You look so bright and happy this morning but, of course, you always do!" He probably never stopped to consider all the different effects his well-intentioned remarks had on Miss McArthur, and any other staff members who happened to hear them.)

The Impact of Judgment and Criticism

Judgments and criticism, even more dramatically than misapplied praise, can undermine efficacy, reduce independence, and induce resentment. While there are some teachers who become anxious when receiving feedback, we contend that, when conversations about their teaching are handled skillfully, most teachers don't have any difficulty identifying aspects of their practice that were good, or not so good; methods they would use again, modify, or put aside; or different strategies they would like to use in future with different students. In short, they are quite adept at determining the extent to which their lessons have been successful, and what they will do in future to make their lessons more successful.

Unfortunately, conversations that include too much judgment or criticism have the potential to create misunderstandings, and hurt feelings that can long endure, possibly for a whole career. In all of our projects, teachers have reported extensively and very personally on the negative effects of what they consider to be examples of unwarranted or unappreciated judgment or criticism by supervisors. In all our graduate courses, educators have reflected upon, and written about, the impact of judgment and criticism on their sense of self-worth, their beliefs about their own professional effectiveness, their morale, even their desire to stay in the profession. We're not talking about a mere handful of teachers; literally hundreds of educators with whom we have worked over the years have in common a pronounced distaste for the kind

of judgment and criticism --- about them and their professional practice --- that causes them to feel less valued as educators and as human beings.

Incidentally, when we worked with college instructors, we found many of them included heavy judgment and criticism in their observations of colleagues, as a matter of course. Often, when asked about this practice, instructors would say they believed in “constructive criticism”. An old-time Adlerian professor from the University of Oregon, Raymond Lowe, once offered the following challenge to all supervisors who believed their type of criticism was actually ‘constructive’.

Before you go home this evening, compile a list of the top 10 things about your significant other that, with the right kind of constructive criticism, could be made much better. When you get home, pour both of you a nice drink, and invite your partner to relax while you share your list. How far do you think you would get? What might be some of the more obvious outcomes of this exercise in arrogance and foolhardiness? His key point was, if constructive criticism does not work very well with someone with whom you share a close and valuable relationship, what chance does it have with people to whom you are virtually a stranger, people you don’t know well at all?

The Limited Value of Personal Anecdote

In a great majority of discussions between supervisors and teachers (or colleagues) in the early stages of these projects, we have observed that a single event or even a brief comment by one participant often triggers an extensive and personal response from the other participant. For example, a teacher offered her opinion that a grade 12 student “seems to be trying to fail every course.” Instantly, her principal launched into a long and highly personal history of his own son’s high school experience. In another video, a supervisor tried to help a beginning teacher who was having difficulties with a group of grade 8 girls by describing, in great detail, what *he* did when he was faced with a similar set of circumstances 20 years before. Ten minutes of talking by the supervisor, with virtually no input from the teacher! In yet another session involving a superintendent, a principal expressed some concern about a teacher whose students had not done well on a high school diploma exam. The superintendent then spent the rest of the meeting sharing one story after another about the high school he turned around in another district far away.

These are but a couple of multiple examples of such behavior that, while it may be well-intentioned, is more likely to result in unproductive outcomes. Virtually all educators have a supply of personal anecdotes to fit most occasions. However, in promoting the benefits of the generative dialogue, more effective participants are able to limit their need to share their stories in favor of the other participant’s need to reflect on his or her own experiences.

Who Gets to Talk?

In early discussions in which educators involved in our projects have led conversations about a teachers' classroom performance, we have noted that some may talk for up to 90% of the available time. Unless they have experience in leading productive discussions, many educators approach conversations with their colleagues as an opportunity to share what they know, how they feel, what they want to see --- and their overall perceptions of how well the other person is doing. As they come to realize the importance of other elements of the generative dialogue --- its value for their colleagues; its potential to promote reflection; its developmental character; its impact on growth --- educators frequently reduce the amount of time they talk, exchanging it for more intensive listening, more thoughtful questions, and more helpful feedback. In a recent three-year project focusing on leadership growth and school improvement, 82% of school leaders (principals and vice principals responsible for over 600 teachers) reported their greatest area of improvement was either "listening skills " or "questioning skills." Not surprisingly, one clear indicator of the usefulness of the generative dialogue is the amount of time each participant actually talks.

The generative dialogue, situated as it is in the centre of a process of collaborative inquiry, draws its power from the willingness of educators, regardless of positional authority, to work with each other in a spirit of mutual respect, and a climate of trust. In the absence of essential levels of respect and trust, educators are much less likely to take the risks necessary to pursue a commitment to continuous professional growth over the life-span of their careers. Moreover, without trust and respect, educators will not enter into the kinds of collaborations that are most likely to enhance professional practice and contribute most to school and district improvement. Compliance will trump initiative, and the need for certainty ("not to be seen to be wrong") will overwhelm a willingness to explore.

A Brief Summary of Selected Techniques of Inter-Personal Communication

Confidence in the use of the generative dialogue can begin with the acquisition and practice of some basic communication skills. Below is a brief listing and description of some of the skills (and habits of mind) that can promote trust and mutual respect among professional educators.

- **Positive Regard** – In your interactions with professional colleagues you convey, verbally and non-verbally, respect for the values, beliefs, opinions, and experiences of others.
- **Encouraging Autonomy** – Through thoughtful conversation, you try to sustain in your colleagues a commitment to learning and action. You engage with others on the assumption that the learning and action resulting from your conversations will be primarily their responsibility.
- **Suspending judgment** – In your comments, questions, and responses you show your colleagues that you will try not to be a source of judgmental comments.
- **Avoiding criticism** – You do not engage in criticism of your colleague's ideas, opinions, or behaviors.
- **Limiting controlling responses** – You demonstrate care and caution in the use of praise or blame.
- **Effective Listening** – You talk less and listen more. You convey to your colleagues that you are actively listening and accurately processing what you are hearing them say.
    - Paraphrase – You offer a fair summary of what you think you heard and/or ask your colleagues to summarize what was said.
    - Extension – You invite your colleagues to expand upon ideas and explanations ("Tell me more about that." "What does that looks like?" "How did that feel?").
    - Perception Check – An effective perception check indicates to others that you truly want to understand the experience or idea being described. ("Am I getting this right?" "Were those students off base in their application of the concept?")
- **Reflection –** Your questions, curiosity, and interest in and about what your colleagues are doing stimulate greater thoughtfulness which, in turn, can help them refine aspects of their own teaching and learning.
- **Encouraging Responsibility –** You *assume* your colleagues are competent. You *expect* them to be as committed to their work as you are. You are careful not to try to "rescue" or "save" others with whom you are engaged in conversation; nor do you excessively explain, on their behalf, reasons why (you think) events or circumstances unfolded as they did.

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- **Reciprocity -** To give and receive mutually is one definition of reciprocity. As it applies to supportive relationships, reciprocity can include experiences that enhance shared learning and mutual respect for each person's contributions to the relationship (Adams, P., & Townsend, D. 2012. *Developing possibilities and potentialities: A mentorship handbook for educators*. Edmonton, AB: Alberta Education).
- **Maintaining Focus** – In your conversations with colleagues, you take responsibility for staying on topic, following an agreed-upon agenda, and providing an accurate record of what you discussed.
- **Avoiding personal anecdotes** – You do not inject into conversations with others too much of your own personal history or experiences (your own 'war stories'.)

THE FORMAL CYCLE OF CONVERSATIONS AND OBSERVATIONS

The Planning Conference

Sometimes referred to as a pre-observation conference, this scheduled meeting is a critical negotiation that authorizes and adds purpose and value to the classroom visit. At the end of most planning conferences the observer and teacher should have answers to the following questions:

- What are the objectives or planned outcomes of the lesson?
- What will the teacher be doing?
- What will the students be doing?
- What will the teacher accept as evidence that the lesson has been successful?
- What should be the main focus on the observer's attention?
- How will the observations be recorded?
- Are there any special circumstances of which the observer should be aware?
- When should the teacher and observer meet to discuss the observations?

The observer should be prepared to suggest a variety of ways for observations to be recorded and reported. The quality of negotiation in the planning conference has a direct bearing on the usefulness of the process for both teacher and observer.

Classroom observations do not have to last for a full lesson unless the teacher has a good reason for an extended visit. Alternately, classroom visits that last for only a few minutes are not likely to produce a lot of useful information for either party. Once the observation has been made, and the teacher has a copy of the notes, video, still photos, or student artifacts that were collected, the observer should take some time to plan his or her role in the review conference, which should occur while memories are still fresh.

The Review Conference

- As the observer, make sure you and your colleague both understand the information that has been collected.
- Connect the observations to what was discussed in the planning conference.
- Suspend judgment.
- Limit personal opinions.
- Limit praise statements.
- Focus attention on the information collected during the classroom observation.
- Encourage your colleague to analyze, explain and suggest causes.
- Encourage your colleague to provide opinions and background information.
- Use skills of paraphrasing and perception checking.
- Ask probing questions.
- Listen actively and reflectively.
- When appropriate, focus attention on individual students.

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- If you must provide suggestions, offer them in the form of “alternatives” rather than “one best way.”
- Encourage your colleague to make commitments to future action.

ASKING QUESTIONS DURING THE GENERATIVE DIALOGUE

Reflective questioning, when applied in conversations between professional partners, can help ensure that participants are more aware of false assumptions, contradictions, origins, implications, and consequences of their thinking.

We have found that questions often fall roughly into the following categories:

Types of Question	**Examples**
Clarification Questions	What do you mean by……? What is your main point? What is your definition of….? Could you say that another way? Can you give me an example? How does _______ relate to _______? What other strategies have you already tried? What additional knowledge or skills do you need to do what you're planning to accomplish?
Questions about the question	Is my question clear? Why is this question important? Does that question trigger more than one answer for you? Did that question really change the subject? Have you ever dealt with a similar problem? Should I have asked that question in a different way?
Assumption Probes	What have you already assumed? Any ideas about what led you to those assumptions? Can you think of any alternative assumptions that might apply? What if that assumption is false?

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Types of Question	Examples
Reason and Evidence Probes	How do you know? How can you be so sure? What led you to that conclusion? Why this course of action now? What key words came to mind as you were working on this problem? What would it take to change your mind? Can you think of similar situations in which your conclusions would or would not apply? What did you do the last time you handled a problem like this one? What will you accept as evidence that you're being successful?
Origin or Source Questions	Where did you get this idea? Who do you know who does (some skill) very well? Can you think of some alternatives? What effect do you want that action to have? Can you explain the history of this process? Which authors or researchers are guiding your work?
Implication and Consequence Probes	What would be the most desirable outcome? Can you see any difficulties arising from that course of action? Is that what you intended? What do you stand to gain or lose if you go with that decision? Is this action consistent with school or district policy? What will you do if your colleagues disagree with you?
Viewpoint questions	Is this idea or action consistent with your view of yourself as a leader? What concerns you about this plan? How have other people responded? What would you say to someone who totally disagrees with you? What elements of that idea are most or least appealing to you? How are you feeling about this matter?

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Providing Feedback During the Generative Dialogue

The purpose of feedback is to provide constructive information to help people become aware of how their behavior impacts others, or their own performance. It is important to give feedback in a way that will not be threatening to colleagues and, possibly, increase their defensiveness. The more defensive individuals are, the less likely they are to hear and understand feedback. Some suggestions for providing helpful, nonthreatening feedback are included below.

Focus feedback on behavior rather than the person - It is important to refer to what people *do* rather than comment on what you imagine *they are like*. To focus on behavior implies that you use adverbs (which relate to actions) rather than adjectives (which relate to qualities) when referring to others. Thus you might say "John talked considerably in this meeting," rather than "John is very negative when expressing his views."

Focus feedback on observations rather than inferences - Observations refer to what you can see or hear in the behavior of another person, while inferences refer to interpretations and conclusions you make from what you see or hear. In a sense, inferences or conclusions about a person can contaminate your observations, thus clouding the feedback for another person. When inferences or conclusions are shared - and it may be valuable sometimes to do this - it is important that they be so identified.

Focus feedback on description rather than judgment - The effort to describe represents a process of reporting what occurred; judgment refers to an evaluation of good or bad, right or wrong, nice or not nice. Judgments arise out of a personal frame of reference, or value system, whereas description represents neutral (as far as possible) reporting.

Focus feedback on descriptions of behavior in terms of *more or less* rather than in terms of *either-or* - More or less terminology implies that behavior falls along a continuum. This stresses quantity, which is more objective and measurable, rather than quality, which is subjective and judgmental. For example, rather than *good* or *bad* participation, describe participation along a continuum from low to high. (However, you need to be mindful that the use of a continuous scale of measurement may trap you into thinking in categories that, in turn, may lead you to judgment.)

Focus feedback on behavior specific to a situation, preferably in the *here and now* rather than on an abstract recollection of *there and then* – Understanding behavior is increased by keeping it tied to time and place. When observations or reactions occur, feedback will be most meaningful if given as soon as it is appropriate to do so.

Focus feedback on the sharing of ideas and information rather than on giving advice - By sharing ideas and information, you open the space for colleagues to decide for themselves - in the light of their own goals in a particular situation at a particular time – how to use ideas and information. When you give advice, you are probably telling others what to do with the information. Insofar as you tell others what to do, you take away some of their freedom to determine for themselves the most appropriate course of action.

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Focus feedback on exploration of alternatives rather than answers or solutions - The more we can focus on a variety of procedures and means for accomplishing a particular goal, the less likely we are to accept premature answers or solutions that may or may not fit a particular problem. Many of us have a collection of answers and solutions ("our treasury of advice") for which there are no immediate problems.

Focus feedback on its value for others, not on the 'release' it provides the person giving the feedback - The feedback provided should primarily serve the needs of colleagues receiving the feedback, rather than the needs of the giver. Help and feedback need to be given and heard as an offer, not as something forced upon colleagues.

Focus feedback on a usable amount of information, rather than on the amount you might like to give - If colleagues are overloaded with feedback, their effective use and integration of the information is reduced. When you give more that they can use, you are probably satisfying some need for yourself, rather than supporting another's teaching practice.

Focus feedback on time and place so that personal data can be shared at appropriate times -Because receiving and using personal feedback involves many possible emotional reactions, it is important to be sensitive about the appropriate time to give feedback. Excellent feedback presented at an inappropriate time may do more harm than good. In short, the giving (and receiving) of feedback requires courage, skill, understanding, and respect for yourself and others.

Focus feedback on what is said rather than why it is said - When you relate feedback to the what, how, when, and where of what is said, you relate it to observable characteristics. If you relate feedback to why things are said, you move from the observable to the assumed, bringing up questions of motive or intent.

NOTE:

The type of feedback described above is specific to the generative dialogue process --- two professional practitioners engaged in improving or refining their practice. In their book, *Classroom Instruction That Works*, Dean, Hubbell, Pitler and Stone (2012) offer tips on the kind of feedback they believe enhances student learning. They present four recommendations for classroom practice with regard to providing feedback:

- Provide feedback that addresses what is correct and elaborates on what students need to do next.
- Provide feedback appropriately in time to meet students' needs.
- Provide feedback that is criterion-referenced.
- Engage students in the feedback process. (p. 11)