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What constitutes an ope
education, education

Nick Putman

Towards the end of my first trip to Western Lapland, I asked senior members of the open-dialogue team how they accounted for their success. The response I invariably received was *"education, education, education"*. The fact that 90% of their staff members are trained family therapists is testament to their belief in the value of this.

And yet, what do they, and we, mean by education? I think the word 'training' threatens to mislead us. A glance at an etymological dictionary suggests roots stretching back to the late 14th century, and the meaning, *"to draw out and manipulate in order to bring to a desired form"*; and yet my experience of the trainings that have been of greatest value to me are far removed from this. Of course, we don't have to look back, we can find new meaning – language evolves – and yet, I suspect what most mean by the word 'training' is not so far from this root meaning.

To reflect on the question of what constitutes an open-dialogue training is a daunting prospect as I coordinate a new training programme in the UK, commencing in 2015. The Finnish programme has evolved over 25 years, and will no doubt continue to do so. My current answer is based on my experience of being with teams in Western Lapland; attending a two-year training in the approach, led by Mary Olson and Jaakko Seikkula in the US; my experience of the Parachute Project training in New York; the work done to date on the three-year UK training programme, and my psychotherapy training with the Philadelphia Association in London.

The question concerning technology (revisited)

At a recent international meeting of those developing open dialogue and related approaches, there was a workshop entitled *The philosophy of manuals*. It was of no great surprise to find those in attendance rejected the idea of a manual, for the *"technological attitude"* (Heidegger, 1993) has no place in the history or development of open dialogue. And yet, those of us involved in training have a responsibility to convey something of the

substance, spirit and rigour of the work in Western Lapland. This will be particularly important when it comes to research.

There is structure to the training programme at Keropudas Hospital, which can be delineated to a significant degree. And yet, I would argue that the programme is more embodied than otherwise; that it is in the improvisational moments, the responsive responding of the trainers (and the trainees), that the essence of the approach is most fully conveyed.

Matters of the heart and matters of substance

At the heart of an open-dialogue training for me is the development of the trainees' capacity to tolerate and entertain uncertainty or, as Kierkegaard (1981) writes, to embrace the *"dizziness of freedom"*. Of course, there is more to the training than this. Participants will learn about the Open Dialogue service-model and its evolution over the last 30 years, develop their clinical skill through extensive supervision and role plays, immerse themselves in a variety of theoretical, clinical and philosophical literature pertaining to the approach and its roots, explore different aspects of the work such as being with families affected by psychosis or violence, and engage with their own networks in the 'family of origin' seminars. However, ultimately, I think that all of this can be seen to be in the service of a more open, free and responsive way of being with others, where practitioners are not limited by a need to follow any particular model or theory, but instead are responding to the requirements of the moment.

At times, I have heard the task of open-dialogue practitioners being described as becoming part of the family for the duration of the work. Not unrelated is the following quote from a paper by Jaakko Seikkula and David Trimble:

The feelings of love that emerge in us during a network meeting…are our own embodied responses to participation in a shared world of meaning co-created with people who trust each other and ourselves to

be transparent, comprehensive beings with each other (2005, p. 473).

At first, we may even question the appropriateness of the word 'love', wonder what is meant by 'embodied responses', or what it is to be a 'transparent comprehensive being'. Trainees will be grappling with questions such as these. The various aspects of the training not only enrich each other, but also develop simultaneously. Thus, for instance, the 'family of origin' seminars, as well as helping participants to understand themselves in their contexts more fully, also deepen an appreciation of the dialogical process and its emergent creativity in network meetings, as meaning develops over the course of these seminars. Similarly, engaging with a variety of approaches and models can help participants be more at ease in a polyphony of voices as well as in their work with individuals and families who express themselves in unusual or at first incomprehensible ways.

Tolerance of uncertainty, not knowing and unlearning

Tolerance of uncertainty is the bedfellow of 'not knowing', a philosophical stance that transcends the centuries. In open-dialogue literature the version of 'not knowing' most commonly referred to is that proposed by Harlene Anderson & Harry Goolishian (1992), a more humble, flexible, curious and collaborative way of being with clients, in which the therapist stands to be affected as much by the encounter as the client(s). Not unrelated is their caution against understanding too quickly, for this runs the risk of blocking the development of new meaning.

'Not knowing', the capacity to tolerate uncertainty, cannot be taught in a classroom. Rather, it is a capacity that develops through conversation and embodied experience, in training, in network meetings, in life. Trust is, of course, a key ingredient – trust in the process, in the collective dialogue and, in open-dialogue meetings, trust in your colleague(s). The fact that senior practitioners have been through this process many times before and seen a positive outcome is of great import.

We could perhaps say that an open-dialogue training has as much to do with unlearning as learning. Whilst some may well have a natural disposition to being dialogical, and some will indeed have less unlearning to do, I would like to propose that unlearning takes many forms, and our personal development can be just as limiting as our professional learning. Or, as John Shotter writes in his paper in this special issue, *"the change required of us is very deep"*.

But, whatever the balance of learning and unlearning, it is clear to me that there is significant skill involved in facilitating open-dialogue meetings. Helping the family and network to feel safe enough, in a time of crisis, to open to each other in a way that may not have been possible previously; being open and transparent about your work with families in their presence, rather than behind closed doors, sharing your reflections with your colleague(s) as the family and network listen, constructing and maintaining *"a dialogic frame in which new meanings can emerge"* (Rober, 2005), the capacity to bear intense emotion at a time of crisis, to mention but a few aspects of the work – these are skilful means, which require a good deal of practice.

If I had to pick out one aspect that was most striking on my first trip to Lapland, it would be my sense of there being something profound in the embodied presence of team members in network meetings, something about the quality of their capacity just to listen, to 'do justice' to all the voices in the room. And this sensing has since been borne out in network meetings I have witnessed in English-speaking contexts.

The subjectivity of the therapist

There is room for the subjectivity of the practitioner in open-dialogue meetings, for sharing one's associations to the conversation. These may be shared to further the connection between all in the meeting, and/or to extend the dialogue. The practitioner's 'inner' voices are a resource in the work, a springboard for dialogue and understanding, so long as they are reflected upon carefully and used

responsibly and speculatively. Jaakko Seikkula (2011) describes how our 'inner' voices are activated in the process of doing this work, what he refers to as 'vertical polyphony', and the more familiar and reconciled we are with these, the more effective our work will be. This needs time hence a three-year training programme. For more details about this please visit my website www.opendialogueapproach.co.uk

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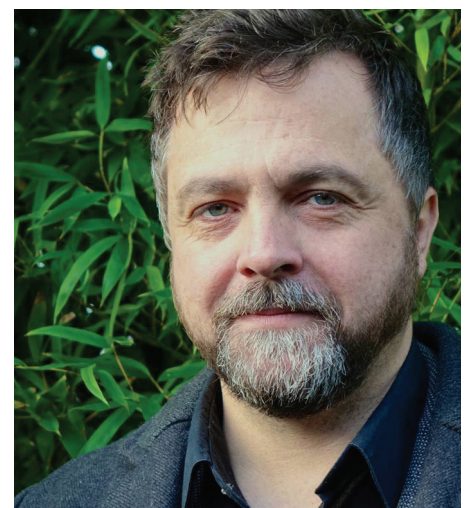
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