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## Conversation as Experiential Learning

**Abstract** *This article proposes a framework relevant to the continuous learning of individuals and organizations. Drawing from the theory of experiential learning, the article proposes conversational learning as the experiential learning process occurring in conversation as learners construct meaning from their experiences. A theoretical framework based on five process dialectics is proposed here as the foundational underpinning of conversational learning. The five dialectics—apprehension and comprehension; reflection and action; epistemological discourse and ontological recourse; individuality and relationality; status and solidarity—are elaborated. As participants engage in conversation by embracing the differences across these dialectics, the boundaries of the dialectics open a conversational space. Attending to this conversational space enables those in the conversation to remain engaged with each other so that differing perspectives can catalyze learning experientially and promote individual learning and organizational learning. **Key Words:** conversation; conversational space; dialectic; dialogue; experiential learning; organizational learning*

Members of an executive management team have been working for about a year to learn how to collaborate more productively as a team. Over the year, it becomes increasingly clear that without major changes in the company's direction or dramatic improvements in the economy, the future does not look good for their company. At their last meeting the chair of the executive management team made a bold proposal that, if adopted, will take the company in vastly new directions in an attempt to head off the company's financial problems. The team is now faced with a major decision. Several people on the team are in favor of this bold initiative, which seems irresponsible to one team member, who wants to postpone the decision thinking that the economy may improve without such risks. Another team member suggests that less dramatic changes are needed now. This decision presents the team with their first substantial test to gauge the progress they have made in their efforts to learn how to work together more effectively as a team.

As you read this scenario, what comes to your mind? What are the ‘next steps’ you would probably want to take if you were a member of this executive management team? Are there clear answers? From your perspective, is there one path to resolution, one truth? Would conversations play a role in next steps?

While individual responses about next steps are likely to vary appreciably, most people would agree that conversations play a major role in the decision-making process. If candid and respectful conversations are a well-established norm for the team, it is more likely that people can begin to understand each other’s perspectives somewhat more easily. If frequent, candid conversations are more of an anomaly, the impact can be dramatically different. What contributes to conversations that offer ongoing opportunities for seeing perspectives not imagined before and for learning from each other? If people can share and learn from each other’s experiences, their decisions may be markedly different.

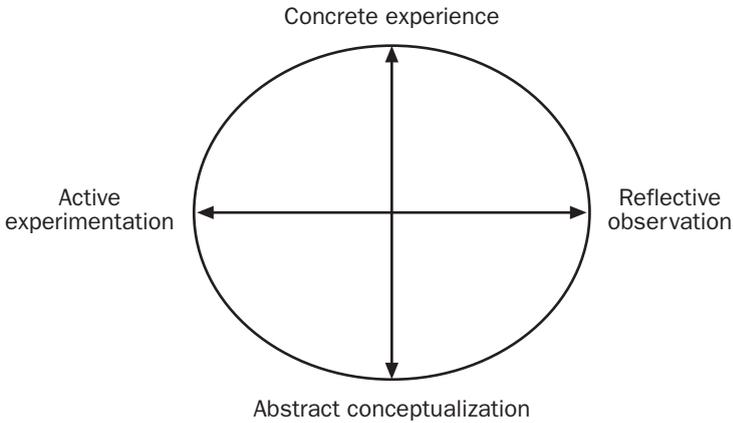
### Experiential Learning Theory

Grounded in Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), this article proposes a theoretical framework for *conversational learning*, a process whereby learners construct new meaning and transform their collective experiences into knowledge through their conversations.

Possible scenarios and actions for this executive management team will be suggested throughout as examples of how to use a conversational learning approach and to highlight the values of learning from diverse experiences through conversation. Thus the focus of the article is to build the theory and to illustrate how it could be used.

ELT emphasizes the central role that experience plays in the learning process, ‘the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience’ (Kolb, 1984: 41). Kolb provides a multilinear model of the learning process that is consistent with what we know about how people learn, grow, and develop. The theory also is called ‘experiential’ because its intellectual origins are in the experiential works of Piaget, Dewey, Lewin, Freire, and James, forming a distinctive perspective on learning and development.

The ELT model portrays two dialectically related modes of taking in, grasping experiences—apprehension (concrete experience) and comprehension (abstract conceptualization)—and two dialectically related modes of transforming experience—intension (reflective observation) and extension (active experimentation). A closer examination of the ELT learning model suggests that learning requires individuals to resolve abilities that are polar opposites, and that the learner must continually choose which set of learning abilities he or she will use in specific learning situations. Some people grasp new information through experiencing the concrete, tangible, felt qualities of the world, relying on their senses and immersing themselves in concrete reality. Others tend to perceive, grasp, or take hold of new information through symbolic representation or abstract conceptualization—thinking about, analyzing, or systematically planning, rather than using sensation as a guide. Similarly, in transforming or processing experience some tend to carefully watch others who are involved in the experience and

**Figure 1** The experiential learning cycle

reflect on what happens, while others choose to jump right in and actively start doing things (see Figure 1).

Drawing from the theory of experiential learning, in this article we propose *conversational learning* as an experiential process of learners constructing meaning from their collective experiences through conversation—that is, conversation as experiential learning. As such, a theoretical framework based on five process dialectics is proposed here as the foundational underpinning. As participants engage in conversation by embracing the differences across these dialectics, opportunities to hear new perspectives beyond their personal frames of reference can be increased. The boundaries of these five dialectics open a conversational space that in turn influences the receptivity to learning.

Years ago Abba Eban, former Foreign Minister of Israel, took part in a summit of world leaders that he and others felt accomplished nothing. After the summit, his assessment of the central problem was, ‘These leaders “have not learned to think together”’ (in Isaacs, 1999: 2). William Isaacs (1999) uses this comment as an example of what he sees as a pervasive problem worldwide, crossing private and public organizational boundaries. In response, Isaacs advocates the formal process of dialogue because it ‘not only raises the level of shared thinking, it impacts how people act, and in particular, how they act all together’ (p. 22). This article likewise is about rediscovering the art of talking together. We begin by briefly clarifying our choice of the word *conversation* and distinguish it from the word *dialogue*.

## Conversation or Dialogue

Contemporary research on learning and meaning-making in conversation is expanding in many fields—such as philosophy, information systems, management, organizational behavior, psychology and sociology. Dialogue is one major response evolving from this work. Although there is much similarity between dialogue and

conversation and many researchers use the terms interchangeably, there are differences worth noting here.

While some dictionaries define conversation and dialogue as *talk*, a deeper etymology reveals notably different roots for the two words. The origin of the word *conversation* according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) gives the earliest recorded usages in the 1340s as ‘living or having one’s being *in* a place or *among* persons . . . living together, commerce, intercourse, society, intimacy . . . to be united in heaven in conversation’—usages that all embrace collaborative, contextual interactions. Nearly all the definitions emphasize the communal, sensual, and emotional aspects of conversation.

The English word ‘dialogue’ can be traced through French to Latin and ultimately to the Greek *dialektos* (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 1989). Unlike conversation, the etymology of dialogue includes frequent references to words like *debate* and *discussion*. The original definitions of the word debate include ‘strife . . . dissension, quarrelling . . . fight, conflict . . . to beat down, bring down, lessen, diminish . . . take away’, while discussion means ‘drive away, dispel . . . to shake off, to set free . . . remove . . . to examine or investigate, to try (as a judge) . . . to sift the considerations for and against’. Thus the root of *dialogue* is more related to ‘opposing voices in search of truth’, a definition that emphasizes conflict and a more rhetorical approach than *conversation*.

Traditionally, the word dialogue generally is preferred by critical theorists, classicists, and other theorists who are epistemologically oriented—those who see ‘talk’ primarily as an intellectual process of refining knowledge. The term ‘conversation’, in contrast, is used by more ontologically oriented writers (Gadamer, 1994; Palmer, 1998; Rorty, 1980, 1989) who focus on human understanding and human experience rather than on abstract knowledge about ideas. Gadamer addresses the essence of this distinction: ‘The first condition of the art of conversation is ensuring that the other person is with us . . . requires that one does not try to argue the other person down but that one really considers the weight of the other’s opinion’ (1994: 367). To paraphrase Gadamer (1994), conversations of inquiry and exploration can create learning opportunities that are larger than could be accomplished by an individual, acknowledging the relational, communal qualities.

Our intention is not to undermine the value of dialogue or to distract attention into a dualistic debate over the two words. Our intention is to emphasize that for our purposes, the word *conversation* more fully encompasses the relational aspects of social, experiential learning as people strive to increase understanding together.

## A Dialectical Approach to Conversational Learning

In the sections that follow we will explore the role of five dialectical processes in conversational learning, beginning with a discussion of what is meant by a dialectical approach in this context. After an elaboration of the two dialectics mentioned earlier, we explore the three new dialectics. We examine the dialectical tension between the epistemological, discursive process and the ontological, recursive process and explore the fourth dialectic of individuality and relationality that contrasts conversations as inside-out and outside-in experiences. Finally, the

**Table 1** Five dialectics

Apprehension	Comprehension
Reflection	Action
Epistemological discourse	Ontological recourse
Individuality	Relationality
Status	Solidarity

dialectic of status and solidarity describes the positioning and linking dynamics that shape the social realm of conversation (see Table 1).

The simultaneous interactions among these five dialectics ultimately guide and shape the act of learning through conversation. The description of the five dialectics will be followed by an exploration of the nature of conversational space that holds and sustains conversation across these dialectics.

This proposed dialectical stance on conversational learning suggests that conversation is a meaning-making process whereby understanding is achieved through the interplay of opposites and contradictions. Traditionally dialectics have been viewed as a linguistic process that leads to the generation of new ideas and concepts through one's awareness of a tension and paradox between two or more opposites. It involves stating a point of view and questioning it from other points of view, eventually seeking consensual agreement that in turn is ultimately questioned from still other perspectives.

Dialectical inquiry aspires to *holism through the embracing of differences and contradictions*. It begins with contradictions, or literally opposing speeches. By taking the most opposite imaginable point of view, one increases the chance of encompassing the whole situation. For instance in the opening scenario, by using a dialectic approach each member of the executive management team could explore together the broad range of their differing perspectives to collectively make wiser, more systemic decisions on behalf of the company. Various paths for that process of inquiry are suggested below. Inquiry into the dialectics of conversation is one means of uncovering the assumptions and frames that cause a 'tunnel vision' of the whole (Mitroff and Emshoff, 1979). An inviting attitude regarding differences in opinion and perception is key to the process. Peter Elbow (1986: 241) affirms this view as follows:

Since perception and cognition are processes in which the organism 'constructs' what it sees or thinks according to models already there, the organism tends to throw away or distort material that does not fit this model. The surest way to get hold of what your present frame blinds you to is to try to adopt the opposite frame, that is, to reverse your model. A person who can live with contradiction and exploit it, who can use conflicting models can simply see and think *more*.

For example, if each member of our hypothetical executive team briefly tried to articulate the perspective of the person with whom they disagreed most strongly, he or she might begin to 'see and think more' than before.

John van Maanen (1995) critiques paradigmatic organizational science as excessively focused on establishing a ruling discourse that obliterates or subsumes opposing ideas. He proposes a new brand of theorizing based on ongoing

conversations that ‘plant, nurture, and cultivate’, rather than on contentious and defensive debates that lead to polarization of differing views. For the hypothetical executive management team, differences of perspective would be invited rather than suppressed, and talked about rather than debated.

The five dialectics presented here are an attempt to describe similar dialectical contradictions of a process that is continuously creating the conversational content. This dialectical process can open a conversational space where opposing ideas can be explored, resolved, or embraced through conversations. In light of its centrality to the concept of conversational learning, the notion of a conversational space and its relationship with the five dialectics deserves close attention, briefly here and later in the article. On one hand, the five dialectics serve as a network of dynamic processes that opens a space where multiple conversations are generated similar to those ongoing conversations that van Maanen suggests plant, nurture, and cultivate increasing understanding. On the other hand, conversational space can be seen as a boundary that preserves the integrity of the dialectical processes that catalyze and support those conversations.

External factors act on the internal dynamics of the dialectical relationships that may disturb or support the integrity of the conversational space. It is also true that the internal dynamics of the five dialectical interactions will largely determine the patterns and quality of conversations that are generated within the conversational space. These dynamic external and internal interactions and their impact on conversations will become clearer as we proceed to discuss the five dialectics as a network of processes. There is subtle, intrinsic overlapping among some of the five dialectics, and this congruence further supports their intersubjective nature. Yet each is articulated separately as part of the theoretical foundation to intentionally distinguish subtleties that might otherwise be overlooked or undervalued. The first two dialectics were briefly introduced and are further explicated below to show the interrelatedness of the dynamics of conversational learning.

#### *Apprehension and Comprehension: Concrete Knowing and Abstract Knowing*

The dialectic of apprehension and comprehension is at the heart of dual-knowledge theory whereby reality is grasped through two distinct, but inseparable modes of knowing: concrete knowing and abstract knowing (Kolb, 1984). As previously introduced, concrete knowing is called apprehension—an immediate, feeling-oriented, tacit, subjective process largely based in older regions of the human brain, which serve as physiological and emotional gatekeepers that monitor the emotional dimensions of learning. Abstract knowing is called comprehension—a linguistic, conceptual, interpretative process based in the relatively newer left cerebral cortex of the brain (de Bono, 1969; Gazzaniga, 1985). Learning is based on the complex interrelationship of these two knowing processes. Thus integrated learning occurs when learners engage simultaneously in these two complementary modes of knowing.

William James articulates the conceptual underpinning of the dual knowledge theory in his philosophy of radical empiricism (Hickcox, 1990; James, 1890). James’s philosophy was based on two co-equal and dialectically related ways of knowing the world—‘knowledge of acquaintance’, based on direct perception (apprehension) and ‘knowledge about’, based on mediating conception (compre-

hension). In his own words, ‘through feelings we become acquainted with things, but only by our thoughts do we know about them. Feelings are the germ and starting points of cognition, thoughts the developed tree’ (1890: 222).

In radical empiricism, direct perceptions have primacy since all concepts derive their validity from connection to sense experience. Concepts, however, have priority in guiding human action because they often enable us to predict the future and achieve our goals. James (1977: 243) further draws attention to the importance of this co-equal relationship as follows:

We thus see clearly what is gained and what is lost when percepts are translated into concepts. Perception is solely of the here and now; conception is of the like and unlike, of the future, and of the past, and of the far away. But this map of what surrounds the present, like all maps, is only a surface; its features are but abstract signs and symbols of things that in themselves are concrete bits of sensible experience. We have but to weigh extent against content, thickness against spread, and we see that for some purposes the one, for other purposes the other has the higher value. Who can decide off hand which is absolutely better to live and to understand life? We must do both alternately, and a man can no more limit himself to either than a pair of scissors can cut with a single one of its blades.

For James, conversation is more than an exchange of concepts; it is a perceptual process as well. That is to say, conversation is a sensual experience. Conversation is typically thought of as speaking and listening, but James would enlarge the realm of conversation to conceiving and perceiving that involves all the senses including emotions and feelings, touch, taste, and smell. His observation that rationalism and discursive thought are intrusive on the conversational experience is a warning to those who would study conversation as a solely discursive process that is unaffected by the experiential context in which it occurs. Different conversational experiences that take place in varied contexts enhance or restrict different senses and hence affect what is *heard* and *perceived* in the conversation. As many communication theorists have said, most of the meaning in communication is nonverbal. From the speakers’ perspective, conversation is as much about showing and feeling as it is about telling. From the listeners’ perspective, conversation is as much about perceiving as it is about hearing.

For the executive team in the opening scenario, acknowledging people’s feelings and encouraging them to talk about relevant previous experiences is a way for the team to learn together from their collective concrete experiences—that is, through apprehension. Complementing those conversations with consideration of data, economic trends, and diverse management models, for example, can round out the learning by emphasizing the comprehensive dimensions that are also vital. By overemphasizing either extreme, the capacity for conversational learning is diminished.

### *Reflection and Action: Intension and Extension*

Kolb (1984) articulates the central idea of experiential learning theory as follows:

The simple perception of experience alone is not sufficient for learning; something must be done with it. Similarly, transformation alone cannot represent learning, for

there must be something to be transformed, some state or experience that is being acted upon. (p. 42)

We learn the meaning of our concrete immediate experiences by internally reflecting . . . and/or by acting . . . and thus extending it. (p. 52)

This view is crucial in understanding the synergistic nature of the dialectic of apprehension–comprehension and the dialectic of intension and extension as they represent two distinct but interconnected learning processes. Learning is like breathing; it follows a rhythm of reflecting on ideas and experiences to find meaning and of expressing that meaning in thought, speech and action (Kolb, 1984).

Freire (1992: 75, 78) describes the dynamic interplay of this dialectic of reflection and action as follows:

Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed—even in part—the other immediately suffers . . . When . . . deprived . . . of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter, into verbalism, into an alienated ‘blah’. On the other hand, if action is emphasized exclusively, to the detriment of reflection, the word is converted into activism . . . action for action’s sake negates the true praxis and makes dialogue impossible.

Conversation is fundamental to this dialectical interplay, where reflection is an essential element of meaning-making that in turn guides and informs behavior that creates new concrete experiences for reflection. Experiential learning approaches intentionally take time and strive to create conversational spaces for the *praxis* between reflection and action to be recognized and continuously renewed (Baker et al., 1997).

Deliberately setting aside time for group reflection is a way for the team in the opening scenario to create opportunities to revisit earlier ideas and comments that were mentioned and yet never explored. It allows opportunities for more thoughtful questions to be asked and answered, encouraging individual and collective reflection. Conversations that began several months ago, but were never completed, can be revisited. If the team rushes into action, they may make quick decisions without integrating each other’s perspectives or obtaining input from people outside the team. Waiting indefinitely to take action can, on the other hand, leave the organization unnecessarily vulnerable and unprepared.

#### *Epistemological Discourse and Ontological Recourse: Doing and Being*

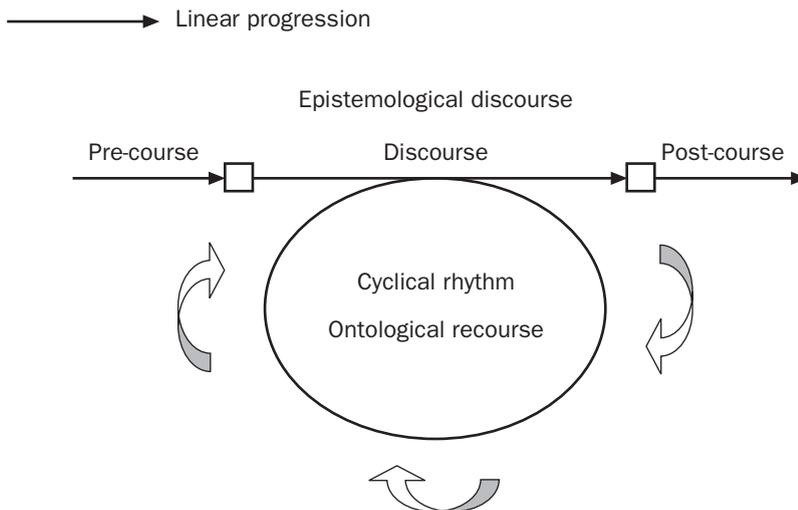
Epistemological discourse, as used in this context, describes the linear, forward movement and naming of ideas and concepts generated in conversations. Ontological recourse softens and deepens that trajectory with recursive, cyclical reconsiderations implicit to iterative learning. The interplay of epistemological discourse and ontological recourse extends conversational learning. This dialectical continuum encompasses dimensions of actual conversations while the previous reflection–action dialectic is more related to the contextual aspects of transforming experience into meaning.

The discursive process is at work when learning is grounded in the *naming of the world*, whereas in a recursive process learners return to subjects that *reappear* anew through in-depth questioning and inquiry. The discursive process is often seen as logical and cognitive, giving the conversation momentum, and keeping it from becoming repetitive. The recursive process, on the other hand, is a more ontological and subjective desire to return over time to the same ideas and experiences generated in conversation. In this sense, ontological recourse is cyclical in nature, where ideas and concepts acquire new meaning as individuals question and inquire anew about their experiences. As such, learners' ability to engage simultaneously in these two dimensions will largely determine the depth and quality of learning generated in conversations (see Figure 2).

As illustrated in Figure 2, the discursive process follows a linear progression over time from pre-course, to discourse, to post-course. Pre-course is a manifestation of previous conversations, which sets up the assumptive frame for the discourse. In this sense, pre-course serves as 'fore-structure' of the conversation (Hans, 1989) or 'prejudgments' (Gadamer, 1994) that individuals bring into the conversation. Simply stated, in anticipation of joining a particular circle of conversation, individuals have assumptions and expectations about the experience they will embark on. These assumptions and expectations will ultimately influence and shape the discourse as they join and establish their positions in the conversation. In their studies of recursive process in adult learning, Sheckley et al. (1994) describe the discursive and recursive dialectic in the adult meaning making process: 'Simply stated, what learners "know" influences what they "experience" and conversely what they "experience" influences what they "know"' (pp. 60–1).

The end of the conversational discourse leads to what is referred to here as 'post-course', where there is a process of selecting what to keep from the conversation and what to throw away. The resulting story of the conversation becomes pre-course for future conversations, thus transporting the discourse into

**Figure 2** The discourse/recourse dialectic in conversation



other contexts in the future. Thus any conversational discourse is embedded in a complex network of previous and future conversations.

The recursive process of generating assumptions gives shape to the conversation by *framing* the discourse, which is in turn *naming* ideas and concepts. *Framing* of a discourse is a tacit, apprehensional process, while *naming* is a verbal, comprehensional process—another of the subtle and vital interrelationships among the dialectics. Thus assumptions are like a *frame* that *holds* tacit and unconscious ways of knowing that are made explicit only through the naming process (Schon and Rein, 1994).

Robert McNamara (1995) reports in *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, a tragic example of how difficult frame reflection is. He points out that while there were many policy debates within the administration during the war, the assumptions that *framed* these debates—the domino theory, that this was a war to contain Communism or the idea that the war could be won with European warfare tactics—were never seriously questioned.

The management scenario at the beginning of this article offers another example of the difficulty of engaging in frame reflection. It would require the team members to have the discipline to explore imbedded assumptions behind the issues facing them—such as, what is necessary for major organizational change to take hold successfully, who should be included, what do we assume about economic fluctuation, and whether the source of success is determined by the individual, group, or fate. Assumptions that members of a team hold are often rooted in previous experiences that may or may not be relevant now. Reconsidering these kinds of assumptions may seem like unnecessary backtracking over ground already covered. However, it often leads to recognizing that challenges and opportunities have been misnamed or incorrectly identified. More common ground than was expected can be discovered. The prospects can become much wider as new possibilities—in addition to supporting the chair's proposal, slowing down, or waiting—are discovered. The up-front time for recursive conversation that is needed to expand on the linear projection of discourse can save time in the long run.

Taking the time to hear other perspectives through the telling of each other's stories can often provide a path for returning to the questions or decisions at hand in ways that are easier to hear. In storytelling and in recursive conversations, new ways of framing can be grasped—apprehended—and the ontological recourse informs the learning. In his philosophical inquiry, Hans (1989) offers an insightful argument as to why humans, at least in western cultures, often fail to engage equally in discursive and recursive processes in a given situation. According to Hans, humans tend to be driven primarily by the linear, epistemological dimension of the dialectic and shy away from the recursive, ontological end of the dialectic. The accentuation of the linear, says Hans, is caused by the fear of the *return of the same*. In returning to the same, one stands face to face with one's *being*—an ultimate ontological state that manifests itself in the cyclical passing of time. This fear of *being* evoked by the cyclical, recursive process drives some people to embrace the epistemological, sequential progression of events, where they find comfort in the absence of repetition.

However, the regular return with a difference is at the core of all understanding, and it ultimately guides humans to attain a higher level of consciousness. Freire

(1992) describes the understanding that is achieved through simultaneous engagement in the epistemological and ontological dimensions of the dialectics as follows: ‘To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming’ (p. 76).

Conversational learning is expanded by distinct, yet intertwined, linear and cyclical processes that ultimately come together as the flux of spiral movements, as new ideas are advanced discursively and questioned from differing perspectives through recursive reconsiderations.

### *Individuality and Relationality: Inside-Out and Outside-In*

The tension between individuality, where a person takes in life experience primarily as a separate entity, and relationality, where life is experienced as connection with others, can be described as an intersubjective process whereby an individual maintains a sense of self while at the same time is aware of, and open to influences of others (Hunt, 1987; Jordan, 1991). According to evolutionary biology, humans have two biological prime directives—to preserve the self as an individual and to preserve the species as a whole. Guisinger and Blatt (1994) argue that these two orientations are dialectically related: ‘individuality (or senses of self) and the sense of relatedness to others develop in a transactional, interrelated, and dialectical manner’ (p.111).

Carl Rogers’ (1961: 22) reflection on his professional and personal life is an insightful example of someone whose selfless act of extending oneself to others is drawn from his very capacity and willingness to be himself:

Yet the paradoxical aspect of my experience is that the more I am simply willing to be myself, in all this complexity of life and the more I am willing to understand and accept the realities in myself and in the other person, the more change seems to be stirred up. It is a very paradoxical thing—to the degree that each one of us is willing to be himself, then he finds not only himself changing; but he finds that other people to whom he relates are also changing. At least this is a very vivid part of my experience, and one of the deepest things I think I have learned in my personal and professional life.

In *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, Belenky et al. (1986) approach intersubjectivity through the concepts of separate and connected knowing. According to their study, separate knowing operates in a primarily comprehensive mode assuming autonomy, extrication of self, and doubt whereas connected knowing assumes relatedness, empathy, use of self, and connection. Their research revealed a more intersubjective way of knowing where learning is a process of:

Weaving together the strands of rational and emotive thought and of integrating objective and subjective knowing. Rather than extricating the self in the acquisition of knowledge, these women used themselves in rising to a new way of thinking. As Adele described it, ‘*You let the inside out and the outside in.*’ (1986: 134–5; emphasis added)

Finally, Gadamer (1994: 104) articulates the value of this approach to conversation as follows:

When one enters into dialogue with another person and then is carried along further by the dialogue, it is no longer the will of the individual person, holding itself back or

exposing itself, that is determinative. Rather, the law of statement and counterstatement in the end plays them into each other. Hence, when a dialogue has succeeded, one is subsequently fulfilled by it, as we say.

The individuals in their conversations create together new ways of understanding as they relate to one another.

What are the implications of this dialectic for our hypothetical executive management team? If team members begin to trust that exploring the perspectives of others and genuinely trying to understand their differences does not mean having to give up their individual preferences and beliefs, it can be easier to listen. Sharing individual perspectives can also become an investment in building long-term relationships that can serve them well on many dimensions over time. Recognizing that they are not limited by having to choose *either* the proposal of the chair *or* a watered down consensus opens wide spaces for brainstorming, scenario planning, and other forms of broad participation. Also, extending the notion of relationality even beyond the team can create more openness to seeking input from people throughout the company.

#### *Status and Solidarity: Positioning and Linking*

The dialectical tension of status and solidarity opens a hospitable space conducive to conversational learning where individuals engage in conversation with mutual respect and understanding. Relationships among human beings, as well as other social animals, can be portrayed as a two-dimensional, interpersonal space of status and solidarity (Schwitzgabel and Kolb, 1974). Status here refers to one's influence and positioning in a group, while solidarity refers to the extent to which one is linked interpersonally with others in a network of relationships. The underlying premise is that some measure of both status and solidarity is necessary to sustain conversation learning. Without some sense of positioning, where one or more participants take the initiative and share expertise and experience, the conversation can lose direction. Without solidarity, where participants build on and link to each other, conversation can lose connection and relevance and not benefit from the diverse perspectives and expertise of each person. At the extreme, succumbing to direction from others because of their status or position leads to an unanswered monologue from the top. With excessive solidarity, talk can be aimless and repetitive. In practice the implications thus call for more shared, peer-like kinds of leadership and facilitation.

Wilber (1995) offers an insightful discussion on this matter. In his view, a living system is made whole by a healthy interaction of hierarchy (positioning) and heterarchy (linking) of its components. A healthy hierarchy contributes to the wholeness and integrative capacity of a living system. Its ultimate goal is the actualization of each individual member as a valuable contributor. This kind of hierarchy turns pathological when its functioning is based on force or threat that results in suppression of individuals, groups, or individual actualization, thus undermining the good of the whole.

In a normal heterarchy, no element is given special importance or dominant position; each element strives to contribute equally to the wholeness of the system. A normal heterarchy becomes pathological when an individual element 'loses itself

in others—and all distinctions, of value or identity are lost . . . Thus pathological heterarchy means not union but fusion; not integration but dissociation; not relating but dissolving' (Wilber, 1995: 23–4).

A similar view is offered by Miller (1986) who identified two fundamentally different types of inequality in relationships—temporary and permanent inequality. *Temporary inequality* permeates the relationship when the *lesser party* is socially defined as unequal for a limited period of time. In this kind of relationship, one person assists another during a period of development. This development, from unequal to equal, is the primary purpose of the relationship. For example, parents assist children to become adults, teachers assist students to become capable graduates and colleagues. The ultimate goal of this type of relationship is to end the inequality. In the second type of unequal relationship, permanent inequality, the goal is to enforce the inequality. Here, individuals or groups are permanently defined as unequal by ascription into categories by class, sex, race, religion, or positional power, for example. The nature and range of these unequal relationships are seen as being 'birthrights' and implicitly assumed by the dominants to be permanent.

Critical to understanding this dialectical tension is the dynamic nature of status and solidarity unfolding in conversation. For example, returning to our executive team, one member may be an expert in a particular area at any given moment. However, his or her position is temporary in that expertise is shared by all team members as the needs for specific knowledge, experience, and perspective shift during conversations. Status as defined by position must be highly flexible and embedded within the network of relationships. The chair will need to deliberately avoid using positional power, however subtle, to force acquiescence from team members. Maintaining the tension of this dialectic does not mean that the preferences and opinions of individuals have to be subsumed to work collaboratively. It does mean that the team will need to develop ways to openly and respectfully express those differences while also earning the mutual trust needed for team work. In their conversations each person both tries to respect the experiences and concerns of people who think differently while also actively participating and sharing their expertise. As the conversational positioning and linking fluctuate, each person over time has the chance to speak openly and to be considered seriously.

This shift in our hypothetical team is also mirrored in major struggles within society as articulated by Anthony Giddens (1998) in his emphasis on the importance of the democratizing of personal and work relationships. According to Giddens, where the rules and norms of society are no longer fixed, sustaining both personal and public conversation and egalitarian relationships is essential for reconciling differences among people without violence. This kind of fundamental mind shift cannot be cursory because for conversational learning, the conversation or 'Dialogue seeks to address the problem of fragmentation not by rearranging the physical components of a conversation but by uncovering and shifting the organic underlying structures that produce it' (Isaacs, 1999: 20). This tenuous balancing of status and solidarity is articulated by Freire (1992: 76):

But while to say the true word . . . is to transform the world, saying that word is not the privilege of some few men, but the right of every man. Consequently, no one can say a

true word alone—nor can he say it for another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words.

A conversational learning space does not favor extreme positioning or extreme linking; it simply acknowledges their qualitative differences as they bring life to conversations by the virtue of their own distinctiveness.

### **The Conversational Learning Space**

Making space for conversation can take many forms—making physical space, such as when a manager moves from behind his or her desk to join colleagues around a table; making temporal space, such as when a family sets aside weekly time for family conversation; or making emotional space through receptive listening. Action research and action strategies that bring theory and practice together to inform each other can offer another space or medium. Both action research and conversational learning are built on premises of increasing participation, continuous learning, and holistic change toward more humane behaviors. Yet unlike action research, conversational learning is intended to be more broadly and contextually adaptable without deliberate intentions to mold or impose specific kinds of change and intervention, or for testing to theorize (Coghlan, 2001; Dickens and Watkins, 1999; Raelin, 1999).

The extreme poles of these five dialectic dimensions define the boundaries of the space within which conversational learning occurs. It is easy to become so focused on the structure of conversation, on what is said, and how speech flows from one participant to another, that one fails to notice the bounded space that holds and shapes the conversation. Some semblance of boundaries is necessary to preserve and make space for structures, just as the process of structuring creates boundaries. The dual knowledge dialectic opens a space where speaking and listening create conversation. Speaking without listening or listening without speaking is futile. Similarly, as Freire points out, reflection without action turns into 'idle chatter', and activism by itself becomes action for action's sake. Discourse without recourse is brute force; recourse without discourse—of course. Extreme individualism, 'I touch no one and no one touches me', can result in alienation, while total relatedness can lead to conversations that go nowhere. Totalitarian authority crushes other voices, while laissez-faire egalitarianism can produce aimless talk. When one pole of any of the dialectics dominates, learning through conversations is impeded and may cease to exist.

Conversational learning as a self-organizing entity cannot exist without a receptive space to hold it. Hence a conversational learning space can be viewed as a tour de force of the dialectic of boundary and structure—between boundaries that define and protect a conversational space and the internal processes and norms that shape the conversational interaction. The conversation can be killed from within, as when, for example, an authoritarian monologue crushes the spirit of other participants. Or it can be destroyed from without by strong rhetorical pre-emptive, prejudice, or prejudgment (see Table 2).

In conversation, a self-monitoring process can be seen in the development of norms. As conversations progress, a normative value core that structures the

**Table 2** Illustration of dialectical extremes

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If Apprehension blocks out Comprehension, then Naiveté
If Comprehension excludes Apprehension, then Rationalism
If Reflection never leads to Action, then Stagnation
If Action is not informed by Reflection, then Activism
If Epistemological Discourse prohibits Ontological Recourse, then Group Think
If Ontological Recourse silences Epistemological Discourse, then Ruminantion
If Individuality refuses Relationality, then Isolation and Alienation
If Relationality overcomes Individuality, then Fusion
If Status crushes Solidarity, then Authoritarianism
If Solidarity overturns Status, then Ethnocentrism

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conversation evolves and at the same time creates boundaries that define the space. These norms determine what can be said and not said, what and who is heard and not heard, who has voice and who does not have voice in the conversation. At the same time, these norms create boundaries that define who is in and who is out of the conversation. Being physically present is distinguished here from having influence. Having influence is distinguished from provoking reaction. Those who do not know the norms or do not abide by or participate in changing the normative patterns can be excluded from the conversation—hence diminishing their influence on the construction of new meaning.

There is a paradoxical quality to conversational boundaries. Initially it seems that they inhibit or block conversation, and indeed conversation across boundaries is often difficult. However, the space created by the boundaries can create enough safety for the open exploration of differences across various dialectical continua. 'From this perspective, boundaries are not confines but "shape-givers" that can provide us with healthy space to grow . . . boundaries are not prisons, rather, they serve an essential function to make our existence more alive and vibrant' (Wyss, 1997: 4). The interrelatedness of these five dialectical processes thus is shape giving and life giving for conversational learning.

## Concluding Thoughts

Understanding is thus an ongoing inquiry of mutual participation among diverse perspectives. In a process of trying to be open to listening to other points of view and the reconsideration of one's own point of view, the integrity of the process of conversational learning emerges. The person cannot remain detached and apart from others or the context. Understanding is gained through ongoing conversations that ask each person to remain open to having his or her own prejudgments (prejudices) challenged—a process distinctly different from an assumption of detachment. In the words of Don Lavoie (1997; email message):

all understanding is 'a matter of interpretation' . . . but it also denies the implication that . . . to be interpreted means it is utterly arbitrary. 'Anything goes' is wrong for physics but it is also wrong for literary interpretations of Hamlet. The difference

between the human and natural sciences is not that one is contextual and interpreted and the other is objective. The difference is that the human sciences are 'doubly interpretive' . . . [and] involved in interpretations of interpretations.

Conversations of openness and listening to learn from diverse points of view are the medium for this 'doubly interpretive' inquiry. This process is challenging and similar to the creation of 'theory in context' articulated by John van Maanen who says that:

The answers—if indeed there are any—must come from the polyphonic voices that comprise our highly diverse field. We must be willing to listen to each other and to listen with respect. The goal is not to control the field . . . or impose a paradigm for self-serving or utilitarian ends. The goal is to learn from one another such that our ink-on-page theories and consequent understandings of organizations can be improved. (1995: 140)

And in that spirit, this article proposes *conversational learning* as an experiential learning process through which people construct meaning together from their experiences. From a theoretical and practical perspective, the holistic complexity of the process draws on the most fundamental simplicity of attending to how we talk to each other.

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