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*Every month **Attractors** shares tips and tools from human systems dynamics.
This month we invited HSD Institute Associate Darlene Goetzman
to explore the connections between Human Systems Dynamics and Dialogue Education in order to
explicate the concept of safety.*

Safety: Bounded Freedom

Training or teaching has little practical value when it is designed without direct and specific relevance to or immediate application in the lives of the people involved. Dialogue Education (DE), as first described by Jane Vella in 1995, uses a framework that assures verifiable evidence of learning, taking advantage of the fact that adult learners are professionals and decision-makers in their learning process. It switches the focus from what instructors will say about a topic to what learners will do with the content to demonstrate learning. The creation and maintenance of a safe, yet challenging, learning event is guided by a set of more than sixty principles and practices.

The principle of safety is critical to practicing new skills, attitudes and knowledge (content). Organization development and HR professionals will recognize safety in its connection to employee engagement. In Dialogue Education, safety is defined as knowing that one can practice (or make mistakes) without fear of embarrassment or disrespectful criticism, while being held accountable for learning, reflection and practice. Safety is directly related to a person's willingness, motivation and ability to listen without judgment, to question, respond, think critically, commit to memory and practice or develop competence—in another word: learn. (Brookfield, 1987; Cranton, 1994; Hooks, 1994; Jenson, 1997; Johnson, 2006; Smith and Berg, 1987; Taylor, Marienau and Fiddler, 2000; Vella, 1995, 1996; Wlodkowski, 1999).

A useful tool and lens for examining how safety can be created is the CDE Model as described by Glenda Eoyang, with the Human Systems Dynamics Institute (2003, 1997). Born out of the fields of complexity theory and other systems theories, Human Systems Dynamics uses metaphors from natural sciences to explore the patterns within and between human systems. The CDE Model (container, difference and exchange) is one tool that can be used to describe what is currently happening within complex situations, and ultimately can be used to influence these situations in order to bring greater coherence within groups and businesses.

The CDE Model is often used to examine organizational issues. Here, we will use it specifically to examine a microcosm – learning events and the creation and experience of safety in order to increase learning. We might ask, “What *things hold this group together?*” And therefore identify one of many types of **containers**. Or we might look for what **differences** exist among the participants that appear to keep them apart? We might then explore exchanges by inquiring: “*What exchanges could help transform the differences and bring the group into coherence?*” The CDE Model provides multiple ways to view the interwoven dimensions of any situation.

Containers

Here are some examples of **containers** that the DE approach uses to build safety:

1. A tight **time limit** for completing a learning task which in turn increases the energy, may make explicit the production is about practice not perfection, and encourages speedy group delegation of roles, or sharing of contributions.
2. A set of **achievement-based objectives** names and provides the boundaries for what participants will have done (achieved) by the end of the session, thus ensuring a certain comfort of knowing where the group is going, and what they will be doing.
3. A **table group** or learning task, too, can serve as containers as this group works together on a particular task.

Differences

At HSD Institute and in a DE approach to learning and change, we look for the difference that makes a difference in that time and space. Some ways that difference can be explored safely for learning include:

1. Learning tasks that invite participants to compare their research to the expert's research, note what differences arise, postulate the implications of these differences without judgment, and brainstorm alternatives to mediate any implications.
2. Alternating the timing of tasks, the variety of tasks, and taking breaks to ensure energy and focus for whatever challenge is at hand, each of these acknowledges and honors learning differences in a way to promote learning for all.
3. Small group work can take advantage of differences and provide for safety when the learning task is designed as an open question for the small group with all the resources they need to successfully respond.

Exchanges

We can influence and/or build safety with our exchanges, as well. Whether they are declarations, information, money, affirmations, an agenda, or many other options - all indicate a certain level of give and take, and as indicated in the previous paragraph, exchanges like containers or differences can be used respectfully or not.

Here are a few other examples of exchanges:

1. A small group, provided with a case study and these four open questions, is an excellent opportunity for transformative exchanges:

What do you see happening here? (Describe)

Why do you think it happens? (Analyze)

When it happens in your life, what problems does it cause? (Apply)

What suggestions do you have for change? (Apply)

2. Inviting participants to share and explore their experience in light of a particular concept, also opens the way for exchanges, sometimes these are transformative exchanges.
3. Affirmation of contributions enhances the potential of exchanges by assuring safety through the nonjudgmental acceptance of a person's participation.

Using the CDE Model provides us with one more way to consider safety as historically situated and dependent upon the intersection of multiple DE principles and practices for its existence. By considering the various containers that form and can be formed, noting and respectfully juxtaposing differences that make a difference, and creating opportunities for exchanges that honor learners as decision-makers in an

atmosphere of respect and safety, we increase the learning that takes place when adults take responsibility for their choices.

In the new book *On Learning and Teaching* (Jossey Bass, 2007), Vella reminds us *the design is the means, the end is learning, the purpose is peace*. As we work with clients and Associates at the HSD Institute, we are learning to apply the principles of Dialogue Education in our work. If you want to create a sense of safety in your institutional learning, give us a call or visit us on the web - 800-HSD-INST, www.hsdinstitute.org. We would be happy to talk with you about this and other possibilities.

For more information on Dialogue Education, Dr. Jane Vella, and Global Learning Partners visit:
www.globalearning.com

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