



## CHAPTER 1

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF DIALOGUE

### Dialogue is an Ancient Practice

While the benefits of Dialogue have been known since before the dawn of history, it has usually been practiced only by the elite—seldom by the masses. In America today, most adults are unaware that Dialogue is a form of conversation with the power to transform lives and organizations. Many associate the word with philosophy departments, celebrity talk shows, and international diplomacy—places too lofty and inaccessible for most of us. This is a shame, since Dialogue is as natural to human beings as eating, sleeping, and breathing—if we have had the opportunity to watch others do it well, and to develop our innate abilities.

The Greek philosopher Socrates modelled a type of teaching in Athens in the 5th century BC which has been esteemed and emulated

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ever since. He was willing to learn with anyone. Not teach them—but learn with them, asking interesting questions that inspired the person find his own answers. Socrates' questions helped his companion make new connections and forced him to examine the validity of his convictions. The Socratic method, when practiced with a spirit of equality, has a power to deepen and transform understanding. (The Socratic method as practiced in law schools is more aggressively confrontative.)

Unfortunately, since the time of Socrates, philosophy has become increasingly obscure and removed from everyday life. For the ancient Greeks, philosophy was a method of inquiry into the nature of things they considered most important. Not an abstruse body of intellectual *content*, philosophy was a *method* of inquiry. Less a matter of *what* to learn than *how* to learn.

In what we now call the Socratic method of teaching, pouring facts into a student's mind takes a back seat to drawing out a deeper understanding of what is already there. In a group Dialogue, members help one another reconsider, reevaluate, and reassemble bits of information they already have, integrating them into a new, more inclusive whole.

Plato, a student of Socrates, immortalized his teacher by transcribing some of his Dialogues. In *The Republic*, he describes a plan for the education and training of the Philosopher-King. This term has two meanings: externally, it means that individual best qualified by nobility of spirit to govern the city-state; internally, it means the soul of any individual, that part best qualified to govern one's life. Thus, in the second meaning, the education of the Philosopher-King applies to each of us.

Plato describes Dialogue as the pinnacle of the Philosopher-King's education. After years of study of literature, music, mathematics, and science, the practice of Dialogue enabled him to synthesize all his learning, ascending to the heights of human wisdom. It was a means of attaining Enlightenment.

### Dialogue Today

Today, in the dawn of the new millennium, many corporations are rediscovering the power of Dialogue as they rethink and restructure their operations. Peter Senge, Director of the Center for Organizational

Learning at MIT, is a consultant who helps large corporations apply the power of Dialogue to develop their organizations. William Isaacs, the founder of the DIALOGOS consulting firm, is another. Their work clearly demonstrates that Dialogue increases common understanding and mutual respect, and produces valuable new insights. Gaining fresh, dynamic perspectives on the problems they face, Dialogue participants are better equipped to find effective solutions. Organizations improve their effectiveness and productivity, as well as the morale of their members.

Nuclear physicist David Bohm was a colleague of Albert Einstein and Neils Bohr. In his subsequent collaboration with Indian philosopher Krishnamurti, he excelled in the practice of Dialogue. At different locations around the world, and using no text, he led large, heterogeneous community groups. He felt that any group of about forty is a microcosm of humanity; addressing issues which come up in such a group helps humanity heal and grow. Bohm wrote many books about conversation in groups, most notably *On Dialogue*. His work inspired many, including Peter Senge.

Mortimer Adler was the Chairman of the Board of Editors of the Encyclopedia Britannica. In 1952, he helped found the Great Books Program, based on a collection of the most important books of Western Civilization. Adler included a method for exploring these books, a form of Dialogue called the Great Books Discussion.

Adler was also instrumental in the formation of the Aspen Institute, which made the Great Books Discussions available to community leaders in a different setting. Since 1949, the Aspen Institute has provided intellectual renewal for business and political leaders from around the world. The content is drawn from the Great Books; the method is Dialogue. Participants don't spend thousands of dollars a week to enjoy the stunning backdrop of the Colorado Rockies. What draws them like bears to honey is the stimulation of a level of conversation they can't find elsewhere.

Human beings can be subject to many forms of deprivation. Lack of adequate nutrition causes loss of general health and vitality. Lack of oxygen produces mental dullness and torpor. Lack of contact with nature results in a general decrease in well-being. These facts are well known.

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Fortunately, these effects are easily corrected by supplying the missing nutrient: food, oxygen, or beautiful scenery.

The fact that human beings may suffer from lack of stimulating conversation is less well recognized. Visitors leaving the Aspen Institute remark on feeling reinvigorated—as though they had been deprived of something, but unaware of a gradually diminishing zest for life. They discover that a good dose of Dialogue is as beneficial as a dose of pure oxygen, a regimen of vitamins, or time spent in the grandeur of Nature. After engaging with others from outside their workplace, they return to work reinvigorated to meet their tasks with new energy and insight. Their enthusiasm convinces friends and colleagues to enroll in the programs, so they too can enjoy this transformative experience.

Mortimer Adler wrote many books on philosophy and education. His *How to Read a Book* is a fascinating demonstration of how to read and think critically. In the early 1980's, he chaired a think tank which produced *The Paideia Proposal*, a plan for revitalizing American education. Anticipating the publication of *A Nation at Risk* by a year, *The Paideia Proposal* said that our nation could do a much better job of preparing our young people to be citizens of a democracy. Democracy requires citizens who can think deeply and critically about the issues which affect them; citizens who can think independently without being swayed by advertising, peer pressure, or other forms of manipulation. The Paideia Program outlined a model of schooling which included Paideia Seminars, a form of Dialogue. (*Key 1: Three Kinds of Teaching and Learning*, is a restatement of the Paideia model.) With headquarters at the University of North Carolina, the Paideia School Network continues today, and includes hundreds of schools in ten different states.

Ted Sizer and Dennis Gray were two noteworthy members of the Paideia Group. Ted Sizer went on to found the Coalition of Essential Schools, a successful program for reforming high school education. Dennis Gray travelled around the country training teachers to lead Socratic Seminars, a type of conversation based on the Paideia Seminar. Gray observed that many aspects of the Paideia Program were already being practiced by the better schools; the crucial missing element was the Seminar. Socratic Seminars are a form of Dialogue in which students learn to think critically as a team, delving into important content more

deeply than in typical classroom discussions. (Dennis Gray trained me in this discipline and has been my mentor for many years).

Ted Sizer wrote an influential book called *Horace's Compromise*, which paints a bleak picture of life in a typical high school. Drawn from hundreds of observations and interviews, Sizer describes the life and work of a composite high school teacher. In Horace's school, most students are unmotivated; they feel lost in a large, impersonal institution and fail to see the connection between different courses, or the relevance to their lives.

Sizer subsequently founded the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES), based upon a set of ten Common Principles, philosophically similar to the Paideia Program. The first Principle says that—rather than memorizing volumes of unconnected facts—students should “learn to use their minds well.” This prepares them for a lifetime of learning and the likelihood of several different careers. CES schools use a variety of methods, such as block scheduling, team teaching, and project-based learning to train students to think critically while doing important work.

Peter Senge, a professor at MIT's Center for Organizational Learning, wrote a book entitled *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (1990). Although it describes Senge's method for helping multinational corporations become more effective, the book was enthusiastically received by educators involved in school restructuring.

Senge's work draws strongly on the field of systems thinking. Indeed, his fifth discipline is Systems Thinking, in which changes are made only after considering their impact on every component of a complex, interconnected system. His fourth discipline, Team Learning, a form of Dialogue inspired by the work of David Bohm, is important reading for anyone interested in Dialogue.

### **The Invisible School**

I founded *The Invisible School (TIS)* in 1993 as “Socratic Seminars West” and began offering Socratic Seminar workshops and training throughout California. *The Dialogue Game (TDG)* was developed to help classroom teachers learn to facilitate Dialogue. The method was refined for ten years to reach its present form.