

Guided Dialogue

For Releasing Depth Wisdom

Jean Watts

The human mind is like a radio dial that can tune into different stations.
Wherever we direct our thoughts, energy follows in the form of words and actions.¹

We humans are capable of processing torrents of vibrations flooding in from our environment. The human mind clothes these thought forms with denser substance and brings them into the physical world as images, words, and action. Over many generations, mystics, philosophers, and change agents describe the wholeness of the universe where no “thing” or movement exists in isolation. Today our experience of this wholeness leads us to seek ways to connect our thought forms, insights, and wisdom to the way we behave within our organizations, communities, and societies.

Leaders are becoming increasingly clear that they cannot address their organizations’ operational issues without addressing their underlying values, assumptions, and beliefs that are sustaining them.

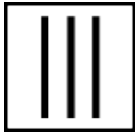
Within every organization, individuals reeling from stress and burnout from an overemphasis on engagement are now searching for ways to share their insights, feelings, hopes, and assumptions with others. Those tired of corruption and power plays are seeing new ways to bring order and meaning into their communities and workplaces. Those frustrated with traditional ways of thinking and acting are aspiring to find new ways to advance and choose among the overwhelming possibilities for effective engagement. Those overwhelmed by the economic and emotional costs of caring are searching for guiding principles, system-based strategies and integrative structures to deal with rapid changes and resulting chaos.

Leaders in every sector are realizing that a new style and form of leadership that benefits their organization while benefiting all humans is required. Among group dialogue methodologies, I have found “Guided Dialogue,” to be the most effective in both assisting groups in these transitions and unearthing the depth wisdom required of human kind in today’s world.

The Guided Dialogue process evolved from the Art Form Method which was developed by the Ecumenical Institute: Chicago during the 1960’s to enable individuals to become more aware and provide an environment for groups to experience collective consciousness. By asking a series of questions the facilitator was able to provide a way for participants to engage individually in self-reflection while in a group. A piece of art, a video, or a written text was originally used to initiate the conversation.

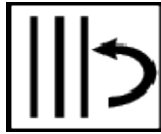
The Art Form Method required four stages or levels and was based on the assumption that “the self is a relation which in relating itself to itself, and willing itself to be itself, grounds itself transparently in the power that posits it” (Kierkegaard, p.147). In other words, the self exists in relationships. It experiences these relationships. It attaches meanings and interpretations to these interpretations, and makes decisions about them. Then it connects and integrates these relations, experiences, interpretations, and decisions. The theory was graphically explained with the following image:

¹Seifer, p.35.



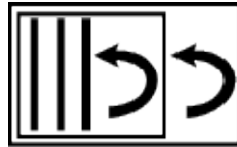
Self exists in relationships

Objective Level



Self experiences relationships

Reflective Level



Self attaches meanings, interpretations, and makes decisions

Interpretive Level



Self integrates relations, experiences, interpretations, and decisions in deep self-awareness

Depth/Maieutic Level

This method was described in detail in *The Art of Formative Questioning: A Way to Foster Self-Disclosure*, by Dr. John Kloepfer, a faculty member of the Ecumenical Institute, as a process that provides an environment for two modes of self-reflection, introspection and transcendent self-presence. In this context, introspection involves standing outside one's self and analyzing thoughts, feelings, sensations, or actions. In this process, self is experienced as separate from the world. Transcendent self-presence is standing outside of one's self and observing one's self as connected to the universe (Watts, Miller, Kloepfer, p. 4). In this process, the self and the world are experienced as a single reality (Wilber, 1981, p. 158).

Joseph W. Mathews, Dean of the Ecumenical Institute, gave a concrete understanding of the experience of shifting from introspection to transcendent self-presence in a lecture given in 1965 in New Orleans:

In spite of the pain and suffering of life, life is good just as it is....
In spite of my bag of neuroses, fears, and faults, I am received....
In spite of all the tragedy and mistakes in the past, the past is approved....
In spite of all the pain, problems, and crises, the future is open and all is possible.

The faculty of the Ecumenical Institute used the Art Form Method in seminars to provide an opportunity for participants to experience a sense of wonder and openness to their latent wisdom and to expose their inner or depth knowledge. The method was also used to integrate the diverse perspectives and talents of individuals for the benefit of all. The Guided Dialogue, like the Art From Method includes the depth/maieutic level (cf., p. 7) of the above graphic image as the fourth level. During this level the facilitator provides an environment for the participant to experience the existential dynamic between introspection and transcendence where depth wisdom emerges.

The Institute of Cultural Affairs, a partner organization with the Ecumenical Institute, later packaged the levels of objective, reflective, interpretive, and decisional as "The Focused Conversation Method" under the Technologies of Participation (ToP®) group methodologies, with the acronym "ORID." The intent of this method is to provide an environment for participatory conversations related to consensus, implementation, and action.

Both dialogue methods work well whether the participants know each other or not, or whether participants are from diverse backgrounds with multiple or with well-established or homogeneous perspectives. Both methods follow the natural way humans respond to information, which is introduced through a physical sense. Human beings have an (usually unconscious) intuitive or emotional response. They interpret both simultaneously, and integrate them into a thought form, word, or action. Participation in the dialogue allows for a harmonious integration of the body, emotions, and mind.

The facilitator helps provide an environment of profound respect for everyone to participate naturally in the conversation. Participation means both the opportunity to partake of (listen to) or to take part in (contribute vocally to) the dialogue (Bohn, 1996, p. 47).

In the Guided Dialogue process the facilitator guides the participants through the progression of four interactive but distinctive levels of reflection:

1. Objective
2. Responsive
3. Interpretive
4. Depth

This four-level process differs from the Focused Conversation Method in that it allows the group to see the inner meaning of events and circumstances, look for their hidden causes and significance, see the whole rather than the parts, and perceive the subtle connections between what appears physically to be separate. When the inner wisdom is integrated with concrete thinking, the participants become conscious of their inner knowledge on the plane of everyday living.

The group facilitator begins the conversation with a very brief introduction that presents the topic, reason for the conversation, and the timeframe. The topic of the conversation may be a shared event, video clip, a piece of written material, an art form, or a simple concept or idea.



OBJECTIVE LEVEL

At the Objective Level, the facilitator helps the participants to focus on the topic by asking questions which just require the physical senses to answer the questions with objective information that can be communicated spontaneously. These questions are easy to answer and require brief answers. Thus, if the group is small, all participants can naturally immediately engage in the conversation. The simpler and more direct the questions, the easier it is to draw the participants beyond any initial resistance. When it is important that each participant speak, this is the only level at which the facilitator might request an answer from every participant.

Sample Objective Questions

<p>TEXT What words immediately stood out? Exactly what did the author say?</p> <p>VIDEO What scenes do you remember? What sounds did your hear?</p> <p>VISUAL ART What objects do you notice? What colors did you see?</p>	<p>CONCEPT or IDEA What other words do you associate with this? What other words can you use to describe this?</p> <p>EVENT What stands out? What did we do today?</p>
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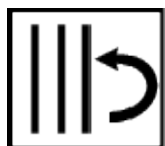
It is important that the facilitator ask the questions in a non-threatening manner that expects multiple responses. When the participants observe that the facilitator accepts diverse answers to

the initial questions, it builds an atmosphere of trust and affirmative openness, which invites participation.

Authenticity and integrity become obvious to the group when the facilitator is consciously aware of the intent of the question and the form of an answer. No one comes to the conversation with an empty mind. Each participant is always creating a unique set of thoughts, so moving too quickly into the Responsive Level will leave some participants in their own separate worlds.

The questions move gradually from objective to subjective reflection. When the facilitator senses that the participants are focusing on the topic, it is time to shift to Level Two with a simple question that requires an immediate response, but includes some reflection. For instance, if the topic for discussion is a video clip or piece of literature, the facilitator might ask, "Which words or phrases occurred repeatedly?" This question is similar to an objective question asked in the first level, "What words or phrases do you recall?" but requires more awareness.

There are three stages or movements within both the Responsive and the Interpretive Levels.



RESPONSIVE LEVEL

Responsive Level questions request participants to use their imagination and to share emotional reactions. In this context, "imagination" is understood to be a creation of the connection or perception of a relationship that is not explicit in the dialogue's topic. Imagination requires the use of the right brain. Aristotle said, "the soul never thinks without an image." Kenneth Boulding claimed that a person uses images to filter and perceive information and experiences. He called these "operational images." They can be unconscious, subconscious, or conscious. They are the current integrative residues of information and knowledge possessed by the person. They govern one's responses and behavior. A person grows or changes as his or her images change. The process of learning, change, or growth is an interaction between the operating image and a shift of consciousness (The Image, pp. 3-18).

When imaginative questions are not asked, the opportunity for more awareness or exposing latent wisdom is usually lost.

First Movement

When the facilitator senses that the participants are now focusing on the topic, it is time to shift to the next stage. The facilitator then asks an imaginative question, like, "Was this event more like eating a peanut butter sandwich or an ice cream sandwich?" Such questions catch participants off guard as they are asked to imagine what is physically not there. This enables them to respond naturally, and emotional sensitivities surface in addition to cognitive awareness of the topic, because the responses are followed by a why. A response might be something like, "It was more like a peanut butter sandwich because it had both substance and was fun," revealing the participant's emotional sensitivities to the event. Or if the topic is a poem or piece of text, a question such as "What color did you see while listening to or reading it?" One participant might answer "blue" since it was calming or peaceful, while another might answer "yellow" since it was insightful or revealing.

It is important that the facilitator move very quickly through this stage to prevent the participants from losing focus on the topic. Once several participants have spontaneously responded to the first movement questions, the facilitator moves to the second movement.

Because imagination is the action of the mind that produces a new idea or insight, conversations that have not included an imaginative question lack creativity and innovation.

Second Movement

In the second movement the facilitator directly asks the participants to share emotional feelings toward the topic. Since it is not easy for some participants to share their emotions or feelings with a group of people they do not know well, a good first question might be, "What emotions did you see expressed in the video or text or event, and where?" This question is further removed from the objective or descriptive data of the topic itself, but requires the participants to use their imagination, and reveals the underlying assumptions they are making. The questions then shift directly from objective data by the participants to subjective responses: "What emotions did the video or text evoke in you? What part of the event did you enjoy or like best? Dislike or found challenging? Surprised, intrigued, or disturbed you?" These kinds of questions are intended to be pivotal, moving the topic and the group's discussion to the personal or inner life of the participants. Most participants become more absorbed in the conversation at this point, forgetting fatigue, boredom, or self-preoccupation.

Third Movement

When the facilitator notices that some of the participants have freely shared their emotional reactions to the topic, he or she sets up the transition into the Interpretive Level. Just hearing others in the group express what they are experiencing gives courage or "en-courages" the others to acknowledge and explore further themselves. Regardless of the initial interest or disinterest of the participants in the topic itself, they are deeply attracted to their emotions and reactions that these questions evoke. They are looking into themselves to find the answers. Since hearing others express their feelings helps break down reluctance to acknowledge and share emotions, it is not necessary to spend a lot of time with these questions. In fact, if too much time is spent at this level, some participants may get caught up in the wonder of their own responses or absorbed in the power of their emotional involvement with the topic, preventing them from listening to the other participants in the group.

So the next question might be one of these: "Which character in the video do you most identify with? What lines in the text have you found yourself saying? Which phrases most resonate with you?" These questions begin to disclose to the participants facets of their inner selves that they may not have been previously conscious of.



INTERPRETIVE LEVEL

Interpretive Level questions catalyze the sharing of experiential knowledge and personal decisions or resolves. The participants are asked to interpret the topic of discussion by relating it to the world and to their own lived experience. The questions asked begin to probe for relationships, self-evaluation, and levels of meaning. The answers to these questions require the cognitive capacities of the participants' left brains. The questions now seem more about the participants' lives rather than the topic itself. They elicit deeper reflection, require interpretation, and reveal implications for living. The participants begin to make connections to their own lives by identifying with other participants' comments and through self-reflection. It is the interpretive questions that initiate collective consciousness as they begin the process of integration, which requires the use of the participants' noetic or intellectual capacities.

This level may not require as many different questions as do earlier levels, but each question usually takes more time because it requires reflection, thus, is not so easily answered.

First Movement

The latter questions of the Responsive Level focus on the personal relationships and responses to the topic. The Interpretive Level questions shift the focus of attention to the larger context of the whole text, video, event, object, or topic. The first questions asked at this level are, “What is or was really happening here?” or “What is this really about?” These questions require that the participants shift from the shared imaginative and concrete personal interior worlds of feelings and intuition to the more abstract world of ideas. As the minds of the participants synthesize this dynamic interplay of polarities between the inner and outer worlds, meanings begin to unfold. As the participants’ answers begin to reflect some facet of human existence, the facilitator moves to the next stage to ask where they see or locate it in time and space.

Second Movement

Questions such as, “Where do you see this taking place in the world today?” “What implications does this reveal?” or “What changes (in general) are being called for?” begin to take the conversation to a deeper level. The “this” of the question is determined by the responses to the questions of the first level. The context of the “world today” is intentionally inclusive, moving the sphere of thought beyond the individual realm, which puts distance between participants and their personal perspectives. The answers reveal underlying assumptions the participants are making about others. However, the participants are rarely aware that these assumptions come from their own underlying values and beliefs based on their personal life experiences.

Third Movement

The final questions of the Interpretive Level focus on increasingly concrete and personal applications for the meaning of the topic. The facilitator might ask, for example, “Where do you see this taking place around you – in your city, neighborhood, place of work, or family?” This moves the discussion still further toward the specific and concrete and applies it to the actual life of the people the participants know. Eventually, questions such as “How is it taking place in your own life?” “What decisions are being required of you?” “What have you learned?” “What will you do differently now?” These questions are particularly helpful for those participants who are reluctant or do not frequently look within, but who easily exteriorize ideas and prefer to intellectualize concepts.

Through the Interpretive Level of the process, the reflection required becomes increasingly more personal. As others in the group share their responses to these questions, several things begin to happen. The process of identifying with others in the group through shared feelings and experiences deepens and intensifies. As people share how the particular realities and dynamics being discussed operate in their own lives, their own private thoughts and experiences are validated, and the group gains courage to share still further. Deeper levels of care, compatibility, and compassion are shared. A sense of community frequently emerges. These dynamics of shared self-disclosure with others and private self-reflection require time as well as sensitivity, and skill on the part of the facilitator to hold the space so the specific meaning and implications can emerge within each participant. Without this, the participants cannot experience a new level of understanding or collective consciousness.

Some participants who have not developed the skill of thinking imaginatively, which is learned through meditation and contemplation, may get locked into a calculative, analytical mode of reflection and find it difficult to get beyond a superficial or literal level of interpretation. They tend

not to resonate with answers from others who reflect a freer, more imaginative level of thinking. Their answers to these questions tend to focus on "other people" who need this or that or who should be doing this or that rather than giving personal answers to the questions.

Other participants' fear of risk or change or an unwillingness to move from the status quo may prevent them from responding to the interpretative questions. Fear of change inhibits the creative and imaginative power of poetic metaphor and analogous thinking required in answering questions at this level. Without abstract or poetic metaphors and analogous thinking, it becomes difficult to move to deeper levels of identification, inquiry, compassion, and meaning.

Nevertheless, when the facilitator keeps his or her intent focused on the group as a whole, and stays faithful to the process, an ineffable freedom unfolds which enhances the group's capacity to respond to the inner callings of their deepest nature.



DEPTH LEVEL

Depth (or Maieutic²) Level questions develop a shared sense of purpose and meaning by eliciting a sense of wonder and openness to the transcendent dimension of life. The word maieutic is taken from the Greek word maia, meaning midwife, which implies that one is bringing forth a "new self" or a new interior form (Kloepfer, p. 183). The questions at this level are maieutic in the sense that the answers to the questions draw out the latent ideas or inner wisdom within the participant. As the awareness of this latent wisdom emerges, the conversation shifts to the specific meaning and implications the topic has for the participant's own inner life and self understanding, creating "a new interior form." This new form replaces the disabling negative thought forms, beliefs, or values with positive enabling ones. Each participant now perceives that what is of real benefit to them must also be of benefit to others.

Up to this point, the group dialogue has focused on the dynamics or relationships within the topic, the lived experiences of the members of the group, their perceptions of the external world, and what is concretely being called forth in them. The depth questions move the participant into still deeper levels of awareness. The dialogue slows down as the conversation shifts more into the transcendent self-presence mode of reflection. In this mode, the individual's consciousness connects with the inner wisdom of the other participants. They become able to disidentify or defocus from sensations, emotions, and thoughts sufficiently to recognize their witnessing consciousness (Elgin, p. 132). The significance of the topic, in light of its "ultimate" meaning or universal horizon of human experience, is brought into focus as participants collectively discover, discern, and affirm a deeper self-understanding.

The facilitator continues to change the nature of the questions at this level by asking the participants to search within for ever wider horizons of meaning, including underlying and broadest implications. Questions such as, "What does this really mean?" "Describe this in other words?" "Is this true for you?" "Is it true for everyone?" evoke an inner movement to self-consciously take a profound relationship to the topic or open themselves to the deepest dimensions of their own inner selves. Our higher potential as a species is our ability to achieve full self-reflective consciousness or "knowing that we know" (Elgin, p. 18). These questions are the most difficult to phrase. The facilitator must ask these questions in such a way as to prevent the participants from returning to abstract or cognitive reflection on the overall meaning of the topic. The answers to the questions are grounded in the concrete lived experience of the participants.

²Maieutic comes from the Greek *maieutikos*; to midwifery or the process of helping a person to bring forth his or her latent knowledge.

In conducting the Guided Dialogue, not all the questions need to be asked. A facilitator usually prepares more questions than are actually asked and frequently rewords the questions to fit appropriately into the ongoing dialogue.

At this level of the conversation, the facilitator should provide an environment for moments of silence and meditative reflection between questions and responses. These moments of silence during the conversation provide a participant the inner space necessary for the interaction between solitude and communication. When the facilitator is willing to confirm and support each answer to the questions at this level, each participant is enabled to affirm any truth, even when painful. This is an important component of transcendent self-presence. It relieves guilt and doubt and calms anxiety, thereby empowering each member to choose to affirm and be his or her unique self in the midst of the collective. Even the slightest judgmental attitude, particularly on the part of the facilitator, severely limits the willingness of the participants to risk becoming aware of their inner selves, much less sharing and exposing it to others.

The extent to which the group chooses to go into this mode depends upon numerous factors. The maturity of the group, its homogeneity, size, mood, or state of mind all play an important part, as well as the skill, sensitivity, and prowess of the facilitator. It is difficult for many participants to let go of the need to be in control and to go beyond the more familiar and comfortable functional dimension of rational thinking. As the depth questions lead the participants to become aware of the transcendent dimension, they intuit that something new or different is being called forth. Fear of the unknown makes it difficult for them to enter into the experience of awe that is required in this mode. This is not a mechanical, step-by-step process that is at work, but an open, dynamic one. No one can predict or control the extent to which individual or collective transformation can occur. Nevertheless, the potential is there for each individual and/or the group to come to a new, enlivened awareness. As the inner-self is awakened, glimpses of a new self emerge, allowing participants to re-connect with others and that which posits and empowers all.

The dynamics present in the Objective, Responsive, and Interpretive Levels – plus the first questions at the Depth Level – create a field where transcendence can emerge. During the final questions, an individual can be fully aware of the questions being asked, the other members of the group, and their responses to the questions, while also engaging in self-reflection. Everything is given a new perspective. It is like seeing through a new set of glasses. Things that had once seemed fuzzy are brought into focus. Or it is like relaxing one's focus in a 3D illusion. Suddenly, depth and dimension appear. One gets a glimpse of one's true self, centered not in ego, but in something much deeper. As individuals experience new self-awareness, the boundaries of time and space seem to disappear. There is a sense of wonder and awe as participants observe the larger picture of what they themselves have been thinking or saying. A new interior form emerges, which produces a new perspective, which alters one's perception, which results in a new belief, even, which often produces new behaviors.

Enabling this shift in awareness in groups requires specific facilitation skills. Only those facilitators who are well grounded in their own spiritual nature will succeed in guiding a group through the Depth Level. Facilitative leadership requires individual practice of self-reflection, where one comes to know the self. When this is achieved, one "knows not only itself but all selves" [Bailey, p. 1237]. With this knowledge the facilitator manifests an authentic presence with the ability to remain aware of the deep internal shifts taking place within the participants as each question is asked.³

³This paper was prepared for the workshop sessions of the Transforming the Legacy Symposium, December 17-19, 2009, Washington DC, in honor of Joseph W. Mathews and Bishop James K. Mathews.

[As a demonstration of the Guided Dialogue Method, the facilitator can pass out copies of the song, next page, and ask participants to read along as Greg Tambyn sings the song. If time permits, the song is played a second time for the group to sing along.]

“All These Atoms”

You breathe out, I breathe in
We're sharing molecules again.
Oxygen and hydrogen, but
Do you know where your atoms have been?
Parts of me were once in you
Genghis Khan and Hitler too,
Jesus Christ and dinosaurs,
Princes Di and Dinah Shore.

All these atoms everywhere circle back
So we can share.
No escaping, yes it's true
Parts of me were once in you.

My whole body smooth and hairy
Is really very temporary
Every year a new epidermis.
Maybe next year's will be firmer
There's some atom somewhere in Spain
I could use back in my brain
They stay awhile and then they leave, but
They only fit what we conceive

All these atoms everywhere circle back
So we can share
Like some ever changing brew
Parts of me are now in you.

As hard as it might seem to be,
Parts of you were once a tree
Once a fish in the primal soup
Something's dinner, something's poop.
Fifteen billion years ago
The bang was quite a show
All this time and now here we are
But parts of you were once a star.

All these atoms everywhere circle back
So we can share.
No escaping, yes it's true
Parts of me are now in you.

All these atoms here on earth
Get recycled death to birth.
Like some ever changing brew,
Parts of me are now in you

All these atoms we've collected
Only mean that we're connected.
Since we share what we're made of,
Don't you think that calls for love?

Guided Dialogue on “All These Atoms,” song by Greg Tamblyn

Rational Aim: Demonstrate Guided Dialogue	Existential Aim: Collective Consciousness
<p>Introduction/ Opening: [5 minutes] Ask the group to listen to the song while reading along silently. Then ask them to sing along with Greg.</p>	<p>Facilitator’s Intent for Each Level</p>
<p>Objective Level: [6 min] <u>Impressionistic questions</u> 1. What words or phrases caught your attention? 2. What lines of the song stood out for you? 3. What personalities were mentioned? 4. Can someone hum a part of the tune for us?</p>	<p><u>Open up cognitive awareness of the topic:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • engage participant attention through physical senses • review words and phrases of the song • invite participation with easy questions
<p>Responsive Level: [7 min] <u>Imaginal questions</u> 1. What lines were repeated? 2. What pictures or images did you see? Describe them. 3. What emotions were you aware of in others? 4. How did listening to this song make you feel? What emotions were you aware of within yourself? 5. Which lines did you particularly identify with?</p>	<p><u>Invite personal responses to the topic:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • enable participants to be absorbed in topic • evoke the use of participant imagination • invite participants to share emotional responses • enable participants to be personally engaged • initiate meditative self-transcendence
<p>Interpretive Level: [10 min] <u>Q’s to connect song to world</u> 1. What do you think the writer of this song wanted to communicate? 2. What does it really mean to say we are connected? 3. Where do you see these connections taking place in the world? In your community? 4. When have you experienced this sharing?</p>	<p><u>Stimulate intellectual faculties of participants:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • discuss the purpose/meaning of the song • catalyze the sharing of lived experiences • enable participants identify with the song • provide space for participants to get in touch with the truth about themselves • disclose participation in the transcendent dimension of life
<p>Depth Level [10 min] <u>Q’s to evoke universal meaning</u> 1. Words or phrases could be substituted for the word ‘love’? 2. In what ways have you experienced this? 3. What does this really mean for us?</p>	<p><u>Expand their personal horizons of meaning:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • deepen their meaning of being connected • open them to transcendent self- presence • provide space to affirm interior directives • enable experience of depth awareness
<p>Closing: Thank you for sharing your thoughts and insights.</p>	

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