

WHY ARE CONVERSATIONS CENTRAL TO LASALLIAN EDUCATION?

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I met a colleague and friend Ken who had until recently been educating Israelis, one long weekend a month, in Tel Aviv. He is an Irishman, who among other things asked me if I was going out to Palestine. "No", I replied. "Do you know" he said, "Two years ago I spent three weeks going everywhere in Israel." He paused staring at me, glaring at me, bemused, "It is horrifying now."

Then he stopped dead, frozen; there was silence, he was frustrated and in pain. The violence in Ireland and in Palestine and in my childhood flashed into my mind. And into this space I said, "Walls do come down walls always come down ,but, when, we do not know." "Yes", Ken, said, colour with hope returning into his face, "We have seen it happen." As I walked away I thought of the unpredictability of appearing and disappearing walls – the Rabbit fence, the Ghettoes, The Crematoria of World War II, the Berlin Wall, the Great Wall of China, Hadrian's Wall, Apartheid, and Genocide etc. and felt the unpredictable mysterious power and act of Freedom that the risen Christ continues to bring to birth among us in the midst of violence. But also of so many who die in the violence.

All conversations are unpredictable for it is during these moments that the unpredictable emerges, if we are able to recognise it, and if we are up for it.

Close Personal relationships, family relationships, small group relationships, large groups like a Lasallian Assembly, and organisations like schools are processes of communication. What is central is the meaning we find in the interpersonal communication that occurs in these endlessly variable physical spaces. The locations or the context of these groups, while important, are secondary. In all of these situations the individual and the group, the self and other, the me and them, and I and Thou, can be viewed as different perspectives of a dynamically changing reality.

People in communication bring into being an entity of the group in the minds of the participants. This mindedness is a mental construct formed by the interaction of the members trying to make sense of where they find themselves in a particular context. The ideas and feelings that the participants have are all different and during conversation endlessly change. There is no single notion of the group or of what is happening or of a static meaning even though most of us believe that there is.

I will try to address briefly some of the evidence for the importance of the unpredictable nature of conversations and how these are central to our understanding of education.

There have been and continue to be many approaches, theories and research into this unpredictable dynamic that takes place in conversations. Each one of these we might consider as a metaphor; a particular way of looking at one face of a facet of a jewel while not seeing the whole and the inside. Here are a few of these metaphors with very sketchy outlines which you may recognise in formal education such as Lasallian schools or in your personal lives and elsewhere:

The Scientific Model - of Max Weber which is bureaucratic/ charismatic/natural. Or Classical Management theories and Scientific Management MBO (Management by Objectives) as in schools and Mac Donald's etc. Design objectives in industry and jobs. Etc.

The Organism – The Systems Theory of Von Bertalanoff, Eric Trist's socio-technical approach etc. The Hawthorn Experiment of Mayo. Maslow's Hierarchy of needs. Systems concepts found in – open and closed systems, homeostasis, entropy, negative entropy, sub-systems etc. There are also the studies of species of Organisations. Etc.

The Brain – Learning to Learn. Bateson' Cybernetic Epistemology, Argyris & Schon's Learning Organisation and double loop learning. Holography and the multidimensional aspects of neural networks. Marshall McLuhan The Medium is the Message. Etc.

The Culture – Organisation a subset of its Societal context. Ed Shein e.g. Japanese Zen of Matsushita. The English class system and Charles Handy in Gods of Management. Quality as some kind of religion and the magical shared meanings and bindings. Etc.

The Politics – Organisation as system of government, Divine Right of managers to rule & the Divine Right of Kings, Pyramids of Power, creative conflict. Political Rule. Great Leaders. Control. Strategies of behaviour and conflict management. Formal authority control of boundaries, and resources. The Tyranny of the unequal relationship. Stalin and Hitler. Etc.

The Organisation or the Group as Flux – Parmenides, Heraclites. Bohm's implicate explicate orders. Wave particle dualities, quantisation, Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principles, Field Theories, String Theories and multi-dimensions, Complexity Theories. Maturana and Varela, Autopoiesis – self producing systems and self renewing and evolving

systems – closed systems. Psychic perception as an active formulation of reality e.g. colour vision. Etc.

The Organisations or Groups as Instruments of Exploitation – domination, and control. Multinationals and Facelessness. Marx's Capitalism, Lenin's Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Etc.

The Psychic Constellations – Freud's Sexual Repression, primary and secondary process thinking, models of mind: Klein's Paranoid/Schizoid and depressive positions and mechanisms of splitting, denial, projection, projective identification; Hirschorn's Work as reparation: Bion's Basic Assumptions and Epistemology of thought, Winnicott's Organisations and Change Agents as Transitional Objects; Unconscious Defences against anxiety Menzies Lyth: Elliot Jacques. Object Relations and Self Psychology; 'The Psycho-dynamics of Groups and Organisations'. Foulkes' Matrix and Cortesao's Pattern. Etc.

None of these viewing positions is sufficient alone to bring any consistent success in understanding our group conversations. Each framework is deficient, limited and confined. Particular questions in each metaphor may or may not take us further. However the same questions asked in another metaphor may fail to find any answers; pursuing the enquiry becomes meaningless. In other words we are confronted with paradox and uncertainty in all these positions of our thinking minds.

So what can we say about conversations personally and together in our groups and in our Schools?

In conversations we seem to follow an iterative movement in which we each of us discover the meaning of what we say in the response others have to what we say. And we of course say things in many ways: words, actions, silences, looks, absenteeism etc. All of these and many more are part of our conversations. We find ourselves recognising the meaning of what we are saying (in all its forms) as we speak into the response of others and, as we do this, the meaning of what we are saying may well be transforming of oneself and all of us. At a given moment one of the theories may offer some kind of map but things change unpredictably in conversations, and other maps, often very different ones, may or may not help but only for an unpredictable time.

In accepting the unpredictable nature of our conversations we may then acquire a special listening and noticing focus. This is awareness and an acceptance that what we are saying we do not fully understand and that we need others to respond to us and in this back and forth flow of experience we may be changed. Conversation like this is learnt, it requires an experience of trust, which later becomes a capacity for intimacy.

We need to be part of groups to be educated. Groups shape us, and our identity is established and changed through participation in groups.

Furthermore we might glimpse that this kind of participation is an important aspect of Lasallian Education.

Let me finish by drawing on the thoughts of **S.H. Foulkes** (1973: "The Group as Matrix of the individuals Mental Life" in Foulkes' "Selected Papers"; London : Karnac, 1990 and from 1964 *Therapeutic Group Analysis*. London : George Allen and Unwin.) and **Ralph Stacey** (2001 – Group Analysis Pg 457 – "What Can it Mean to Say that the Individual is Social Through and Through"?)

In talking in this way about group conversations Foulkes says we need to think about the matter of the group in figure-ground terms. Sometimes our focused attention is on oneself or an individual member as a figure against the back ground of the group. Sometimes our attention is the other way round, it is on the group as a whole and the individual is in the background. It is impossible to focus in both ways at the same time. This kind of situation is very much reflected in descriptions of groups as a Matrix. The Matrix is a multi-personal 'field', in which subjects and objects appear, interact, change and transform in personal, interpersonal and transpersonal functions. Stacey comments that we are postulating a system that is behind, above, beneath the action of communicating and relating. In other words we are postulating a system of interaction itself that has agency, causal powers, and some kind of intention, all of which is unknown and unpredictable.

There is much in this that reminds me of how the Gospels, the Acts and St Paul describe the surprises of the Risen Christ among us. And furthermore the ways in which our Faith is unpredictable in the ways we understand and live and minister, and full of unexpected individual and collective changes. There is much in what I have briefly described about conversations and our relationships, that I think, has applications to group relationships in families, communities, young people and peer groups, parents, pupils and teachers in classrooms, staff groups, places of work, parishes etc.

Ultimately, however, it seems that human freedom and the possibility of something enfolding us that is new, adventurous, good for all of us, unpredictably coming to birth, and transforming, may lie in our capacity as Lasallians to encourage suitable group conversations that enable us individually, and through mutual support, to choose to change.

When we become confident and notice together unpredicted changes we are aware of how education is always about changing relationships. This is what happened when Ken and I met.

Do we need a Lasallian Centre in which we might begin to learn how to discover the unpredictable changes that arise through conversations?

The Assembly in St Cassian's Kintbury:

Friday evening 30th March until lunch on Sunday 1st April

This important meeting is open to everyone. If you would like to be there send your name to Brother Sean at:

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