

Living Organizational Communication: Consuming Dialogism and Polyphony as Practical Wisdom in the Production of Consciousness

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Abstract

The realities we know as organizations come to exist through conversations. For years such conversations are shaped by the mainstream Cartesian worldview and Newtonian mechanics. As cracks on the said worldview and fissures on the above mechanics become bigger and wider, the need to look at other ways of seeing and producing a more 'living conversations' are inevitable. We suggest Bakhtin's polyphony as the new way in the production of such 'consciousness' (living conversations) for learning creation in the context of organizational communication realm. Polyphony is basically about the construction of voices of characters with equal rights, and it is done with responsibility overseeing by the Third. In this work we argued that polyphony should be celebrated as the wellspring of learning creation following 'theory of action' in the context of the production of consciousness, for addressing the issue of future organizational fitness.

Key Words: dialogism, polyphony, consciousness, learning creation, Third.

Introduction

For years, management based studies, like organizational communication, were very romantic with modern paradigm (Gergen, 1992:208-10), a paradigm based on Cartesian-Newtonian mindset. As such the only 'accepted, clean and scientific' organizational communication were works that move along the rational, linear, logical, positivistic methods. The cause and effect that identify the time-order events, whereby in due process the causal links between variables were established, were godly praised and catholically considered as the best practice. In this 'modern state', discussions about overcoming communication 'barriers' or 'noises' are topics of utmost important as order not communication disorder/ 'miscommunication/disruption is the rule of the game in achieving a single, monologic voice of truth.

This century is often being equated with the age of globalization where compression of time and space, diversity of voices and conversations flourished. Similarly, old markers of learning where ordered certainty and predictability were being challenged. Meanwhile narratives from the margins were catapulted to the centre, and in other instances the take-for-granted universal values were losing their teeth. Subjects that used to be observed now talked back. Indeed, new 'proofs' in the scientific fraternity challenged the stability of the Cartesian world view and Newtonian mechanics. For example the notion of order from disorder is now celebrated. In reading Darwin (2002:11) we found this question in between lines: "Were managers that so obsessed with the above [Cartesian] view and [Newtonian] mechanics were slaves of defunct scientists or philosophers?" The question was a paraphrase arising out of a remark made by Keynes (1936:383): Practical men, who believe [that] they to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences are usually the slaves of some defunct economist.

Organizational communication in its early years of development assumed that human converses/communicates in a perfect rationality. An organization in this view functions as a container that in which communication takes place. The modern paradigm that upholds only one single truth or reality should be present in an organizational life-world was catholically revered. As such issues that concern with 'cause and effect' were regarded as 'organizational communication'. Moreover, this modern 'scientific' paradigm related myth was broken by Alta Conference 1981. Scholars at the conference suggested that an interpretative approach for organizational communication was another or alternative way forward for the field (Putnam and Pacanowsky, 1983). However emphasis on modern paradigm remained and continued to be in the towering position in many organizational communication circles. Indeed old habits of consuming a single voice [of positivism] about a life-world do not go away easily. Truly, changing from one ground to another ground is notoriously difficult, commented Michael Rolof on Corman and Poole's (2000). As cracks on Cartesian-Newtonian synthesis and mechanics becomes wider (Darwin, 2002), we believe it is appropriate for us to celebrate and move on with different point of view or ways of seeing. We believe that organizational communication scholars are more sensible than some sociologists who denied Edward Burghadt Du Bois's, even though his contributions to the field were seminal. According to Elias (2006), Du Bois was discriminated by others on the ground of 'protecting the exclusiveness of a domain'. Similarly we believe organizational communication scholars are not men scared of the new lights outside the Platonic Cave. We realized that this suggestion may 'disturb' many die-

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hard or faint-hearted positivists, but it is naïve and narrow-minded to assume that one particular theoretical or methodological perspective can completely reveal or illuminate the whole complexities of organizational communication (Jensen, 2003:14). In this position we take Galileo advice highly. According to Probst and Buchel (1997:168) Galileo used to say that one cannot teach a man anything but can only help him/her discover it within himself/herself.

Our suggestion to appreciate other ways/paradigms is not new though. Since late 1970's Burrell and Morgan (1979), among others, had given reasons why Cartesian-Newtonian views and mechanics should not be *the only way* of how to understand the world. Calas and Smircich (1999) were revolutionaries when they called for a migration from the shadows of positivism/functionality. In their searching for different points of views, be in term of interpretations, causalities, predictions and histories, they found solace in the realm of linguistics and literature. Here, scholars put a great faith on language use as the primary means for organizational action. Narratives meanwhile become the primary scheme and organizing principle.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) noted that conversations are what said and listened to between people. In the context of communicative behaviour, conversations can be described as complex information-rich mix of auditory, visual, olfactory and tactile events (Capella and Street, 1985). In elaboration, Ford, Ford and McNamara (2002:107) suggested that a broader view of conversations should includes not only spoken, but the full conversational apparatus of symbols, artifacts, theatrics, that are used in conjunction with or as substitutes for what is spoken. In organizations people construct its reality through conversations, and that realities exist in the 'reported' words, phrases and sentences of the management and in 'coffee table talks'. Indeed, conversations give us the life-world/reality. As such some conversations are living in the sense that they give 'good life' for people like creating a sense of harmonious completion or awakening a new reality. Similarly conversations can also infectious (Ford, 1999) to the point that they can make the people blind and stupid (Ford, Ford and McNamara, 2002:113). In theorizing the complexities of conversations in organization life-world for a living organizational communication, we utilized works on dialogism and polyphony as authored by M M Bakhtin (1895-1975).

In the following paragraphs we attempt to understand the dynamics of dialogism with an emphasis on polyphony as new 'theories of action' for a living organizational communication. Polyphony is basically about the construction of voices of characters with equal rights, and it should be celebrate as the wellspring for a living learning creation. We construed that 'theories of action' as theories for production of consciousness in organization. Here, we posited consciousness as 'living conversation', that is a conversation that takes place between people and between signs. In the context of organizational communication, studying the production of consciousness comes under the term process --- a study about communication behaviour in organizations (Jablin and Putnam, 2001:704-731). Jensen (2003:59) noted that processes helps to provide a dynamic as opposed to the static view of communication in the organizational context.

Theories of action, dialogism and the production of consciousness

'Theories of action' are theories upon which organizations or individuals base their conversation activities, and they exert dynamics influence and may set the learning processes in motion. Basically there are two kinds of theories of action: official theories and 'theories-in-use'. Official theories are the formal or informal ideas and values according to which individuals and organizations officially direct their actions. These theories are normally espoused by and spring from management principles held by leaders. Theories-in-use are theories from which real courses of action can be derived, and these theories usually are not publicly discussed. Living conversations, consciousness as described by Bakhtin, that arising out of theories-in-use are usually arising out of interactions between individuals. It is a kind of 'consumated' knowledge that circulates among specific circles (Douglas, 1980).

Discrepancies between theory-in-use and the espoused theory usually trigger problems or turbulences for organizations as the former often altered the old way of consciousness. In this process of reconstructive learning one needs to do 'unlearning', and it is a difficult to gain such mastery if the organization is practicing monologism whereby homophony is the king/beast. Bakhtin (PDP,1984) revealed peculiarities in the homophony state, among others, as follows:

- a) Monologists often denied the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities. A tone of superiority prevails in this environment.
- b) Monologue consciousness is finalized and it pretends to be the ultimate word. Thus such consciousness is deaf to others' responses, and it does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any form. Monologists pretend to process a ready-made truth whereby they cast a mantle of objectivity over every

point of view they do not share, turning it to one another into a thing, under the rubric of a monological unity. Thus another consciousness is merely an object of consciousness, and not another consciousness.

- c) Monologists ignored the fundamental plurality of unmerged consciousnesses as it is a world that corresponds with a single and unified authorial consciousness (PDP, 9).
- d) The monologic self is viewed an independent and unique source of meanings. As such collaborative learning or collective inquisitions do not make any sense. The individual is the knower, and knowing in this regard is something objective universal facts. In this regard monologist managed without the other, and to some degree materializes all reality single-handedly.
- e) Homophonic state supports surplus authors. These type of authors keep a surplus of meanings in their bags so much so there is an inequality in conversation process (Emerson, 1984: xxxvii). In due course they assert their voice over the whole process of conversations.

Dialogism is a contrary to monologism. In dialogism, the production of consciousness (living conversation) is something people do together rather than work of individual possession. Here consciousness are made and remade, reified and maintained, challenged and destroyed (Dervin, 1994:377) through dialogue. As a form of organic life, it allows organizational members to engage in a learning process where tacit assumptions and theories-in-use are examined and elaborated. For Bakhtin (1984:293), life by its very nature is dialogic; it is 'unfinalizable, open, and heterogeneous nature of social life. Dialogism in this position is viewed as the interrelatedness of self and other. When self is conversing with the other, the self is 'borrowing' the words of others that belong to pre-existing language communities. Our words in this view are construed as 'populated with the memories of other's and [one] own past conversations' (Baxter and Montgomery, 1996:27). As such one's utterance is not owned by the speaker, but both self and the other. In this context, there is no finalizability, but 'going on' unfinalizability of meaning as it being shaped and reshaped by self and other. The direction of that interrelatedness meanwhile is being determined by what being expressed or uttered by both speakers. Expressions made can either be centripetal or centrifugal to the conversation as centralization and decentralization, unification and disunification intersect in all utterances (Bakhtin, 1981). In this dialogical imagination, Bakhtin viewed that each word reflects and refracts other words, and 'our' words, reflect and refract not merely 'our' thoughts, but also the thoughts of those with whom we might be disagreeing (Shotter and Bilig, 1998:16).

In the context of the above, conversations in a dialogical manner simply mean a criss-crossing of differently oriented social accents, if we use Voloshinov's (1986:41). [Voloshinov is considered as Bakhtin's or even Bakhtin himself]. During dialogical encounters two different types of consciousness filled with intentions and accents are at work. It is a living involvement where the truth of unitary and unique event is appropriated by participants (Shotter and Bilig, 1998:23). It is not about 'zero dialogic relationship' where actual dialogic contact is made but no contact of meaning. Bakhtin (1986:293-294) describes,

The word in language is half some one else's. It becomes one own only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his/her own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to his moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words), but rather it exists in other people's mouth, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word and make it one's own.

In relation to the above, the production of consciousness (living conversations) ala Bakhtin's for organizational communication needs *phronesis* (practical wisdom). We suggest exploring polyphony as the 'norms of answerability'. For Bakhtin, wisdom is a normative and appropriated action of 'how should I act [given the imaginary subjectivity] of another who can answer me back --- however different the subjectivity might be from my own' (Nielsen, 1998:214). As known, organizations that decide to be strategic, not to be dinosaurs, valued every single voice of their members as they could not afford to lose potential contributions for their 'immortality' growth. Covey (1997:37) metaphorically described such believing in human potential as seeing the oak tree in every acorn. Indeed Bouwen and Steyaert (1999) argued that one of the principles of organizing [like organizational communication] in the age of globalization should be polyphony. In this light voices with differences and otherness of others are celebrated as the main feature of a hierarchical imagination (Hamel, 1997:91) in a journey to win the race to the future. Hamel described that imagination as follows: If you want to create a point of view about the future, if you want to craft a meaningful strategy, you have to create in your company a hierarchy of imagination, and that means giving a [share] of voice to the people who up until now have been disenfranchised from strategy-making process. Indeed in the above situation of argument that we must read Bakhtin (1981) statement that reads 'no meaning can be derived outside of relationships.' Polyphony,

therefore, is an important topic to explore because it helps us examine the use of voice that defines the conversation that is used to build our relationships. A point to note, polyphony is not about an individual but about relations in organizational life.

Understanding and consuming polyphony

Basically polyphony means many voices or producing many sounds. Without polyphony, dialogism is impossible. Emerson (1984:xxxvi) observed that a voice for Bakhtin is not just words or ideas strung together but it is more of a semantic position, a point of view on the world; a personality orienting itself among other personalities within a limited field. In this paper, polyphony is being defined as a condition when people of different conversations are fused together in a horizon of understanding, and all voices or the others are given equal opportunities and rights to be heard and valued in creating acceptable, co-constructed consciousness for a living organizational communication.

Polyphony is said to happen when organization emphasizes listening for diverse conversations in the light of dialogic understanding (Barry and Elmes, 1997). In this multi-voicedness or variegated speeches environment, disagreement and dissent emerged, not as unitary view but as normal. Differences, for example in vocabularies or disparate dialects, are not marginalized but brought forward to the centre for dialogical encounters. It is a work of seeking and exploring new consciousness as 'there cannot be one story of the world' (Czarniawska, 1999:14). Every one is a subject not object, and all are polyphonist in their own fully characters. Here, co-presentness of plurality of consciousnesses which is living, organic, and independent with equal rights in their own worldly terms, but are all inter-connected in unity of *sobytie* (event) like organizational communication planned change program thrive. It is worth to remember that unity is not *direct* combination of separate elements of reality as the essence of polyphony lies precisely in the fact that voices remain independent, and they are combined in a unity of the higher order than homophony (Bakhtin, PDP, 1984:21).

In consuming polyphony, the position of the other and their otherness must be certain by polyphonist. For Bakhtin human are polyglot beings who mastered a variety of 'dialects and accents' derived from various experiences to the point that each of us is actually not philosophically 'I' but 'we' (Booth, 1984:xxi). In this field of vision, the otherness is never outside but inside the dialogical parameters that uphold polyphony, and both consciousness are tied by the *sobornost* (togetherness) of the moment. Here, a 'novelistic' (PDP, 6-8) invitation for other voices to be present therefore must be made so as to make them 'full characters'. In this sense, one consciousness does not transform others, and does not make any other consciousness into a second-hand position (PDP, 67-68), but turning characters with voices that are actually present and capable of answering in the dialogical encounters. Holquist (1990:20-21) argued that a failure to attend the otherness of the other in the above polyphonic manner would resulted in incompleteness for a dialogical relationship; one body's motion has meaning only in relation to another body. Thus when a speaker in dialogical position converses, she/he converses in expectation of a response, agreement, sympathy, objection, execution and so forth. In that state of polyphony, heteroglossia thrives as speakers voiced their point of views, experiences or differences side by side, not privileging one or another.

In positioning 'other-languagedness', voices may be juxtaposed or co-existed to one another, or perhaps mutually supplement or contradict one another. What important here is the artistic re-working and dialogically re-arranging of polyphonic voices into a harmonious music at a given chronotopic moment. It is not an enactment of finished finality of the whole though, but a continuous relationship of dialogic struggle (Emerson, 1984: xxxix). Realistically, as the world is full of different voices, differing vocabularies, disparate dialects and accents, it is not easy to have a perfect living conversations. Truly, some voices are louder than others, and some are heard at the expense of the other. In the above state of dialogical abrasion, a sense of dialogical civility that take order/equilibrium over disorder/chaos then should be appreciated highly (Schrag, 1986). In essence, as Bakhtin viewed polyphonic state is of higher order than in homophony, authors in disarray must put their artistic will of polyphony as a will to combine many wills (of speakers), that is a will to the 'event' (Bakhtin, PDP,21). In Bakhtinian term, an event (*sobytie*) is being *with* another, and it can only occur among interacting consciousnesses (PDP:6).

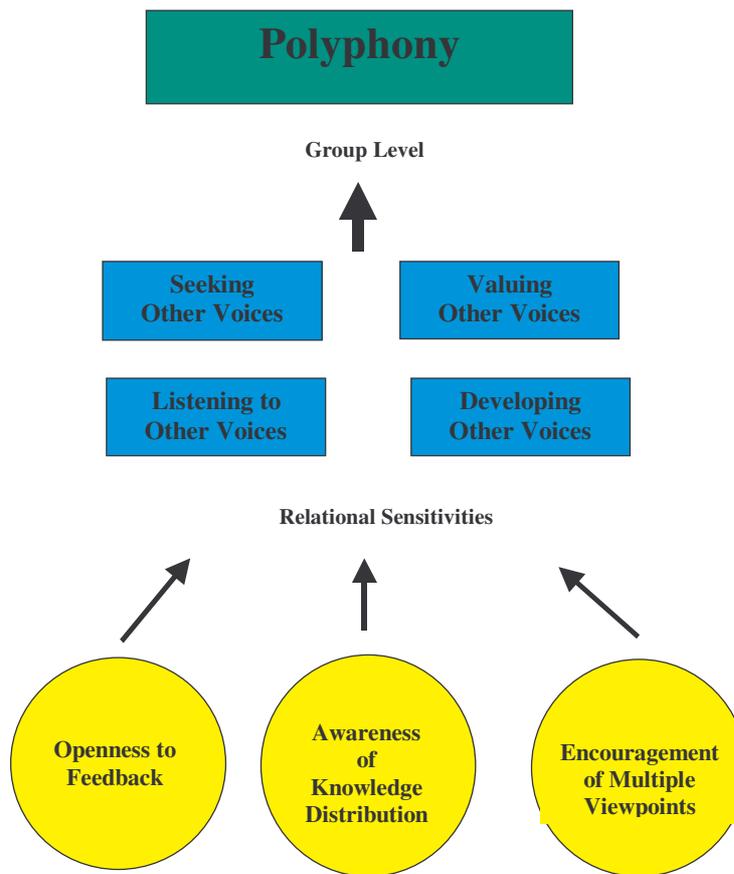
Lessons from the field for organizational communication

We select two case studies to show how dialogism and polyphony can create a living organizational communication. Rodriguez (2004) in his study in a printing company showed that voiceness is the result of dialogical relatedness between participants, relational sensitivities like how people sought out, listened to, valued

and developed the voices of other members, must be observed. Without that sensitivity new consciousness arising out of the learning process initiatives perhaps could not take place.

Rodriguez study showed that dialogism and polyphony thrive and alive if organizations provide the environment, in which organizational communication plays a major role in creating and promoting them, of valuing and expecting differences but at the same time respect voice inclusion and equality. In that mood of co-inquiry for truth, monologism was unacceptable. Meanwhile self-reflexivity and challenging one own polyvocality is appreciated. Knowledge and conversations in this light were viewed as socially constructed. The study also revealed that dialogism and polyphony climate give the organization a better competitive and cutting edge in making decisions and opportunities.

Based on the above study, he provided following theoretical model for polyphony to be embraced and consumed by other practitioners, in our case organizational communication practitioners.



The second case study refers to Leadership, Organization and Determination (LOM) program of Sweden. In LOM, a relational landscape is the key feature for development. In a report prepared by Shotter and Gustaven (1999), a set of 13 directives was outlined for the above purpose:

- a) Work experience as the point of departure
- b) Participants concern with the issues under discussion
- c) Dialogue is based on two-way discourses
- d) Participants are under an obligation to help the other
- e) All participants have the same rank in the dialogical encounters
- f) Some concrete experiences must be seen as relevant

- g) All participants must spend time to understand the topic
- h) An argument can be rejected only after exploration of its details, not on the ground that it emanates from a source with limited legitimacy
- i) All arguments that are to enter the dialogue must be expressed by the actors present
- j) All participants are obliged to accept that other participants may have arguments better than their own
- k) No one is exempted from a discussion however ordinary it may look
- l) The dialogue should be integrate a growing number of differences
- m) The dialogue should generate decisions

In the above LOM, dialogically structured moments are celebrated. As such Bakhtin's remarks that within dialogical arena, both centripetal tendencies (inward towards order and unity) and centrifugal (outwards towards diversity and difference) are viewed as responsive relations. The small details of local knowledge is not neglected but raised as full of event potential as part of plurality of consciousness in postulating a unified truth (Bakhtin, 1984:81). Both Shotter and Gustaven noted that the above unified truth indeed cannot be captured with a single consciousness, but the idea. They quoted Bakhtin (1984:88) in explaining what an idea --- "a live event played out at the point of dialogical meeting between two or several consciousness ... Like a word, the idea wants to be heard, understood, and answered by other voices from other positions."

Challenges and reflections

We believe dialogism and polyphony are strategies for a continuity of an organization. Change in this regard is inevitable to maintain continuity. Prahalad (1997:63) noted that if continuity is of value, then change is a prerequisite: if you don't change you die. As organizational communication 'connects' all organizational members, a right definition what is organizational communication is very crucial. In this light, organizational communication practitioners must dynamically move from the traditional idea of becoming a 'glue' for a 'brain' that not only imagine about the future but also have to build it in the form of strategic architecture --- the big picture full of opportunities and common aspirations of a dialogical organization. Moreover to implement dialogic and polyphonic principles is not an easy endeavour if we believe that organization is a house full of Morganian images (Morgan, 1986).

We assumed that Bakhtin provided answers for the above problem when he emphasized the notion of 'special responsibility' in doing dialogism and embracing polyphony. For Bakhtin both 'language activities' must be done with in a 'novelistic' way whereby both of them be seen as live-communion between consciousness in a dialogic meeting. In that intersecting moment, the living conversations brought together ideas and world-views by mean of dotted line to the point of counterpoint, an artistic and creative orchestration with voices. It is the art of weaving together a number of melodies to create polyphonic harmony in the contextual will of the unity of event as co-being.

In addition to the above, Bakhtin noted that all conversations/utterances should be made with the awareness of the present of the Third. Such suggestion should be read in the light of Bakhtin's vision about the heart of man as the battleground or theatre of war between good and evil. According to Bakhtin every dialogue proceeds as though against a background of a responsive understanding of a third who is invisibly present, metadiologically, standing above all the participants in the dialogue. Indeed for Bakhtin, the third is a constitutive feature of the whole expression/conversation. It is 'the over-I' that acts as a witness, reference point for the interaction of voices and a of judge for every man (Patterson, 1988:31, 39). Indeed dialogism is not set of relations in binary, as often (mis)understood, but tertiary, not a duet but a trio. Bakhtin (1986) clearly spelled out in the 'Problem of the Text'. Patterson (1988:147) concluded that the third is the definitive element of responsibility; responsibility is accountability to the third. Holquist (1986, xviii) elaborated the notion of the third as the higher super-addressee in the following words: Each speaker authors an utterance/conversation not only with an audience-addressee, but a superaddressee in mind who absolutely just and responsive understanding is presumed... if there is something like God concept in Bakhtin, it is surely superaddressee.

Endnotes

Shotter and Gustaven (1999) urged that when we see/converse we must not see/converse like a State [read: monologic] but rather like regions [read: polyphonic]. They quoted a story of Malaysian farmer, based on Scott (1998:333), for that purpose. It is a story of how the World Bank, acted like a State, wanted to make its loans dependent on the adoption of 'scientific' methods of agriculture, including the general and the indiscriminate use of pesticides. Scott narrates {Mat Isa is} the elderly head of a household. [He was] ridding the family of a mango tree of red ants, which destroyed most of the mangoes before they could ripen. For a number of weeks, Mat Isa laid the thin curled leaves of the nipah palm tree around in the strategic places in the village. He knew that black ant queens would lay their eggs in the leaves. When the accumulated masses of black ant eggs beginning to hatch, he then laid the leaves at the base of the mango tree. Black ants are the enemies of red ants, but do not destroy the mangoes. The mango tree was saved.

We end this paper with Bakhtinian words as mentioned in Morson and Emerson (1990:54):

What would I have to gain if another were to fuse with me?

He would see and know only what I already see and know

He would only repeat in himself in the inescapable closed circle of my own life

Let him rather remain outside me.

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