Dialogue as a strategy for collective learning

Some reflections on a Dialogue Course for Local authority staff

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A Local authority in a municipality, as well as any type of organisation, must over time change in structure and attitude in order to provide the inhabitants with the services they require now and in the future. A general problem seems to be a lack of places for the staff to meet for reflecting conversation about their work in a deeper sense (see for example Ståhl, 1998). On the other hand a lot of meetings about ordinary-work problems are common and they have a tendency to be frequent and consume much time. At the same time there is an increasing need to develop a range of individual and collective skills. Efforts so far have mainly been directed at improving the skills of the individual. It is perhaps time to emphasise on collective learning in order to help professionals to co-ordinate and collaborate their work more efficiently and effectively. The operationalisation of this goal requisite that places for dialogue is created.

> The promise of dialogue is that a small group of people might do something that impacts
> the world. Evoking this potential, supporting its articulation, and asking people to reflect
> on it can make an important difference to progress going forward. (Isaacs, 1999:293)

In an attempt to create such places for conversation a Dialogue Course was set up in a Local authority in a small Swedish municipality. It started as a preliminary project in autumn 1997. In the autumn of 1998, the first real stage of the course was initiated.[1] All permanent employees in the Local authority (approximately 850 people) were intended to take part in the course: "Dialogue - the ability to think together". According to the project specification the aims are described as follows:

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[1] The training derive from a project which started in 1992 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in Boston, USA.

Dialogue is a corner stone in the learning organisation for communication and mutual reasoning, which takes advantage of the collective knowledge in good informed groups. It is also a basis for team learning. The dialogue turns unproductive discussions into productive and proper problem solving. It is a process with deep investigations into fundamental skills and assumptions that steer the staff in the team in the Local authority. The purpose of the dialogue is to widen the boundaries, to reach further than is possible for an individual on its own.

The course included following elements:

- Introduction to dialogue

- Working in dialogue

- The art of thinking together

- Systems and organisational thinking

- The Individual and the organisation's Interface Profiles

From this point of view the aims of this paper are to explore:

a) how the Dialogue Course was realised concerning aspects relating to both form and content

b) the participants own perception of what kind of knowledge the course generated

c) if the course influenced the participants own daily practises at their work

Hopefully can these questions be beneficial in our ambition in this paper to draw conclusions about the possibility to create collective learning-processes.

Limitations and method

Data used in this paper was collected to a qualitative evaluation that was made by the authors of this paper. 593 survey-letters were distributed during January of 2000, of these 231 persons answered. Also 29 interviews were carried out with a number of individuals with various functions, such as participants in the project, members of the project management group and the supervisory group, politicians from the Municipal Executive Board and directors from the municipality. Two of the three authors of this paper participated in the so-called "Dialogue week" as a part of the commission to evaluate the project.

It is however a problem that this kind of processes takes time and it is not possible to se results immediately after a project has been initiated (Ekholm, 1990). Development-work is characterised by its passage through different phases. The time related framework for each phase could vary. According to Ekholm, the *initiation* of a development project can take between six months and one and a half years. The next phase, *implementation* can run over a period of 12 to 18 months. *Institutionalisation* can take even longer. Changes do not usually manifest themselves until five or six years, after the initialisation of the project. This is a circumstance one has to be aware of when assessing the effects and it is at the same time a limitating factor in this case for the possibility to draw conclusions.

Some theoretical considerations

In this section we will present some theoretical aspects in order to facilitate the interpretation.

Shotter & Gustavsen (1999) discuss how collective learning-processes can be developed by so called dialogue-conferences. One possibility to initiate collective learning-processes seems to be to arrange that the actors involved may have a possibility to meet and change thoughts with each other in dialogue-conferences.

When a participant from education meets, say, a businessman, the point is that both get to know more about, respectively, education and business, with a view to seeing how they can become better linked and inter-related. (Shotter & Gustavsen, 1999:45-46)

In our analysis the two perspective of implementation, top-down and bottom-up can be of some interest. The difference between these two means of realisation can be described as follows: "/…/ the top-down perspective is based on the *intentions of the decision-makers*, whereas the bottom-up perspective is based on the *actions of those responsible for implementation*". (Sannerstedt, 1991:19). Top-down implementation therefore deals with decisions of for example, political character, which in an authoritative manner are passed on to be implemented by a lower level in the hierarchy. Bottom-up implementation deals with how the receivers will implement and solve the imposed tasks. It is worth mentioning that both perspectives deal with authority: "The difference between the two is that the bottom-up perspective emphasises more strongly the deficient reliability of control". (Sannerstedt, 1991:19). A top-down perspective simply deals with how and why the receivers do other things than they eventually have been told to do.[2] The Dialogue Course can be viewed as aimed at setting bottom-up processes in motion. The intention to allow all staff in the Local authority to participate in a collective training programme also holds an ambition for encouraging bottom-up processes.

One important aspect of the Dialogue Course is its aim to developing the individual participants' ability to reflect and critically analyse their own surroundings. A useful tool for the interpretation is the so-called triangle of praxis, created by Handal and Lauvås[3]. This triangle deals with different levels of analysis (se figure 1). The first level "action" is a descriptive level, where actions are recalled and described. The next level relates to reflecting

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[2] A classic study of this can be found in Lipsky, 1980.
[3] This section is based on research referred to in Stensmo (1997, s 54-55).

and understanding one's own actions from theories, personal experiences and from the experiences of others. The third level is about legitimising and evaluating actions, which occur in the light of ethical aspects.
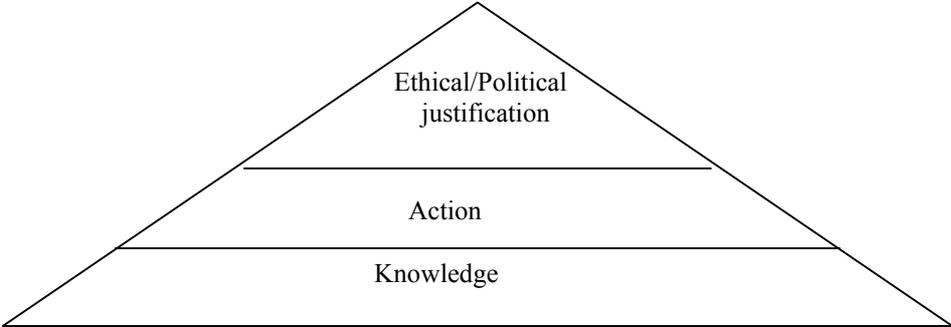
Ethical/Political
justification

Action

Knowledge

Figure 1. The triangle of praxis.[4]

The Dialogue Course in focus for this paper can be seen as a means for promoting reflection of one's own actions and the actions of others. A prolonged educational scheme of this kind can lead to the arrival at the third level of analysis where the reflection has political and ethical implications.

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[4] A slightly altered version of the figure can be find in Stensmo, 1997:54.

The Dialogue Course

Organisation and aims

The Dialogue Course was arranged as "dialogue weeks". In each week approximately 20 employees from various departments took part under the direction of a couple of "dialogue leaders". The "dialogue week" consisted of discussions in a "dialogue circle'" (involving all the participants) combined with work in smaller groups. It took about one and a half year before the course was completed. Supervisors and directors have also received a further 15 days of in-depth training. Around 15 individuals of the staff have received special training for being dialogue leaders. The *Human Dynamics*[5] item was part of the 15-day in-depth training, and the training for the dialogue leaders. The Dialogue Course seems to have similarities with the social constructivism since people in the course is requested to create their own judgements about the reality in dialogue with other people. As a result people that is trained to communicate in dialogue form can create common ways to understand reality.

The Director of development emphasised that the training should be viewed as a "means" for developing the local authority organisation along the lines of the decisions taken by the council:

The training is only a means of proceeding with the development at our work place, /.../ of individuals and groups in the work places, to improve the work environment and work situation, so that people feel a greater commitment in this, and really are visible and tangible. 'Leadership of collective intelligence'. A leadership that brings out the accumulated knowledge in our groups. We have started to work with individuals in order to achieve this. (Director of development)

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[5] Human Dynamics is a theory about different types of personalities with regard to, for example, the patterns of behaviours and reactions. See Seagal & Horne (1997).

Meeting others

During the realisation of an educational venture such as the Dialogue project, those responsible are faced with a number of choices, not least in terms of organisation and working methods. The choices can for example concern the composition of the participant groups during the training weeks. There are views among the participants, for example, that the politicians and managers should have attended the Dialogue weeks together with the staff: "Why /…/ [w]ere not our politicians and officials part of all our dialogue groups? They could have divided up so that we could have different representatives present" (Participant). A similar view is:

> "I thought that it would have been good to mix directors and politicians with 'us'. It is between these levels that we have to listen to each other and obtain understanding for what we do and why." (Participant).

Some of the participants seem to be disappointed that politicians and managers (with a few exceptions) did not participate in the course. Maybe the participants wanted to share experiences and problems from their work with politicians and managers. Dialogues of that kind could have been interesting and fruitful but could also have generated conflicts if the participants see the course as an opportunity to complain.

The mixture of different departments and occupations in the groups has however been met with appreciation. It has for example led to the establishing of new contacts: "I have through the dialogue got into contact with other/'new' colleagues in the Local authority, with great benefits" (Participant). Mixing staff from different sectors has however some disadvantages:

A continuous training course and meeting people from other work places was good. At the same time it took a long time before my whole work place could attend the course. It would probably have been easier to keep the experiences 'alive' if more of us had attended at the same time. (Participant)

The different procedures all involve advantages and disadvantages. Mixing staff from different occupations has the advantage that increased understanding of different assignments can be obtained by the participants. The disadvantage is that the established work groups, which are involved in the everyday work together, may not be trained during the same Dialogue week.

What do the participants perceive that they have learnt?

A project of this size will generate different kinds of experiences and thoughts, both positive and negative. Most of the participants in the Dialogue Course however express positive experiences. The participants underline that they perceive to have had a better self-confidence and a better ability to communicate which must be seen to be of great importance in order to be able and dare to act in social situations of various kinds.

The Dialogue project has strengthened and confirmed my own sense of self. I feel a stronger self-confidence. To a certain degree I have gained a new (better) picture of myself, but also an awareness of my weaknesses, so that I can work on these. (Participant)

The following statement also indicates that the training can affect self-confidence in a positive way:

The training made me pluck up my courage to phone my employer and find out if there were any temporary posts available – I have been on the sick-list for a long time. I am working again now (in a new work place) and I like it. (Participant)

Openness and honesty are other positive features that the training seems to have generated:

The dialogue, for me personally, has meant that I dare to be more open ... it is not so bad to dare to say what's on your mind and to be able to speak out in a group of people that you have never met before. (Participant)

Participants also mention that they have learned to improve their listening abilities and that the Dialogue functions as a tool for increasing their skills when it comes to co-operating: "We have started to talk more <u>with</u> each other and not about each other" (Participant). The training also gave a chance to: "/…/ stop and think: what am I like, how do I want to be treated, how do I treat others" (Participant). The dialogue has supported the work-team, according to the following statement, which can be said to illustrate the kind of Leadership for Collective Intelligence that the project was aimed at:

We have gained the same language in the work-teams, we use the same kind of terminology when a problem emerges. Altogether, the project has facilitated dialogue, we listen on "all" levels.[6] We have also considered developing our four roles (promoter, executor, opponent, observer) so that our collective competence can be utilised. <u>I</u> will do what I am good at." (Participant)

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[6] The participant refers to the different levels contained in the Dialogue course and not the levels of analysis (Handal & Lauvås) that are described in the section "Some theoretical considerations".

The project seems to have involved achievements on several different levels, both individually ("stronger self-confidence") and at a collective level ("to be able to speak out in a group situation", "We have got the same language in the work team"). The existence of these positive experiences indicates that the training has given the participants valuable tools that can be applied both in the working life and privately.

Nobody does comment the content of the training to a great extent, due to the communicative characteristics of the training course. This could also be due to the fact that participants in the different dialogue weeks have promised each other not to pass on what had been said during the week. The content was however focused on personal experiences of different kinds, quite often related to private life. It seems however, that the concepts used during the week can be applied and are of use both at work and in private, even if many participants do not explicitly describe the concepts and tools that the training course involved. "In the dialogue training we receive words as tools to be used in everyday life. We can sit down and talk with each other and everyone knows what it is about" (Dialogue supervisor). In the following statement are examples of concepts that seem to have a strong impact mentioned: "I acquired new concepts and tools to work with, for example the steps of inference, the four roles, the left-hand column, to say 'I' instead of 'one'. (Participant). The training seems to have resulted in a method for expressing personal thoughts:

I have /…/ got names for things that you always strive towards, but that you find difficult reaching, if you do not know the underlying factors. When you have a word for it and certain guidelines then it is easier to achieve the goals. (Participant)

As a summary it seems that people need concepts of various kind in order to describe and understand interaction and co-operation with other people. Professionals groups usually develop concepts related to the activities they perform and their interactions. Though this is

not usually the case with non-professional groups. In general they do not have access to concepts related to social psychology and of human-relation nature that can help them to understand for example why they succeed or fail to co-operate with other people. The Dialogue Course seems to fill a function in that case. In one way it is however remarkable that these concepts, used in the course, are not commonly known since they to a large degree represent basic knowledge in the field of communication and relations. However the participants seem to lack this kind of knowledge and accordingly the course has been of value for them.

Everyday work impacts

In order for the dialogue ideas to have effect, the participants must apply the knowledge from the training in their everyday work. Perceptions among participants are varied concerning the effects that the training has had in their everyday work, at least based on the statements in the data collected for the purpose of the present evaluation. For the dialogue project to take effect, the importance of it being followed up at the workplace can be highlighted using the following opinions:

> ”We were more active for the 1-2 months following the dialogue training (the content,
> our experiences, opinions and the need to continue this in some way) but the discussions
> got lost and don't exist today – unfortunately”. (Participant)

There are at the same time positive experiences regarding the training at the work place. There are participants who bring out aspects of the dialogue training which seem to have resulted in a change of attitude at some work places:

> The training has been positive in terms of ability to deal with conflicts, and the opinion of one of the participant regarding the influence of the Dialogue project at work is that: 'the place has a nice atmosphere there'. Better at solving conflicts. (Paricipant)

One participant states that the Dialogue project has led to organisational change at the work places: "We are working on an action programme to centre our work around dialogue ideas" (Participant). Another participant writes: "We devote time for dialogue every week". The following ambitions have been expressed by a member of the project management group (who also is manager in the organisation):

> We try to work in accordance with the dialogue. We have planned a new organisation in the New Year, we have tried to follow the dialogue with advice from the staff. It is about sharing responsibilities. There has been a fair bit of turbulence over the past few years. We have had to lay off staff. All employees have now taken part in the training so we can begin work from this starting point. X (name of the manager, author's note) has put the work with the dialogue into action from the start. (Member of the project management group)

The opinions about the effect the project has had on the regular operations are divided. Some consider that their work place has moved in a positive direction because of the project and some suggest that the training has not affected the regular operations at all.

How to improve the Dialogue Course?

When it comes to requests and suggestions for improvements among the participants, there is a desire that politicians and directors should also have been involved in the dialogue week together with other staff. A follow-up of the dialogue week is also something that has been

requested: "I would like to have a follow-up in a year or so, otherwise I think that all the good things we have learnt will fall into oblivion" (Participant). Participants have also noted that staff in long-term substitute posts and other temporary staff has not been trained:

> Good that <u>almost</u> everyone can attend, but not so good that, for example, staff in long-term substitute posts who might be working for several years in the same place cannot attend. (Participant).

The project manager wishes for a continuation of the ideas behind the dialogue training in the work place:

> Then it is not X in capacity as dialogue leader or a director that shall decide the contents, those on the floor level shall do that. It is they who, as suggested, shall use the tools, stop, reflect on their own situation, instinctive feelings and secure strength from the dialogue circle, /.../. [A] life-long process that never shall fade. (Project manager)

There is also a desire and a wish amongst the dialogue leaders for a follow-up of the work started:

> I would like to continue this work and go out and provide support at different work places that is my strongest wish as dialogue leader at the moment. I could give up other duties at work in order to devote my time to this work. I wish that someone would say this to me now. (Dialogue leader)

Suggestions seem to have arisen during the Dialogue weeks that may be used as a starting point for further development at the work place:

> In the group (dialogue training, author's note) where I was, there were so many ideas about how to render the work place[s] more effective. That surprised me, but no one had listened to them earlier about how to work better. There was no forum available for discussing thoughts like these. I think it would be interesting if groups could be started up at some work place where you could talk about thoughts like these. (Project assistant)

In summary, it can be observed that the project has led to a number of expectations and visions for the future. These deal with, for example, how to integrate the project in the workplace.

Discussion

In this section our aim is to discuss some of the aspects and implications of the Dialogue Course.

a) *The main purposes of the project* were to develop the communication skills among the participants and to emphasise that such skills are of great importance in co-operation between colleagues. A general reflection is that the most of the participants seem to have positive experiences of the training. They perceive for example an increased ability to reflect on themselves and on their surroundings, as well as speaking before a group of people. Another merit has been the development of insight into other persons' working conditions, due to the mix of staff from different departments and occupations during the dialogue week. Skills that is necessary in order to create collective learning. More formal and definite skills and knowledge seems to be of less importance when it comes to the aim of the course. Instead it has emphasised informal aspects of work and co-operation and strengthened the ability to learn together. From this point of view the Dialogue Course has been functional and gained its

purpose. On the other hand it is not possible to predict if the project will has any long-term effects. In that case there probably have to be different kinds of following-up activities.[7]

b) *For the Dialogue leaders*, the project has involved valuable leadership training, most of all in the spirit of "learning by doing", where aspects of theory and practise have been interwoven in a productive way. The dialogue leaders seem to have been functioning as driving forces in the project. As a conclusion one could say that they have had a key-position in the project. Another positive remark is that about 15 of the Local authority staff has, due to the Dialogue Course, acquired high quality leadership training since they, in real settings, had the role of dialogue-leaders. This can in this case be seen as a spin-off effect of the project and a valuable resource-group has been established for the future.

c) *Is it possible to create collective learning?* The answer to this question depends on how one defines learning. Learning must of course be seen as an individual process. The point in collective learning is that the involved persons learn from each other and as a result of that also create a common idea of reality. In that sense the Dialogue Course seems to be an example of how collective learning can be arranged.

As a concluding remark according to the processes described in this paper collective learning seems to be a challenging form for organisations to develop. Although it is also important to take in account that when it comes to processes of learning there are usually contradictions and ambiguities involved. All these different aspects of collective learning are interesting to discuss and analyse. In discussions of that kind can hopefully the Dialogue project in focus for this paper function as a noteworthy example.

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[7] We also know that there are such activities already planned.

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