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*“How might
learning
become the
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means for
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change it is
intended to be?”*

DIALOGIC MENTORING

Core Relationships for
Organizational Learning

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Organizational learning has become a popular initiative for responding to unstable environmental conditions. Relational development and community building that cultivate exploration, experimentation, and risk are foundational to the organizational learning enterprise. This essay offers a conception of mentoring as a dialogic practice and as a core relational practice for learning organizations. We argue that dialogic mentoring has advantages over both conventional mentoring relationships and extant practices for generative learning in organizations, and we suggest implications for research and practice.

Organizational learning (Senge, 1990a) is emerging as an increasingly viable change initiative for survival and success in post-industry. Organizational learning attempts to make productive use of the flexible organizational form via empowered collaborative internal processes such that the flexibility actually works in substantive ways—to achieve a “double-loop” (Argyris & Schon, 1978), “generative,” or “transformational” response to turbulent environmental conditions, that is, to learn how to learn.¹ Learning organizations have been described as systems of continual self-renewal in which change is a routine process rather than an outcome or end state (Marshall, Mobley, & Calvert, 1995). They encourage experimentation, risk taking, openness, systems thinking, creativity, authenticity, imagination, and innovation (Kofman & Senge, 1993; McGill & Slocum, 1993; McGill, Slocum, & Lei, 1992).

Organizational learning is intended as a top-down and bottom-up, organization-wide phenomenon (Kim, 1993; Meen & Keough, 1992), and, to be successful, it must be woven into the fabric of everyday organizational practices (Denton & Wisdom, 1991; Ryan, 1995). How this weaving gets accomplished, however, is crucial. Proponents of organizational learning and observers of organizational change seem to agree that to be any more successful than the variety of previous culture change initiatives, learning has to become such an integral part of the organization that it becomes “invisible” (Ryan, 1995). It is here that the weaving gets tricky.

Certainly dissemination of the principles or disciplines of organizational learning—personal mastery, team learning, shared vision,

working with mental models, and systems thinking—is rather easily accomplished via traditional packages, seminars, workshops, and in-house training and development. Indeed, a decade after Senge's (1990a) introduction of them in *The Fifth Discipline*, such dissemination is commonplace. By contrast, widespread diffusion of organizational learning practices that embody and employ the principles in ways that routinely encourage their use remains difficult. Organizational learning is hardly convenient, normal, or easy; it is counter to conventional management practice, visibly disruptive to organizational routine, and psychologically and politically challenging work. How then might learning become the organization-wide means for substantive change it is intended to be?

Our response to that question lies in a substantive and practical recovery of the nature of “relationship” crucial for generative learning practices in organizational contexts. Supportive, mutually productive developmental human relationships have long been associated with correlates of organizational effectiveness such as satisfaction and commitment (Jablin, 1979). As well, such relationships are explicitly thematized as foundational to organizational learning enterprises (B. Isaacs, 1994; W. Isaacs, 1993, 1994; Schein, 1993a; Senge, 1990a). However, extant practices for *learning* seem to have bypassed such relational development in favor of either practice field experimentation or conventional nonrelational methodologies. Specifically, we offer in this essay a conception of mentoring as an especially viable site for the relational development and generative processes anticipated by learning organizations. This conception of mentoring derives from a dialogic understanding of the nature of relationships, and differs sharply from the conventional understanding of professional developmental relationships. In so doing, this understanding contributes to a communication foundation for genuine transformational practices in organizations aspiring to learn.

Broadly, our purpose is to integrate three evidently distinct bodies of literature concerning organizational learning, mentoring, and dialogue in ways that indicate avenues for further inquiry, as each of these research areas have distinct and important connections for and to organizational and interpersonal communication scholar-

ship. By way of preview, we first argue that extant practices for organizational learning divert focus from relational development, community-building and cultivation of dialogic processes in favor of a more traditional emphasis on organizational knowledge products. Second, we contend that although conventional mentoring relationships could be a viable organizational mechanism for both relationship and community-building and the diffusion of learning practices, these are nevertheless understood, utilized, and enacted around monologic themes. Finally, drawing from contemporary dialogue theory as articulated by Buber (1965, 1970, 1972), Bohm (1995, 1996), Bakhtin (1981, 1986), and others, we outline a dialogic perspective on mentoring specifically suited for learning organizations, as well as implications for research and practice.

LEARNING LEARNING: EXTANT PRACTICES

Currently, weaving learning practices into everyday organizational life involves methodological assumptions and procedures that thematize the idea of “safe places” where the risk taking and experimentation necessary for learning how to learn can happen without the fear and negative sanction associated with mistakes and failures. These include what are formally acknowledged by Kofman and Senge (1993) and consequently most widely discussed in the relevant literature as *practice fields*: dialogue experiences and learning laboratories.

The recent resurgence of interest in dialogue and its application to organizational change is traceable to organizational learning theorists such as Senge (1990a) and W. Isaacs (1993, 1999). Dialogue experiences (B. Isaacs, 1994; W. Isaacs, 1993, 1994, 1999; Schein, 1993a) aim to explore communication patterns and expose assumptions and tacit cultural/functional “theories-in-use” (Argyris, 1982, 1986, 1990, 1991, 1993a, 1993b; Argyris & Schon, 1978; Schein, 1993a, 1993b, 1994, 1996), which hinder the generation of collaborative learning efforts and result in counterproductive decision making and dysfunctional organizational practices. Radically distinct from usual patterns of communication at work, such dialogues

seek and depend on the following: (a) a genuine care and respect for the other in interaction; (b) the ability and willingness to engage in reflection, both individually and collectively; and (c) the ability and willingness to speak authentically of one's thoughts, ideas, and assumptions. Ideally, these capabilities are viewed as having productive, positive effects on organizational change, innovation, and learning.

Some limitations of such dialogues must be acknowledged, however. As discussed in the literature, dialogues are structured, facilitated, episodic interventions or settings at the collective level (e.g., Schein, 1993a; see also Bohm, 1996; W. Isaacs, 1994). Designed as therapeutic interventions for key leadership personnel, dialogues offer a sort of cathartic "do over" for working relationships constrained by conventional thinking about rules, roles, rights, responsibilities, and proprietorship.

Moreover, what is typically left undiscussed about dialogue experiences is that like any form of interpersonal therapy, the client is responsible for its success outside the therapeutic context. Not only is such practice logistically problematic in everyday organizational life, it also requires for diffusion a depth of relationship commonly discouraged in practices of perhaps even the most progressive organizations. Edgar Schein (1993a) writes, for example, that "dialogue aims to build a group that can think generatively, creatively, and most importantly, together" (p. 44). We agree that dialogic communication should do that, but what happens outside the safe and facilitative climate of that group or with membership changes within the group? How do dialogic processes or something that might be called *dialogic competencies* get diffused throughout the organization to create broader conditions conducive to organizational learning? Dialogue experiences may in fact yield a great deal of output in the form of knowledge about how others operate and what might be useful ways of collaboratively approaching specific issues, but the challenge here is both to learn about others to solve problems collaboratively, and learn how to learn about both self and others to become a more aware, systems-oriented interactant in everyday organizational practice. The latter is what is vital for the organization-wide diffusion of learning capability.

Dialogue settings are typically advocated to work in tandem with managerial practice fields (MPFs) (Kim, 1993, 1994) or, more specifically, learning labs (Benson, 1993; Kim, 1990a, 1990b, 1993; Meen & Keough, 1992; Morecroft, 1992; Senge, 1990b), virtual worlds or microworlds (Senge, 1990a, 1992), or management flight simulators (Kim, 1994). MPFs provide the virtual circumstances and conditions for surfacing and exploring tacit assumptions and are a valuable complement to the dialogue experience because the latter itself isn't tangible enough for many participants (Meen & Keough, 1992, p. 70; Morecroft, 1992, p. 22). MPFs seem to demonstrate unusual utility for scenario planning and the generation of possible options and alternatives for decision implementation in real organizational time and are seen as valuable for the experimentation necessary for learning without the repercussions that typically accrue to mistakes. MPFs provide opportunities in which "managers can experiment, make mistakes, slow down, speed up or even reverse time, and try things that could never be tried on the job. . . . [They are] infrastructures in which 'performing' is subordinate to 'learning' as the primary goal" (Kim, 1994, p.1).

The downside of MPFs, like dialogue experiences, is that they are structured, artificial safe houses. Even when realistically and effectively designed—no small task in itself (Kim, 1994)—they remain simulations where the dynamics of the real game in real time on the performance field are absent. In Schein's (1994) parlance, we could say that for participants in a simulation the anxiety associated with not learning has not been made greater than the anxiety about learning, so the motivation to do so is somewhat less. It is in this regard that we understand the cautions of Senge (1990b) and others (W. Isaacs & Senge, 1992) that the entertainment value of the microworld may exceed its educational value and that the transfer of learning from the practice lab to the performance field is questionable. Also, there is conflicting evidence as to whether the generative learning capability sought via learning labs and practice fields is actually yielded (Paich & Sterman, 1993; see also Kim, 1994, p. 15; Senge, 1990b, p. 21), and, if yielded, how available that capability is for diffusion (Cohen, 1991; Knudsen, Li, & Aamodt, 1981; Singley & Anderson, 1989).

But beyond these issues, there is something about the idea of a practice field that seems somewhat inconsistent with the open systems basis of transformational learning. Theoretically, in open systems, practice and performance are fused rather than separated out into their own closed subsystems: The point of open systems is the pursuit of learning via amplification of deviation—mistakes are opportunities for growth rather than resolution, alternatives for exploration rather than exclusion. Yet, it is easy to infer from the organizational learning literature, to use common examples, that although a sports team or an orchestra would not dream of performing in the absence of practice, that practice is typically for the purpose of getting it right or getting it “just so”—being prepared to implement the correct solution and execute the correct action at the right time: in other words, for error correction or reducing deviation from comparatively stable performance standards.

What is interesting about this is that the criteria for performance standards can only be derived from extant organizational premises, such that selecting and interpreting an environmental phenomenon as a deviation in need of reduction can only be a single-loop, error correcting response if it does not provide extensively for the cultivation of relational complexity and communication among the participants such that those very premises can be questioned (Dery, 1982). Consequently, as Dery continues, “comprehensive intervention for better learning would be comprehensive . . . by providing organizational conditions that facilitate continuous questioning and replacement of organizational premises” (p. 222).

Such organizational conditions may be what Dixon (1997) intends with her noteworthy metaphor of the construction of hallways: the creation of safe spaces where interactants feel free to access and engage in deeper and more disclosive levels of discussion about organizational issues and unencumbered by the “expert” knowledge, streamlined databases, and reified perspectives that typify more formal and “legitimate” settings and channels. In other words, a hallway is a place for authentic and genuine interaction. But the hallway is a structural condition, much more difficult to construct and not quite as elegant as the metaphor might suggest. For hallways to be constructed, organizational structure must

change; for structure to change in the substantive way the hallway metaphor suggests, relationships among organizational members must change. Even that criticism misses the vital point that circumstances of organizational encumbrance—cultural norms, accepted values, prescribed interaction patterns, and socialized ways of thinking and acting—do not disappear in the hallway; they are simply more invisibly or hegemonically regulated. Such conditions are internalized as the price of organizational membership, and it is the individual's willing participation in their enforcement—in the form of self-monitoring—that is the primary means of control and constraint rather than the degree of formality or legitimacy associated with a particular setting (Deetz, 1992; Foucault, 1986; Gramsci, 1971).

Kofman and Senge (1993, p. 20) cite a suggestion from a Ford executive of a three-stage *architecture of engagement* for the development of learning communities: (a) identification of those predisposed to do this work, (b) core community-building activities, and (c) practical experimentation and testing. With some irony, extant practices speak only peripherally or secondarily, if at all, to the first two of these suggestions. Core community-building activities must be directed toward the cultivation of the everyday relational competence necessary for exploration and dialogue. This requires individual organizational members capable and willing to do this—outside of the virtual safety of dialogue settings, microworlds, or hallways—in ways that diffuse such learning capacity so that these practices ultimately gain enough routine acceptance as to be invisible. In addition, extant practices in the form of dialogue settings and MPFs are not only expensive and time consuming, but such highly visible extravagance lavished on key managerial personnel makes the potential of learning as both a top-down and bottom-up endeavor rather suspect. Although there is a clear correlation between organizational learning and genuine participative or democratic organizational potential, rarely are those closest to the problems the subject of published reports of learning labs or dialogue experiences (but see Meyerson & Scully, 1995; Scully & Segal, 1994).

Ultimately, although each of these practices has specific advantages for the organization-wide diffusion of learning, one could

argue that each of them misses this fundamental relational point about organizational learning: It is a social interaction process (Bouwen & Fry, 1991) where the learning is about “acquiring not explicit formal ‘expert knowledge’ ” but the ability to behave as a member of a community of learners and innovators (Brown & Duguid, 1991, p. 48). “Workplace learning is *best* understood, then,” continue Brown and Duguid, “in terms of the communities being formed or joined and personal identities being changed. The central issue in learning is becoming a practitioner and not learning about practice” (p. 48).

Understood this way, the diffusion of learning in organizations becomes a matter of relationships among learners, where the relationships are what is practiced and the learning is what happens rather than the other way around. It is the relationships—rather than the learning labs, dialogue experiences, and training programs—that cultivate learning, disseminate learning, and maintain learning processes as a way of organizational life.

Indeed, our specific contention here is that although practice is certainly crucial for learning environments, the safety that contextualizes it must derive from the organizational conditions and interaction that authenticate it (e.g., Gorden, Infante, & Graham, 1988). The implication of practice fields and hallways, by contrast, is that the dynamic of the real organizational performance field is not safe. This seems counter to fundamental assumptions of both organizational learning and total quality management or continuous improvement predecessors that the internal environment must be one of genuine unencumbrance—fear driven from the workplace—such that risk, innovation, experimentation, and the relationships that cultivate these become accepted, routine organizational practices. Thus, a more genuine practice for learning might be one where safety is meaningfully derived from relationships dedicated to exploration and experimentation, where mistakes can be made on the performance field, but where the relationship itself functions as the mechanism to provide generative or double-loop learning experiences. It is significant that if something loosely called *relating* could be combined with the utility of the MPF, the intended authenticity of dialogue settings, and the safety of the hallway, then

weaving learning into the fabric of everyday organizational practice may well be a matter for a particular kind of immensely functional interpersonal endeavor: mentoring.

LEARNING RELATIONSHIPS: MENTORING

Mentoring is conventionally understood as an enabling or developmental relationship (Kram, 1985), and, broadly speaking, may be the best available concept to capture the kind of ongoing interaction crucial for generative learning and its diffusion in organizational contexts. Other than the superior-subordinate “managerial couple” (Krantz, 1989), mentoring seems to be the only dyadic relationship in organizational life that is both more or less formalized and positively sanctioned. Mentoring relationships are explicitly oriented to learning experiences that benefit both mentor and protégé. Valued mentor functions commonly include counseling, advising, and social support; and, as discussed in the professional literature, some mentoring relationships appear to exhibit some of the interpersonal characteristics understood to be conducive to generative learning. H. Levinson (1979), for example, identifies good mentoring relationships as highlighted by candor, some emotional investment, and in-depth knowledge of the other; Clawson (1980) highlights mutuality of respect and trust. Protégé reports of important mentor functions include some of those understood as indicative of generative learning potential and associated with learning leaders (Argyris, 1993b), such as facilitating, coaching, modeling (Ulrich, VonGlinow, & Jick, 1993), “opening doors,” and “hosting a new world” (Burke & McKeen, 1990, p. 322). In addition, as an explicit enabling or developmental relationship, mentoring is assumed as a crucial distinguishing management development practice in learning organizations (McGill, Slocum, & Lei, 1992, p. 14). Finally, and perhaps most important, mentoring relationships have both longitudinal and latitudinal aspects: They carry both mentor and protégé forward in the unfolding history of organizational life, affording a broad range of innumerable opportunities for both

internal and external influence throughout this process. On the face of it, mentoring is a learning pursuit.

MENTORING AS DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIP: MONOLOGUE

Although there exists potential to understand mentoring as a core community-building practice for generative learning, there are many ways in which traditional developmental relationships do not currently fit the bill. Most, if not all, of mentoring is understood in terms of conventional monologic themes. Monologic themes are those that reflect or intend unilateral, uninterrupted movement toward some posited objective goal, steered by common assumptions of the “true,” “correct,” or “right” way to do things. Monologic themes operate on stability, clarity, and equilibrium; deviation is an undesired state that requires a corrective response.

Many of these premises are explicit in conventional accounts of the mentoring function: the products or measurable outcomes of the relationship, including career development for the protégé (e.g., Burke & McKeen, 1990; Collins & Scott, 1978; Kram & Isabella, 1985); benefits for the mentor (e.g., Kantner, 1977; H. Levinson, 1979; Phillips-Jones, 1982); and value to the organization (e.g., Schein, 1978; Zey, 1985). As such, developmental relationships are charted along a linear path of progress toward mutually anticipated and preferred goals and objectives; both career and psychosocial mentoring functions are dedicated to facilitating progress toward such outcomes (Kram, 1985), and, once achieved, the mentoring relationship deteriorates (e.g., Collin, 1979). Traditional developmental relationships both reflect and enact foundational themes of certainty: the developmental path is assumed as stable, the goals fixed and objective; the mentor’s primary functions are those of slicing through the instability and disorder that hinder the protégé’s development; and mentors take care of the uncertainty, protect the protégé from it, train, coach, advise, and counsel the protégé in how to navigate through it so as to maintain professional and career equilibrium. To use Weick’s (1979) terminology, the mentor func-

tions as a handy resource of assembly rules for regulating the uncertainty of the protégé. In return, the mentor receives a dose of inspiration for a career in its midlife (Erikson, 1963) and the opportunity for legacy (D. Levinson, 1978), recognition, and perhaps admiration (Kantner, 1977). Importantly, the exchange process here is explicit and sometimes contractual (Murray, 1991), making the developmental relationship a distributive one, with a fixed pool of resources, from the outset.

Conventional monologic mentoring themes are enacted by the developmental relationship via monologic interaction practices. Such practices are sender/source or expertise oriented. In turn, such interaction is scripted, in terms of the planning necessary for accurate reception, and product-oriented in terms of both information content and strategic/influence effect. Third, such interaction is closed, impermeable to new, intersubjective, innovative, or constructed meanings or meanings that are not existing, fixed, objective, or shared; new meanings cannot emerge or be mutually constructed. If they do, they have disrupted effective expertise-based transmission and relational equilibrium based on this expertise (e.g., Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

Such interaction practices are explicit in conventional mentoring. They can be strongly unilateral, characterized by managing, supervising (Jablin, 1979), training, or simply providing information where the mentor's function is to reflect organizational reality to the protégé (Kram, 1985); interaction or communication content here is in the form of information, data, tightly scripted and fixed objective answers, lists (Browning, 1992), recipes, or prescriptions contoured specifically around task performance. They can also be weakly unilateral, characterized by coaching, guiding, supporting, or sponsoring, where the primary function of the mentor is to interpret reality for the protégé; communication content still features informational utility but in the form of less tightly scripted, experience-based, "best way" responses, such as stories (Browning, 1992), narratives (Mumby, 1987), or memorable messages (Stohl, 1986), which highlight organizational tradition and politics and indicate culturally appropriate and historically effective ways of thinking and acting. Either way, conventional mentoring seeks

sameness in terms of both fidelity with and reproduction of extant organizational culture. The purpose of relationship is for development along stipulated paths for the achievement of stipulated outcomes. The learning outcomes here can only be those of adaptation, error prevention or correction, or reduction of deviation: single-loop processes.

Certainly there is no denying the importance of such a focus for the achievement of stipulated organizational goals, for organizations whose external environments are perceived as stable and for whose internal environments' relational and structural complexity are seen as unnecessary. Especially relevant here is the legitimacy of an outcome focus for traditionally marginalized groups of organizational members (e.g. Burke & McKeen, 1990; Collin, 1979; Reich, 1986; Shapiro, Haseltine, & Rowe, 1978). But what happens en route to such outcomes is tremendously fertile ground for the cultivation of community-building necessary for generative learning practices. By pulling the relationship into the foreground, the conditions for such an accomplishment might be thematized differently.

MENTORING AS RELATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: DIALOGUE

The terms *dialogue* and *dialogic* have recently become rather abused in organizational practice, particularly in the way they are used to market more or less conventional episodic communication events, encounters, and experiences. Ideally, the terms represent open and freely negotiated interaction (e.g., Deetz, 1992, 1995). At their practical best, they solicit employee or other involvement in decisions, strategy, and innovation already in the works by senior management. At their practical worst, they are simply different labels for committee meetings. At their most insidious, they represent the collective forums for manufactured consent (Burawoy, 1979), concertive control (Barker & Cheney, 1994), or team tyranny (Sinclair, 1992).

However, organizational and management development practitioners can hardly be made to carry the blame for the flippant usage. As discussed in the relevant academic literature, dialogue remains inaccessibly abstract and an informed understanding of its practice virtually nonexistent; it remains an outlook or attitude (Johannsen, 1971) and still an idea for organizations to think about for a while (Eisenberg & Goodall, 1997, pp. 44-46).

We prefer to think of dialogue as a collaborative, mutually constructive, critically reflective, participatory and emergent engagement of relationships among self, other, and world (cf. Bokeno & Bokeno, 1998, p. 54). Although this conceptualization may be no less opaque than those in current writings, we intend it to subsume most of the crucial components of extant dialogue theory: most basically, the idea of equitable transaction (Eisenberg & Goodall, 1997, p. 39) but also the empathy and other-orientation of Rogers (1961) and Anderson (1991), the reflexivity and reflection of Bohm (1995, 1996), the mutual implication and collective mindfulness of Anderson (1991) and Bohm (1996), as well as Anderson's temporal flow and Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) multivocality and chronotropicality (see also Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), and finally, the transcendence and genuine communion of Buber (1965, 1970) and the sense of inquiry and exploration (Evred & Tannenbaum, 1992; B. Isaacs, 1994; W. Isaacs, 1994) that seems to pervade all perspectives. Thus, our framework for situating dialogue is synthetic and intended to endorse no single perspective in particular.

However, the notion of transcendence is of special concern to us here, for it speaks directly to the mutual ability or inclination of interactants to inquire, explore, and learn, that is, to actively seek to get beyond their individual perspectives to a place neither could have reached individually. "The crucial point," write Evred and Tannenbaum (1992, p. 45), "is to go into dialogue with the stance that there is something I don't already know, with a mutual openness to learn. Through dialogue, we don't merely receive information, but revise the way we see something." It is this aspect of dialogue we believe to be crucial to the relational development necessary for organizational learning because revising the way we

see something requires the existence of and exposure to alternative and even opposed perceptions.

Consequently, we also feature the importance of contradiction as that which drives learning. Theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1986) argues that relationships are characterized by the dynamic interplay of two polar tendencies: centripetal tendencies, or forces of unity, and centrifugal tendencies, or forces of difference. The essential tension produced by their contradiction is what characterizes the authenticity of a relationship; contradiction is thus the irreducibly fundamental component of relational development and change. In this view, a relationship characterized by the absence of contradiction is one that has ceased to exist (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 73.).

Thus, in stark contrast to traditional conceptions of mentoring that see effective relational dynamics as fueled primarily by forces of sameness, this conception of relationship holds implications for an alternative kind of mentoring especially viable for learning organizations. If the goal of learning organizations, in the normative sense, is that of continual exploration, then the goal of the relationships in such organizations should be the active continual cultivation of contradiction that would permit such exploration. Nowhere is this more feasible, we believe, than in mentoring relationships: relationships already explicitly designed as learning experiences.

In an attempt to pull the rather abstract notion of contradiction into a frame perhaps all of us can relate to, we can say that the best teachers are not those who teach, but those who let protégés learn. Such teachers are not expert at (re)producing the text but at framing the margins and white space for the learner to explore, at knowing when to talk and when to say nothing, and knowing when to show and when to watch. That is, the best teachers are those who cultivate the difference between the *known* and the *to-be-experienced-and-discovered*. Questions and play are contextualized in relationships that (a) frame possibilities for the learner rather than dispense certainties; (b) support the learner in real risk, in real time, and through real failure; (c) model the way learning is to happen and prepare learners to transfer the process to others; (d) let relational

partners argue, experiment, create and innovate, while all the time actively cultivating the contradictory tension between the known, the unknown, and the sought-after that would sustain those learning practices; and (e) thereby continually celebrate the emergent authenticity of the relationship.

Beneficial mentoring relationships, then, especially those for organizations aspiring to learn, might be characterized as “dialogic” (Gantt, 1997) or as having “dialogic complexity” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 58). In such relationships, the role of mentor would be that of constructing organizational reality with the protégé rather than reflecting to or interpreting for the protégé. Such relationships would be characterized by unscripted exploration, unfettered by correct or appropriate answers and actions, in which the answers and actions emerge from the exploration. The fundamental communication behaviors here would be those of continual questioning and interpretive listening rather than answering and directing. Interpretive listening (Stewart, 1983) seeks mutual and reciprocal production of a novel fusion rather than an empathic collapse of one’s perspective into that of the other. As Bakhtin puts it,

What do I gain by having the other (simply) fuse with me? He will know and see but what I know and see, he will but repeat within himself the tragic dimension of my life. Let him rather stay on the outside vantage point, and he can thus enrich essentially the event of my life. (cited in Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 25)

It is through the engaged maintenance of equitable difference that we get the interpretive possibility and potential for generative learning.

As well, distinct from any other speech act, questions request immediate and equal participation in the construction of meaning. In doing so, questions solidify the relational nature of human beings working together (Goldberg, 1998). To ask a question is at once to initiate a participative relational contract from which neither party can escape. In explicit contradiction to monologic communication, the purpose of questions is the asking, exploration, and mutuality of relationship implied rather than the closure or finality of the answer.

Dialogic mentoring thus cultivates generative or double-loop learning via the relational processes that contextualize such learning. Such relational processes feature the following characteristics as indicative of the “dialogically competent” (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, p. 195) pursuit of generative learning through mentoring.

First, dialogic mentoring celebrates contradiction and difference rather than resolving, reconciling, preventing, or otherwise managing it. Indeed, although organizations, managers, and traditional mentoring relationships operate within the parameters of task-specific effectiveness or political appropriateness, few, if any, question the value and/or validity of those parameters; behaviors are effective or ineffective, appropriate or inappropriate and there is little space to explore. Argyris (1982; see also Argyris & Schon, 1978) has shown that exploration within closed parameters requires an explicit intervention to get the leverage needed to expose contradictions and make productive use of them. Dialogic relationships understand simply that there are better things to do with contradictions than resolve them; that there is much more to explore in the confrontation of contradictory views than in the collapse of one or compromise of both (e.g., Bouwen & Fry, 1991).

Second, complementary to the cultivation of contradiction is the focused pursuit of openness, in the sense of ongoing communication that is not and cannot be finalized. In opposition to the emphasis of traditional mentoring on linear developmental progress toward some idealized outcome and the products of its achievement, openness seeks actively to keep the conversation going; the products and progress here are measured only by the ability to generate more questions than answers and a mutual *going there* to places where more questions can be asked.

Third, dialogically competent mentoring celebrates equity of voice. Although this may be assumed naturally from the cultivation of contradiction and the pursuit of openness, equity of voice means not so much that there are equal opportunities for communication, but that the talk of one carries no special privilege, except perhaps the experienced ability to frame more intriguing questions.

Although our primary intent has been to conceptualize mentoring as a dialogic relationship and thus as a viable alternative vehicle

for driving organizational learning, recent work illustrates and supports these claims empirically, and shows the possibility and practice of dialogic interaction in relationships specifically designed for workplace learning. Ellinger and Bostrom (1999), for example, identify 13 relational behavior sets conducive to workplace learning, many of which exemplify our dialogic principles above. For example, 2 of these sets were “shifting perspectives” and “broadening employees’ perspectives—getting them to see things differently” (Ellinger & Bostrom, p. 758), which closely parallel contradiction in that employees were deliberately exposed to people, business segments, and viewpoints throughout the organization unlike those with which they were familiar and secure. Similarly, one mentor in Dymock’s (1999) study of mentoring pairs confirmed the importance of contradiction in offering that

We talk and sometimes we disagree but it’s fine. I don’t walk off in a huff saying she doesn’t know what she’s doing. It’s nothing like that. It’s all very healthy—the relationship is very positive and I’m getting development out of it as well. (p. 315)

To return to Ellinger and Bostrom’s (1999) behavior sets, “question-framing to encourage employees to think through issues” and “holding back—not providing answers” (p. 758) are indicative of both openness and contradiction in that they function to both mitigate the tendency toward closure in interaction and on issues and to enable participants to transcend easy, immediate, paradigm-paralyzed solutions. In Argyris’s organizational learning terminology, they facilitate getting past single-loop, error-correcting communicative responses. Finally, “transferring ownership (of learning responsibilities) to employees” and “working it out together—talking it through” (Ellinger & Bostrom, 1999, p. 758) seem to us indicative of both openness and equity. As a different mentor in Dymock’s (1999) study illustrates,

We could just sit, talk it through, understanding, and I shared a lot about me and what I was trying to do with my personal development so my mentee understood what I was trying to do and what I was trying to get out of this as well. (p. 315)

We believe that as a result of these practices and processes, dialogically competent mentoring continually refreshes cognitive, affective, and linguistic possibility in interaction and therefore makes a place for interpretive play (Stewart, 1983) along with the growth, risk, and exploration indicative of organizational learning. To the extent that such a process exposes and examines assumptive constraints on learning behavior, dialogically competent mentoring is generative learning. To understand mentoring as dialogically competent relating is to understand it essentially as an ongoing, long-term process of mutual growth and exploration, therefore making it extremely viable as a core practice for organization-wide transformation.

But how is it that dialogic mentoring might achieve success in the diffusion of learning capability beyond extant practices? Primarily, there is something about the dyadic relational experience of mentoring, as opposed to MPFs, mediated training, and development or communication in the “hallway” that makes it inherently more capable of the dialogic complexity necessary for learning. Indeed, most if not all of discussion about dialogue in organizational learning processes conceives of it as a group phenomenon rather than an individual achievement (W. Isaacs, 1993, 1999; Schein, 1993a; Senge, 1990a). But the dyad may be more useful, safe, and effective in the pursuit of creativity, innovation, and liberation from traditional organizational encumbrance required of learning organizations. There is ample evidence that nonconformity to prevailing norms, assumptions, and actions is effectively established via the social support offered by a relational partner to the deviate, even when that partner is physically absent; moreover, the deviate’s tendency to conform with status quo assumptions and actions increases when the relationship with the partner is presumed terminated (see the extensive review of this literature in Allen, 1975). Indeed, in conventional mentoring, the relationship is terminated when the protégé is presumed socialized.

The mentoring relationship also provides a more immediate and localized context for the transfer of learning. The dyadic relationship is often seen as crucial for learning development, and substantial educational literature supports the effectiveness of one-on-one

learning experiences. In the same context, a dyadic mentoring relationship also tends to be devoid of the performance assessment or test-like characteristics of the simulators and virtual worlds, as well as potentially destructive conflicts with peers in therapeutic dialogue settings (e.g., Bowerman & Collins, 1999). Thus, the anxiety about learning is reduced. Mentoring takes place on a continual basis, and it is comparatively inexpensive as the resources are already there.

Crucially, although initially immediate and localized, it is the dyadic relational process that is foundational to growing learning cultures and diffusing learning capability across organizational boundaries (Ulrich et al., 1993) because of the following: (a) ideas and learning processes generated from such relationships carry forward across time boundaries via the protégé; (b) mentoring relationships, almost by definition, traverse vertical hierarchical boundaries; and (c) to the extent that mentoring relationships can represent diverse functional areas in an organization, it diffuses learning capability across horizontal boundaries as well.

Also, to return to the sports metaphor, mentoring takes place on the performance field rather than the practice field. It is done on performance time with performance risk and performance game plans. Consequently, through real risk, real failure, and real success, this relationship plays the real game. A key accomplishment of mentoring is initiating or generating a culture of relational learning where safety is an assumption of the relationships and their authenticity, rather than a virtual feature of simulators or hallways. Generative learning isn't safe, as the example of Socrates clearly shows. In a way, all who would endeavor to dialogic mentoring run the contemporary equivalent of Socrates' risk; there is no way to escape it, but the risk is evidently the same in traditional monologic forms of mentoring (e.g., Burke & McKeen, 1990).

In addition, dialogically competent mentoring is a viable means of initiating organizational learning processes from the bottom up. As most entry level or aspiring managerial personnel arrive fresh from undergraduate or even MBA school with neither the cognitive capabilities for double-loop learning (Argyris, 1993a; Churchill, 1997) nor the relational capacities for dialogic communication

(e.g., Axley, 1984), exposure to an actively risky, experimental, visionary, creative, caring, and facilitative individual may serve to promote the most effective learning diffusion: that which is an integral part of the assimilation experience. Of the many lessons learned from the Jewel Companies' prototype mentoring program, the most important may be that "young managers learned how to take risks, accept a philosophical commitment to sharing, and learn how to relate to individuals in a caring and sensitive way" (Burke & McKeen, 1990, p. 324).

It is also here where we think a productive, organizational response to a career in midlife might be of some substance other than admiration, recognition, power, and legacy (Kantner, 1977). It is from such relationships, in the midlife period of generativity (Erikson, 1963), that the mentor is not only learning in ways that would not otherwise be possible (Burke & McKeen, 1990; D. Levinson, 1978; H. Levinson, 1979) but potentially leading learning by constructing double-loop or transformative experiences from the everyday, real organizational experiences and situations confronted by the mentor and protégé (Argyris, 1993b). Ultimately, as Merriam (1983) writes,

The fundamental question is not how mentoring leads to material success, but how it relates to adult learning. . . . [I]f mentoring can be shown to contribute to the capacity for working, loving and learning, we might readily cultivate such relationships. (p. 171)

Indeed, such would be an organizational world where the learned may celebrate the opportunity to continue to learn.

LEARNING LEARNING TOGETHER: IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Perhaps the primary contribution of our analysis of dialogic mentoring to organizational communication theory is a focused reassertion of the dyadic relationship as a unit of organizational analysis and change. It is commonly assumed that learning and change in organizations are accomplished either by individuals,

such as renegades whose preparation has met with especially fortuitous opportunity, or by visionary leaders, or else by larger collectivities such as dialogue groups or the anthropomorphized organization as it gains an increasingly better grasp of its failures and successes over time as these are retrieved from organizational memory. Although the superior-subordinate relationship is the focus of most interpersonal analyses in organizations, such work assumes a more or less conventional conduit (Axley, 1984) understanding of human communication effectiveness (see Deetz, 1995) and within more or less conventional hierarchical structures. Given the contemporary academic and professional interest in flatter, more flexible, and less authoritatively constraining organizational structures, however, it may become increasingly important for researchers to provide equally productive and viable alternative understandings of the ways that dyadic relationships in organizations can be construed.

The concept of manager-as-coach, for example, has gained tremendous practical popularity in less than a decade; moreover, some of this work is rather adept at prescribing the contours of what dialogic interaction might look like in practice at work (e.g., Flaherty, 1999; Murphy, 1995). Could the prescription of such behaviors be matched with a substantive theoretical understanding of the nature of dialogic dyadic relationships or relational responsibility (McNamee & Gergen, 1999) such that a more humane and meaningful work life practice seems a realizable goal? We believe that an understanding of mentoring as relational development and dialogue as the means for understanding and accomplishing that development is an initial step toward the goal.

As an initial step, however, our conception of dialogic mentoring anticipates significant navigational difficulty along the course in both theory and practice. First among these is how an admittedly ideal conception of dialogic mentoring would accommodate very real issues of power and politics in organizational relationships. We have presumed an inherently antithetical relationship between dialogic mentoring and organizational/interpersonal power based on (a) prominent theoretical understandings of dialogue and dialogic relationships in which power asymmetry is simply removed; (b)

empirically discerned dialogic interaction behaviors (e.g., Downs, 1985) in mentoring relationships (e.g., Bowerman & Collins, 1999; Dymock, 1999; Ellinger & Bostrom, 1999) that do not imply asymmetries of power; (c) the hypothetically decentralized structure of a learning organization that precludes formal hierarchical subordination, and (d) the process of organizational learning as one free from fear of negative sanction. Nevertheless, there is some risk involved in stipulating an ideal by presuming other ideals and so we reserve some negotiative space for the possibility that such presumption is perhaps too easy.

Indeed, although rewards-based or exchange conceptions of power would be diametrically opposed to dialogic mentoring, it is not quite that clear whether an understanding of power from the perspective of Foucault (1986) or Giddens (1990) could be dismissed that easily. Here, the idea of the essential tension and constant contradiction between centrifugal and centripetal forces (Bakhtin 1981, 1986; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) in mentoring relationships guides us to the complex and emergent currencies of power/knowledge, or how subjectivities might fluctuate between agency and structure: the interpretive openness of both mentor and protégé juxtaposed with their formal subordination and formal superordination, respectively. Foucault suggests, for example, that power operates on both subordinates and superordinates. Accordingly, Beech and Brockbank (1999) found through their interviews of mentoring pairs that as protégés became more fluent in management discourse and more comfortable in behaving managerially, it was they who assumed the gaze of surveillance, and the mentors who assumed the look of compliance. Further research may be able to offer some additional understanding of the way in which power is not absent from the dialogic mentoring relationship, as the more celestial explications of mutuality, trust, or genuine communion might imply, but rather is struggled through and thus is productive of the authenticity and generativity—learning how to learn—that would characterize such dyads in organizational learning contexts.

Consequently, consideration must be given to the range of issues involved with how the dialogic mentoring relationship itself navigates through extant organizational power and politics such that

learning capability, or generativity, gets diffused. Organizational learning, generally, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology version of it, specifically (W. Isaacs, 1999; Senge, 1990a), have come under increasingly relentless attack by critically-minded organizational scholars for their failure to provide an explicit theoretical account of power in learning organizations and in the processes of organizational learning (e.g., Blackler & McDonald, 1999; Coopey, 1995; Finger & Bürgin Brand, 1999). But even in the absence of a power theory, the diffusion of generative learning practices—the explicit mechanisms of learning transfer—remain undeveloped in organizational contexts. Certainly learning gets diffused as relationships traverse time, functional, and hierarchical boundaries. Yet, the practical complexities of this movement are incompletely understood. For us, and for other scholars interested in development of dialogic relationships in pursuit of organizational learning, important research questions remain: At what point is it possible to say that generative learning practices have been transferred from dyadic dialogic mentoring relationships to a larger collectivity? How does that happen and how can we assess its effectiveness in facilitating organizational transformation along the principles of organizational learning? We organize our speculations here in a way that attempts to speak to both the power issues and the diffusion issues.

Certainly, learning-unfriendly or dialogue-unfriendly cultures would be unaccommodating of the kind of mentoring relationships we describe. Moreover, in such cultures it is not unlikely that the role of human resources management (HRM) in designing mentoring programs may easily assume a panoptic function built around a conventionally “hard” strategy of appraisal and performance feedback (see Beech & Brockbank, 1999). At the outset of the essay, we designated dialogic mentoring relationships as alternative practices for organizations aspiring to learn rather than a method for transforming traditional bureaucracies. Thus, assuming that organizational learning emerges as a planning initiative, a “soft” HRM strategy more concerned with development than discipline would be in better alignment.

Indeed, initially a bit confused as to its specific role (“If an organization learns by itself, what’s training for?”), HRM development

increasingly understands itself as ideally positioned for considerable contributions to the organization-wide dissemination of learning (e.g., Kramlinger, 1992; Solomon, 1994). The centrality of HRM system linkages may be of visible advantage in the facilitation of relationships designed to pursue generative learning. One important way HRM can help employees become practitioners in, or perhaps pioneers for, learning communities is by helping them live with the indeterminacy characteristic of such communities through the coordination of mentoring relationships. There exists significant support with regard to the effectiveness of facilitated mentoring programs in organizations (Murray, 1991; but see H. Levinson, 1979); there is also equal support for the ability of HRM to coordinate them, as HRM is often in the unique position of knowing who the innovators are and what the “natural associations between people” are (Solomon, 1994, p. 63). Indeed, it may be here where the first stage of the architecture of engagement described above (“find those predisposed to do this work”) gets addressed by matching mentors and protégés and by tracking the health of such relationships (Murray, 1991) on the understanding that such relationships or partnerships are the community-building foundation of learning organizations.

However, this is not to suggest that a softer HRM strategy removes resistance. HRM also remains constrained by its own traditional core practices. Development work ensuing from HRM initiatives is typically tied to conventional and sometimes rigid notions of demonstrated need and measurable performance outcomes (e.g., Gordon, 1992; Redding, 1997). And as long as this is unalterably the case, the diffusion of generative learning practices will not likely be an integral part of human resources development work. That is, the traditionally legitimate emphasis of HRM development on transforming philosophies into programs seems to work against it here. However, Antonacopoulou (1999) suggests how HRM might be otherwise:

By focusing on outcomes organizations are missing much valuable information about the multiple and varying factors which shape whether individuals learn in order to change and the nature of changes resulting from learning. It is therefore critical that there is a

shift of emphasis from the outcomes of learning and change to the processes of changing and learning. (p. 11)

To illustrate such a shift, we appropriate the metaphor of core-periphery (McAuley, Tietze, Cohen, & Duberley, 1999) for guiding us to the dialectics of power between organizational structure and dyadic change-agency; we assume this dialectic to be a necessary, eternal, and productive tension. At the core is the center of power/knowledge, formally acknowledged; at the periphery are the participants, formally acknowledged. The core is constituted by both HRM and senior managers, with junior managers closer to the periphery. As mentoring relationships typically consist of a senior manager with a junior manager, a structural link is already established between the core and the periphery.

But it is also a relational link between two individuals and can be one with emergent possibilities. For the diffusion of organizational learning practices, we propose that that link is utilized as a bridge between a senior management representative of central or core interests and a junior management representative of peripheral interests. Here, the mentoring partners in relationship can function as interpreters or translators between interests with the ability to deconstruct or reconstruct the meanings of one community in terms of the other. Here, distinct communities of management practice are connected via mechanisms that enable dialogic practice by permitting the core to be accessible and the peripheral to be more centered and thus facilitating the diffusion of generative learning. Such core relational links function as boundary blurs that provide the opportunity to unlearn negative norms and identify situations where the development of intellectual capital are typically unexploited (McKenna, 1999).

Finally, such boundary-blurred relationships may provide especially viable sites from which the dialogue concept might begin to be operationalized. We acknowledge that the very suggestion of operationalizing dialogue will be simply unpalatable to some theorists (e.g., Arnett & Arneson, 1999; Barrett, 1979; Ellul, 1964). Nevertheless, as mentoring practices are situated around real issues on real time in real organizational circumstances, the employment of some counterfactual ideal measure of authentic communication

may enable researchers to determine what kinds of messages might be produced such that meaning is a mutual construction of the relational members, and growth, learning, and transcendence are mutual perceptions of participants in the workplace.

CONCLUSION

Organizations aspiring to learn have a variety of means to accomplish this, yet must keep in mind that the transfer of generative learning processes is fundamentally a relational endeavor, requiring a special kind of dialogical relational development. Such relationships require the ability to maintain contradiction as an irreducible property of learning, and therefore continual vigilance of the indeterminate processes of learning and the assumption and practice of equitable voice in the relationship.

Mentoring seems to be the site in organizations where such relational development may be explored and experienced. Traditionally understood as learning relationships, when understood in light of dialogic characteristics, mentoring offers tremendous potential as a core generative learning practice vital for community building by affording (a) learning opportunities in real time, (b) the authenticity of relationship that makes such learning possible, (c) safety arising from such authenticity, and (d) possibility for greater diffusion of learning processes as the protégé moves forward in the organization, as HRM can “softly” coordinate and broaden the mentoring function, and as mentors are provided with the opportunity to continue to learn. Organizational members become practitioners in learning communities by engaging and maintaining such mentoring relationships.

NOTE

1. The concept of *organizational learning* used in this essay is based on Senge (1990a) and Argyris and Schon (1978) and the proliferation of research inspired

by these authors. Nevertheless, organizational learning remains subject to a wide range of definitions and conceptualizations. Broadly, we intend the term to mean expanding the responsive capacity of an organization to uncertain environmental conditions via critical examination of organizational premises and assumptions and their systemic guidance of routine adaptations and their (counter) effects. More specifically, our focus here is on learning organizations that DiBella (1995) calls *normative*: those that aspire to learning as a long-term change strategy on the assumption that organizational conditions for learning do not currently exist.

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