

Final project report

Dialogic OD: A report from Center for Diversity and Inclusion, University of Houston

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Abstract

The Center for Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Houston serves the campus community by leading efforts to support and enhance diversity in the campus. In this paper we have tried to present our findings on how organizational development is interwoven into daily transactions of CDI and whether those activities can be classified as dialogic or diagnostic.

Keywords: organizational development, conversation, emergent, biases, narrative, social co-construction, observation of leader

Introduction

Organizational Development (OD) is an approach to improve efficiency and effectiveness within an organization. While historically OD has been practiced in a planned way (Bushe et al, 2015, p.xv), but with changing times OD consultants believe that instead of using a linear, top down approach, practitioners should use a holistic and humanistic approach.

As a part of the graduate coursework on Dialogic Organizational Development, we did observations and interview with Ms. Niya Blair, Director of Center for Diversity and Inclusion (CDI) at the University of Houston. The CDI was founded in 2014 to support the campus community towards a diverse and inclusive campus. In this paper we have noted our interpretations as a result of these observations and interview.

Scope of applying Organization Development principles at Center for Diversity and Inclusion, University of Houston

Although from the definition of OD it might seem that OD is applicable for large scale organizations, but the central essence of *Organization* represents a unit of people who are pursuing a collective goal. The principles of OD can be applied to manage human relationship in any sphere, be it in universities or between family members.

In this context, do we really understand the essence of diversity and inclusion? Does diversity refer to race and gender? Does inclusion mean fitting in? The term diversity is just like an iceberg (referenced from Diversity 101 workshop, Center for Diversity and Inclusion, UoH). What we know or perceive about diversity is only 10% of the spectrum of diversity.

The issues we face in our community are interconnected. Whether we are trying to deal with violence or racism or health disparities, diversity is often interwoven in all of these issues.

In the light of this, one often ponders how do we reflect, discern and commit to diversity and inclusion in all the functions of university? We recognize that in order to work effectively across differences at the individual level, we need a new set of skills and a new framework for change. As the world becomes more complex, less predictable and more culturally interdependent, we need processes which are based on the principles of equality, participatory and adaptive.

Consultant's background

Ms. Niya Blair serves as the Director of CDI at the University of Houston since August 2014. She has been instrumental in setting up this center and taking it forward through her

leadership and strategic vision. Prior to this role, Ms. Blair has ten years' professional experience in working with issues related to social justice and inclusion at three other institutions of higher education.

Ms. Blair has earned her Masters of Education Degree with an emphasis in Higher Education Administration from the University of Arkansas and her Bachelor of Arts degree in English from the University of Central Arkansas.

Process

Over a period of three months (Feb 2018 to Apr 2018) we attended two workshops (Intent vs. Impact and Diversity 101) where Ms. Blair was a facilitator; we also observed her during two internal staff meetings. Additionally, we also conducted two interviews to understand her leadership style.

Interview results

The foundation for CDI at the University of Houston was laid down by Ms. Blair and her team on Aug 2014. University of Houston is considered to be one of the highly diverse higher institutions of the nation (retrieved from <https://www.collegefactual.com/colleges/university-of-houston/student-life/diversity/>). But having diverse students does not necessarily mean diversity of thought. The CDI was created to challenge the *status quo*, creating something new reflecting the vision of an inclusive and diverse campus. The initial recommendation to create a diversity center for students came from a task force, who did surveys at the campus to assess the campus culture. But after an initial assessment, Ms. Blair realized that in order to maintain and sustain a diverse campus, the center should serve not only to the students but also to the faculty and other staff members of UoH, thus she broadened the outreach of CDI.

As the director of CDI, Ms. Blair is *receptive to the changing social fabric* of 21st century. She acknowledges that the changes in the diversity of our social fabric extend beyond historic markers of race, ethnicity and national origin. She ensured that theme of the workshops is attuned to this changing millennium. Diversity 201 was created to probe deeper into the topics of other dimensions of diversity (like age, gender expression, sexual orientation, marital status etc). Ms. Blair also realized that in times of turmoil it is important to safeguard the dreams of undocumented students and this gave birth to Dream Zone Ally training. Although many of the

workshops are requested by faculty, student organizations, but Ms. Blair also ensures to host tailored conversations when the need arises (special campus conversation in response to events like pulse night club shooting, shooting of black males).

While being asked on how she measures the success of her work, Ms. Blair quoted “I only plant a seed and water it; someone else will probably watch it blossoming”. She hopes the conversation which the participants have at the CDI workshop will have a rippled effect. As the old narratives are challenged and analyzed, she hopes the participants will be able to outgrow the perceptions which are no longer valid.

Ms. Blair also believes that in order to be a successful leader one needs to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses. In order to refine her expertise and competencies, Ms. Blair continues to meet with her mentor Dr. Cross-Brazell (ex- Vice President, Student affairs, Arkansas State University) monthly to talk about progresses and issues.

She also believes that change is an ongoing process. In her words, “Nothing stays the same, so we should make the best of time”. As a transformation agent, the role has helped her to become more malleable, accept others as they are and have stretched her beyond her usual comfort zone.

Observation results

Observing a leader during their everyday activities can reveal a lot about leadership style. The observation result noted here are the outcome of two workshops and two team meetings. During this process we referenced the observation guide as developed by our fellow classmates Ms. Sehar Javed and Ms. Fakeha Khokhar ([Appendix B](#)).

Observation of workshops: University of Houston student CDI regularly holds workshop on various topics related to diversity. The essence of diversity is not merely having a community of students who are different in regards to age, gender, religion, culture, or sexual orientation, but actually having an awareness to accept everyone.

The workshops in this case can be compared to **Dialogic OD container**. Containers in dialogic OD are spaces where *collective inquiry, learning and meaning making* takes place

(Bushe et al, 2015, p.291). Containers are also the place where it holds the tension and energy of the system.

As we observed the workshop we have witnessed Merizow's ten phase of *transformative learning* happening within these workshops. Merizow proposed that transformative learning can be facilitated through the following key steps: Disorienting dilemma – Self-examination – critical assessment of sociocultural assumptions- recognition that one's discontent and process of transformation are shared- exploration of new roles and option. ((Bushe et al, 2015, p.247)

Ms. Blair often used personal story and inquiry to tap the collective wisdom and encouraging participation from everyone. In one of the workshops she asked participants “*What does respect mean to you?*” In another instance, she asked the participants, “*What does it mean to be an American?*” The art of *framing questions* is one of the cornerstone in Dialogic OD, as *meaningful questions* can lead to new possibilities and have the power to disrupt *status quo* (Bushe et al, 2015, p.271). The answers to these questions are less important than the conversations they trigger. The “*exchange of dialogue*” is critical for the transfer and transformation of energy and information throughout the system.

Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the noted philosopher of early 20th century quoted, “Truth is not born, nor is it found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in their process of dialogic interaction” (retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikhail_Bakhtin). Another activity which Ms. Blair also used to promote **collaborative meaning making** was *Think-Pair-Share*. Think Pair Share provides opportunity to reflect and facilitates conversation amongst participants.

As a facilitator, Ms. Blair often uses **metaphors** in her presentations to promote deeper introspection. Metaphors (visual images in this case) helped participants to examine their biases and assumptions. For instance, to introduce the concept of diversity, one of the workshop slides uses an image of **spectacles as a cultural lens**. Our values and behavior is driven by our “cultural lens”. And when we observe/criticize someone else's behavior, we interpret it through our own cultural lens.

According to Ernst Cassirer (1946) metaphors serve our understanding of the world by drawing out similarities, assigning meaning to a situation and making connection. (Quoted from

Bushe et al, 2015, p. 104). The use of spectacles (as a metaphor to cultural lens) helped participants to acknowledge that we always interpret the world around us with *our own colored lens*. And unless we are conscious about our cultural biases, we would be always limited by the narratives from our past experience.

In another instance we have observed Ms. Blair using video clips to evoke emotions and trigger new level of thinking.

All the above examples of using inquiry, metaphors, collaborative activities helped participants to experience sense of vulnerability, and understanding that individually they could not effect much change but together they could support each other in making changes.

Ms. Blair's role of facilitation can be often compared to as a *Sensor* (assessing what is going on in the system and encouraging diversity of views are brought to the table) and *Frame Setter* (offering a sense of direction and orientation while divergent views are brought to the table), (Bushe et al, 2015, p.330)

Apart from the organized workshop, we have also observed Ms. Blair during her monthly staff meeting. One of the meetings unfolded with everyone sharing their *peach and pit moment* (peach -a recent event in their life which has a positive outlook and *pit* - something which has not so positive outlook). A positive icebreaker like this foster communication, help people "see" each other, celebrate victories and talk about challenges.

While navigating through different agenda, Ms. Blair ensures that everyone gets an equal opportunity to participate and share their voice. She also makes it a point to discuss about the events that are taking place around the world ([Starbucks Philadelphia](#)). In her words, the "*micro level*" situations often shape the event on the macro level. And this thought process is similar to "*Butterfly effect*" as conceptualized by social scientists. In social science context, butterfly effect means a small local change can give rise to chaos somewhere else. (Bushe et al, 2015, p. 126) As a practitioner of transformative social change, she ensures that she is well aware with the microlevel happenings to address the bigger community later.

Overall reflection

Diversity has the potential to either disrupt function or be the source of creativity. As the world searches for answer, CDI has embraced Dialogic OD to gain insight on how to work collaboratively and effectively. Dialogic OD has lots of tool in its arsenal ~ inquiry, collaborative learning and meaning making, exploration of new alternatives and planning a course of action. As Bushe advocates that it is often the mindset of practitioner which steers the process towards a dialogic approach. In dialogic approach emphasis is always on changing mindset about what people think (in contrast to changing behavior). Like a true Dialogic OD practitioner, Ms. Blair helps to restructure frame of mind, and she helps participants to *see* what we are *not seeing*.

We all need to practice dialogic OD, be it with our colleagues at workplace or with our family members. It probably requires a deep insight, patience and practice to successfully apply Dialogic OD.

Dialogic OD has the power to co create the future through present conversation. Transforming culture is complex. But perhaps by asking meaningful questions, responding to visual images we can shape new patterns of thought and action.

Reference

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Appendix –A

Interview questions:

Core question: How conversations can co-create cultures of diversity and inclusion at the university campus?

1. What is the stance of university in terms adopting diversity and inclusiveness?
2. What is your trigger for the need of organizing a workshop on diversity and inclusion?
3. What activities do you use to facilitate workshops? How do you get people onboard?
4. How do these activities lead to change?
5. Apart from face to face workshops have you ever used any other kinds of design to lead the workshop?
6. How do you engage your audience to have the best possible outcomes?
7. What skills and mindset does one need to be a facilitator?
8. Have you been able to see any change in the UH campus as a result of these workshops? If yes, please share an example.
9. What key lessons have you learned from this role?
10. What are the possible future conversations/initiatives by CDI.

Appendix B

Observation guide sheet

<p>Interactions: (Is there structure? What is the intent? Is it effective? Is there any meaning-making system? Are there internal or external factors guiding this? Are there unplanned or planned disruptions? Are they effective?)</p>	
<p>Language: (What are the narratives, texts, and stories being told? How are they being facilitated? How is the language shaping the way they communicate and think? What are the symbolic expressions? Are they using metaphors? Can you see change in the language, change in the conversation that is triggering emergent change? Did the conversation change at the end?)</p>	
<p>Context: (What specific areas are we trying to observe? Observe body language and gestural cues to add context; What objects are present? How are they relating to the activities and conversation? How is the room organized? Is there equal voice? Are there power plays? Who is silent? Who is marginalized?)</p>	
<p>Discourse & Generativity: (Is the emphasis on either or both? Are there new ideas, new ways of looking at things emerging? Are the ideas favored over others?)</p>	
<p>Other Areas of Observation: (Are activities goal directed? What are the activities? Are environments spatial? Take note of the space functions. Are the users, who are the people, involved in the activity? Who are they, what are their relationships?)</p>	
<p>Reflective Comments: (Debrief on main themes which stood out; Were there observations to explore further? What mattered most to the participants? Were there any surprises?)</p>	

