

( Chapter in Book )

**The Dynamics of Learning Conversations:  
A Self-Organised Approach to Management Development**

by:

**Laurie F. Thomas**

**&**

**Sheila Harri-Augstein**

in:

**Handbook of Management Self-Development**

T. Boydell (Ed.)

Centre for the Study of Human Learning  
( C.S.H.L.) Oxford. UK



# **The Dynamics of Learning Conversations: A Self Organised Approach to Management Development**

**Laurie F Thomas**

**E Sheila Harri-Augstein**

*Self development involves the construction of personally relevant and viable meaning- the integration of the knower and the known. To do this I need to become a self organised learner - one who 'expects to go on learning, to make independent judgements and to question '. I can be helped to become a self organised learner through a number of techniques which enable me to develop the ability to converse with myself about the processes of learning. Learning to learn can be facilitated by such learning conversations.*

*The chapter describes a number of learning conversation techniques, and then looks at a number of implications for trainers. In particular, the trainer must first learn to view and experience himself or herself as a self organised learner.*

*The authors also suggest that self development is not just a 'flavour of the month', but that in 'the crisis-ridden conditions which prevail in contemporary industry', learning to learn becomes an 'important selective factor in the struggle for personal and industrial survival' a point also made by Reg Revans in Chapter 13.*

## **SELF-DEVELOPMENT AND SELF-ORGANISATION**

The capacity to learn from experience and to take control of the direction, quality and content of one's learning is central to making the best of management opportunities. The skilled manager learns to construe a wide variety of events, people and technical systems in ways that enable the participating individuals to achieve their organisationally defined purposes more economically and effectively. In our view this is best achieved by encouraging and enabling managers to become more aware of themselves as learners. Insight into personal learning processes experienced at work is a prerequisite not only for self-development but also for enabling others to develop their competence. The concern then becomes that of developing means for becoming more aware of personal learning processes within the context of the socio-technical environment of management. Self-development in management implies learning with others and this depends on the practice of techniques which not only facilitate self-awareness but also enable the exchange and effective negotiation of personal meaning systems amongst groups, which work more or less permanently together within a given set of purposes, determined by the institution's shorter and longer term goals.

This chapter introduces a number of awareness raising techniques and content-free conversational heuristics which have been developed at the Centre for the Study of Human Learning in the last ten years. In a number of action based projects, managers in a wide variety of institutional settings and pursuing diverse purposes have applied these conversational techniques to explore, review and develop their competence. Case studies illustrate how individual managers, a management team, and a company as a whole can learn to change in directions which may be mutually advantageous.

In educational and industrial settings, self-organisation is with us. Let us accept and use it. Institutions have to adapt to self-organised learners and towards the end of this chapter the implications of this challenge for the dynamic and creative growth of an organisation will be discussed. The examples also serve to illustrate the theoretical and practical implications of the dynamics of 'Learning Conversations'. The final part of the chapter outlines a conversational theory and associated heuristics which we have developed for enabling personal growth in men and women at work. The implications of this approach for trainers is discussed within this context.

## **SELF-ORGANISATION AND THE LEARNING CONVERSATION**

If we are to encourage people to learn from experience, to think about their needs and purposes, to plan their strategies, to evaluate their success, and to review, revise and improve their methods of learning, then inevitably we are emphasising self-organisation. Self-organised learners expect to go on learning, to make independent judgements and to question. This makes them potentially more useful. The company or institution can effectively harness the rich variety of available experience so that it itself becomes enriched and capable of dynamic change. Everyone has to learn to adapt and develop. This depends on the recruitment of procedures which facilitate personal growth. In our view an emphasis on 'process' rather than 'product' enables the development of a 'meta-language' which is itself content free and which once acquired enables individuals, often for the first time, to take control of the ways they learn from experience. In the crisis ridden conditions which prevail in contemporary industry, where 'the products' of today can easily become the chains restricting tomorrow's growth, the development of a language which enables a way of thinking about personal learning processes becomes an important selective factor in the struggle for personal and industrial survival.

How can this be achieved?

First, let us examine briefly what learning is, and what we mean by the process of becoming self-organised.

Learning is not a fact that can be directly observed. It must be inferred, either from behaviour or experience: preferably it is inferred participatively from both. The observer of behaviour sees things which the learner often cannot, but only the learner has access to his or her own experience. In the 1960s the psychology of learning became obsessed with measurement in terms of behavioural objectives. Learning in this sense is measured in terms of how well the trainer achieves his objectives. 'Training' is really what is measured by the trainer when he reviews the learner's behaviour in terms of how well it demonstrates changes which 'the trainer' was trying to achieve. Let us call this learning Type T. Now, if we consult self-organised learners, our effective managers, they would argue that learning was something only they, as learners, could assess. Expressed in terms of experience or behaviour they would believe themselves to be successful learners if they had learned something which they themselves valued. This might be very different from what the expert or their boss intended! Let us call this learning Type L. Self-organised learners, who have learnt how to develop in their own terms (Type L) may or may not do well in their jobs. It depends on the extent to which their purposes and strategies include or overlap with those of others with whom they work. What the self-organised learner can do is learn from his or her experience, and use these methods to facilitate others to learn. It is this view of learning which led the authors to define it as 'the construction and exchange of personally relevant and viable meanings'. This

gives emphasis to both behaviour (viability) and experience (personally significant meanings) in the person's own terms (Type L).

Now we approach the core issue. How can people be enabled to think, feel and act more effectively, and thus live more fully? How can people learn-to-learn?

Listening, discussion, consultation, problem-solving, decision making, reading and writing reports, are some managerial skills that can be recruited for the development of greater self-organisation in learning. Learning-to-learn consists in an ability to converse with oneself about the processes of learning; to observe, search, analyse, formulate, review, judge, decide and act on the basis of personal encounters. This involves as much feeling as thought.

Unaided, most of us are not able to generate effective learning conversations with ourselves. Many develop an 'unwillingness to learn' that owes little to their potential capacity. It may be withdrawal from an intolerable situation or even boredom at having done the same job for a long time.

Our studies show that people of all ages can be encouraged to break existing habits which have become self-validating and inhibiting to personal growth. A variety of awareness-raising techniques have been developed to negotiate this process of learning-to-learn in each area of learning skill. This chapter focuses on conversational 'repertory grid' and 'structure of meaning' procedures which are specifically designed to elicit, display and reflect upon personal systems of meaning. These have been used to extend a person's range of meaning and to exchange more effectively their meanings with others.

The learning conversation is designed to assist in the acquisition of new skills as well as in achieving effective review and development of deeply-embedded habitual skills. It is conducted as a meta-commentary around a learning event. This term is used to indicate the nature of the conversation. This is concerned primarily with the processes of learning so that the learner can be more aware of these processes. The learning conversation is only concerned with the content of the learning event (e.g. decision-making, problem-solving, chairing a meeting, writing a report) in as much as this can be used to illustrate, emphasise and concretise the processes by which the participant learner(s) construct their meanings. The creation of a language in which to converse about learning processes requires much more than a dictionary of terms and a syntax in which to string terms together into conversationally agreed phrases. The language must arise out of the sharing of personally meaningful experience. The focus of the learning conversation is the reflection on process, and the repertory grid techniques and structures of meaning procedures are used as mirrors of process, heightened awareness enables the learner to explore skills and attitudes in a particular area of central importance, thus achieving greater competency. The conversation is based on a systematic control, guidance and exchange of experiences within a learning event. It is useful to describe the learning event in terms of phrases such as:

1. Negotiating personal needs into articulated learning purposes.
2. Developing and reviewing the processes of learning in terms of skills, strategies and tactics.
3. Recognising, revising and improving the outcomes of the learning processes and the criteria by which they may be evaluated.

It is important to recognise that such a 'phrases description' is concerned only with one cycle of the process at one level of event. Effective learning almost always consists of a series of such cycles in which the purposes become progressively more clearly articulated and the outcomes become more precise and determined and well mapped onto the purposes. Thus a meta-language dealing with learning requires a structure that acknowledges phases, cycles and the levels of a learning event.

As a learner becomes more self-organised, the learning conversation is internalised. He or she becomes his or her own mentor and tutor. Self-organised learners use a model of the process of learning to review and improve performance. They can identify needs and translate these into realistic learning purposes. They are able to plan how to go about the learning task, recognise personal limitations of skill, and develop effective strategies which overcome these. They must be able to generate criteria of success which match purposes and which can be applied to the outcomes of the learning efforts. Self-organisation depends on evaluating one's own performance. Periodically, learning processes in given areas must be reviewed, to prevent a take-over of habitual mechanisms which stabilise and inhibit further development. This is difficult. External conversations can re-establish contact and this may best be aided by a trainer. The trainer can help the learner to draw a 'learning contract' and then by acting as tutor or coach; he can aid the periodic reviews of progress. This organising role of the trainer as an aid to maintaining and developing greater self-organisation in learning has enormous repercussions for the structure and organisation of industrial training departments. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss these in detail, but various papers by the authors (Thomas and Harri-Augstein. 1976, 1978, 1979a) refer to the theory of 'Learning Conversations' and the impact of this on training and tutoring.

In this chapter some examples of the conversational use of awareness-raising techniques serve to illustrate that the heuristics of learning conversations can be applied to any area, It is a matter of selecting the appropriate procedures for raising awareness and review of learning processes. The conversation takes on different forms depending on the requirements of the lecturers and the content of the learning event. Within this paradigm we have explored job appraisal, selection interviews, problem-solving discussions, quality control, and a wide range of other management events as learning experiences for individuals and groups.

## **A Techniques which allow self-organised learning**

People operate through a system of personal meaning. The more self-organised one is, the more one acts as a personal scientist (Kelly, 1955) differentiating, categorising and theorising about the world and people in it. Personal theories (meanings) are constructed and form the basis of anticipation and action. During learning these are tested and revised in the context of ongoing experiences. Only when the same situation has the same meaning for two people will they react similarly to it. Five members of a management team working on a practical problem such as job appraisal, selection, forward planning, quality control or marketing will in all probability perceive the situation differently and draw different inferences from it. One may see it as a chance to demonstrate his competence to his superiors, one as an opportunity to explore a part of the organisation to which he normally does not have access, another may see it as a learning event, while another may well see it as a chore to be endured. The fifth may see it as part of a larger and more intractable problem.

The position, responsibilities, and past experience of each manager have led to a development of different meaning systems. Each system influences the way in which a situation is

perceived, to select certain aspects and ignore others, to give more emphasis to some characteristics than others, and it determines the way in which the perceived dimensions combine into an overall meaning. The five managers not only perceive the situation differently, but also tackle the problem from five different points of view.

Using the Repertory Grid to explore changing views of management The Repertory Grid procedures provide a basis for identifying the dimensions in a person's meaning system. They can also be used for comparison of two or more individual systems of meaning, so that groups can explore areas of agreement and disagreement. Rarely is an individual fully aware of these dimensions and they are usually inaccessible. Questionnaire and interview techniques force the respondent's answers into the inquirer's meaning system. Normal discussion often results in one or more participants taking over the structure or content with the result that most participants' views remain hidden.

The repertory grid is a two-dimensional matrix in which events (elements) representing a given (chosen), universe are interlaced with abstractions (constructs). These constructs are bipolar dimensions along which events can be placed according to the similarities and differences in a person's frame of reference. An individual's repertoire of constructs cluster into patterns which underlie his or her meaning system (Thomas and Harri-Augstein, 1977).

The content of the grid is determined during the elicitation conversation. It will be as significant or as trivial as the quality of the interaction between elicitor and subject. Both must fully participate in the conversational process (Thomas, 1978). This aspect is often under-emphasised. Before any content is entered into the grid, the purpose of the exercise must be negotiated. In this context the grid should be seen as contributing to the solution of a learning problem experienced by the subject. The nature of the problem is explored and an understanding of it shared. This understanding forms the basis of guiding, controlling and selecting the 'elements' and 'constructs' in a grid conversation.

Studies carried out at the Centre illustrate the range of management topics that can be explored.

1. Industrial inspectors used windscreen wiper blades as elements to explore the meanings which each assigned to the acceptable defective criteria of subjective quality assessment.
2. Wine and tea tasters and whisky blenders used their 'products' as elements to explore the meanings (verbal and non-verbal) they assigned to the qualities of each product.
3. A quality assurance manager, market researcher, production manager, research and development manager, factory manager, sales manager and training manager explored their view of quality (faults) of a well known food product.
4. Industrial trainers used 'training situations' such as 'on the job', 'lecture', 'project', 'film', 'discussion', 'demonstrations', 'case studies' as the elements in a grid to explore the assumptions they brought to the designing of a course.
5. A group of managers in the paints division of a major company used as elements 'people to be appraised' in order to explore the range of their constructions and to relate these to the standard appraisal form which each was compelled to use.

6. Shop managers in a shoe company used the repertory grid to explore their views on managing a retail business.
7. The constructs obtained in example 6 were used as a starting point for further grid conversations to identify criteria for effective recruitment.
8. A wide ranging group of middle managers in an international company used 'management events' as elements for identifying their ideas of effective management.
9. Managers in a research and development pharmaceutical company used learning events to explore ways of identifying criteria for setting up a 'high creativity' environment for their research teams.

The 'appraisal grid' will be used to illustrate how the awareness raising grid conversation is carried through. The main phases of the conversation are:

- (a) negotiating the purpose,
- (b) eliciting and agreeing the elements,
- (c) eliciting the bipolar constructs,
- (d) assigning elements to positions on the constructs.

### *The Appraisal Grid*

In this study the elements are the people to be appraised. In the following example Mr Donaldson and his subordinates are invented; but his constructs are a small sample of those most widely shared by the managers who took part in this study. Mr Donaldson has subordinates Mr Smith, Miss Jones, Mr Brown, Mrs Green, Mr Black and Ms White. To begin to elicit a repertory grid from Mr Donaldson three elements are selected (say Mr Smith, Miss Jones and Mr Brown). He is asked to consider them as people working for him. 'Now if you consider each of them as people that you know well and who work for you, which two seem most alike and which one seems most different from the other two?' Mr Donaldson thinks about this for some time and then he replies, 'Mr Smith and Miss Jones are similar and Mr Brown is different'. He is then asked what it is about these two which make them similar and he replies, 'They are poor at planning and analysing problems'. Mr Donaldson is then asked what it is about Mr Brown that makes him different. He says, 'Oh, Brown has good planning and creative ability'. Mr Donaldson has now revealed his first bipolar construct:

Poor at planning and analysing problems      v      Good planning and creative ability

Mr Donaldson's own terminology is faithfully recorded. The repertory grid and each construct in it are taken to be samples of how Mr Donaldson thinks and feels about his subordinates in his own terms. He is now asked to assign the three remaining elements, Mrs Green, Mr Black and Ms White to one or other pole of the construct. The second construct is elicited in the same way. Mrs Green, Mr Black and Ms White are used as the second triad. Mr Donaldson puts Ms White and Mrs Green together as 'followers' and calls Mr Black a 'leader'. Four more constructs are elicited and each time all the elements were assigned to one or other pole.

In its raw form (not shown) the repertory grid presents the elements in the order in which they were originally named and the constructs in the order in which they were elicited. But

this is not the best form of presentation from which to abstract the full meaning of the responses. Visual comparison of the element columns in the raw grid reveals that Mr Smith and Ms White have been similarly assigned to all the constructs. Mr Black and Mr Brown have also been assigned similarly. The meaning of the grid is partly clarified by re-ordering the elements. Now visual inspection reveals that Constructs C2 and CS contain a similar pattern of responses.

FOCUSing is a two-way sorting procedure developed at the Centre. One paper and pencil form of this method of analysis has been introduced by Margaret Neal and Peter Honey in earlier articles. The procedure is described in detail in a Centre Working Paper. A Manual Grid Sorter or a 'FOCUS' computer program are available to facilitate this analysis. The fully FOCUSED grid is presented so that the meaning contained in the responses recorded in the raw grid is made explicit.

The FOCUSed grid shows that Mr Donaldson sees Dr Black and Mr Brown as intelligent creative persistent leaders, good at planning and communicating and who are well able to accept pressure. On the other hand, he sees Ms White and Mr Smith as unintelligent followers, lacking in determination, who dislike pressure, are poor at planning, analysing problems and communicating. He sees Mrs Green and Miss Jones as having some good and some bad characteristics. But the grid reveals as much about Mr Donaldson as it does about his subordinates. It shows the terms in which he thinks and feels about subordinates. (In practice a grid usually contains more than six elements and six constructs.) It shows how his different thoughts and feelings relate to each other. On the evidence of these six elements, Mr Donaldson feels that:

- (a) followers are poor communicators and leaders are good communicators;
- (b) intelligent people can accept pressure and unintelligent ones dislike it.

A series of learning conversations was conducted with Mr Donaldson and his colleagues. Each conversation started from the individual's FOCUSed grid and raised his awareness of his own construing. Figure 15.2 illustrates a talk-back heuristic for a focused grid. The managers then went on to pool their experience by comparing and contrasting systems of constructs. Various additional 'grid procedures' were used to enable this group of managers to develop a psychologically, as well as procedurally, shared system of appraisal.

#### *Learning conversations with the FOCUSed grid*

Eliciting and focusing the grid offers unique opportunities for learning to learn. Used to create conversations with oneself it is both a method for achieving personally relevant changes and a paradigm of how this can be done more informally. Seven 'grid games' are outlined as examples of extensions of this self- conversational technique.

1. *Elaboration*  
When a grid is focused, clusters of elements and constructs emerge. If each cluster is split by introducing new constructs to differentiate between similar elements and new elements to split constructs the meaning represented is elaborated.
2. *Brainstorming with the grid*  
An exercise in divergent thinking is to look for elements and constructs which would form into additional clusters to those already in the grid.



FOCUSED		REPERTORY GRID					
STAFF APPRAISAL PROJECT							
o . . . . Pole 1 . . . . o	E6	E1	E4	E2	E3	E5	x . . . . Pole 2 . . . . x
C2 Follower	o	o	o	o	x	x	Leader C2
C5 Poor communicator	o	o	o	o	x	x	Good communicator C5
C4 Lacks determination	o	o	o	x	x	x	Persistent C4
C1 Poor at planning and analysing problems	o	o	x	o	x	x	Good planning and creative ability C1
R C3 Unintelligent	o	o	x	x	x	x	Intelligent R C3
R							R
R C6 Dislikes pressure	o	o	x	x	x	x	Accepts pressure R C6
R							R

							Dr Black
							Mr Brown
							Miss Jones
							Mrs Green
							Mr Smith
							Ms White

Figure 15.1 Mr Donaldson's FOCUSED grid

3. *Superordination*  
Another approach to the focused grid is to look for unifying concepts, which adequately subsume a whole cluster of elements or constructs.
4. *Cross-Grids*  
If two grids A and B containing different but related sets of elements are combined, all the A elements can be placed on the B constructs and all the B elements on the A constructs. The combined grid can be focused to reveal how the 'different' elements and constructs cluster with each other.
5. *Types of construct.*  
A procedure similar to that in 4 can be used to explore how different types or levels of construing relate one to another.
6. *Non-verbal construing*  
An interesting perceptual exercise is to collect together a set of objects that are important to one. Now one can take any three and identify the two that are most alike; but one must not name the similarity, even silently in one's head. Next, one can sort the rest of the objects on to operationally defined poles. The exercise can be continued with new triads. The usual result is a greatly heightened awareness of visual and/or tactile phenomena. This technique has proved particularly useful in training for subjective aspects of industrial inspection.
7. *The Change Grid*  
The change grid serves to raise awareness of change in construing over time. Specifically, it is a comparison between two grids displayed on a focused version of the later one. In addition to the direct comparison of ratings on the initial elements and constructs (change in rating is shown by circling O changed responses), new elements and constructs are displayed. These are shown in their relationship to original elements and constructs. The change grid shows how a person's view of a topic varies over time.

This example of Type L learning illustrates how individuals can explore an area of personally important understandings without initially having committed himself or herself to any clear-cut ideas about what would constitute a successful outcome. This process of exploration has three aspects:

- (1) the revision, elaboration and extension of one's own personal construct system;
- (2) the close regarding of others' systems of constrictings to compare and contrast with one's own;
- (3) 1 and. 2 eventually stabilise to produce a new pattern of personal meanings. Out of this emerges a retrospective definition of needs and purposes.

Later in the chapter, procedures for the exchange of meanings are briefly outlined. The examples so far have concentrated on procedures which facilitate the process of becoming aware of one's own system of meaning, exploring it and differentiating it. This enables one to become more flexible and amenable to growth.

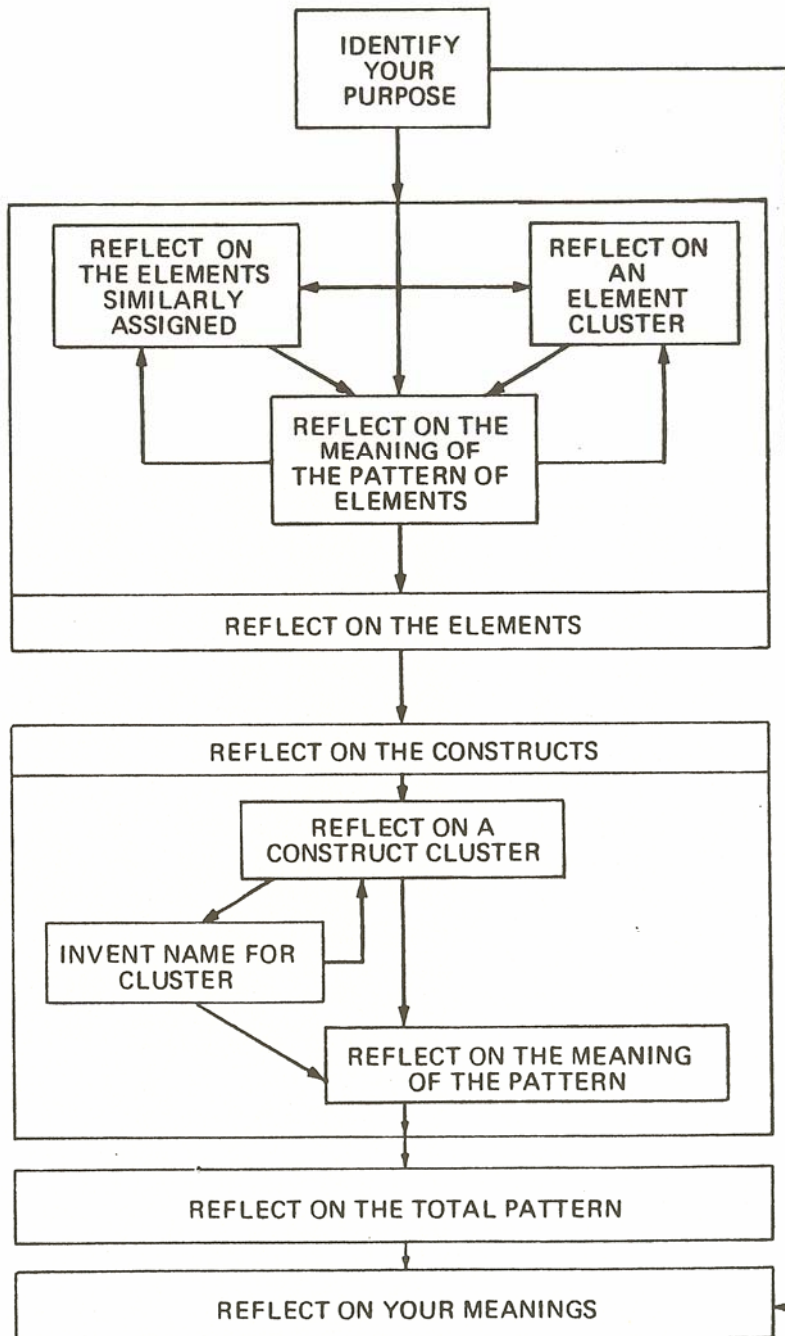


Figure 15.2 Talk-back heuristic for a FOCUSED grid

Details of conversational talk-back heuristics are published elsewhere (Thomas and Harri-Augstein, 1976b). Conversational heuristics have been embodied in content-free computer programs which have the capacity to encourage and control conversation as vigorously and systematically as behavioural modification techniques and other instruction-based procedures control behaviour. The FOCUS program re-orders a completed grid for feedback purposes. The pattern of responses is highlighted. PEGASUS is an interactive program which elicits a grid and gives a feedback commentary immediately the responses are entered. ARGUS elicits several grids simultaneously from one person from different points of view. Other BASIC 'grid games' are built into programs and paper and pencil techniques.

## **B Techniques for enabling groups to exchange and share meaning**

Effective processes of learning Type L consist of the creative search for personally viable meanings within an informed context of established knowledge (in management appraisal forms, selection criteria, behavioural modification techniques, problem solving heuristics) and the reported experiences of others. But one has to learn that to understand a position does not necessitate finally agreeing with it and that initial disagreement need not be a barrier to understanding. The exchange of meanings can take many forms. Learning to learn from the experience of others requires that we learn how to enter into another's reality.

### *Exchange Grids*

The 'exchange grid' procedures are methods for generating a variety of systematically controlled conversations about a mutually agreed topic, for example with ICI managers about 'appraisal' or with the people working for M & S suppliers about 'quality of underwear'.

For simplicity of explanation a two person exchange is described.

Sid and Arthur have each separately completed grids on the topic of 'problem solving', have reflected upon their FOCUSED grids and played some grid games to make themselves more aware of and creative about the implications of their own 'problem handling' experience. They now get together. Sid describes his elements (items from his own experience) to Arthur and Arthur explains his to Sid. Each now fills in a new grid form with his own element names and construct pole descriptions. They do not fill in the cells (the 'o's and 'x's) of the grid. They then swap grid forms and each completes the other's grid. Comparison of Sid's own grid with Arthur's attempt to enter into Sid's pattern of meaning is revealing. The PAIRS DIFFERENCE and CORE procedures can be used to facilitate the comparison (Analysis Programs).

Three forms of exchange grid are:

*Understanding - misunderstanding* where Sid attempts to complete Arthur's grid as he believes Arthur would have originally completed it.

*Agreement - disagreement* where Sid fills in Arthur's grid as he believes it should be completed.

*True exchange* where Sid and Arthur pool their resources to produce a new shared understanding.

These controlled encounter techniques may produce:

- (a) takeover: 'I understand what you mean. I had it wrong (or at least I cannot see how what you are saying is wrong and I do not believe in myself sufficiently to work it through). Let's agree to see it your way.'
- (b) give-over: 'I understand what you are saying but you cannot really mean it'; or
- (c) compromise: 'I understand you and you seem to understand me, we differ, now what shall we do about it?'

But such conversations increase the possibility of:

- (d) a creative encounter: 'I understand you, you understand me, and we differ. Let us see if we can throw our meanings into the melting pot and create something new that transcends our separate positions and achieves it all'.

These techniques, particularly when they achieve a creative encounter, enable us truly to learn from another's experience. The other may even be 'the expert' or an acknowledged source of publicly recognised know-how, knowledge or expertise. The real lesson is to learn not to be (passively) instructed but to enter fully into their world, explore it, and then create a new system of personally relevant and viable meanings of one's own. If the expert source is acknowledged, and included in subsequent developments, the isolated encounters can gel into a coherent enterprise. If creative encounter is in reality a 'pirate raid', communication closes down and the rat race is perpetuated.

## **IMPLICATIONS: THE ACHIEVEMENT OF SELF ORGANISED CHANGE**

This chapter has sketched out a paradigm for self-organised change. Examples illustrate how this can be carried out in practice. Specific conversational techniques are recruited to heighten awareness and to develop a meta-language to converse about learning processes. We are unskilled as change agents and we are unskilled in collaborating to initiate and sustain processes of change. Pre-planned instructional paradigms tend to produce efficient robots. A conversational paradigm acknowledges each participant as a semi-independent mode of control and influence. Only by fully embracing this approach can we hope to sustain a process of creative change.

Some view of the self-organised learning system is essential as a model on which conversational encounters can be based. One aspect of this relates to the change process itself. The personal system of meaning which is creating a certain level of competence is ultra-stable. Figure 15.3 shows how, when an attempt to change is made, the whole system compensates, creating strong pressures to return to a stable condition.

The established methods of work, and the existing systems of relationship, are familiar, and provide a cosy escape hole from the winds of change. Any sustained attempt to change is bound to go through periods of relative discouragement when lack of skill compounds with inevitable difficulties to produce almost un-resistible pressures for a return to the status quo. Indeed, in the most insidious forms of failure. It is the apparent successful completion of the 'planned change' which enables everybody to absorb it comfortably without allowing it to disturb the fundamental habits of thoughts and work.

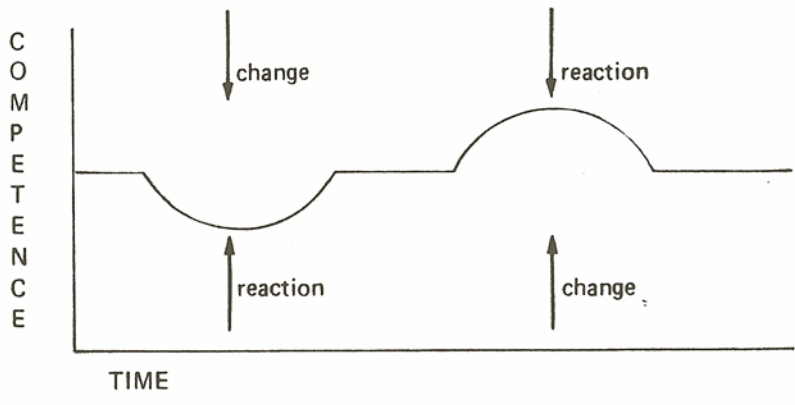


Figure 15.3

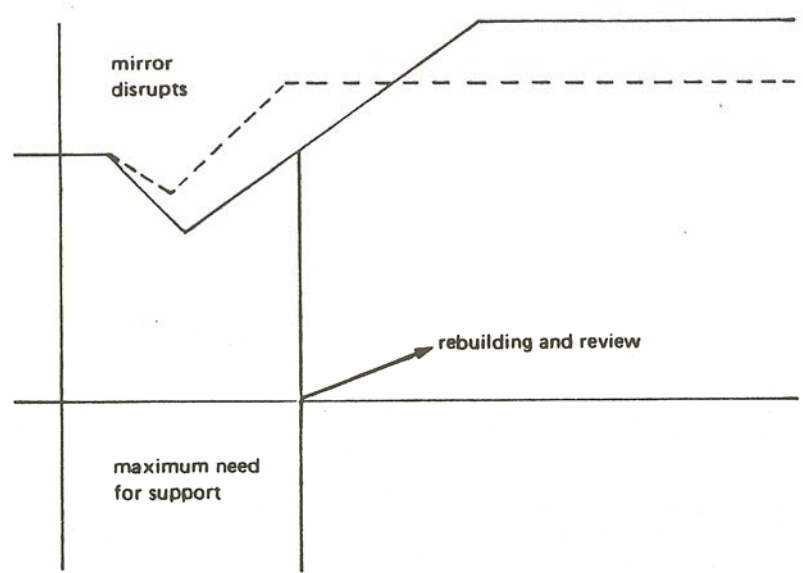


Figure 15.4 The disintegration of performance before improvement

When a habitual skill is disrupted, performance drops and the learner becomes emotionally vulnerable. He or she requires support and discipline from inside and outside to continue down into the trough of the process of change and to enter into the positive reconstructive phase of growth. Figure 15.4 illustrates this.

Any system of thought, feeling and action can usefully be classified as either habitual or flexible. Change depends upon flexibility but this can be very time-consuming if it is too tentative and exploratory. Habits occupy no attention but people can easily become imprisoned by them. A characteristic of self-organised learners and fully functioning people is their resolution of this dilemma. It is conveniently designated the 'hour glass phenomenon'. Provisionality during the exploratory period is followed by decisiveness (Figure 15.5). This establishes new habits which cope with the new situation until a need for further review and growth is recognised.

The trainer who is interested in effective change, both in individuals and in the performance of a group working together, must, in our opinion, treat people singly or together, as self-organised learning systems. The conversational paradigm would further require that to achieve this, the trainer must first learn to view and experience himself or herself in the same way. It is the purpose of this chapter to indicate that the effective agent of change is a self-organised learner. This capacity enables him or her to identify personally valued learning processes in others. Effective change is the product of personally valued learning.

The skills by which learning is achieved must themselves be learnt, but they are seldom encouraged in training departments or educational institutions. A 'scientific' understanding of the self-organised learning system and of the conversational process is essential. The Centre has developed a theory and awareness-raising tools for enabling people to learn-to-learn. The conversational repertory grid and structure of meaning procedures are two such tools. A 'learning conversation' is designed to achieve effective review of deeply embedded and partially developed skills. This requires three parallel dialogues. Together these reflect the learning processes to the learner, support him or her through painful periods of change, and encourage the development of appropriate referents which anchor judgement about the quality of the experience (Harri-Augstein, 1976). The three dialogues can be described as:

Commentaries on the learning process Purpose (P); Strategy (S); Outcome (O); Review (R).  
Personal support of the learner's reflection  
Referents for evaluating learning competence.

Tools for exhibiting processes of learning contribute to the development of the meta-language on which these dialogues are based. Each dialogue signposts separate roles for the trainer as an agent for change (Thomas and Harri-Augstein, 1977). People do not necessarily learn from experience, it depends on the meaning they attribute to this and on their capacity to reflect and review. Most organisations tend to disable us as learners and the onus is clearly on trainers and top management to provide a context within which learning conversations can be nourished and sustained.

## **LEARNING-TO-LEARN, TUTORIAL AND LIFE CONVERSATIONS**

The structure of 'learning conversations' within short, medium and longer time intervals has led us to a hierarchical view of the learning-to-learn encounter. Three levels of conversation have been differentiated, as shown in Figure 15.6.

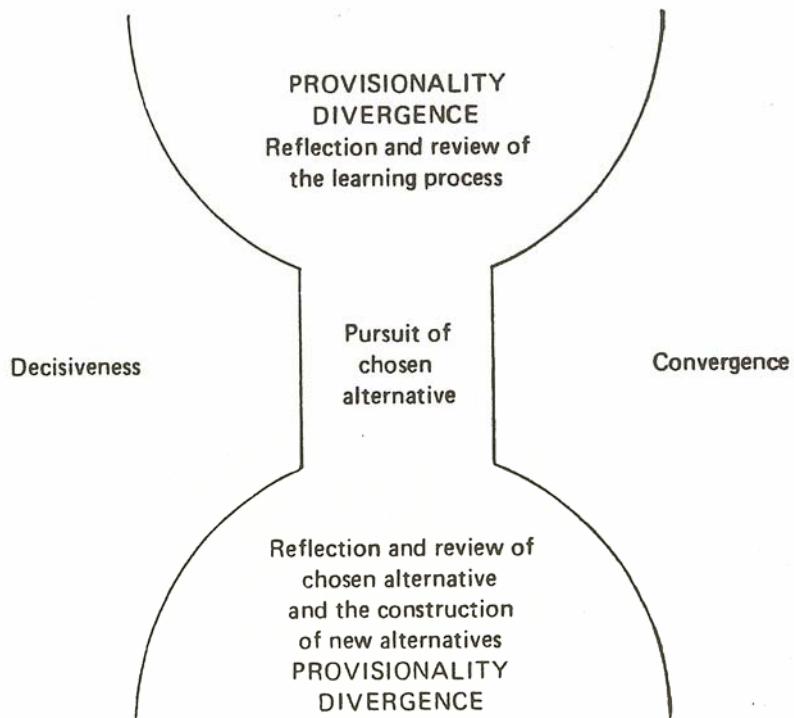


Figure 15.5 The 'hour-glass' phenomenon of 'process'

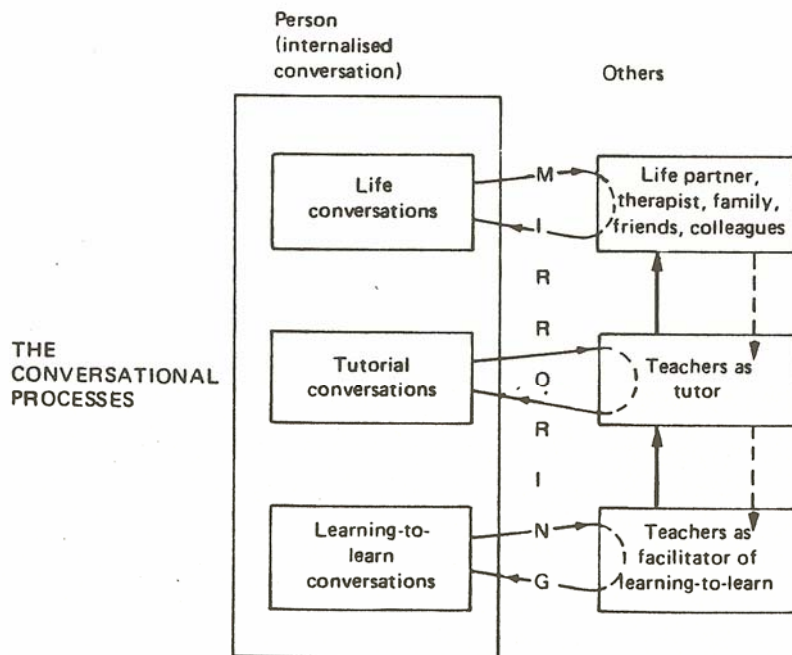


Figure 15.6 Levels of conversation



The 'learning-to-learn conversation' is primarily concerned with skills by which personal understanding is achieved. The detailed interaction, by which habits can be broken, reviewed and rebuilt, becomes the focus of attention. The 'tutorial conversation' on the other hand is more concerned with the long term strategic aspects of learning; the planning of goals and the execution of purposes over a period of weeks, months or years. It depends on the establishment of explicit learning contracts where the content of the learning is negotiated, the needs articulated into specific purposes, the resources identified and the strategies put into action. The deployment of basic learning skills forms part of the conversation. It can also raise the issue of when a learner should spend time in raising his level of competence in anyone skill. It is when such decisions are made that the 'tutorial conversation' refers back to the 'learning-to-learn conversation'.

Questions about the relevance of what is being learnt are raised in the 'life conversation'. In training this deals with issues of self-development and with the learner's perception of his role, job and tasks.

The emphasis on self-development and the practice of learning conversations has enormous implications for trainers. This section highlights some of the issues involved. As managers of self-development they must play a key role in any organisation. They become the catalysts for change at all levels including top management. Such people will need guidance for their own development and will also need encouragement and assistance in providing an organisational context for all participants to grow and change. To act as 'managers of learning', trainers will require new skills, sensitivity, a wide knowledge of learning methods and considerable resources, and above all, they will need to be self-organised learners themselves. One major responsibility of industrial organisations is to meet the challenge involved in enabling training staff to adapt themselves to the changing scene. For an organisation to achieve creative growth and change it must work as a system of corporate, self-organised learners. It is not too far-fetched to envisage 'conversational networks' made up of semiautonomous modes at all levels in an organisation. Each mode defines its own responsibilities within the context of the total network and achieves this by conversational interactions between modes. Some of the techniques and philosophy described in this chapter could be recruited to achieve this. A fully participative corpus, made up of supporting self-organised groups is feasible. To meet the demands of today's society and the challenges of the micro-processor revolution which is almost on us, the trajectory to growth must involve the management of people as self-organised learners and fully-functioning beings. Only by moving into this unexplored terrain can industrial society survive and grow.

## REFERENCES AND NOTES

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