



CHAPTER 4

A SAMPLE DIALOGUE

ON "THE ROMAN SYSTEM"

The best way to learn about Dialogue is to participate in a series of conversations with an experienced facilitator. When you do this, you gain insights from other participants, the facilitator, and the process itself. Such personal experience makes the ideas discussed in this book more meaningful.

But if you have had little or no such experience, how can this book make sense?

Good news! This chapter is intended especially for those who have never witnessed an experienced Dialogue group. The transcript of an actual group conversation has been edited for clarity and annotated to highlight aspects of the process demonstrated by the group's interaction.

Studying these notes carefully will be equivalent to several facilitated sessions in person.

Dialogue involves learning to maintain two areas of attention: *content* and *process*. *Content* refers to the flow of ideas; *process* to the group dynamics. Remaining aware of both simultaneously improves the quality of conversation. You will probably need guided practice to do this comfortably. If you are new to this mode of conversation, I encourage you to study this chapter carefully. When the flow of ideas and group dynamics becomes clear, the rest of the book will be more meaningful.

As a reader, you can slow down or stop reading in order to closely observe what's happening. This advantage is offset by the limitations of the printed page. You won't have the full experience of being in the room, and can't add your own thoughts to the conversation. I'll suggest some ways to overcome these limitations as much as possible.

Although people in the conversation can't hear your comments, I invite you to respond—silently, if not aloud. Consider what you might say in a given moment. Imagine your comments create a parallel universe where the conversation diverges into a different time-stream because of the insightfulness of your contribution.

Being present in the room would entail a full range of sensory experience. Most important are sight, sound, and feeling. Please keep in mind when you read this transcript that you will be limited to sight (visual information) and the meaning of the words. You won't be able to perceive the shades of meaning conveyed by the tonality of voices (auditory information) or the feelings (kinesthetic information) communicated in the room.

For the most satisfying vicarious experience, please remember that the following aspects of Dialogue do not appear on the page:

Pace of the conversation

The following conversation was transcribed from a tape recording, which duplicates its leisurely pace. Participants speak slowly and thoughtfully. Pauses between comments indicate everyone's thinking about what they've just heard. Slow, thoughtful pacing is characteristic of Dialogue.

Full curve of the conversation

You won't read the whole conversation (which is twice as long). You won't hear all the thoughts which connect, amplify, and clarify those printed here. You'll miss some of the rich tapestry of meaning which constitutes the joy of Dialogue

The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Remember, you are only reading some of the parts.

Rapport between the participants

Conversations between people who Dialogue together become more comfortable and relaxed. This familiarity can be heard in the tone of voice—relaxed, calm, and gentle—and in the easy, spontaneous laughter.

Participants hearing the tape recall an atmosphere of respectful collegiality, in which they took a pleasant and stimulating time-out to explore ideas which mattered to them.

Absence of argument

Noticing something which *isn't there* can be difficult, so this bears mention. Dialogue contains different perspectives on an issue—including opposing or contradictory opinions. These are handled in ways which are not polarized or argumentative.

In Dialogue, we try to understand all perspectives. Rather than arguing or opposing, we ask a question in order to better understand a divergent viewpoint.

As you read this conversation, imagine you're sitting with friends who are all comfortable with each other. Everyone's relaxed and feels secure enough to say anything that seems relevant. No one fears being judged, put down, or attacked for anything they might say. Everyone expects to grow closer in mutual respect and understanding by the end of the conversation.

The text for the following Dialogue is “The Roman System” by Richard Mitchell. You’ll find a copy in Appendix C. Before the original Dialogue session, each participant read the text carefully—more than once—before meeting to explore it. Take the time to read it at least once before examining what they said about it.



*Here begins the Sample Dialogue on “The Roman System.”
Numbers refer to notes on the opposite page.*

PHILLIP (Facilitator): Since this is the last Dialogue of this workshop, I am going to ask us to try to maintain our focus on a core question, as a sort of center of gravity of our conversation. Okay?

There are nods and murmurs of agreement around the circle.

Mitchell makes a strong case for the potency of the Roman System: it has been with us a long time; we really like it; it is subtle; it co-opts any attempts to change it. At the same time, he weaves a thread of thought that perhaps there is another mode of life possible, which exists without domination.

The question I am asking us to entertain is: “What degree of hope does he provide that it’s possible: first, to imagine a system which exists without domination; then, to achieve it in some fashion?” ¹

RACHEL: Well, I guess I’m going to start. When I was reading this, it reminded me of comparing the three columns yesterday—comparing the Socratic Seminar with lecturing and how the lecture is very efficient when you have 500 students to teach in an hour. But if you can work with smaller numbers, you can get a deeper understanding with the seminar technique. ^{2a}

And the Roman System was an extremely efficient system for large groups of people. It dominated huge groups of people and lasted a long time, with huge cities and very well organized. I know a lot of people liked it, but it did have a certain lack of freedom for someone who didn’t want to fit into that system.



Notes on Sample Dialogue on “The Roman System”

Note: Terms highlighted in bold are specific to Dialogue. Many are previewed in Chapter 3: Behavior Specific to Dialogue.

- 1 The facilitator asks an open-ended question, which invites a wide range of responses but suggests none in particular. How open-ended do you find the question to be? Since you have read the text—right?—stop for a moment and consider how you’d respond.
- 2a “Three columns” refers to *Key 1: Three Kinds of Teaching and Learning*, which can be summarized as: 1) lecturing, 2) coaching skill development, and 3) facilitating Dialogue.

When you compare it with the Greek system, the Athenian Greeks seemed more like the third column. That was a surprisingly small group of people which changed the world forever, and there was a huge amount of freedom, especially for women—probably more there than anywhere in antiquity—at least until today.

And so, when you ask, “Is there another system?”, I think the Greeks had a very good system. It didn’t last very long, but it certainly gave a lot of freedom to people. ^{2b}

PHILLIP: So you are suggesting that scale, or size, is an important factor? ³

RACHEL: Yes. Think of a city like New York city, where the more people you have the more rules you need. You could break up New York into the seven boroughs, but you still need more rules and regulations. You see that in San Diego from just twenty years ago, how everything needs to get more organized when you have more people, unless you break it up into sub-units. That was my thought.

PHILLIP: Isn’t that part of the Roman system, though, that it very efficiently breaks things up into units, and sub-units, and sub-sub-units? ⁴

RACHEL: But there is still the Roman soldier right there, making sure that the system holds together; while the Greeks didn’t have that sword held quite so obviously. I’m sure there was a certain amount of that; if you robbed someone there was a price to pay, but they didn’t have to demonstrate the threat quite so strongly. I think that was because people felt it was fair; they felt they had a say in what their outcome was.

And that was democracy. I think that’s what Thoreau was talking about as the ultimate democracy.

Long pause as everyone considers what they’ve just heard. ⁵

JOSH: I was reacting to a couple of assumptions that I hear. I think this is related to what Rachel was saying. First of all, the assumption that organization is necessarily this power-driven Roman thing. And I also thought of the Greek democracy, where it was able to work for a very short period of time, because there was among the free males

- 2b Does she actually respond to the question the facilitator asked? Do her comments move the conversation forward?
- 3 The facilitator **paraphrases** or **summarizes** Rachel’s comments as a question in order to make sure everyone understands what she means.
- 4 The facilitator again tries to grasp the thrust of her comment, while **connecting** it to ideas in the text.
- 5 Some participants may be wondering how Rachel’s comments relate to the **opening question**, and how they should respond. (Did Rachel address the question or go off on a tangent? How do we know if it *is* a tangent, or an important contribution?) Often, it’s only after several participants have spoken that most of the group gets a sense of how the question has touched them and where they want to go with it.