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# Dialogic OD in Practice

## Conversational Approaches to Change in a UK Primary School

By Stefan Cantore and Wendy Hick

### Setting the Scene

This case study explores what Dialogic OD (Bushe & Marshak, 2009) looks and feels like in practice from the perspective of a client and an OD consultant. It charts the development of a working relationship between Stefan Cantore, a conversational consultant, and Wendy Hick, the recently appointed Headteacher of Manorfield Primary School, London, UK during 2012, and a Dialogic intervention they planned and delivered together. Each contributes their own narrative in the style of a conversation. Editing has been kept to a minimum to retain the richness and uniqueness of each perspective.

### Context

Manorfield Primary School is a larger than the average primary school located in the East End of London. The number of pupils is increasing and there are approximately 650 pupils and 87 staff at present. The proportion of pupils from minority ethnic groups is very high. The largest ethnic group is of Bangladeshi heritage and the next largest group White British. The proportion of pupils known to be eligible for free school meals is more than twice the national average. The proportion of disabled pupils and those with special educational needs is also higher than the national average. Most of these difficulties relate to speech, language, and communication needs. The school meets the current “floor” standard set by the government for pupils’ performance (60% of the children

reaching a basic level in English and Math at age 11, and where children make below average progress between 7 and 11).

In February 2012 the school went into “special measures.” The Schools Inspections agency considered that the school failed to supply an acceptable level of education and appeared to lack the leadership capacity necessary to secure improvements. Wendy Hick was appointed as Executive Headteacher for an interim period in order to help the school to improve and raise standards.

*Wendy (WH): Stefan, can you describe how you came to be a Dialogic OD practitioner and something about your approach?*

Towards the end of a 20+ year career in healthcare management I took on a system transformation project that prompted me to reflect deeply, perhaps for the first time, on what was most impactful in my leadership and support for change. I came to the conclusion that the conversations I encouraged amongst professionals seemed to make the most difference. For me, a dialogic approach means hosting both one to one conversations with clients as well as group or organisation-wide conversations helped along by processes like World Café (Brown & Isaacs, 2005) and Open Space (Owen, 2008). I use the term *hosting* deliberately and prefer it to using the term *consultant* that tends to imply, in my mind, a more expert advisory role than that of host which offers more possibility of a co-created process emerging between myself and those I am invited to work with.

A conversational host pays attention to how spaces are co-created in which mind-to-mind and heart-to-heart exchanges generate new shared futures.

Underpinning my practice is a growing appreciation of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008; Lewis, Passmore, & Cantore, 2008) as both a philosophy informing my thinking and a set of processes that effectively contributes to my work. By weaving Appreciative Inquiry (AI) with conversational processes I sense new opportunities to be of service to people.

*Stefan (SC): Wendy can you please tell me about your background, interests, and what brought you to Manorfield.*

I am currently the Interim Executive Head Teacher for Manorfield Primary School and Kobi Nazrul Primary school in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. I have been in the teaching profession for 18 years and in that time I have held a variety of posts that have equipped me well for school leadership. This has included consultancy work, school improvement work, and training and developing others. A particular interest of mine that has emerged from my studies at University of East London (UEL) is using Appreciative Inquiry as a means of developing staff. In retrospect, this is the approach that I used at Kobi Nazrul primary school to lead the school into being a successful primary school. I didn't originally set out to use this particular approach. I did, however, set out with the intention to build a solutions focused team who incorporated open questions and active listening into their approach.

*SC: Wendy what did you find when you arrived at the School (strengths and challenges) and what did you decide needed to happen? What then led you to make contact with me?*

When I arrived at Manorfield I used the experience from my previous headship to establish structures and systems. This time, however, I was keen to be more explicit about using coaching (including Appreciative Inquiry) as an approach to

develop the staff and pupils. This was, therefore, clearly outlined in the school improvement plan. Having met you, Stefan, at UEL, I approached you initially to discuss ideas for a whole school INSET (staff development day) for about 100 people. It was important that I set the scene for the conversational approach with the staff from the outset of my Headship there. As Manorfield school was in special measures there was a real tension with quick fix approaches as opposed to giving the staff a voice. I felt that listening to staff and beginning to build a culture of professional dialogue was absolutely necessary.

### **Beginning the Work**

*WH: Stefan, can you remember our early conversations about Manorfield? What particularly struck you as we spoke? How did what I describe connect with your own interests in conversational OD?*

We first spoke in the context of a staff development day you were planning on April 20. You had asked me via a colleague if I would be available to help facilitate the day. I remember your enthusiasm about the potential of the staff at Manorfield. You spoke of previous experiences in changing attitudes and behaviours of staff at one of your previous schools and how you found that a very rewarding experience. We also talked about a session I led in 2011 on Appreciative Inquiry during your Coaching Masters program. There was a sense you had that we were on the same wavelength in our approach to leading change. You talked specifically about developing a coaching culture in the school and using coaching as a process for transformation. I am not sure that either of us knew quite what that might look like but it did not seem to matter. Indeed, I really found your willingness, Wendy, to stay with the uncertainty about what might emerge as really exciting. I have learned that if a client is open to the unknown, holding lightly to specific processes and frameworks, then this augurs well for something really interesting to be co-created. I thought that you were offering the opportunity to inquire with you into what would work

best for the school. I really warmed to your desire for us to work in partnership. I sensed freedom and potential emerging in our early contact. As I shared some initial ideas and we bounced them between us you signalled your interest and willingness to take fair risks, and this left me excited at what conversational approaches might take shape. You also signalled that you saw this as a long term project rather than a one off assignment and that also opened up new possibilities in my mind.

*SC: That's my perception, Wendy, but what was important to you in our conversations? What did you see in what I offered as a dialogic consultant as being relevant to your own situation and the needs of Manorfield?*

I use open questions to promote reflection and dialogue a lot in the training that I deliver to staff. Also, I use collaborative group techniques to allow for greater interactions. I was therefore really interested in the World Café approach during my early conversations with you. I had not heard of this approach before and it fitted well with my own style of delivering training. An important factor for me in our initial discussions was discussing and mulling over ideas and you guiding me with framing the most important questions to ask. The use of questions to promote conversation was absolutely key and you used questioning and active listening techniques with me also to best understand what my aims were for developing the staff.

### **Planning and Hosting Conversations for the School Staff**

*WH: Stefan, can you describe the process you went through to come up with the proposed design for the staff engagement day? What were the principles, practices, and processes that you wove together to come up with your initial proposal?*

It began with carefully listening to all that you said to me in our initial telephone conversation. I was less concerned about the facts and more attentive to what I sensed or heard behind the narrative. I was paying attention to language and the

description of relationships, attitudes, and behaviors. I was interested in your reaction to the school and how it triggered various thoughts and feelings for you. As you spoke I sensed in myself a series of reactions. Sometimes empathy with the staff and children, sometimes for you, and sometimes recollections of my own life experiences that resonated with the situation. All of this data enabled me to access my own thoughts about the questions that staff might be asking during this difficult time in the school's life, and indeed for some in their own professional lives. Prior to speaking with you I looked

- » Share the context for the day and the overall approach to development.
- » Give people an opportunity to experience a different approach to change.
- » Identify key actions that will enable transformational improvement in relationships and outcomes for pupils and staff.
- » Secure the support of staff and governors for change.
- » Help people see the strengths and resources they have available to them and understand how they might begin to use them for the benefit of the whole school.

**In this case, Wendy, I recall you thought the staff and external stakeholders, like the local education authority, would feel much more confident in the future direction of the school if there were some clear recorded outcomes. In Dialogic OD the conversational processes and the changes that happen within them are the key focus. Holding to the familiar in peoples' experience as they engage in conversational change also seems important. In designing days like this the skill is in holding, with the leader, the tension between the old ways and the emerging new.**

at the school website to get a feel for the language and colors and people represented there. I reflected on the aspirations staff might have for themselves and for the children. I wondered what the local community needed the school to be in the future. All these thoughts and impressions I held as I stepped back to take a reflexive position, to consider how and why I was reacting to what I was hearing. This deep listening was fundamental to developing a sense of what might be useful to offer you.

After our call and my reflections I jotted down some outline objectives/outcomes for the development day:

#### **Objectives**

- » Encourage people to speak with one another about the things that are important to them.

These objectives I think reflect the tensions I sense in working dialogically. At one level, for me, the conversations between staff around questions that matter are the work. If that happens, well then I am content that what needs to happen later will manifest itself. I personally have no pre-occupation with action lists in the context of relational changes. They can feel like a distraction. In this case, Wendy, I recall you thought the staff and external stakeholders, like the local education authority, would feel much more confident in the future direction of the school if there were some clear recorded outcomes. In Dialogic OD the conversational processes and the changes that happen within them are the key focus. Holding to the familiar in peoples' experience as they engage in conversational change also seems important. In designing days like this the skill is in holding, with the leader,

the tension between the old ways and the emerging new.

The objectives demonstrated our mutual intention to focus on strengths and to do all we could to help the staff to do likewise. There was plenty in the school's recent past to talk about from a problem solving perspective. Instead we discussed the need for staff to use their energies to converse about the future rather than contemplate what went wrong. Our interest was not in training people in a particular approach like Appreciative Inquiry, although we have talked about that as a possibility for future leadership development activities, but rather to use it to help shape the philosophy and language of the day.

One interesting feature of the day is that I was only able to be present in the afternoon. Wendy, you were more than willing to host the morning World Café. I remember you saying how much the process I suggested fitted with your own previous experience. The main work for both of us was therefore less about the technicalities of the process and more about framing the questions that would form the focus for the conversations. I sent you a number of options and you picked the one that you thought best fitted with the intention of the day. This was, for me, a great example of co-creativity in a Dialogic OD process.

At the end of the morning we included some silent reflection time and I offered a few questions to guide people in their thoughts. I am always struck how this is often a particular help for people whose preference is to reflect on ideas before speaking. It also gave acknowledgement on this day to your desire to build a coaching approach to how relationships develop in the school in the future. I thought that getting people used to reflecting in response to open questions would help achieve that aim, at a least a little.

The day was designed to be a blend of World Café and Appreciative Inquiry. My reasoning, on reflection, was that World Café, through its cycles of movement between tables, enables people to connect and have conversations that may never have happened before. Quite simply it would give an opportunity for everyone

to speak and be listened to. Appreciative Inquiry enables people to both feel comfortable that an action list will emerge whilst continuing to engage in conversations around questions that matter to them. An afternoon is a very short amount of time to cover all the four elements of Appreciative Inquiry, Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny, and yet a time limit adds momentum and focus to the conversations. What I like about the last stage, Destiny, is that it is very suited to having the whole group in a large circle with individuals speaking, as they feel able, into the community to commit to some next steps.

*SC: Wendy, what was your reaction to my suggestions and do you recall how you shaped the final design? What knowledge did you use to make your own judgements?*

Your suggestion, Stefan, to host a World Café style event resonated with me. I particularly liked the structure of the AI approach and could visualize how the day would flow. The planning of the questions was fundamental. The structure of the day was important as it allowed for flexibility if staff needed to have longer conversations. The support that you offered helped me to structure the day although I did start the day with some VIA strengths work (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and personal discussion, which helped it to get off to a positive start. One of the most useful aspects in the design of the day was to have creative conversational support from you (particularly as you are not directly involved with primary education).

### Plan for the Day

Table 1 (next page) sets out the plan for the day. I sent it to Wendy to enable her to make some choices about questions and format.

### Learning from the Day

*SC: Wendy, what happened for you and the staff on the Development Day? What were the highlights and where could we have improved upon our design? What did you observe about*

*my behavior and how would you say that differed from conventional facilitation?*

You did not attend the morning session, Stefan, but when you arrived you fitted into co-hosting the session seamlessly. I feel this was due, in part, to the fact that we had planned the session so well together. The staff felt truly empowered by the day and commented on the fact that they had never had the opportunity to talk and interact with each other like this before. This was an important starting point for me as I am focused on developing a coaching culture

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throughout the school. An extremely important part of the afternoon session for me was when they were in discussion and you asked me coaching style questions about the staff. For example, you asked me to reflect on their energy and their use of body language. This was powerful indeed as often one is caught up with delivering training and not always reflective enough on one's own practice.

*WH: How did the day go for you Stefan? What did you observe and what did you learn?*

I remember wondering on the car journey up to London, given that I was not present in the morning, if things had gone as we had hoped. I definitely need not have had any level of anxiety. I have vivid memories of arriving at the school hall and being almost overwhelmed by the noise of the conversations! The whole room was buzzing and the body language of participants

demonstrated very high levels of engagement. You mentioned that it had been like that all morning. It had been as if this huge amount of energy had been pent up for a long time and now found a space in which to express itself. The afternoon hosting of the Appreciative Inquiry process largely took care of itself. I learned that the process must be the servant of the participants rather than my treasured possession to hold onto at all costs. It is, I confess, how I feel at times after spending much effort of designing a day. On this day people were in a flow and I thought our role was to sup-

port them. I remember helping with pens and paper for tables as well as looking after some of the refreshments. These tasks are an integral aspect of hosting and not a chore.

It struck me how seamless our thinking and acting during the event appeared, at least to me. Co-design and co-hosting were I think truly modeled by us. I found myself relaxing and enjoying the passion and liveliness of the people in the room. I was again reminded that in Dialogic OD 95% of the work is in building the relationship with the client and in careful listening and preparation. The remaining 5% is in bringing yourself and your willingness to serve on the day.

*WH: Stefan, what did you learn through the experience of working with me and the staff at Manorfield?*

It was great meeting someone like you Wendy who really gets dialogic approaches

Table 1: Draft Plan for the 20th April Development Day

TIME	ACTIVITY	WHO/RESOURCE
10:00-10:15	Welcome, outline of day and objectives, brief table check-in: » One thing you are pleased about today. » One thing you would like to experience today.	WH
10:15-10:30	Setting the context/background to the day/personal reflections	WH
10:30-10:35	Explanation of World Café approach, the value of conversation; encourage people to have fun at the tables etc.	WH+ world café materials already on the tables
10:35-11:15 Round 1	<b>The Manorfield Development Café is open</b> Ask someone at the tables to volunteer to be the host for the table (and draw attention to the one copy of host guidelines on each table; also ask people to look at the café etiquette and have a few copies of those on the table; it is worth reading each point out). The question on the table is something like: » What strengths do we have individually and collectively that will enable us to achieve our vision for the children we teach in the next 3 years? Or » What can we do individually and together to achieve our vision for the pupils and school as a whole?	WH
11:15-11:45 Round 2	Invite people to move to new tables and ask the hosts to welcome people / facilitate introductions and re-cap on key points from the last conversation.	Perhaps a coffee break at this point or take coffee to tables?
11:45-12:15 Round 3	Invite people to move to new tables and ask the hosts to welcome people / facilitate introductions and re-cap on key points from the last conversation (It may be useful to put in a new question at this point, e.g., How can we support one another and the pupils in the work we need to accomplish in the next year?).	
12:15-12:30	Invite folk to be quiet for a period of reflection while you ask some prompt questions like: » What's emerging that is new for you? » What new connections are you making? » Is there anything that's surprised you? » If there was one thing that hasn't yet been said to reach a deeper level of understanding /clarity what would that be? » What is missing from the picture so far? What are we not seeing? » What deeper questions are emerging for you?	
12:30-12:45	Plenary Conversation: invite comments and insights from the conversations.	WH
12:45-13:30	<b>Lunch</b>	
	<b>Making a reality of our vision by working together-appreciating our strengths, and building on them</b>	
13:30-13:45	Introduction to Stefan and AI principles ( maybe with an immediate post lunch check-in as well)	SC
13:45-14:00	Appreciative Pairs Interviews 1 Using the pro-forma as a guide tell the story of when you felt you made a great personal contribution to the life and learning of a Manorfield pupil/s.	SC—pro-forma guide
14:00-14:15	Appreciative Interviews 2 Using the pro-forma as a guide tell the story of when you worked effectively with a colleague to make a great contribution to the life and learning of a Manorfield pupil/s.	SC—pro-forma guide
14:15-14:45	In groups of 4 consider what Manorfield would look and feel like for staff and pupils if the best of your past experiences happened 100% of the time.	Perhaps invite them to capture this in writing/drawing on a flip chart paper that we can put up around the room if that is possible?
14:45-15:45 Including tea break	In new groups of 5/6 explore what needs to happen to enable the vision to become a reality—ask people to write down action points.	
15:45-16:00	In larger groups of say 12 invite people to say to colleagues in one sentence what they plan to do on Monday morning to start putting the plan into action.	
16:00-16:30	Closing plenary and comments	WH/SC

to OD. You get it with your mind and your heart and there was never a need for me to struggle to explain what we might be attempting to do. This meant that we could enjoy lively creative conversations. It also meant that we did not need to spend a great deal of time between us trying to negotiate a compromise. We both had a sense of excitement about the possibilities of the day and the longer term.

You have a strong belief in the potential of the staff at the school and this, strengths based attitude, is quite catching. As we talked about the staff I think your expectation that their potential will be realized became apparent in the intentions behind the day and what you and I think they collectively experienced. I was reminded of the social constructionist truism that what we speak about is what we shall ultimately experience as a social reality. It began for me with our early client-consultant relationship and manifested itself throughout the design and delivery process. In some ways the Appreciative Inquiry Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny cycle also set the frame for how we worked together.

SC: Wendy, what would you say have been the outcomes of the work we have done so far?

This important day has set the scene for developing the conversational practice at the school, and is always part of staff training. Developing the school as a coaching school is becoming part of the reality. Fifteen members of staff have expressed an interest in taking coaching training. Staff are becoming more reflective, they have space to discuss their ideas and the energy of the staff group has become more focused and less pent up. We are currently in the process of developing our vision and values.

### Closing Reflections on the Practice of Dialogic OD

Hopefully, we have well illustrated the dance of conversation between client and consultant that co-created a powerful conversational space for the staff of Manorfield Primary School. Both Wendy and I have

had moments of insight in our studies and careers that have shifted us towards a commitment to conversational practice. The consequence has been a growing emphasis on listening to others and seeking to understand the questions in the organization, and indeed the wider system. Alongside this is a practice of listening to our own intuitions and responding appropriately. So emotions, gut instincts, past narratives, longings for a better future, and a passion to further develop ourselves and those around us all contributed to the liveliness in conversation we both enjoyed with one another and in some strange way infected those we worked with. Making choices about how to approach the OD challenge offered by Manorfield was neither the consultants nor the clients' prerogative. Conversation can, and did, bring a sense of equality and unity between people. We think that was our experience both in our working relationship but also in the relationships among school staff that emerged after the event. If you enjoy consulting because of the individual status, expert power, and recognition it gives you then we would say that Dialogic OD is probably not for you. However, if you value working as a collective then the rewards for all are huge.

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