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# Dialogue Method: A Proposal to Foster Intra- and Inter-community Dialogic Engagement

Rafael de Araujo Arosa Monteiro, Renata Ferraz de Toledo, and Pedro Roberto Jacobi<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** How can we learn and experience dialogue within and between communities? Inspired by the methodological ideas of David Bohm, William Isaacs and Paulo Freire, as well as by the professional experiences of the first author of this article in the field of education and the environment, our aim in the present text is to present in detail a method, which has been developed, tested, and analysed in recent years, to learn and experiment dialogue, which can be used within and between communities. The method is composed of two major interdependent cycles that alternate. The first is a reflexive one, without agenda, composed of four practices that constitute a junction and a transformation of the procedures of suspension of assumptions, by Bohm and Isaacs, and codification and decodification, by Freire, with the purpose of stimulating interpersonal understanding and connection. The second is a deliberative one, with agenda, inspired by Freire's ideas of dialogic collaboration and the principles of educative intervention for sustainability, as suggested by several authors in the field of education for sustainability and social learning, with the purpose of promoting structural changes. We recognise that there is still a long way to go to verify the efficiency of the proposed method, and that numerous research and experience reports are needed based on its application.

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<sup>1</sup> Rafael de Araujo Arosa Monteiro is a PhD student with an MSc in Environmental Science (2018) at the University of São Paulo; specialist in Environmental Education for Sustainability in Senac (2015); researcher in the thematic project 'Environmental Governance of São Paulo's Macrometropolis in the Face of Climate Change,' financed by Fapesp (015/03804-9). E-mail: [rafael.araujo.monteiro@usp.br](mailto:rafael.araujo.monteiro@usp.br)

Renata Ferraz de Toledo holds a Master's (2002) and PhD (2006) in public health from the School of Public Health of the University of São Paulo and did a post doctorate (2013) in education at the School of Education of the University of São Paulo. She is a professor and researcher of the postgraduate program in architecture and urbanism at São Judas University, as well as researcher in the thematic project 'Environmental Governance of São Paulo's Macrometropolis in the Face of Climate Change,' financed by Fapesp (015/03804-9).

Pedro Roberto Jacobi is Senior Professor and Research Fellow at the Institute of Energy and Environment of the University of São Paulo (Brazil). Research Fellow at INCLINE/USP Interdisciplinary Climate Investigation Center and Regional Network on Climate Change and Decision Making/ Unitwin. Editor of the journal *Ambiente & Sociedade/Anppas/Brazil* since 1997. Since 2011 President of the board of Local Governments for Sustainability -ICLEI-South America. His research focuses on urban sustainability, water governance, solid waste and sanitation, socio-environmental governance, metropolitan governance and climate change, social learning, and education for sustainability.

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## Introduction

Community is a concept with a wide range of definitions and the subject of much discussion. We appropriate here the ideas presented by Bauman (2003), from which we can understand the community as a space that adds an important contradiction. On the one hand, it provides security, comfort, and acceptance to the people who are part of it. On the other hand, it stimulates an internal homogenisation, suppressing the presence of diversity within the community and the contact with the different, belonging to other communities.

Such a situation seems to be confirmed by several studies (McCoy et al. 2018; McCoy and Somer 2019) on the pernicious social polarisation present between people from different communities with different values, ideas, and interests, leading to the 'us versus them' Manichaeism that fosters domination, exclusion, and, at the extreme limit, extermination of the different.

This scenario of exacerbated competition, which Greene (2018) calls tribalism, hinders the necessary capacity for cooperation between the various communities to face complex problems that affect everyone, even if in different measures (alluding to the socio-economic inequalities that mark the different capacities to face crises).

A possible way to face and overcome this scenario is dialogue, understood here as a different way of thinking, talking, learning, and acting. It is a way of thinking that seeks the re-admiration<sup>2</sup> of one's own beliefs, understood here as our convictions about the most varied subjects (Alcock 2018), based on ideas and values built throughout our experiences, instead of reaffirming them, with the purpose of pursuing criticality (Freire 1981; 1983) and coherence (Bohm 2005; 2007). It is a way of talking that aims to understand the other and to make oneself understood, instead of imposing one's own beliefs as synonyms of the absolute truth. It is a way of learning together, recognising the different life experiences that underpin the different beliefs. And it is a way of acting that recognises the legitimacy of the other, that is, recognises their humanity, despite disagreements on different values, ideas, or interests.

With this in mind, in this paper we seek to answer the following question: how can we experience and learn dialogue within and between communities? Inspired by the methodological ideas of David Bohm, William Isaacs and Paulo Freire, as well as by the professional experiences of the first author of this article in the field of education

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<sup>2</sup> This concept will be explained later in the text.

and the environment, our aim in the present text is to present in detail a method, which has been developed, tested, and analysed in recent years (Monteiro 2018; Monteiro 2020; Monteiro and Sorrentino 2019; 2020; Monteiro and Jacobi, 2020; Monteiro et al. 2020), to learn and experiment dialogue, which can be used in encounters between people from the same or different communities, thus increasing our capacity for collaboration to address the various problems and crises in place.

Within such a diversity of theoretical interpretations and experiences, there is one noteworthy aspect. By appropriating the ideas of Bohm, Isaacs, and Freire, we could identify several convergences and divergences among their proposals. Among the divergences, there is one in particular that seemed to strongly oppose the perspective of Bohm and Isaacs on the one hand, and that of Freire on the other.

This divergence is in the problem of the agenda. For Bohm (1980; 2005) and Isaacs (1999), a dialogue group should not have an agenda, that is, objectives to pursue. This is because in having a goal, some assumptions (those that support the goal) will not be questioned. Therefore, the dialogue will be limited, unable to reach its deepest level of sharing of meanings. On the other hand, Freire (1981) will say that the dialogue, carried out within the culture circles, cannot take place without the hope of achieving something, that is, without objectives.

Moreover, we should take into account the recommendations made by scholars and practitioners on the respective authors' ideas, regarding the possibilities of improving and reinventing them. Gunnlaugson (2014), for example, highlights some limitations of Bohmian dialogue. An important limitation is the diminution of the personal dimension. This occurs as a possible side-effect, perhaps not foreseen by Bohm, of establishing the focus of the dialogue on the thought process. Such situation leaves open to each participating person how to carry out the contemplation of thought, which leads to two other relevant challenges.

The first is to contribute to a lack of ability to work with and transform the existing obstacles to the emergence of dialogue related to the identification of people with their ideas, feelings or experiences, given the author's failure to propose a practice for that purpose. And the second, a consequence of the previous one, is the difficulty in being able to disseminate and work the Bohmian dialogue with other people not familiar with it, since this practical clarity on how to do it is lacking (Gunnlaugson 2014).

According to Gunnlaugson (2014), Bohm resisted offering more detailed methodologies and practices to stimulate the different aspects of dialogue, such as the necessary conditions for its emergence, suspension and creativity, for example. Thus, it is

possible to deduce a structural limit of Bohmian dialogues: the methodological lack – to which we seek to offer contributions from the method proposed in this paper.

Similarly, Padilha, director of the Paulo Freire Institute, states that ‘Paulo Freire did not want to be imitated, but reinvented, always based on dialogue [...]. To be Freirean is not to be his disciple’ (Basilio 2021, n.p). Thus, we seek to contribute to Freire in the same way we seek to do with Bohm, offering methodological advances based on his proposals.

In view of all this, we seek to build a method composed of two major interdependent cycles that alternate. The first is a *reflexive* one, without agenda, composed of four practices that constitute a junction and a transformation of the procedures of suspension of assumptions, by Bohm (2005) and Isaacs (1999), and codification and decodification, by Freire (1981), with the purpose of stimulating interpersonal understanding and connection. The second is a *deliberative* one, with agenda, inspired by Freire’s (1981) ideas of dialogic collaboration and the principles of educative intervention for sustainability, as suggested by several authors in the field of education for sustainability and social learning (Jacobi 2013; Jacobi et al. 2020; Monteiro and Ribeiro 2020; Muro 2008; Oca 2016; Portugal and Sorrentino 2020; Souza et al. 2019; Souza et al. 2020), with the purpose of promoting structural changes.

It is worth emphasising that the method itself, being dialogical, creates openings for new and different stages, for the emergence of the new. In other words, it is a ‘method’ that presents itself as a possible path among several others and which is flexible enough to be rethought and readjusted by whoever is interested in working with it. In the following, we present the main characteristics of the two cycles and their possible outcomes.

## **Reflexive Dialogue Cycle**

### **Recognise the principles and preconditions of dialogue**

To start this cycle, it is first necessary *to know what dialogue is*, following Bohm’s (2005) suggestion of knowing the theory before practising it. Therefore, it is important to understand its definition, its principles, its practices, its possible outcomes, and its limits. Otherwise, the chances of being dominated by anti-dialogical habits during the practical exercise are quite high.

As a first precondition for this different way of thinking, talking, and relating to the other, *the willingness to dialogue* is necessary, even before the beginning of the dialogue. As obvious as it may seem, without this will, the dialogical process is harmed or even prevented.

Another important precondition is the *hope* that the other will enter into dialogue with us. Without it, our motivation, that is, our willingness to engage in dialogue, is frustrated and possibly suppressed. Furthermore, *respect* is necessary, recovering its etymological meaning, as recalled by Isaacs (1999), which means ‘to see again’, that is, to allow oneself to go beyond the first impressions one has of something or someone.

Another precondition is *genuine curiosity*, understood as a genuine interest in understanding the other and why what makes sense to them seems so different, even strange, to us.

Finally, the *momentary renunciation of the resolute posture* is also necessary, as proposed by Bohm (2005), characterised by the habit of trying to find ways to solve problems. The objective in this Reflexive Dialogue Cycle is to understand why the other thinks and acts in a certain way, leaving aside the moralising condemnation. In this sense, the resolute posture may quickly lead us to fail in this exercise, since the definition of resolute paths implies the choice and hierarchisation of ideas, therefore, the judgement between what is better and what is worse.

## The four dialogical practices

Once these preconditions have been met, it is possible to start the exercise of the four practices of dialogue: *listening*, *identifying emotions and feelings*, *speaking*, and *re-admiring*. Each of these practices has specific characteristics for the promotion of dialogue.

### Listening

- *Listening to pauses rather than seeing them as gaps to interrupt the other person's speech.*

We often perceive the moments of pause in someone's speech as an opportunity to say what we think. By acting this way, we do not allow the other person to finish their speech and, therefore, we are not really listening, but we want to react quickly to what has been said. This reactive listening disrupts the communication process and hinders dialogue.

To overcome this bad habit, we suggest seeing the pauses as moments of breathing for the speakers, allowing them to organise their ideas and continue telling their thoughts, and as moments of ‘digestion’ of what is being said by the listener. To help this dynamic, it is possible to define some gesture that indicates the end of the speech.

- *Listening without interrupting, regardless of whether we have an idea that seems incredible and we want to share it immediately.*

When we listen to the other person, many ideas or memories may come to our minds. Generally, when they seem to positively reinforce what the other person is saying, a desire arises in us to tell them immediately to show that we are in tune – after all, if we leave it for later, we may forget. It is almost as if we were giving them a present. However, when we act this way, we stop listening and interrupt the other so that he or she can hear us.

The proposal here is that when you realise the emergence of such a desire, you let it go the same way it came. That way you will be able to keep listening, and if that idea behind the desire still makes sense when it is your turn to speak, it will most likely resurface and you will be able to share it.

- *Listening even if we do not agree with what is said*

The purpose here is to overcome the discomfort of hearing something with which we do not agree, not giving vent to our reactions that may prevent us from listening, such as rolling our eyes, snorting, among others (we will talk in more detail about this in the next practice).

- *Listening without making assumptions*

Another habit that hinders dialogical listening is trying to assume what the other people are going to tell us before they finish speaking. By trying to complete the others' ideas with something that makes sense to us, we stop listening. Moreover, we can create misunderstandings, since our assumptions are based on our personal experiences (which are usually different from those of others) and therefore do not necessarily make sense to the other person.

The exercise here is to identify the habit of making assumptions and not let yourself be dominated by it. When you notice that you are making assumptions while listening, turn your attention back to the other person and, if necessary, ask them to repeat what they were saying.

- *Listening without judgement*

We usually hear what someone tells us and immediately make a comparison with what we already know and believe to be true; if what is said is aligned with what we think, it is very easy for us to accept the idea. On the other hand, if there is no alignment, we immediately disagree. We close ourselves off to that idea. And finally, we judge. 'You're wrong.' 'What nonsense.' 'You need to change.'

To listen without judging is to leave aside that automatic mechanism of comparison we have, from which we emit a verdict of ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, immediately agreeing or disagreeing with the other, as Mariotti (n.d.) suggests.

It is worth saying that we are not condemning here the choice of what is good or not for each one of us. To make our choices, we need to judge what makes sense or not to us. However, when the goal is to understand others, what led them to think that way, what were the experiences that made them believe what they believe, we should leave aside the judgemental posture, as Bohm (2005) suggests. We should abandon the belief that ‘if I hear a different idea, I will put mine in danger’.

You will not be in danger! We can listen to different ideas without our own being threatened and without our needing to change. We can always change, but we do not need to impose the necessity of change on ourselves or on others. Therefore, we suggest replacing the idea of RIGHT and WRONG with what makes SENSE and what does NOT MAKE SENSE to you.

### **Identify emotions and feelings that arise when listening**

- *To perceive the impulses that emerge within us while listening to what is said, without giving vent to them or suppressing them.*

These impulses are almost immediate bodily reactions (*emotions*) that arise in us, the result of our reflexes in response to what we hear (Bohm 2005; 2007), bringing out corresponding *feelings* and thoughts, as Kahneman (2012) suggests, which can hinder our understanding of what is being said.

When we listen to an idea we do not agree with, we may feel our heart race, our palms sweat, our head throb; we may wrinkle our nose, shake our head in the negative, etc. We become angry, disgusted, uncomfortable. On the other hand, when we hear an idea with which we agree we want to nod our head in the affirmative, clap our hands, give a thumbs up, among others. We get excited, happy, comfortable.

The proposal here is to try to perceive our bodily reactions and feelings as soon as possible, without giving vent to them or suppressing them, as proposed by Bohm (2005), recognising their interrelationship. This exercise will help us to identify and re-admire our beliefs, as will be explained later.

## Speaking

- *Speaking in the first person singular*

It is customary to use the first-person plural when we are talking about something we believe in. ‘Gee, *we* get really nervous when we see news like that on TV, don’t we?’ or ‘It’s very annoying when *we* have to wake up before eight o’clock in the morning.’ But, ‘*we*’ who get very nervous? ‘*We*’ who find it boring to wake up before eight o’clock? When we speak this way, we are making a *generalisation*, implicitly assuming that the other (inserted in the ‘*we*’) thinks and acts the same as we do in a certain situation, which is not necessarily true.

To avoid such generalisation, in dialogue we seek to use the first person singular (I) when speaking to someone, taking, as Rosenberg (2006) suggests, responsibility for what we think and feel.

- *Sharing bodily sensations and feelings when faced with an idea*

It is talking about what we feel when we hear the idea presented by the other. In other words, it is sharing what we feel, instead of reacting automatically. If, for example, we feel anger after listening, the proposal is to talk about the anger and not with the anger. For this, it is possible to start the speech by saying: ‘When I listen to this idea you presented, I feel [complete with the feeling]’.

- *Sharing thoughts about what you are talking about*

It is sharing the idea that emerges in our minds when we hear what has been said, always taking care to wait, without interrupting, for the other people to finish their presentation. A possible way to start our talk is: ‘When I hear that idea you presented, I remember.../it comes to my mind.../I think that...’.

- *Share the sources of information you have on that particular subject*

Something that can help us think together is being honest and transparent about our sources of information. Stating them in our speech can help us avoid generalising or even adopting ideas from unreliable sources, something that can happen because of biases in our memory, as Alcock (2018) suggests.

- *Sharing personal stories*

Stories have the power to connect us and enable us to understand the various lived situations that have helped in the development of our being, guiding our way of thinking, talking, acting, and learning.

Tell your stories. Try to share your life experiences. Besides helping the other to understand you, it will make it possible for you to understand yourself better, also encouraging the practice of re-admiring.

- *Asking questions of the other*

By asking questions, we can broaden our understanding of the other, trying to understand the reasons they think and act the way they do. Some questions that may help us in this task are: Why do *you* think this way? What were the experiences *that led you* to think this way? Why does this make sense *to you*? From whom did *you* learn this?

Note that in these questions we evidence the personal direction by using ‘to you’ or another similar word/expression. This ‘to you’ at the end may bring something implicit that says: ‘I noticed that this subject is important to you; tell me more about it.’ It is an invitation for the other person to tell us how they think about a certain subject without, however, provoking them to convince us that what they say is a truth to be accepted by everyone. This helps to avoid moralising generalisations that often lead to non-dialogue.

By knowing and exercising this valuable practice, it is possible to avoid falling into traps, such as when someone asks us the question ‘why is [...matter...] important?’ without personal direction and with a universalising pretension of the idea. In such cases, we can begin the answer by saying, ‘*To me* it is important because...’ That is, as respondents, we can nurture the dialogic stance and avoid the debater.

## **Re-admiring**

- *Looking again at what you believe you know, at what seems to be a truth for you and for others who think similarly.*

This practice helps us to identify and rethink our beliefs and the behaviours which result from them. And by doing it with other people, it helps us gain new insights from the encounter of different world views.

Once some feeling is triggered in the face of some situation (something we hear, for example), there are two steps for the realisation of the re-admiring:

### **1. Finding our beliefs**

The first step is the identification of our most fundamental beliefs, those that are so obvious that they become invisible to our consciousness, although they strongly ori-

entate our life. To find these beliefs, we use emotions and feelings as indicators that something important to us is at stake, being reaffirmed or challenged in some way.

Once we have an understanding of what we are feeling, we can apply the *succession of 'Whys'*, an exercise that will help us in self-understanding. The first 'why' may be linked to the feeling: why am I feeling this way about the situation which is happening/has happened to me? The subsequent 'whys' will be directly linked to the possible causes of the feelings.

For example, imagine the boss of a small company who is used to angrily shouting orders to his employees. Faced with this situation, we could use the first 'why': why are you feeling angry? Possible answer: Because they do not do the job as *I need* it to be done. Why do you yell at your employees? Because *I need* to achieve results. And why does shouting make them help you achieve results? Because *it's the only way* to make them listen to me. Why? Because they must have learned it that way/because they are lazy... .

Here, two beliefs become clear, which are usually accompanied by words or expressions, such as 'I/We need', 'it is necessary', 'we should/shouldn't', 'this is the only way', 'it is fundamental', among others. The first belief is the need for results, to do a good job and keep the job. This makes sense. After all, without results, work fails. The second is that his employees only listen to him when he shouts. And finally, the classic behaviour of always putting the blame on the other, denying his responsibility in the process of inter-comprehension.

The proposal here is to ask yourself 'why' until you arrive at a very taxing, fundamental answer. The one that seems to be the last possible answer. That 'because yes, that's the way it is or should be'. Generally, these answers have the key words that we have pointed out. If you can get to them, you will be very close to identifying the beliefs that guide you.

## **2. Re-admiring our beliefs**

By identifying the beliefs through the 'whys', that boss could move on to the second set of questions: Is shouting really the only way for employees to get the job done? Is there really no other way? Who did I learn this from and why does this idea make sense? What are the outcomes (desired and undesired) that I get from the actions I take? In other words, apart from making them work, are there other consequences of my behaviour that will not help achieve my goals?

It is also worth mentioning that the two steps of re-admiration can feed back on each other. When we find the belief (step 1), we can initiate its re-admiration (step

2) and, in doing so, we will most likely find other beliefs (step 1) connected to that first one, which can be re-admired (step 2).

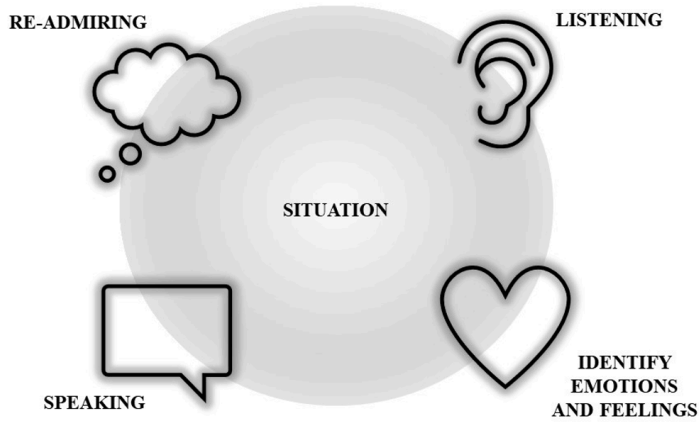
Another relevant point that we must consider in the practice of re-admiring is the need to face the *dialogical discomfort* that arises by questioning and possibly shaking our most important beliefs. If we decide to face this discomfort, we will be able to dive into the depth of the dialogical exercise. If we do not face it, we remain in the comfort of the surface and dialogue is incipient. It has its value, but it is incipient.

However, when we manage to overcome this discomfort of re-admiring, we begin to have a greater understanding of our beliefs, which brings us two benefits in terms of dialogue: 1) we manage to share more clearly with others what makes sense to us, based on our life experiences; and 2) we manage to perceive whether our actions to concretise these beliefs are coherent or incoherent. In other words, we exercise the search for critical and coherent thinking, as suggested by Freire (1981) and Bohm (2005; 2007), respectively.

## The interlacing of practices

How do these practices intertwine? We suggest three possible paths. They all start with a *situation*, something that happens to us. It can be someone's speech, the observation of someone else's behaviour, a song, a memory, among other things.

Immersed in this situation, the first path begins with the practice of *listening* (which may be accompanied by the other senses: sight, touch, taste, and smell). From there, we are emotionally affected, enabling us to *identify our emotional reactions and feelings*. Next, we can share what we are feeling through *speaking* and then begin the practice of *re-admiring* (see Figure 1). In possession of our findings, we can *speak* again to others about what we have found, noticing how our feelings are maintained or transformed, just as we can listen to others' re-admirings and feelings. And so the process continues indefinitely until the moment we decide to end the dialogue.

**Figure 1** – Possible links between the four dialogical practices

Source: own.

The second path has the order of the last two practices reversed. We start by *listening*, we move on to *identifying our emotional reactions and feelings*, we *re-admire* our beliefs, and then we *speak* what we find. And so, in the same way as the previous path, the process continues until we decide to end the dialogic moment.

The third path would start by *speaking*, so that we could ask, motivated by curiosity, how the other thinks about a certain subject, which would lead us to *listen*, *identify emotions and feelings*, and *re-admire*. A multiplicity of possible ways exists to start the exercise of the four practices; thus, we mention only a few here.

Looking at the practices, we can exercise them at two different but complementary moments.

### **‘Being with’ and ‘being alone’: alternating moments**

When we begin the process of learning dialogue, it is possible to identify two moments that interchange: ‘being with’ and ‘being alone’. The moment of ‘being with’ is when there is a physical or virtual encounter with other people to establish the dialogue of the I with the other, in which we build bonds of trust by exercising the four practices of dialogue.

How many others should one ‘be with’? If the exercise of the practices aims at the *transformation of the I*, the number of people involved is of little importance. One can be with one, two, three, five, ten, or more people. It is the encounter with them that will allow the I to re-admire its beliefs and behaviours, identifying the existing inconsistencies.

On the other hand, if the exercise of the practices aims at collective transformation, the *transformation of the We*, the number of people starts to have some relevance. The more people engaged in the exercise of dialogue, the greater the chances of re-admiring collective incoherence, reorienting the course of action undertaken. However, there is a limit of people for which the adequate exercise of the practices is possible. Bohm (2005) suggests a maximum number of forty people. Thus, to encompass the totality of society, we should hold several groups concurrently, constituting dialogical communities and promoting the transit of participants between them.

It is also worth mentioning that for Bohm (2005), there is an ideal lower limit for the emergence of the *transformation of the We*, set at twenty people, since in such a scenario the creation of a cultural microcosm is stimulated, in which it is possible to recognise the collective incoherences and thus seek to re-signify them. In other words, such a quantity seems to be a way of guaranteeing the meeting of the various visions present in society. Nevertheless, the author states that in smaller numbers of people, the emergence of dialogue is also possible, although more challenging.

In this sense, we sustain that for the methodological proposal suggested here, a number below twenty people does not configure a problem. A group of seven, ten, or fifteen people can also achieve the *transformation of the We*, even if the diversity is reduced. Moreover, taking into account the current scenario of social polarisation present in many countries, especially in Brazil, where populism, Manichean discourse and the algorithms of social networks sharpen the anti-dialogicity, the idea that dialogue groups are formed by similar people, who have ‘little’ difference in their views related to basic values, seems more plausible to us, at least momentarily. The task of challenging such homogeneity falls to the facilitator, bringing the perspective of the different to the meeting. This constant exercise will allow the confrontation of polarisation, stimulating the openness and willingness of participants to connect with what is different. In other words, the conditions for the *transformation of the We* are nurtured.

It is worth emphasising that both the perspective of *transformation of the I* and the perspective of *transformation of the We* are relevant to the dialogical process, being concomitant processes that feed each other. We could even say that they are inseparable processes, since we are beings of the relationship (Buber 1979; 2014) and, therefore, there is no I alone, self-sufficient.

Where do we meet, both for the *transformation of the I and the We*? We can meet physically or virtually. In the physical environment, it is important to recognise some important characteristics to be taken into account for the emergence of dialogue, such as good acoustics and low distraction, as Isaacs (1999) suggests. Furthermore, being in an environment in which people feel safe and comfortable may facilitate the exposure of what they really think. Another important aspect, pointed out by Bohm (2005), Isaacs (1999) and Freire (1981), is the arrangement of people in a circle, the geometric arrangement that does not encourage physical hierarchisation of people, that is, does not put any individual in a prominent position and allows everyone to see each other. About this, we maintain that there are other possible geometric arrangements that do not seem to offer great resistance to the emergence of dialogue, such as a semi-circle, a rhombus, a square, or even a triangle, as long as it is possible for all people to see each other easily.

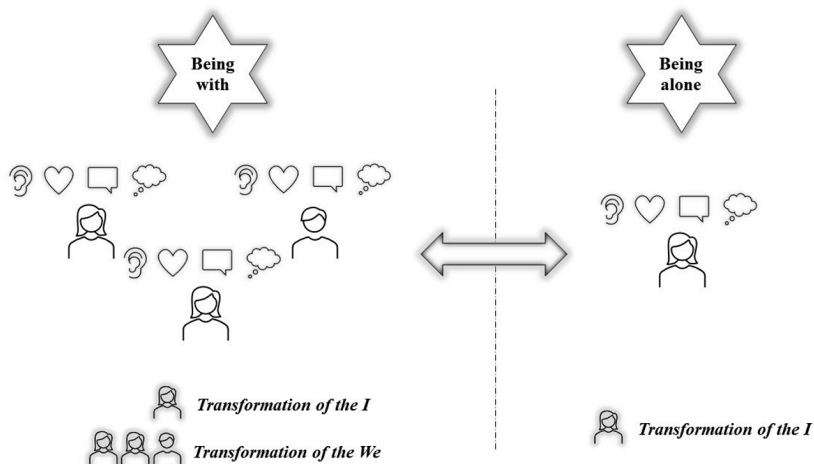
In the virtual environment, a good internet connection is crucial for the viability of the conversation. Low distraction is also necessary and quite challenging, since the notifications of programs and apps can easily steal attention. Virtuality can bring in itself a sense of security, as people are physically in familiar environments in which they feel protected (Monteiro et al. 2020). Circular layout is not possible here, so it is important that all people are able to see each other on the screen at the same time.

How often do we meet? When dealing with the *transformation of the I*, the encounters can be spontaneous, as when we meet with someone different without having anticipated it, or planned, as when we make an appointment to be together. In the *transformation of the We*, however, because it takes place in the context of a group that meets intentionally to dialogue, the meetings are planned so that their constancy is something important to stimulate the construction of affective bonds and ties of trust. Bohm (2005) suggests a weekly or fortnightly frequency to meet this objective. With this consideration, we support the idea that a more intense regularity, such as two meetings a week, or less intense, such as monthly meetings, may also be able to foster the construction of interpersonal bonds, deepening the coexistence between the people involved.

In parallel, at the end of such moments of encounters with the other, it is possible to experience the moment of 'being alone', in which there is no physical presence of another person. But how to dialogue alone? How can I re-admire my certainties if there is no other, different from me, who helps me? Here occurs the dialogue of the I with the other who dwells in me in the virtuality of thought. By recalling moments of memory about past encounters with the other, the I can carry out the exercise of identifying emotions and feelings and of re-admiration, also trying to put itself in the place of the other, in a kind of game in which it alternates roles.

The moments ‘being with’ and ‘being alone’ alternate and intertwine throughout the dialogical journey of the I and the We (see Figure 2). Hence the permanence and constancy of the learning process of dialogue that can be used in various moments of daily life, triggering different types of encounters, which we present below.

**Figure 2** – ‘Being with’ and ‘being alone’



Source: own.

## The dynamics of the encounters: possible outcomes of the Reflexive Dialogue Cycle

By deepening the practice and experience of dialogue, it is possible to exercise it within our communities (family, religious, work, etc.) or outside them, with people from other communities who have different customs, values, and ideas.

For an encounter to stimulate dialogue, we have already pointed out the importance of its taking place with a person who thinks differently. But how different should this person be? This question is relevant because, generally, when we talk about dialogue with people and indicate the need for such an encounter, we notice that they

usually think of a person diametrically opposed to themselves. That is, a person who thinks and lives in a totally antagonistic way, as Freire (1981) would say.

In doing so, people already assume the impossibility of dialogue or, for those who do not give up so soon, feel the discomfort of imagining themselves trying to dialogue and failing. We do not deny that such an encounter is very infertile ground for the emergence of dialogue. The encounter with people who, besides thinking very differently than we do, do not open themselves up to dialogue becomes unfeasible.

However, this is a possible representation of the difference, but not the only one. There is the different who is not so different, the one with whom we share something in common that can be an idea or an affection, as in the case of a family member, a childhood friend, or a work colleague.

Such a spectrum of difference can give rise to two types of encounters when we are spatially or virtually present in the same environment: *encounter without dialogical reciprocity* and *encounter with dialogical reciprocity*. Each of them fosters specific outcomes, as we shall see below.

### **Encounter without dialogical reciprocity**

Here, there is a dialogical posture of the I in the encounter with other people who are even willing to talk, but with an anti-dialogical posture, closed to reflection on their own beliefs. Nevertheless, here it is possible for the I to exercise the practices of dialogue, seeking to understand why the other thinks and acts in a certain way. The courageous gesture of listening to people, for example, may stimulate them to open up to reciprocate the gesture and thus initiate a pre-dialogue. Listening in this case is configured as an act of kindness. This brings an interesting result for interpersonal coexistence, since the I does not limit the other to a category of generalising judgement (evil, prejudiced, fascist, communist, etc.). It also stimulates the learning process of identifying openness to dialogue in different daily encounters.

However, here it is only possible for the I to exercise the four practices of dialogue with the other when there is no threat to its own existence. If there is any threat, there is no possibility of exercising the practices, not even the generous gesture of listening.

Moreover, for various reasons, such an encounter may evolve in such a way that neither the I nor the other will be open and, therefore, the walls will be up. People will position themselves within their fortress of beliefs and values, preparing the weapons (communication and actions) for attack and defence. It is an encounter of struggle in which the learning of anti-dialogical values and behaviours is reinforced.

It is worth stressing that the encounter without dialogic reciprocity, in which the I is open and constantly inviting the other to enter into dialogue is important, but quite incipient in terms of dialogicity, being a previous stage to entering into encounters with reciprocity.

## **Encounter with dialogical reciprocity**

Here, the I and the other are open to an encounter that may develop and may generate three possible outcomes, which foster different types of learning and benefits.

### **1. Comprehension**

This result is often unrecognised or confused with that of the *encounter without dialogical reciprocity* because people confuse understanding with agreement. 'If I have spoken about what I think to the other and they have not changed their way of thinking, they have not understood me. If they had understood, they would see how obvious and true what I said is.' Here lies a trap of anti-dialogical thinking. The other may understand why a certain idea makes sense to me without, however, seeing the same sense for themselves.

Comprehension allows us *to learn about the other*, discovering aspects that we did not know about their way of thinking and acting, which promotes the dilution of judgements and stereotypes that keep us apart. As a result of this learning, a relational change arises, improving interpersonal relationships and, therefore, coexistence. In this way, the *transformation of the I* is processed by learning about the other and the *transformation of the We* by improving interpersonal relationships.

It is worth highlighting the role of conflict in this type of encounter. For this, it is necessary to mention the difference between conflict and confrontation. The first is the shock that occurs when different beliefs meet. This shock evokes emotions and feelings, from which re-admiration is possible. Thus, conflict is essential for dialogue to occur. We can see it as the fuel of the dialogic relationship. On the other hand, conflict can turn into confrontation. This occurs when the clash of different visions evokes emotions and feelings and, instead of re-admiring them, people reaffirm them, defending them as if they were in a battle.

### **2. Comprehension + cognitive change on the subject in dialogue**

This result has one more element than the previous one. Here, learning about the other stimulates learning about oneself to the point of fostering the emergence of *insights* that provoke a change (partial or total) in the ideas and behaviours of *one* of the parties on the subject being dialogued. For example, if people are having a con-

versation about politics and there are several perspectives present, it is possible that some people will completely adopt the idea presented by someone or adopt part of such ideas, transforming their original one. Thus, in this case there is a deepening of the *transformation of the I*, when compared to the previous result, and a possible tightening of relations between people as a *transformation of the We*.

It is worth noting that changes in ideas are processed through the emergence of *insights*, as suggested by Bohm (2007). They are what allow us to perceive the inconsistencies between our intentions-actions-results. They are like 'a sudden feeling of a small awakening' (p. 38) and occur occasionally. This is interesting because it shows the non-controllability of the process.

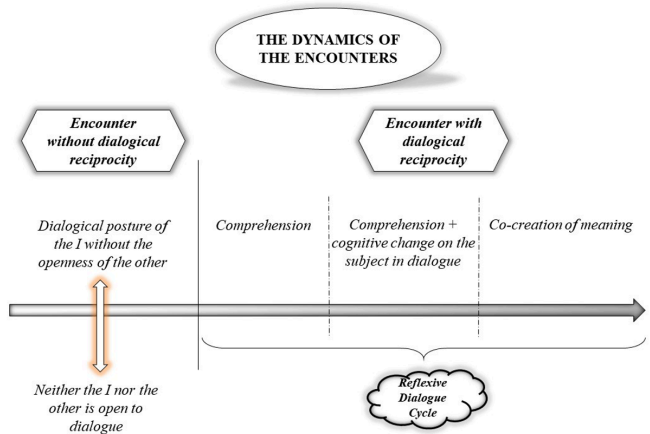
The emergence of insights is always a possibility, never a certainty or guarantee. It may happen now, it may happen tomorrow, it may happen ten years from now, or it may not happen at all.

### 3. Co-creation of meaning

A deeper result than the previous ones, it is characterised by the transformation of *all* the people involved and the relationships between them. The *transformation of the I and the We* occurs from the co-creation of new meanings, fruit of new understandings about the self, about the other, and about aspects of life. This collective creation is always partial because of the contingent character of truth (Bohm 2007) and the limit of people involved in the process.

In view of all of the above, it is possible to perceive a gradient of dialogic quality of the encounters between the I and the other, starting from an extremity in which dialogicity is more incipient (encounter without reciprocity), reaching an extremity in which it is deeper (encounter with reciprocity – co-creation of meanings), as illustrated by Figure 3 below. It is worth saying that such a gradient does not configure, necessarily, a temporal continuum within which the encounters may evolve. It is possible to have encounters of different qualities in the same day, for example, with different people.

Figure 3 – The dynamics of the encounters



Source: own.

It is worth highlighting, at this point in the text, that the dialogical journey taken through the constant experience of the scenarios mentioned above, promotes the development of a *dialogical sensibility*. With a better understanding of ourselves, we can better understand others. We acquire the ability to identify the opening to foster the emergence of a dialogue, pollinating it in the various spaces through which we pass.

We acquire the ability to perceive the reactions of others, especially the angry ones, not as affronts and attacks (on us or on other people), but as indicators that something very important to them is at stake. This allows us not to react automatically, entering the realm of anti-dialogicity, and to invite the people to enter into dialogue with us, once we recognise their attacks as a call for attention and a legitimate request to listen (as long as it does not threaten our existence).

Finally, we close this section affirming that as a result of the co-creation of meanings, the most profound result of the Reflexive Dialogue Cycle, there arises, in hypothesis, the desire to see them materialised, which drives people to co-create actions, starting the second great cycle.

## Deliberative Dialogue Cycle

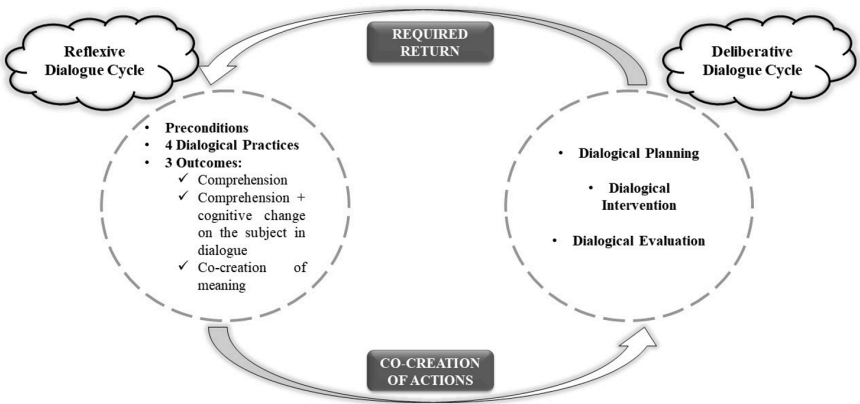
The emergence of collaborative actions initiates the Deliberative Dialogue Cycle which, unlike the previous cycle, is propositional and executive. It seeks to establish common objectives and carry out interventions to reach them.

Inspired by Freire's Theory of Dialogical Action (1981), the Oca Method of educational intervention (Oca 2016) and the precepts of Social Learning for Sustainability (Harmonicop 2005; Muro 2008; Wals et al. 2009; Wals 2011; Souza et al. 2019; Jacobi et al. 2020), we affirm that this cycle begins with a *dialogic planning* process, characterised by the construction of collective agreements and designation of responsibilities; by the mapping and diagnosis of the problems to be faced; and by the articulation with other existing initiatives, which may demand the realisation of a new Reflexive Dialogue Cycle to foster understanding among all the people involved and, thus, strengthen the Deliberative Dialogue Cycle.

Once the planning is finished, the moment arrives for the *dialogical intervention*, which can be directed to different contextual realities, different spatial scales (local, regional, global), and different levels (individual or collective). This entire process of the Deliberative Dialogue Cycle foments the learning of collaboration based on *doing things together*.

Finally, it is necessary to *dialogically evaluate* the process developed, identifying the learning, advances, and challenges found. And from there it is decided, based on the existing needs, either to continue with the Deliberative Dialogue Cycle, improving its aspects in search of the proposed objectives, or to initiate a new Reflexive Dialogue Cycle, searching to deepen the collective understanding of the new situations triggered by the results of the interventions or even to confront possible conflicts that may have emerged during the deliberative process. In this way, the *alternating movement of the cycles* is formed, which reinforce and feed each other (see Figure 4), fostering the Freirean praxis.

Figure 4 – Dialogue Cycles Alternation



Source: own.

Thus, it is possible to perceive that the methodological path proposed here is long, continuous, and permanent. It requires will and courage to re-signify. But the results are worth the effort, since they can lead us to a state of better interpersonal coexistence and social well-being, nurturing the construction of new possible worlds where recognition of the existence of others and recognition that our survival and prosperity depend on the quality of our relationships prevail.

Finally, someone might ask what actions are possible as a result of the first two outcomes (comprehension; comprehension + cognitive change on the subject in dialogue), given that we have presented the one referring to co-creation above. In these two cases, what we have in terms of action is a little different. In these cases, it is possible that, despite the understanding between people and the improvement in relationships, they still do not see any sense in the ideas of those who think differently and do not want to adopt them in their lives. Thus, the possibility of dialogic action as we proposed above is still very incipient, leaving at least three possibilities: non-negotiation, in which there is no action to be performed jointly; traditional negotiation, in which the people involved need to give up something important to them in order to gain another (Bohm 2005), with prevailing feelings of gain and loss; and dialogic negotiation, in which the feeling of loss-gain does not arise, but something approaching a gain-gain does. With the understanding of the other, fruit of the dia-

logue, we are able to understand and feel that what we give up will be for the sake of something very important to the other and, therefore, we choose to assume a welcoming posture, which is perceived and felt by the other, making a climate of co-operation emerge among us, instead of competition (as is the case of traditional negotiation). This does not mean that we stop feeling part of the frustration of giving up something that is important to us, but that it hurts less to know that we do it in the name of making coexistence better for us (the people involved).

## Final considerations

In this paper, we seek to present in detail a method for learning and experiencing dialogue between people from the same community and between people from different communities, based on the ideas of David Bohm, William Isaacs, and Paulo Freire, as well as the professional and personal experiences of the first author of this paper.

Some preliminary tests have already been performed and discussed, in the Brazilian context, and can be found in Monteiro et al. (2020) and Lopes et al. (2020). Furthermore, the method is being tested with a diverse group of researchers from the environmental field in Brazil, belonging to the thematic project *Environmental Governance of the Macrometropolis of São Paulo in the Face of Climate Variability*, funded by the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (FAPESP), nº 15/03804-9, as part of the first author's PhD research, under the supervision of the second and third authors.

We recognise that there is still a long way to go to verify the efficiency of the proposed method, and that numerous research and experience reports are needed based on its application. We therefore invite academics, facilitators, and dialogue practitioners who work with communities (and in other contexts) to implement the method as a possible alternative to face the diverse challenges (social, political, economic, environmental, etc.) that confront us at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

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