

# Reflective Dialogue

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One of the key features in Music Lab was the wide range of different dialogues which occurred during the project between a wide range of parties, including: teachers; students; musicians; advisors, school research partnerships; school senior management; Sage Gateshead. These dialogues happened between groups of participants e.g. teachers and students; teachers and advisors; teachers and musicians; advisors and teachers, advisors and musicians. They also happened among those groups e.g. students and other students; advisors and other advisors.

The reason dialogue may have been emphasised in the Music Lab project might be because a dialogic approach to teaching and learning is often a feature of how musicians at Sage Gateshead approach music participation, especially in more informal settings. When learners are choosing whether to participate or not, it becomes vital to listen to their preferences and aspirations, and design schemes of work and learning programmes around those learners' development. Approaches to Participatory Music in informal settings is often expressed around the idea of 'meeting participants where they're at' - accounting for their perspective in order to build up rapport and levels of trust – as an essential pre-requisite to more sustained work, especially where it might involve leading participants into unfamiliar territory. This attitude to teaching and learning was prevalent in many of the relationships on the Music Lab project. There were a lot of differences of perspective between the various practices e.g. Music; Music education; Science; Science education. Dialogue became an important part of the project – at a delivery level as well as at a project management level – as a means of accounting the various different perspectives, and developing new thinking.

Effective dialogue isn't about arguing over who's perspective is the best, or the 'right' one. It's about using the perspectives and insights of others to develop new insights into what you already think, know or believe. The *dialogic space* (Bakhtin 1981) that opens up between different perspectives is where the real insights are to be had. For that reason, bringing voices from very different perspectives into the dialogue results in this *dialogic space* becoming wider, in turn resulting in a wider variety of insights and new thinking. In Music Lab's case, this was about seeing what insights into Science education emerged from involving musicians more used to working in informal settings in a shared enquiry into Science education. Using a different group of practitioners would have resulted in a different dialogue, and different insights, but the principle remains the same: authentic dialogue with 'voices' from *different* perspectives results in ways of seeing the practices that are different to what you get from looking at something from the *same* perspective.

## Some Tips for establishing a reflective dialogue

### 1. Be Clear

What's the point of having a dialogue at all? If the issue is something you already know the answer to, why not just get on with it? Presenting a *dialogue* as a process, when the insights from it won't affect what you've already decided needs to happen, will just breed resentment. Dialogue is most effective as a tool when you don't already know the answers, and where you want to develop insights that you don't yet have. In Music Lab's case, the

project wanted to develop insights into what makes Science engaging at Key Stage 3. It's such a big question, with so many possible perspectives and insights, that dialogue was helpful in uncovering some of the more elusive issues.

## 2. Be Explicit

Make it clear with everyone involved that you're interested in using dialogue as a tool for revealing hitherto unrealised perspectives. There is no hidden agenda about who knows what; having a dialogue isn't the same as having an argument. In a 'real' dialogue, no-one might be able to predict in advance what the outcome will be, or what insights will be revealed, so everyone needs to be prepared to revise their own thinking as the project, or dialogue, develops. Invite everyone to be clear about their own starting position, and encourage everyone to view what they currently believe as a 'temporary' belief that might change in the light of what emerges through the dialogue.

## 3. Make a Comfortable Space

Especially if the idea of dialogue is unfamiliar, make sure you include elements that will help participants feel comfortable – this might be as simple as providing refreshments, comfort breaks and clear agendas, or it might include thinking about where the best place is to have a dialogue where everyone will feel comfortable. Is it possible to be away from the normal working environment and its distractions? Can you go for a walk together, for example?

## 4. 'Seek First to Understand, Before Being Understood'

This is one of Stephen Covey's 'Seven Habits of Effective People' (Covey 1989). If people approach a dialogue from the point of view of having their perspective heard and valued above others, then a prospective dialogue can quickly become an argument. If everyone approaches a dialogue with an interest first in what others have to say, and what their perspective is, *dialogic space* is easier to develop.

## 5. Ask Questions

People often develop insights into their practice when they are given the time and space to reflect on what they already know, and talk about it. Framing sensitive questions which invite the respondent to explore their practice in more depth can often be a real catalyst for developing self-knowledge and understanding, and refining ideas. Sometimes it can just be as simple as 'noticing-what-you-notice' in someone's response, and allowing your curiosity about what they say to help form a further question which will invite them to explore the subject in more depth. At Sage Gateshead, we learned a lot about this from the national REFLECT co-mentoring programme which we delivered for Creative Partnerships between 2005 and 2008 (Renshaw 2008).

## 6. Be Curious

The sociologist Richard Sennett talks about the use of the *subjunctive mood* as an effective means of promoting dialogue (Sennett 2012). You can hear the *subjunctive mood* in questions which are phrased with curiosity e.g. 'I wonder..?'; 'What if..?'; 'Perhaps...?' As questions, they invite further reflection, and *open* up dialogue, rather than close it down.

## 7. Have a 'Focused Conversation'

This is a particular technique for structuring a reflective conversation developed by the Institute for Cultural Affairs (ICA) (Stanfield 2000). It has four stages to it, which take participants on a structured approach from thinking objectively about the subject, then reflecting on it, interpreting it, and finally deciding what to do about it as a result.

## 8. Take an 'Excursion'

A technique that emerged from within the Synectics group (Synectics n.d., Faulkner n.d.) is about temporarily avoiding the issue you're trying to resolve, and doing something unrelated to it instead. It is sometimes expressed as having four stages to it, with the helpful acronym of the Australian rock band AC/DC:

1. AVOID the issue temporarily
2. CONJURE up unrelated ideas
3. DEVELOP these to absurd lengths
4. CONNECT them back to the issue

A good example of this from the Music Lab project was the opportunity for teachers in one of the schools to form their own steel pan ensemble. On the surface, this could be seen as a jolly extra-curricular activity to support team building. However, by being explicit about it as an 'excursion' – with the intention being at the end of it to connect the learning back to the issue at hand of KS3 Science engagement – and by structuring in reflective dialogue as a key feature of the experience, the teachers got to reflect on their own engagement as learners during the process, and apply that learning back to their own practices of designing engaging learning opportunities for KS3 students. Even the most unlikely activity could be used in this way.

## References

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