Studying Dialogue – Some Reflections

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In this paper, I would like to share some thoughts provoked by the idea of establishing 'dialogue studies' as a distinct academic field, as suggested in the inaugural call for contributions to the new journal. These are not meant to be exhaustive of all the relevant questions that could be considered under this heading. I do not, for example, consider the question of disciplinary contributions or boundaries. My emphasis, rather, is on questions to do with ethos and coherence. In particular, I am interested in exploring the possibility, and the challenges, of cultivating a dialogic approach to the study of dialogue itself. My reflections begin with a look at the tendency, within academia, to privilege debate as a form of communication and the question of whether we might conceive a *Journal of Dialogue Studies* as a forum for a different kind of exchange. I then reflect on some of the difficulties of studying dialogue itself, particularly where this involves outside observers. The final section raises some issues around 'studying dialogue' in relation to teaching, learning and assessment. My overall intention here is to share some current, tentative thoughts in the hope that this contributes to a dialogue on the idea, and perhaps the practice, of 'dialogue studies'.

I

The idea of establishing 'dialogue studies' as a distinct field of enquiry, and a new journal to provide a forum for scholarship on dialogue, raises some interesting questions. One of the aims for this journal, as stated on its website, is to 'bring together a body of original scholarship on the theory and practice of dialogue that can be critically appraised and debated'. Is there a tension in this statement between the intended subject – dialogue – and the suggested style of communication – debate?

Debate does tend to be the default form of exchange for academic journals, and arguably for academia more generally. We talk about 'academic debates', not 'academic dialogues'. At the same time, one of the most common ways of teasing out what we mean by dialogue is to contrast it with debate – and dialogue tends to emerge from these comparisons as a style of communication that is constructive, reflective, and oriented towards fostering understanding and building relationships, while debate is characterised as combative, unreflective, and oriented towards winning an argument rather than deepening understanding (for examples, see

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Escobar 2011, Herzig and Chasin 2006, Kelly and Cumming 2010, Yankelovich 2001). The claim in these comparisons is not that dialogue avoids disagreement while debate relishes it. Indeed, many people are attracted to dialogue not because they want to escape disagreement but because they are hoping for a more meaningful way of exploring differences. These comparisons do, however, suggest that debate is problematic if the aim is to reach enhanced understanding, both of why we ourselves think and feel in certain ways, and of why others may hold different perspectives.

Despite these observations, dialogue is challenging and perhaps even countercultural to many in academia. Many students and staff, consciously or not, still tend to assume that academic study involves a neutral or objective vantage point, that personal details are irrelevant, and that rational argumentation backed up by evidence, rather than story-telling based on personal experience, is the most appropriate form of communication aimed at increasing knowledge. Moreover, the assumption that 'the best way to demonstrate intellectual prowess is to criticize, find fault, and attack' (Tannen 2000) is widespread if not necessarily articulated as such.

My suggestion here is neither that there is no role for critical debate, nor that there are no alternatives to it – academic study does encourage a multiplicity of perspectives and approaches. What I would like to reflect on, however, is what it might mean to take more dialogic forms of communication seriously not just as a subject of study but as a means of interaction between academics, students and practitioners.

The experience of the 'Programme for a Peaceful City' (PPC) at the University of Bradford suggests that this is not easy – the PPC's attempts to open up spaces in which academics, practitioners and interested citizens could come together to explore some of the difficult issues facing the District faced a number of challenges (Cumming 2012):

> For academics, used to adversarial debate, often in written form, involvement proved … a challenge and it became obvious that participation in face to face spaces to explore disagreement presented a counter cultural challenge to norms of academic engagement. Some of this was exposed when we hosted a discussion on multiculturalism (PPC Annual Meeting 2006). The speakers were Dr Ludi Simpson, known for contesting the very notion of segregation and Professor Ted Cantle, famous for the 'parallel lives' concept and subsequent influence on the 'cohesion' agenda. During the discussion, one academic angrily questioned how we could have invited Dr Simpson, on the grounds that his argument was 'just wrong' and another said he had 'brought things to throw at Ted'. …

One of our responses to these dynamics was to deepen thinking about how to 'challenge ourselves to hear the "other"'. A key reflection from our first five years was that we needed more listening and less talking. Despite using safe space groundrules at the start of every discussion which included 'listening', it was clear that not everyone found this easy. … Many of the discussions that we hosted were on issues where there was clear disagreement, particularly in relation to the key challenges facing Bradford. It became clear that many people, including academics, had personal stories and lived experiences behind arguments that were articulated in discussions and decisions about what research was needed. One academic who repeatedly argued that communities were polarised in Bradford framed his understanding of social divisions in a social psychology perspective looking to 'in group, out group theory'. But in smaller discussion spaces he described very personal struggles with changes experienced in his own locality. His stories included being intimidated by groups of young men in the inner city where he lived, and of feeling inhibited from sunbathing in his garden for fear of causing offence to devout neighbours.

Trying to unpack and understand what lies beneath apparently rational argumentation reveals 'how judgment occurs on several registers, and how much more there is to thinking than argument' (Connolly 1999, 148). I would suggest that to the extent that engaging in dialogue can help to open up more of these registers to understanding and reflection, it is more likely to enhance the capacity for critical analysis than to diminish it – and as Tannen (2000) suggests, it could also counteract those academic tendencies that are 'corrosive to the human spirit'.

This suggestion is not new: There is a wealth of existing thought and experiments that are trying to foster more dialogic modes of education and scholarship, and that can offer both inspiration and the opportunity to learn from experience. Ideas and practices of 'integrative education', for example, encourage both students and academic staff to view themselves and each other as whole human beings, to see education as a multidimensional experience that also engages personal experiences, emotions and values, and to cultivate communities of inquiry and spaces for conversation that allow for the expression and exploration of uncertainty, confusion and genuine disagreement (Palmer and Zajonc 2010). And as Barnett (1997) makes clear, an academic culture that integrates different dimensions of what it means to be human is not about abandoning rigour, but about enabling meaningful and committed critical engagement with knowledge, self and world. The reason these arguments need to continue to be made, however, is that mainstream academic institutions and structures remain far less conducive to dialogic forms of exchange and practice than they could be.

Against this background, it would be interesting to explore whether, or how, the

Journal of Dialogue Studies could experiment with more dialogic ways of being a journal. Rather than defaulting to debate, the journal might try to encourage a more dialogic style of communication. It could, for example, feature dialogic exchanges between theorists and practitioners on a particular theme. The question of what it takes for such exchanges to have dialogic qualities itself needs further reflection.[1] Contributors could, for example, be encouraged to talk about their own assumptions and values before critically unpacking those of others (Yankelovich 2001), and to get away from 'a formula that requires scholars to frame their work in opposition to their predecessors" (Tannen 2002, 1667). More broadly, allowing space for more reflective forms of writing, even if they don't conform to conventional academic formats, might also help to encourage this ethos.[2]

II

My first idea for a submission for this journal was to try doing something along these lines: with colleagues who are themselves experienced dialogue facilitators, we recorded a dialogue between ourselves that would then be transcribed. We did have an honest, stimulating conversation that we all valued. And yet we did not, in the end, feel comfortable submitting this conversation. Reflecting on why we felt this way, I think, throws up some wider questions not just about academic conventions (Tannen 2000; 2002), but also about the idea of 'dialogue studies' as a field of enquiry. Can and should dialogue itself - what happens in conversations that we might call 'dialogue' – be studied?

It could be argued that what an emerging field of 'dialogue studies' now needs is precisely that - in-depth analysis of conversations that qualify as dialogue. There are interesting questions to be pursued here: What actually happens when people come together to engage in dialogue? To what extent do real dialogue processes live up to the hopes and expectations associated with the idea of dialogue? On a micro-level, what are the key factors that shape the direction a conversation takes, the extent to which it does in fact open up new understandings, or its success in developing relationships? How do different facilitation styles and/or different processes shape what interactions take place between participants?

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1   It is interesting, in this context, to note that the Berghof Foundation runs a 'Dialogue Series' that takes the format of a lead article on an issue, followed by responses focused on the same theme. Alongside the framing of these exchanges as 'dialogues', however, the tendency to characterise them as debates (and the tendency for authors to set out their positions as critiques of those of others) remains. See http://www.berghof-handbook.net/dialogue-series/.

2   For an interesting example of experimental writing in an academic journal, see Fetherston (2002). Also worth looking at is Peter Reason's project 'Writing the World' (http://www.peterreason.eu/).

In the field of deliberative democracy, a shift from theoretical arguments for deliberation to practical experimentation and the empirical study of actual deliberative fora has contributed to enhanced understanding of the nature, significance and challenges of deliberative processes (for examples, see Black 2008; 2013, Edwards et. al. 2008, Felicetti et. al. 2012, Fishkin 1997; 2009, Gastil et. al. 2010, Mansbridge et. al. 2006, O'Doherty 2013, Stromer-Galley 2007, Wilson 2008). Similarly, scholars in communication studies[3] have carried out a wealth of empirical studies of patterns of communication as they occur in real life. Should we be aiming to take 'dialogue studies' in a similar direction? In thinking about this, I feel a tension between the sense that a greater emphasis on the empirical study of specific dialogue processes could be helpful in developing our understanding of the factors that encourage or limit dialogic interactions on the one hand (see for example Halabi 2004), and the fear that studying dialogue in this way actually risks undermining the potential for dialogue.

Dialogue, by its nature, is a type of conversation that challenges people to enhance their understanding of themselves and others by sharing and reflecting on deeply held beliefs and values. This, perhaps, is what differentiates dialogue from debate most clearly. For this to become possible, participants need to be able to trust in the process, and to feel that their attempts to articulate what can be very personal thoughts and feelings will be respected as what they often are – tentative and uncertain expressions of thoughts-in-progress rather than fully formulated views.

What happens to the possibility of dialogue if an observer enters into the picture – if dialogue becomes something to be studied? Observers who are not also participants are likely to affect how a conversation feels to those who are in it. The awareness that what you say might end up being analysed and possibly published introduces an additional dynamic that might, I think, run counter to the conditions that encourage genuine dialogue. In our attempt at recording a dialogue for this journal, the 'observer' initially was a voice recorder placed on the table between us. Its presence, though unobtrusive, made it harder to relax into the conversation, and we remained conscious of it throughout. It did not prevent dialogic interactions, but it did, I think, introduce a consciousness that we were 'performing' a dialogue, and that we were carefully considering what to share. Looking at the transcript of our conversation, we felt that it did not capture the richness of our conversation, that the written record of words that were originally spoken, and often spoken

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3   I have come to dialogue via the field of deliberative democracy and am less familiar with communication studies. There are, however, a number of relevant journals, including (but not limited to) *Communication Studies*, *Journal of Communication*, *Communication Research*, *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication*, *Communication Education*.

tentatively and with pauses, did not do justice to what we were trying to articulate and think through. The thought of our conversation, as it was, ending up in a published format wasn't comfortable, partly because this might then be analysed – 'studied' – by an outsider. This set of issues, of course, is not unique to studying dialogue. Versions of it appear in any qualitative research process, raising the need for ethical guidelines. Anonymity, for example, can help to mitigate the sense of vulnerability participants may experience. My personal experience, though, was both that recording a dialogue for a wider audience introduced a dynamic external to the dialogue itself that wasn't helpful, and that a transcription of the recording did not do justice to the conversation. What this suggests, perhaps, is that testing research methods on ourselves, and reflecting on the experience, and on the extent to which we feel happy to be represented in the 'products' of such research, would be a valuable exercise for those of us interested in empirical research on dialogue.

In the conversation we recorded, though, we did talk about dialogue – our understandings of it, our experiences of it, and our learning from experiments with dialogue. We were doing this mostly from the perspectives of facilitators and/or dialogue participants. From these perspectives, it is certainly possible – and valuable - to reflect on dialogue, to identify opportunities and challenges, and to learn from experience. Some approaches to dialogue explicitly encourage participants to observe and reflect on their interactions with others – David Bohm's idea of dialogue as an opportunity for individual and collective observation of thought processes clearly involves the additional step of analysing the experience (Bohm 1996). Bohm and his collaborators (1991) acknowledge that in this process, 'changes do occur because observed thought behaves differently from unobserved thought'. The observers in his proposal, however, are simultaneously participants, not outsiders looking in. Similarly, framing this paper as a piece of communication with readers feels better to me than the idea of readers 'observing' a dialogue from the outside.

The study of dialogue does, in fact, often seem to take the form of sharing experience and reflection. Quite a few of the existing resources that I think are helpful to those who want to engage with, and in, dialogue, are attempts to systematise and share learning that has emerged from practice (e.g. Bhari et. al. 2012, Cumming 2012, Escobar 2011, Halabi 2004, Herzig and Chasin 2006, Holloway 2004, Dialogue Society 2013). Similarly, many dialogue facilitators have an ongoing commitment to reflecting on dialogue practice that comes close to action research. In this sense, there clearly are people engaged in 'studying' dialogue, in reflecting on its possibilities, challenges and limits.

Could we envisage 'dialogue studies' as an invitation to dialogue facilitators and participants to share their observations and reflections on dialogue? Intuitively,

this possibility seems to me to be closer to the spirit of dialogue than the idea of academics specialising in 'dialogue studies' from the perspectives of non-participating observers. As a forum for sharing and reflection, 'dialogue studies' itself could also take the form of an ongoing dialogue or cooperative inquiry (Heron 1996, Reason and Bradbury 2008) that encourages reflection and exchange of learning. It would thus be distinguished from the much more common academic tendency towards debate, argumentation, and the idea of neutral observation.

III

The theme of what it might mean to study dialogue also connects to experiences of teaching and learning in relation to dialogue. When we attempt to engage students in the study of dialogue, are we trying to increase their knowledge of dialogue theory, their capacity to analyse the challenges of dialogue, their ability to contribute to key debates within the field? Or are we also trying to give them opportunities to experience how it feels to participate in – or to facilitate - dialogue, to reflect on their own deep-seated assumptions, and to grapple with the messiness of attempts to promote dialogue under non-ideal conditions?

These possibilities are not, of course, mutually exclusive, and ideally, we might want to develop all of them. After all, engagement with theory and research can inform and enhance reflection on personal experience, and vice versa. In practice, though, there can be tensions between different assumptions and expectations that both students and those teaching them bring to their interactions, and to intended learning opportunities. This was brought home by a recent experience on a module that included three sessions on dialogue. Following an overview of the key characteristics of dialogue and different approaches to how they might be approximated in practice in the first session, the second was intended as an opportunity to experience facilitated dialogue. In the third session, students engaged with a number of scenarios around the dilemmas and challenges of hosting, designing and facilitating dialogic spaces.

The critical incident occurred in the second session, when a few students expressed discomfort and resistance to the invitation to enter into dialogue as participants, stimulating a wider discussion of their expectations of higher education. One student articulated their preference for studying why other people might struggle to discuss difficult issues over discussing difficult issues themselves. In a later debrief, this student suggested that it might have been more useful to have a dialogue simulation in which students played roles rather than a dialogue that they participated in as themselves (and in which they found it very challenging to discuss personal concerns and responses) – in other sessions of the same course, students had taken part in simulations of negotiation and mediation.

My instinctive response to this suggestion was a feeling that dialogue cannot be simulated. The reason I felt this is because I think the idea of dialogue implies sharing, and reflecting on, personal assumptions and values, and the stories and experiences behind those assumptions and values. My own assumption here is that to be meaningful, dialogue needs to be 'genuine' or 'authentic'. The implication is that learning how to engage in dialogue is experiential and reflective – in other words, that it cannot be learned from the outside or at a distance. Seeing dialogue as genuine engagement also means that I am inclined to think of dialogue as antithetical to 'performance', and therefore also as an antidote to the tendency and pressure, not least within academia, to perform – both in the sense of playing roles, and in the ambition to achieve.

Against this background, encouraging students to enter into dialogue – and entering into dialogue with them myself - feels both important and challenging: Important because deeper understanding of ourselves and others might enhance both our ability to engage in future dialogue and generate more thoughtful and reflective academic work (Diaz and Gilchrist 2010, Palmer and Zajonc 2010, Thomas 2010). Challenging because engaging in dialogue entails trusting others with personal experiences and reflections (and it was the risks involved in this, I think, that made it difficult for the students in the incident described above). Challenging, too, because doing this in an educational setting means that pedagogical roles and relationships, and the educational process itself, become 'uncertain' and open to question by any of the participants (Barnett 1997, 110, Burbules and Bruce 2001). In addition to these challenges, the current context and organisation of higher education also mitigates against sharing honest reflections on our own experiences within our institutional settings: As Barnett (1997, 54) observes, '[t]he new managerialism, being concerned to promote each university and to project the university beyond the competition from other universities, and being sensitive to market perceptions of negative publicity, is nervous about academics who speak out about university matters'. Sadly, 'speaking out' can, in practice, include attempts to engage in genuine dialogue with students and colleagues about personal experiences that could and should inform our reflections about the relationships, processes, culture and values that we might aim to embody. The performance of an institutional or professional identity can thus be an obstacle to a dialogue that is real rather than simulated.

But does the idea of 'dialogue' as the antithesis of 'performance' actually stand up to critical scrutiny? In the conversation we recorded, another participant challenged me to reflect on this assumption more carefully. Do participants in a dialogue not consider what to say, how to (re)present themselves and their ideas, what risks to take or not to take, just as much as in other forms of communication? What kinds of contributions are made possible – and which kinds are rendered impossible – by

framing a conversation as 'dialogue'?

While these questions have wider relevance to our understanding of dialogue, I want to explore them here in relation to what might be involved in 'studying dialogue' in the context of teaching and learning. If we are aiming to engage students not just in learning about dialogue, but in learning how to participate in and/or facilitate dialogue, good practice suggests that these learning outcomes need to be assessed alongside knowledge of the field (Wiggins and McTighe 2005). There seems to be a tension here between dialogue as a non-instrumental opportunity for personal and social learning on the one hand, and a set of skills that can be learned, performed, observed and assessed on the other hand.

In my own experience, an experiment with assessing a module on dialogue and deliberation partly through an online dialogue between the students worked fairly well, but suggested that while students did seem to be engaging in dialogue, the quantity and nature of their contributions were also driven by the awareness that they were being assessed – another example where the question of the impact of observation on dialogue becomes relevant. Does this undermine the possibility of 'genuine' dialogue – or, on the contrary, might the additional focus on good 'performance' enhance the quality of conversations? In this context, it is interesting that students noted how the expectation of weekly contributions to the online discussion forum meant that they had worked harder for this module than for others – something that undoubtedly improved the quality of their engagement with each other and with the themes of the course. At the same time, the fact that I was assessing their contributions also made it difficult for me to be a participant, something that further illustrates the challenges of building dialogic qualities into teaching and learning strategies.

Is assessment and certification of facilitation skills likely to improve practice, or might it lead to formulaic performances of sets of skills or particular processes? How can we make space that encourages the freedom to experiment and to acknowledge, and learn from, mistakes? To what extent can the qualities needed to engage in, and/or to facilitate dialogue, be learned or taught? And do moves towards professionalization undermine the recognition of practitioners who have come to dialogue through practice and experimentation rather than certified training?[4]

As 'dialogue studies' develops as an academic field of study, and as dialogue facilitation becomes professionalised, it would be helpful for educators, students and practitioners to reflect on these sorts of questions together – this too, I would suggest, could be one of the functions of a *Journal of Dialogue Studies*.

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4   This is another issue that came up in my conversation with dialogue facilitators.

In this paper, I have raised some questions for reflection on what it might mean to 'study dialogue', and in particular on some of the challenges this involves for those of us working in academic settings. These have included the question of whether and how the styles of communication that are valued, practiced and encouraged in a field of 'dialogue studies' could and should themselves approximate dialogue, a reflection on some of the risks involved in studying dialogue itself, and some thoughts on the tensions educators and students might experience in teaching and learning (about) dialogue in academic settings. For myself, as perhaps for others, the thoughts and experiences I have tried to share throw up more questions than conclusive answers. Like most contributions to dialogue, then, these reflections are intended as open-ended thoughts-in-progress, with an invitation to others to turn this into a conversation.

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