Chapter IV

The Human Centrality of Conversational Learning

Gary McIntyre Boyd
Concordia University, Canada

ABSTRACT

More responsible and potent world-wide distributed cybersystemic education is now essential for the survival of eudemonic human being. The main thrust of this chapter is that multi-level multi-perspectival learning conversations supported by manipulatable realia workspaces are essential for potent and responsible education. Three types of conversation: (1) about why this is being learned, (2) about what this amounts to, and (3) about how to better learn, are (after Harri-Augstein & Thomas, 1991) taken as primary. And employed to construct the argument for using and improving versions of learning support ventures based on Gordon Pask's conversation theory. Roy Bhaskar's Meta-Reality Philosophy provides an appealing novel approach toward legitimating the whole collective undertaking.

INTRODUCTION

What This Chapter Is For

Right at the outset it is being stated that the intention is to affect your thinking and behaviour to improve the appropriateness and effectiveness of your learning and teaching; specifically so that when there are opportunities for wonderful teachable/performable experiences you will ar- range to realize them and to complement them with well-framed well supported learning conversations. This whole chapter is really a venture into the why and how you should learn to use and can learn to improve conversation theory framed learning conversations. Here more specifically are the three principal reasons for the commending the conversational learning framework to you: (1) to help you overcome the endemic self-other and either-or mindset dualisms which afflict our

culture so badly (Bhaskar, 2002), (2) to help you creatively design better learning support activity systems (Laurillard, 2002), and (3) to help you critique and re-shape various currently fashionable instructional design ventures strategies and techniques to better meet the desperate collective needs and the most hopeful aspirations (Boyd, 2006).

Human Becoming: A First-Order Functional Model

The main processes of the evolution of human-being are two: (1) Darwinian variation & environmental rejection of genes leaving those which best propagated in particular niches at particular times and (2) Lamarkian evolution of linguistically created memes. The latter involves deliberate creative introduction of new forms which if they attract & hold the attention of high-status tribal (religious, political, scientific, etc.) leaders become widely reproduced and thus survive as important interlocking components of various cultural (transvidual) meme-plexes (Brodie,1996).

Biologically, what has evolved to be 'right' for human-beings, and what usually feels good, even exhilarating, (What I call 'the ought that is') is whatever is done to improve the apparent probable propagatability of genetic and especially of memetic identities. Whatever is done to conjugate and propagate "chunks" of ourselves, of the action repertoires, in ways which seem to offer indefinite continuation (i.e., both genetic & meme-plex this-worldly immortality) feels very satisfying. Too simply put, we are soulstuffers; we stuff up our own souls with stuff that has intimations of earthly immortality and then we try to stuff this up others' souls. We are essentially "soulstuff" learner teachers who try to clone the best bits of ourselves into likely others. At best we are delightful lovers and good parents, at worst pathetic addicts and ruthless pushers. The other side of this struggle is that we each try to avoid acquiring memes which do not fit well with our already cherished identity memeplexes. Much of the pain in schooling originates because what teachers are pushing is incompatible with what the peer group is living out.

The central prediction of this theory is that any situation in which it seems to the actors that they can act to infect other carriers with important chunks of their own identity will be highly motivating toward such "pusher" action. Of course, available energy, noise, and conflicts between propagative opportunities, meme-plexes, and actors will co-determine the actual outcome. Unfortunately, what immediately seems bio-memetically satisfyingly propagatively 'right' to do for some particular human actors, may be tragically self-defeating or even evil when viewed from a wider or longer-term perspective. This is not to imply that any one, even transvidual, actor is omniscient and prescient enough to pronounce generally on what is good or evil (Becker, 1975). To survive together on this small planet, however, we must try to establish consensus to filter out the most pathological memeplexes. The best way to do this is probably through computer communications supported non-dominative legitimative discourse networks (Boyd, 1987).

Conversation and Discourse

Conversation broadly understood is characterized by a certain freedom and flexibility, openness to inspiration, acceptance of obdurate silences, and generally good will. By comparison, formal discourse is necessarily constrained and debates are intrinsically incessantly competitive. A certain amount of competition for admiration based on creative surprises, and a good deal of seriousness are welcome in conversation, but too much earnestness or combativeness destroys conversation altogether—as does too much frivolity. Some conversations are mainly an expression of togetherness and mutual satisfaction or even mutual admiration, they are "*life-world*"

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