

## Enlarging the Meaning of Group Deliberation: From Discussion to Dialogue

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### Abstract

Group communication scholars have long been interested in the relationship among group discourse and democracy. Historically, this relationship has privileged the language of debate and discussion as the primary linguistic form for promoting democracy. Recent theoretical moves emphasizing more appreciative and dialogic forms of discourse have emerged as a counterpoint to the traditional discourses of debate and discussion. I take the position that the language associated with small group discourse needs to be enlarged to include both discussion and debate as well as appreciative inquiry and dialogue. A case study illustrating how these appreciative and dialogic forms of discourse may be created in groups is provided and the implications for our understanding of small group communication when these forms are adopted is highlighted.

### A Preamble....

While this paper will not be presented at the workshop. I wanted to include it on the website to illustrate some of the issues that I am presently working through regarding issues of public participation. This essay was written for Larry Frey's forthcoming book, New Directions in Group Communication (Sage). This essay suggests that group communication needs to move beyond focusing exclusively on forms of communication grounded in debate and problem-centered language in order to foster democracy toward including forms of communication that are more dialogic and appreciative in nature. The impulse for this essay grows out of my involvement with America's Promise—a nationwide initiative to develop the capacity of our youth. In 1997, Waco held the Central Texas Youth Summit for over 1200 youth at Baylor University. Along with other members of the Public Dialogue Consortium, we designed a process that was grounded in dialogic and appreciative forms of communication.

What might this essay have to do with practical theory? One way to read this essay is as a case study in doing practical theory. The essay presents a piece of facilitation work that is grounded in my understanding of communication. Another way to read the essay is as a call for doing practical theory in the domain of group communication. As you read the essay, I make the argument that dialogue and appreciative discourse (i.e., appreciative inquiry) needs to be developed in order to promote community and democracy. This is not a new argument; it has been made in several places including the organizational development literature, the public participation literature, as well as by several of the participants at this workshop. Where I think a tie to practical theory can be made is in the conclusion of the essay.

If practical theory is about developing the grammatical abilities of humans, I would like to pose three questions that are embedded in the conclusion:

1. What happens when we talk about debate and dialogue as separate forms of talk? What would begin to happen if we began talking about debate and dialogue as two conversational threads that are constantly being woven together in interaction?
2. What gets opened up when we begin to construct debate, dialogue, and appreciation as existing at multiple levels? What would a debate look like if it was done within a dialogic context?
3. What new grammatical abilities do individuals need to develop? We have tended to emphasize grammatical abilities associated with rationality, argument, problem solving, decision making, and advocacy. What happens if we take on dialogue and appreciation seriously? Do we begin to cultivate grammatical abilities that are more generative, transformative, and imaginative in nature?

As I think about where I want to go in the future, these are some of the questions I want to play with.

### **Enlarging the Meaning of Group Deliberation: From Discussion to Dialogue**

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[D]iscussion informed citizens in a democracy of basic problems and enabled them to hear all sides of a controversy. Discussion was the best way to mold public opinion and make decisions. Discussion, when contrasted with other techniques for social control such as dictatorial decree or violence and force (the thirties were the period of unrest and emerging dictatorships in Europe), was American, ethical, and noble.

---Bormann (1996, p. 101)

One important reason for studying group communication is because of its roots in the practice of democracy in communities and societies; that is, the belief that enhancing people's abilities to engage in group discussion, they will be better able to participate in democracy. The impulse of scholars to link group discussion to democratic process was evident in the scholarship and pedagogy throughout the twentieth century (see Gouran, 1999). In the 1930s, Lewin and colleagues (Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939; White & Lippitt, 1960) began articulating small group leadership practices that could enhance democracy. In the 1960s, university courses on small groups focused on teaching discussion, and one popular textbook was even titled Discussion: Method of Democracy (Crowell, 1963). From the 1970s through the 1990s, the conversation continued regarding the relationship between small groups and democracy expanded to include obstacles that prevent democracy from occurring (see, for example, Gastil, 1992, 1993).

The lesson from this body of scholarship and pedagogy on small groups is clear:

Democratic practice is made enhanced by developing people's group discussion skills, such as critical thinking, problem solving, decision making, and leadership.

The focus on group discussion can be seen as representing a dominant language game within the community of scholars (Barge, 1994). A language game is a form of specialized discourse among members of a community that reflects their underlying view of reality and shared understandings (Wittgenstein, 1953). Astley and Zammuto (1992) observe that "these understandings are conveyed in the stylized vocabularies and protocols of communication that comprise language games" (p. 444). Research operating within the language game of group discussion has centered primarily on articulating the key functions or decision paths that are associated with effective group decisions (see, respectively, Gouran & Hirokawa, 1996; Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1996).<sup>1</sup> For example, learning how to advocate one's position and how to counteract flaws in another's reasoning are key processes that lead to effective group decisions (see Gouran, 1997; Meyers & Brashers, 1999, this volume; Seibold, Meyers, & Sunwolf, 1996). A variety of discussion formats, such as devil's advocacy and dialectical inquiry, have been proposed as ways of enhancing rigorous examination of ideas and arguments through a debate-centered approach (see Jarboe, 1996; Meyers, 1997; Sunwolf & Seibold, 1999). Discussion, with its emphasis on persuasion and the debate of competing ideas as central to effective decision making, has, thus, been the dominant language game of group life constructed by communication scholars.

The notion that discussion is the primary language game that promotes democratic practice has recently been questioned. Language games grounded in dialogue that

emphasize mutual understanding, collaborative inquiry into assumptions and interests informing conclusions, and creativity have been proposed as central to fostering democracy (see Pearce & Littlejohn, 1998). Rather than viewing discussion as the primary form of communication that leads to democratic practice, discussion is viewed as one of many forms of communication within deliberative discourse that foster democracy. Deliberation, in the broadest sense, is a way of talking where persons recognize that they may disagree about an issue or lack an understanding of one another's position, articulate basic choices to be made, and evaluate options and strategies (Schein, 1993). Hence, discussion and dialogue both represent language games that are associated with democratic process. However, most researchers associate democratic deliberation with discussion and have not fully explored how dialogic forms of communication can enhance both groups and democratic practices.

This essay explores alternative language games in the study of group communication that may foster strong democracy. In recent years, discussion has been complemented with forms of communication that emphasize dialogue and an affirmation of what works well within a human system as a way of building community and fostering democracy (Hammond, 1998; Pearce & Littlejohn, 1998). In addition to explaining these new forms, a case study is presented that illustrates how dialogic and affirmative forms of communication can be used to facilitate group conversation. The essay concludes by highlighting some possible areas for future research on group communication.

### The Language Game of Discussion

Group communication research has a long history of examining problem-solving and decision-making processes within groups (see Frey, 1996). Perhaps the best example

of this discussion-centered approach to group decision making is Functional Theory.<sup>2</sup> Developed by Gouran and Hirokawa (for reviews, see Gouran, 1999; Gouran & Hirokawa, 1996; Gouran, Hirokawa, Julian, & Leatham, 1993; Hirokawa & Salazar, 1999; Poole, 1999), Functional Theory begins with the assumption that communication is instrumental to group decision making in that it fulfills particular decision-making functions. The proper performance of these decision-making functions, rather than following a particular agenda per se, determines the quality of the group decision made. Specifically, Functional Theory maintains that groups are more likely to make effective decisions when members:

1. make clear their interest in arriving at the best possible decision;
2. identify the resources necessary making such a decision;
3. recognize possible obstacles to be confronted;
4. specify the procedures to be followed;
5. establish groundrules for interaction;
6. attempt to satisfy fundamental task requirements by
  - a. showing correct understanding of the issue to be resolved;
  - b. determining the minimal characteristics of any alternative, to be acceptable must possess;
  - c. identifying a relevant and realistic set of alternatives;
  - d. examining carefully the alternatives in relationship to each previously agreed upon characteristic of an acceptable choice; and
  - e. selecting the alternative that analysis reveals to be most likely to have the desired characteristics;

7. employ appropriate interventions for overcoming cognitive, affiliative, and egocentric constraints that are interfering with the satisfaction of fundamental task requirements; and
8. review the process by which the group comes to a decision and, if indicated, reconsider judgments reached (even to the point of starting over). (Gouran & Hirokawa, 1996, pp. 76-77)

Functional Theory has evolved over the years to elaborate the types of functions that need to be performed to make effective group decisions, identifying the obstacles that constrain effective group decision making, and testing the theory in both laboratory and field settings. Throughout this evolution, proponents of Functional Theory have maintained that two forms of talk within groups are important for making effective decisions: (a) problem talk, and (b) debate.

### Problem Talk

The starting place for making any decision, according to Functional Theory, is a clear definition of the issue or problem and an identification of its causes. Since “communication is the instrument by which members of groups, with varying degrees of success, reach decisions and generate solutions to problems” (Gouran & Hirokawa, 1996, p. 55), group members need to assess “the problem situation with which they are confronted” (Hirokawa & Salazar, 1997, p. 160). As Hirokawa (1988) explains:

Effective decision making demands that the group base its choice on an accurate (i.e., valid or reasonable) understanding of (a) the nature of the problem, (b) the extent and seriousness of the problem, (c) the possible cause(s) of the problem,

and (d) the possible consequences of the not dealing effectively with the problem.  
(p. 489)

Talking about problems, consequently, is important because “the most consistent predictor of group performance is analysis of the problem/task” (Propp & Nelson, 1996, p. 37) and “accurate information is needed to define a problem” (Propp, 1995, p. 451; see also Propp, 1999).

A problem situation has traditionally been defined as the “gap” between the current and an “ideal” state (Lewin, 1951). Gaps may arise from disparities in group processes (e.g., a group needs to be further along in its development than it is currently) or policy issues that the group is addressing (e.g., a group needs to find a way to lower its community’s teen pregnancy rate from current levels). Problem talk, therefore, utilizes deficit language (Gergen, 1991), which focuses attention on the shortcomings of people, processes, situations, and/or issues, and moves group members toward taking action that will “fix” the deficiency. Problem talk disposes group members toward viewing situations and issues as problems to be solved and propels them along a conversational trajectory that involves identifying the problem, analyzing its causes, proposing possible solutions, and planning actions (Hammond & Royal, 1998).

Functionalist researchers may claim that this analysis misrepresents Functional Theory because it is an approach to decision making, not problem solving; therefore, it is not inherently linked to problem talk. For example, some functionalist researchers use the term “issue” rather than “problem” and suggest that the foundation of good decision making involves group members showing “correct understanding of the issues to be resolved” (Gouran & Hirokawa, 1996, p. 56) and understanding “the type of answer for

which the issue under consideration calls” (Gouran & Hirokawa, 1983, p. 171). The issue under consideration can be classified according to the kind of choice that a group needs to make. Gouran (1997) observes that choices can involve questions of policy (What action should be taken?), value (What is right, good, or ethical?), conjecture (What might happen?), and fact (What is true?). This distinction Functional Theory makes between problem solving and decision making suggests is not necessarily grounded in on problem talk.

The distinction between problem solving and decision making, however, does not undermine the importance of problem talk within Functional Theory. This is particularly true when one consider that most decisions that groups make are policy oriented in the sense that they are designed to answer the question of “What action should be taken?”; hence problem assessment is crucial to developing high-quality group solutions. As Gouran (1997) observes:

In a narrow sense, problem solving has to do with developing specific means for altering a condition that is creating difficulty; decision making is the act of choosing among alternatives in a situation that requires choice. For our purposes, the distinction is not crucial. You can think of problem solving as one type of decision making. (p. 138)

Within such a perspective, discussion involves talking about an issue/problem and generating actions and solutions on the basis of a rigorous analysis of the nature, causes, scope, and consequences of the issue/problem.

### Debate

Functional Theory also privileges debate as a primary form of talk that facilitates effective group decision making. Ellinor and Gerard (1998) define debate as involving: (a) breaking issues/problems into parts; (b) seeing distinctions among the parts; (c) justifying/defending assumptions; (d) persuading, selling, and telling; and (e) gaining agreement on one meaning.<sup>3</sup> The focus of debate on breaking apart issues/problems and offering justifications and arguments to gain agreement can be seen in both the development of Functional Theory and its practical prescriptions for appropriate actions by group members.

The development of Functional Theory has emphasized breaking apart the causes, functions, and consequences of communication in group decision making. Hirokawa's (1990) task-contingency model, for example, illustrates the functionalist impulse to isolate relevant task factors that influence the role of communication in producing high-quality group decisions. Three task factors are identified: (a) task structure, (b) information requirements, and (c) evaluation demands. Hirokawa offers theoretical propositions that specify the links among each factor, the relative importance of communication, and group performance. For example, a complex, in comparison to a simple, task structure is hypothesized to highlight the need for communication among group members:

Proposition 1A. When task structure is simple, group performance is dependent largely on input variables.

Proposition 1B. When task structure is complex, group performance is dependent largely on process variables. (p. 197).

Once the main effect for each factor has been demonstrated, it is then possible to explain more complex interactions among the factors. According to Hirokawa (1988), “[T]he next step would call for the manipulation of two dimensions simultaneously, while keeping the third constant, to identify the two-way mediating effects of those dimensions on communication/performance relationships” (p. 202). A similar logic is used to articulate how cognitive, affiliative, and egocentric factors enable and constrain group decision making (Gouran & Hirokawa, 1996).

The motivation to break apart and identify the individual causes of communication and group decision-making performance can also be seen in the practical prescriptions for group members’ communication offered by functional theorists. Two practical prescriptions are particularly illustrative. First, group members are urged to identify the nature of the choice they are to make and to be aware that their decision may be nested. Nested decisions occur when the principal question that needs to be addressed is contingent on answers to other types of questions; for instance answering a question of policy may be contingent on answering a question of value (Gouran, 1997). Competent group communicators, therefore, should be able to divide the principal question into its relevant subquestions. Gouran (1997) gives the following example:

A university committee discussing whether the school should raise tuition (a question of policy), for example, would be more apt to conclude that it should . . . endorse that action if its answers to the following questions are yes:

- “Is there a shortage of operating funds?” (a question of fact)
- “Would an increase in tuition be cost-effective?” (a question of conjecture)

- “Is it fair to ask students to share most of the cost of their education?”  
(a question of value). (p. 141)

The ability to analyze the components of decision-making situations and identify the relevant choice points is, thus, central to competent group decision making.

Second, it is suggested that group members need to learn how to identify obstacles present within the decision situation and master the appropriate responses to those obstacles. Functional Theory, therefore, emphasizes helping group members to identify obstacles that may frustrate their ability to make high-quality decisions. Once an obstacle is properly identified, appropriate strategies and responses for overcoming it can be determined. Take, for example, the following prescriptions for group member behavior generated from Functional Theory (Gouran, 1997):

- When a decision-making group is confronting an informational obstacle, direct observations or questions about apparent inadequacies can be very helpful.
- If the members of a decision-making group are displaying analytical deficiencies, statements and questions about whether the conclusions being drawn from information are warranted can be a powerful corrective influence.
- A simple statement—“Let’s be sure we understand what’s wrong before we start trying to fix it”—by keeping discussion on track, can stop a group from making a premature decision.
- Key to managing the conflicts that result from differences in values is attempting to understand the other points of view. (pp. 151-153)

The assumption underlying these practical prescriptions is that the central obstacles confronting a group can be identified and subsequently linked through an “if-then” statement to appropriate responses. Typically, however, the focus is only on one obstacle and the attendant prescriptions for overcoming it and not on the interactions among multiple obstacles. The obstacles are seen as distinct rather than interrelated.

Functional Theory also emphasizes forms of talk that are based on group members justifying and defending their assumptions, as well as attempting to persuade, sell, and tell others the superiority of one’s views. This is not surprising given that Functional Theory, according to Hirokawa (1985), emphasizes rigorous analysis and evaluation of alternative choices:

The group must assess thoroughly and accurately the positive [and negative] consequences associated with each alternative choice. Given the information available to it, the group needs to recognize all important positive [and negative] implications and outcomes likely to result from the selection of each alternative choice. (p. 205)

Rigorous analysis and evaluation of alternative choices occurs by making persuasive arguments for one’s own position and refuting the positions of others (for more analysis of traditional argumentation in groups, see Meyers & Brashers, 1999, this volume).

One way in which group members challenge the thinking of fellow members is through second-guessing, which occurs when group members use retrospective questioning of previous choices to challenge the assumptions and information used to make the decision (Hirokawa, 1987). By asking questions in ways that force group members to justify and defend their decisions, groups, supposedly, according to

Functional Theory, do better at evaluating information and choices than groups that do not.

A second way in which group members challenge the thinking of fellow members is through vigilant interaction, which involves the analysis and debate of decision assumptions and alternatives. Such interaction is important because “high-quality” choices [are] generally preceded by a careful, thoughtful, and systematic discussion of the pros and cons of that choice vis-a-vis other alternatives” (Hirokawa, 1987, p. 10). An example of vigilant interaction is provided by Hirokawa (1987) in the following snippet of discussion from a group of college students discussing what items should be salvaged from a plane that has crashed in the Canadian wilderness to help the group survive:

- B: I really think we should select the box of trash bags.
- C: Trash bags? Why? What for?
- B: ‘Cause I think we really need something like that to help us keep warm, you know, protect us from the elements.
- C: But how? In what way? I mean, look, we already decided on the blankets, we already have a fire—we chose the lighter for that purpose, remember? So with the blankets to cover us, and the fire to keep us warm, what do we need the trash bags for? I mean, I just don’t see a good reason for it, you know?
- B: To protect us. . . .
- C: From what? Protection for what?
- B: To protect us from the wind, from the cold, from the snow, rain, if it rains.
- C: Blankets wouldn’t do that?

- A: No, not really, well not as well as bags, I don't think.
- B: Right, look, OK., we could use the bags like a tent, somehow string 'em together, make a lean-to shelter to keep us dry right? OK, but also we could wear 'em too. Plastic sheeting is a good insulation material—people use 'em to cover their windows in the winter to keep the cold air out. . . . You ever wore one of those bags as a kid, like a costume? It got hot, right? Air couldn't get in, right? Same idea, same principle, the plastic serves as insulation which can protect us against wind chill, cold, wet grounds, rain, you name it.
- A: That's right, and blankets aren't going to do that. Blankets can't keep body heat in or cold air out as well as plastic, plus blankets gets wet, and if they get wet, they're useless, really.
- B: So we could wear the bags over our clothes, then wrap the blankets over us, or wrap the blankets around us and then put the plastic around us. You see our point?
- C: Yeah, OK, I guess. . . . Somehow I never thought about it that way, I was looking at it from a more limited perspective, I guess. . . . yeah, you know, as only for garbage and stuff.
- A: OK, it's settled then, we go with the trash bags? Everyone in agreement on this?
- C: Yeah, OK. (B nods also.)
- A: OK, what's next?

As this conversation demonstrates, vigilant interaction is associated with group members making arguments for their position and taking steps to counteract the faulty reasoning of other members. Making counterarguments and counteracting questionable inferential reasoning, according to Functional Theory, facilitates high-quality group decision making. As such, persuasion becomes a key criterion for being an effective group member. For example, in their examination of what can be learned from the group processes that led to the space shuttle Challenger disaster, Hirokawa, Gouran, and Martz (1988) highlighted the importance of members' persuasive ability when they argued that "faulty decisions can be traced to the inability of decision makers to convince others to accept a high-quality alternative or reject a low-quality one" (p. 431). Persuasive ability is, thus, a key skill that enables group members to arrive at consensus on the nature of the problem, as well as a solution that is intended to solve the problem.

#### An Expanded Conception of Deliberation

The idea that discussion promotes and enhances democratic process within communities has historically been part of United States and Western culture. This cultural predisposition has, in part, driven the emphasis on problem solving and decision making in groups. However, the dominance of the language game of discussion as the most effective form of deliberative discourse has recently been challenged. First, some critics have taken issue with the problem-centered focus of discussion. They question whether a focus on solving problems produces the kinds of transformational change that are required for many communities to grow and develop. Solving problems within a community, they argue, may be different, for instance, than developing the needed resources or assets for continued sustainable change (Benson, 1997; Kretzmann &

McKnight, 1993). Solving problems emphasizes deficits and reducing the gap between the actual and ideal state, whereas developing needed resources or assets builds the capacity of communities to work toward a constructive future. Moreover, focusing on problems has the potential to create a sense of disempowerment within people and lead them to seek out individuals and groups to blame for the problem's existence. Analyzing the causes and consequences of problems may also lead people to feel overwhelmed by the number and enormity of the problems and paralyze them from taking action. Hence, critics suggest adopting a language game that focuses on identifying and creating positive resources for change becomes important for promoting democratic deliberation.

Second, debate presupposes that the parties involved are able to understand each other. Schein (1993) says that debate is "valid problem-solving and decision-making process only if one can assume that the group members understand each other well enough to be 'talking the same language'" (p. 47). The question, however, is whether such understanding can be assumed in a society such as the United States that is increasingly fragmented along cultural and ideological lines. The answer is "no." People often hold opposing views on controversial public issues (e.g., abortion) and are unable to comprehend or understand how others may differ from them. In such a fragmented social world, debate is not only polarized, it is polarizing (Chasin et al., 1996). By maintaining one's views at all costs with an emphasis on persuading, the act of debate prohibits people from genuinely understanding others' positions and being able to coordinate their actions. In contrast, the language game of dialogue is increasingly offered as an alternative means for enhancing understanding and coordination among people (Pearce &

Littlejohn, 1998). Dialogue, therefore, becomes a means of promoting democratic process.

The shift from discussion to dialogue suggests that democratic deliberation needs to be expanded to include alternatives to the language game that has traditionally dominated the landscape. This does not mean that discussion, decision making, problem solving, and debate are inappropriate forms of discourse that lead to weak democracy. Discussion, with its emphasis on problem talk and debate, may be quite appropriate under particular circumstances (e.g. when people share an understanding of the problem and agree on the criteria for selecting among alternatives). Rather, I contend that the discourse of democratic deliberation needs to be augmented by including language games that represent viable alternatives to discussion, decision making, problem solving, and debate. Such language games may be better suited for fostering democracy in particular situations, especially those that call for coordinating persons and groups that hold incommensurate worldviews. While many possibilities exist, two alternative language games that have begun receiving attention from scholars and practitioners are appreciative inquiry and dialogue.

#### From Problem Solving to Appreciative Inquiry

In the 1980s, a new approach to community and organizational development, known as appreciative inquiry (AI), was created (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987). Grounded in social constructionist thought (see Zemke, 1999), AI offers a unique alternative to more problem-centered forms of community and organizational development. The assumptions of AI include:

1. In every society, organization, or group something works.

2. What we focus on becomes our reality.
3. Reality is created in the moment, and there are multiple realities.
4. The act of asking questions of an organization or group influences the group in some way.
5. People have more confidence and comfort to journey to the future (the unknown) when they carry forward parts of the past (the known).
6. If we carry parts of the past forward, they should be what is best about the past.
7. It is important to value differences.
8. The language we use creates our reality. (Hammond, 1998, pp. 20-21)

The starting point for AI, therefore, is that which works well within a society, organization, or group, not “the problem.” By focusing on what works well, a blueprint for future action can be created that is based on the “best of what is.”

Once a community has commissioned an appreciative inquiry and set up a steering committee to oversee the process, it typically consists of four stages. First, appreciative interviews are conducted with members of the community. Prior to these interviews, the steering committee selects a topic or issue that is the focus for the appreciative interview. The interviews then center on appreciating and valuing the best of “what is” for the selected topic. Appreciative questions focus on moments of excellence, high points, core values, proud moments, and life-giving forces. For example, if appreciative interviews were conducted regarding the topic of a city’s image, sample questions might include:

- What would a newcomer to this city say is excellent about it?
- What have been your personal high point in the city? What made it so?

- What do you see as the core values that characterize the city?
- What about your city are you most proud?
- What gives life to and energizes this city?

Hence, rather than focusing on the problems the city may be having, the focus is directed to what people perceive as good and working well in the city.

Second, the focus of AI then shifts to envisioning “what might be.” From the stories elicited during the interviews, “provocative propositions” are developed that capture the best of “what is.” Provocative propositions are symbolic statements that remind people of what is best about their community, organization, or group for the issue that is the object of inquiry. Provocative propositions are affirmative statements that describe an idealized future—“what might be”—as if it were already the case. For example, provocative propositions from the preceding example might include:

- We continually grow and develop as a city.
- People of differing racial and economic backgrounds collaborate on important civic projects.
- Our economic development is balanced with a deep respect for environmental concerns.

The provocative propositions are subsequently shared with the members of the community through a series of small and large open group meetings. These meetings provide a conversational space for members to talk about the propositions and determine what additional provocative propositions, if any, need to be added.

The third stage of AI is dialoguing over “what should be.” During this stage, the steering committee schedules small and large group open meetings where community

members talk about what should occur within their community in light of the information gained from the appreciative interviews and the provocative propositions developed. In particular, people talk about possible ideas and actions that can extend the provocative propositions.

Finally, the fourth stage of innovating concerns “what will be.” Community members determine what next steps need to be taken that will create the kind of desired future that is articulated in the provocative propositions.

Some critics have suggested that AI is simply “happy talk” without substantive action. However, AI has demonstrated remarkable success in helping colleges, community groups, governments, businesses, and nonprofit organizations to develop innovative responses to create desirable futures (see the case studies reported by Hammond & Royal, 1998). One explanation for AI’s success is that it is grounded in people’s lived experience. By asking what has worked well in the past, people begin to build a model for success that is grounded in activities that they have experienced. They know how to create success, and AI reaffirms those moments that have worked well and, thereby, creates an environment where affirming conversation facilitates the creation of more moments of excellence. AI creates a conversational space where all members of a community are able to participate constructively in conversation about their possible futures—a space where democratic process is taken seriously.

### From Debate to Dialogue

Dialogue in communities and groups has been offered as a form of communication that complements discussion.<sup>4</sup> Whereas debate focuses on breaking problems into parts and persuading others to accept one’s viewpoint, dialogue focuses on

seeing things holistically and creating the space for learning. As Ellinor and Gerard (1998, p. 21) observe, dialogue involves:

- Seeing the whole among the parts
- Seeing the connection among the parts
- Inquiring into assumptions
- Learning through inquiry and disclosure
- Creating shared meaning among many

Creating dialogue can be difficult because people may have differing positions on key issues and become defensive when articulating their position because they have been socialized into a debate mode. Dialogue, as a form of communication, takes care not to reinforce these defensive exchanges but, instead, strives to create a field of genuine meeting and inquiry where “people gradually learn to suspend their defensive exchanges and . . . probe into the underlying reasons for why those exchanges exist” (Isaacs, 1993, p. 25).

Dialogue, is, thus, a collective and collaborative thinking process whereby people explore together their individual and collective assumptions and predispositions. In so doing, dialogue moves individuals from engaging in single-loop to double- and triple-loop learning. Single-loop learning occurs when people create or learn existing norms and make corrections in their behavior when it deviates from those established norms. For example, suppose a group has established, either explicitly or implicitly, a behavioral norm that says, “When someone voices an opinion that is different from yours, strongly advocate your viewpoint and refute the other’s viewpoint.” The result is that group members monitor their environment and any time that another member voices an

opposing opinion, they will argue with that person over the validity of his/her opinion.

Double-loop learning involves questioning whether a norm is appropriate and suggesting alternatives. Using the preceding example, group members would call into question the utility of that norm and begin to explore other norms that might be more appropriate for guiding group discussion. Triple-loop learning involves exploring what influences an individual or a group to view situations as calling for the use of this or any other norm.

The question being asked, in this case, is what has led a person or a group to view arguing against opposing viewpoints as an appropriate and preferred mode of discourse?

Dialogue, consequently, creates a space for individuals and groups to explore the underlying assumptions, norms, and values that move them toward viewing situations in particular ways and performing certain types of action.

There are at least three unique behavioral qualities that distinguish dialogue from debate. First, dialogue shifts people from viewing the world as “either/or” to “both-and.” Debate, at least in the traditional sense, is a polarized form of conversation where participants must select between mutually exclusive positions and adopt either one position or the other. In contrast, dialogue adopts a position of “both-and” by recognizing that there are both differences and similarities among supposedly competing positions. The tension between the differences and similarities provides the space for creating new possibilities for moving forward. These possibilities may reflect some of the ideas contained in either position or they may emerge from totally different ideas that are developed through dialogue.

Second, talk that “suspends” people’s assumptions is central to dialogue (Isaacs, 1993, 1999). The notion of “suspension” holds double meaning. One meaning involves

taking individual or collective assumptions and suspending them in front of the interactants for examination. The suspension of assumptions in this sense means holding the assumptions up for all to see. A second meaning of suspension is for individuals or groups to suspend their most deeply held beliefs. This form of suspension is similar to Weick's (1979) admonition to doubt what you know to be true and believe what you know to be false. Suspension, in this sense, is about vulnerability—opening one's mind to consider new viewpoints and ideas. This latter notion of suspension differs from debate, where parties are committed to their viewpoint and unwilling to acknowledge weaknesses in their position and/or strengths in the opposing position.

Third, dialogue, like debate, involves balancing advocacy and inquiry (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998), but use them in ways that are fundamentally different from debate. Dialogue uses advocacy as a means of sharing one's perspective in ways that enhance group members' learning. The purpose is not to force a group to accept one's view or to convince others of the superiority of that view. Rather, by offering one's perspective, the resources for building shared meanings and understanding are enhanced. Similarly, inquiry is used to explore one another's assumptions and thinking with the intent of learning more deeply about them. In contrast, inquiry in debate is typically used to collect information and learn about another's thinking so that a person can better persuade others to adopt his or her way of thinking. In dialogue, there is a commitment to both advocacy and inquiry, that foster high-quality learning, as "I state my views, I inquire into your views, and I invite you to state your views and I inquire into your views" (BMR Associates, 1997).

What are the implications for organizing group conversation if one takes appreciative inquiry and dialogue seriously? That is, what would group conversations that are more appreciative and dialogic look like? To illustrate some answers to these questions, I present in the next section, a case study of group facilitation work that is rooted in appreciative and dialogic forms of discourse.

#### America's Promise: The Case of the Waco Youth Summit

From April 27-29, 1997, retired General Colin Powell hosted the Presidential Summit for America's Future in Philadelphia. Delegates included 50 governors and representative from 140 communities. The summit focused on ways to provide children with five foundational experiences critical for their development into caring, responsible adults: (a) a healthy start, (b) an ongoing caring mentor, (c) safe places, (d) marketable skills, and (e) an opportunity to give back to their community. At the summit, four living presidents (Ford, Carter, Bush, and Clinton) and Nancy Reagan, on behalf of President Reagan, signed a document called "America's Promise," which stated that by the year 2000, two million children would have access to each of these five foundational experiences.

Waco, Texas was one of the communities that sent a delegation to Philadelphia. The youth delegate, Amy Achor, returned to Waco with a commitment to bring the spirit of the Philadelphia summit to the city. During the summer of 1997, an executive committee comprised of Waco youth, mentored by Rosemary Townsend (one of the adult delegates to the Philadelphia summit) planned "The Central Texas Youth Summit for America's Future." The day-long summit on September 6 brought 1200 youth from around central Texas to the campus of Baylor University. The day was full of activities

that ranged from workshops on how to work in teams, to a fair emphasizing voluntarism opportunities in central Texas, to live musical performances by youth rock and country and western bands.

During the day, the youth attended two 45-minute breakout sessions, titled “Dream Catcher” and “Catch the Gold Ring.” These two sessions provided a group setting for youth to talk about their dreams for the community and to develop strategies for making those dreams a reality. The two sessions were designed by members of the Public Dialogue Consortium (PDC), a group to which I am a member. The PDC is a team of teachers, practitioners, and researchers that helps individuals and groups to find new and better ways of communicating in a complex, dynamic, and diverse society (see Pearce, 1999; Spano & Calcagno, 1998; Spano, in press). These two breakout sessions were designed using the principles of appreciative inquiry and dialogue. Before explaining how these principles shaped the design of the breakout sessions, an overview of the specific structure of the sessions is useful.

#### Catching Dreams and Gold Rings

Imagine that you are 14-year-old student entering a very large room at 10:30 A.M. on a sunny Saturday. As you enter the room, you are handed a number by a facilitator wearing a bright red shirt emblazoned with a stylized Texas flag and the words “1997 Youth Summit Facilitator” directly beneath the flag. The number you have been handed directs you to sit at one of the round tables scattered around the room. You quickly see that there are six other youth seated at your table and another facilitator wearing a red shirt. At the front of the room, a member of the youth executive committee introduces the “lead facilitator,” who is a member of a group called the Public Dialogue Consortium.

The lead facilitator welcomes the youth gathered in the room to a session that is called “Dream Catcher.” He highlights the ground rules that will guide each group’s conversation. The groundrules included:

- Asking questions is as important as making statements.
- Ask curious questions.
- Respect others’ opinions, even if they are different from your own.
- Share talk time.

The lead facilitator then invites the youth at each table to introduce themselves to one another. At that point, you notice that there is a big pile of candy in the middle of your table. The facilitator who is seated at the table invites you and all the other youth sitting at that table to take as much candy as you would like and to count the number of pieces you have taken. The facilitator then has each person tell his or her name and as many things about himself or herself as that person has pieces of candy.

After the introductions are completed, the lead facilitator asks the members of each group to talk about their dreams for the community. The facilitator at your table has taken a piece of poster board and drawn a line down the middle, and has written the word “Concerns” in the left-hand column and the word “Dreams” in the right-hand column. Your group takes about 10 minutes and begins to brainstorm answers to the question, “What concerns do you have about your community?” The facilitator writes down the answers in the left-hand column. The facilitator then asks, “Given these concerns, what are your dreams for your community?,” and writes down the answers in the right-hand column.

At the end of the 10 minutes, your table pairs up with another table and compares the list of dreams. The facilitators ask such questions as:

- What dreams do you see on both lists that are similar?
- What dreams do you see on both lists that are different?
- What new dreams can you think of?
- What do you feel is the most important dream?
- What dream do you feel most excited about?

After about 15 minutes of conversation, your combined group selects what the members feel is the most important dream and writes a newspaper headline that captures that dream. The headline is written down on a piece of poster board that says “Youth Summit Gazette” at the top.

The lead facilitator then asks for everyone’s attention and has each combined group report its headline to everyone in the room. The energy is high as two facilitators race around the room with cordless microphones soliciting the headline from each combined group. Once all the headlines have been reported, the facilitators at your table gives you a piece of paper that looks like a blue sky with clouds. At the top of this “cloud paper” is the phrase, “I dream of a community where . . . .” You take a few minutes to write down your response to the phrase and place it in a big gold pot in the corner of the room that has a sign over it with nickname the “Dream Catcher.” After everyone has done this, a 10-minute break is taken.

When you return from break, the first thing you notice is that all the headlines from each combined group have been posted at the front of the room. The lead facilitator then welcomes you back from the break, reads through the headlines that have been

posted at the front of the room, and introduces the next breakout session which is called, “Catch the Gold Ring.” Each table is then given five stars and asked as group to decide which dreams the members want to vote for with their stars. The lead facilitator explains that if there is only one dream that your group considers to be important, all five stars may be placed on that dream; alternatively, the group may also place one star on five different dreams or in any combination desired. After 10 minutes of discussion, the group elects you to go to the front of the room and place the stars on the selected headlines. After all the stars from all the groups have been placed, the lead facilitator then identifies the most popular headline on the basis of which one received the most stars.

Your table is then grouped with three other tables and move to a space in the room where you see a large piece of butcher-block paper with a big circle drawn in the center of it with lines drawn from the circle to the outer edges of the paper. It reminds you of the pictures you used to draw of the sun with rays of sunshine. One of the table facilitators writes in the center of the circle the most popular headline voted on by all the participants present. The facilitator then asks your group, “What actions can we take as a community to make this dream a reality?,” and writes the responses generated in the circle. After about 15 minutes of brainstorming, the facilitator asks, “What kinds of things do you need to consider when implementing these actions?,” and writes the responses generated on one of the lines or “rays” in the diagram. Before the session ends, the lead facilitator asks each group to report what its members talked about and what they learned about factors that influence implementing actions. At this point, the session is over and you head for lunch before the afternoon session starts.

### An Emphasis on Appreciation

Several features of the event design for the facilitation described above are rooted in the principles of appreciative inquiry. First, the dream motif was the organizing feature for both facilitation sessions. The term, “Dream Catcher,” was chosen by the PDC because it was considered to be important to elicit and capture the dreams of the youth for their community. This activity is a variation of the classic appreciative inquiry task of “Describe three concrete wishes for the future of this organization” (Hammond, 1998, p. 56). Talking about dreams captures the enthusiasm, hopes, and aspirations of people far more than talking about problems. As a member of the executive steering committee put it:

I’ve been in several meetings within Waco where that [problems] was the definite focus . . . and the meeting—the whole make up of it—just falls apart instantly. People have so many complaints about what’s going on and so many different negative experiences that they want to bring up and make sure are heard in the community. I think that getting your voice heard in the community is great, but if you focus constantly on the negative, the communication breaks down and people get on the defensive. However, if you focus on the positive, people seem to suddenly be able to think clearer and they are able to think, “Oh, well, I can work with you and I can help build this other process,” and it becomes more of a building up than tearing down.

Dreams, therefore, are viewed not as unattainable utopian ideals but as desirable futures that could be achieved if people are willing to exert effort and energy and work together. As a member of the executive steering committee said, “If it’s something that’s a dream, then its more possible.”

A second feature is that time was allotted in the “Dream Catcher” breakout session for abbreviated appreciative interviews. At the beginning of the session, each table was asked to generate concerns and dreams for the community. The conversation began with concerns because it was felt that the youth might be able to more readily identify concerns within the Waco community. The concerns, however, were used as an entry into their dreams, which then became the dominant focus for the conversation. Again, the importance of talking about dreams, as opposed to problems, cannot be underestimated. Dreams provide the opportunity to look at new possibilities for the future. As one summit facilitator said:

I think what talking about dreams does is open up possibilities and possible futures, rather than focusing on handling the angles of the problems. And I think it’s a lot harder to talk, to get the solution, when you focus on the problem. By starting on the solutions or on the dreams and visions, it just moved people into a more future-oriented place and that’s what they [the sponsors of the summit] wanted to have happen. Then, the next questions that ultimately come up are “How do I do that?” and “How do I get there?,” and that is very powerful.

The appreciative interviews, thus, focused the group conversations on what people desired and moved the remainder of those conversations to ways in which those dreams could be accomplished.

The notion that appreciative inquiry, rather than problem talk, made the conversations easier was voiced by another summit facilitator:

We know that a ton of kids evidenced fears of crime, and while I believe that those are genuine concerns that those kids have—and I don’t want to minimize

crime in Waco . . . and this may sound like I live, you know, in a dream world—but really, Waco’s crime is not that bad. To me, the emphasis on crime was way out of proportion to reality.

Now, that may be those kid’s perspectives. But if that’s what came up when we were talking about dreams, if we had talked about problems, I think we would have spent all of our time talking about things like crime and probably not developing solutions, whereas what we did was we talked about sort of where we wanted to go and how to get there. I think that was a much healthier thing to do. Hence, while AI does not necessarily focus on generating solutions to problems, the act of talking about possible and desirable futures can lead people to articulate what they see as possible ways to move forward. Focusing on hopes for the future, as opposed to past problems, thus creates the space for constructive action planning.

The third, and final, design feature is that provocative propositions were integrated into the facilitation through the use of the headlines in the Youth Summit Gazette. These headlines were a means of articulating the shared visions of what the larger Waco community could be in the future. The headlines/provocative propositions served as a useful bridge from envisioning the future to dialoguing about “what would/should be.”

#### An Emphasis on Dialogue

Given that both sessions had time limits, it was not possible for the youth to engage in a sustained dialogue about community building. Nevertheless, dialogic communication was encouraged in two ways. First, the groundrules presented at the beginning of the “Dream Catcher” session emphasized the creation of a safe climate for

promoting dialogue among the participants. These ground rules asked the youth to not only balance their advocacy and inquiry and to inquire into the positions of others but to do so in a climate of respect for one another.

Second, the “Catch the Gold Ring” session was designed to enhance the likelihood that these youth would see the connections among the different issues discussed. The choice of bringing together four tables to brainstorm using the “sunshine” diagram was strategic. One reason for this choice was to enhance the diversity present within each group; this diversity made it possible for participants to view situations in new ways and make new connections among possible courses of actions. One summit facilitator highlighted the value of such diversity:

I think the different viewpoints were . . . the engine that drove all the solutions and outcomes that happened. When we did the last exercises, . . . we brought all the groups together and they brainstormed and had different ideas of what could actually be done; like I said, taking their thoughts and putting them into action—different viewpoints and different ideas. I call it “the engine that drove it” because having all these different ideas—a diversity of views—coming together from different kids, you know from different socioeconomic classes, different religious backgrounds, different ethnic groups—all coming together and throwing in different ideas allowed them to see what other people thought and look at all of these views and try to determine what would be the best thing. . . . I mean, you have kids from, you know, more rural backgrounds hearing more what urban kids thought, and vice versa. A lot of this is the diversity of the people there that really

added to it. It's useful to see what other people experience in their lives and what are their dreams and aspirations.

Another reason for using the “sunshine” diagram was to improve the likelihood that the youth would see the systemic connections among various actions and implementation factors. By focusing on the dream listed in the center of the circle, the youth could see how many different possible actions might fulfill it. By focusing on the “rays,” the youth could begin to grasp the complexity of the many different factors that could influence the ability to implement actions. As a summit facilitator put it:

In the planning session, or in the Catch the Gold Ring, that followed, . . . my understanding of it and the way it seemed to work was not that you have dreamed this dream with basically no limits put on you but what it is that individuals need to do. What is it that an organization needs to do? What is it that a community needs to do to make your dreams become reality? So, they took this huge, wide, wonderful vision and didn't change it in any way but brought some pragmatic reality testing back into it and, you know, if this is a project of some kind, well, what do you need to do? How would you get those things done?

In the course of the group conversations, then, the youth had the opportunity to share their experiences with one another about factors that had to be considered when implementing action. They had the opportunity to dialogue about the challenges, contradictions, and dilemmas of working with these various factors.

#### Conclusion: Elaborating the Language Games of Deliberation

Group communication scholars have historically associated deliberative discourse with discussion, problem solving, and debate. The implicit assumption is that these ways

of communicating are well suited for participation in a democratic society. However, the abilities required to participate in a democratic society today must expand to include not only the language game of discussion but also the language games of appreciative inquiry and dialogue. What, then, are the implications of this expanded language game for group communication scholarship? What new areas for research are suggested when discussion, appreciative inquiry, and dialogue are viewed as legitimate forms of discourse that promote democracy?

First, the practices associated with AI and dialogue within groups warrant further elaboration. We need to understand the forms of talk and conversational practices that constitute AI and dialogue. Some research into dialogic group communication has been done in the general area of the learning organization (see Isaacs, 1999; Senge et al., 1999), as well in the study of public participation groups (see Pearce & Littlejohn, 1998), but a good deal of work remains to be done to articulate the forms of talk that constitute appreciative and dialogic communication.

Second, the differences and similarities between discussion and dialogue need further inquiry. A basic question is, "In what contexts are discussion or dialogue preferred ways of talking?" Some argue that discussion is best used when people have similar frames of reference; others suggest that dialogue is most appropriate when participants have different frames of reference and divergent thinking is required (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998). It is important, therefore, to understand the ways in which context influences the appropriateness and/or effectiveness of discussion or dialogue. This issue becomes more complex when one realizes that the question is not simply when to use discussion or dialogue but how to manage discussion and dialogic forms of talk within

interactional episodes. Applying recent work in Dialectical Theory (e.g. Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), the choice is not whether to use discussion or dialogue in group conversation but, rather, how to manage simultaneously these conversational forms (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

Third, the exploration of discussion, appreciative inquiry, and dialogue as multilevel constructs merits attention. There is a tendency to view these forms of talk within an episodic framework, that is, what people say or do during the exchange of messages. The result is that the focus has been on the kinds and sequences of messages that are more discussion, appreciative, and dialogic oriented. This foregrounding of the episodic nature of communication puts into the background other important contexts, such as the nature of the participants and the relationships among them and the influence of culture. It is entirely possible that we can use the terms discussion, appreciative inquiry, and dialogue not only as descriptions of specific episodes of communication but also to characterize people, their relationships, and the impact of culture on them. Doing so opens up a vast array of possibilities and questions helpful for understanding the nature of discussion, appreciative inquiry, and dialogue. For example, how do we make sense of dialogic communication when it occurs at an episodic level in a discussion/debate-centered relationship? Does debate take on a different flavor when it occurs in an appreciative inquiry and dialogic-oriented relationship? These are the kinds of questions that become possible and deserve attention when we view discussions, appreciative inquiry, and dialogue as multilevel constructs.

Fourth, the idea of group communication competence needs to be reexamined in the light of appreciative and dialogic communication. Group communication competence

has typically been defined from a discussion-centered model that associates it with decision-making skills, such as defining the problem, generating solutions, and so forth as articulate, for instance, in Functional Theory (see Beebe, Barge, & McCormick, 1998). Group communication competence is also associated in the discussion-centered model with rhetorical eloquence, which refers to people's ability to make persuasive arguments within a particular language community (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1998). Taking the ideas of appreciative inquiry and dialogue seriously, however, changes our idea of what counts as a group communication competence. For example, Barrett (1995) talks about the following kinds of competence in relation to AI:

1. Affirmative competence: [T]he ability to draw on the human capacity to appreciate positive possibilities by electively focusing on current and past strengths, successes, and potentials.
2. Expansive competence: [The person] challenges habits and conventional practices, provoking members to experiment in the margins, makes expansive promises that challenge them to stretch in new directions, and evokes a set of higher values and ideals that inspire them to passionate engagement.
3. Generative competence: [The ability to construct] integrative systems that allow members to see the consequences of their actions, to recognize that they are making a meaningful contribution, and to experience a sense of progress.
4. Collaborative competence: [An ability to] create forums in which members engage in ongoing dialogue and exchange diverse perspectives. (p. 40)

Are these conceptions of competence germane to group communication competence?

Are there other forms of competence or eloquence that need to be considered when group

communication is viewed from AI and dialogic perspectives? Hopefully, in time, research and practice will respond to these questions.

### Epilogue

Following the Central Texas Youth Summit, voluntarism hours by youth doubled in the Waco area. In the Axtell, Texas high school, a new program was established in which students provided mentoring and support to other students. Youth commissions were established by the city governments of Waco and Woodway, a suburb of Waco. A “Facilitators Network” comprised of facilitators from that summit is in the process of being formed. This network hopes to provide ongoing training for citizens in the art of facilitation and to connect trained facilitators with local businesses and nonprofit groups. Clearly, the democratic spirit of the summit lives on.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup>Several language games exist within group communication theory and research, including Symbolic Convergence Theory and more recently, the Bona Fide Group Perspective. However, the focus on key functions and decision paths has been most dominant in the field (see Poole, 1999).

<sup>2</sup>Functional Theory has been chosen to illustrate the nature of the language game of discussion in group communication scholarship because of its strong ties to Dewey's (1910) work on promoting democratic process. Other theoretical perspectives, such as Structuration Theory (see Poole, 1999; Poole, et al., 1996), that also reflect a commitment to the characteristics of group communication that will be examined below--problem-centered language and debate—could also have been selected.

<sup>3</sup>Ellinor and Gerard actually equate discussion with debate, calling it “discussion/debate.”

<sup>4</sup>There are many views of dialogue. For example, there is a long tradition of viewing dialogue from a Buberian perspective (see, for example, Anderson & Cissna, 1997; Cissna & Anderson, 1994; Friedman, 1994). The perspective that I take is derived from Bohm (1996a, 1996b), whose writings have influenced the work on dialogue conducted within learning organizations (see Isaacs, 1993; 1999; Senge, 1990). Bohm (1996a, 1996b) focuses on how dialogue enhances collective thinking, which is consistent with the traditional role of debate as enhancing group deliberation.

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