Reflexive Dialogues

A Story about the Development of Injury Prevention in Two Performing-Arts Schools

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This article outlines a reflexive, dialogical approach to evaluation in which lived experiences, meanings and underlying values become the subject of reflexive dialogues among as many interested people as possible in order to heighten their understanding. Dialogue is considered as an open, divergent conversation. In contrast to a persuasive dialogue, this type of dialogue builds on reflection, the willingness to pause in a conversation, to spend time and to explore more deeply what seems to be essential to the participants themselves. Narrative (versus argumentative) rationality informs this kind of dialogue. A case example illustrates the approach. It concerns a formative evaluation of an injury-prevention programme in two performing-arts schools. The case shows how art students in particular experience the pressures of performance. Getting students, teachers and (para) medical experts to engage in reading stories of each other's experience also raises issues pertinent not only to their personal and mutual understanding but also to the culture of the institution.

KEYWORDS: difference; marginalization; narrative understanding; performing arts; story workshops

Introduction

We must renounce our monologic habits so that we might come to feel at home in the new polyphonic sphere which Dostojewski discovered, so that we might orient ourselves in that incomparably more complex artistic model of the world which he created. (Bakhtin, 1953/1980)

Several years ago we – a team of three evaluators – were asked to carry out a formative evaluation with a developmental purpose of an injury-prevention project at the Conservatoire and Dance Academy within the School for Higher Education in the Arts in Amsterdam. During the whole process (April 1997– April 1998) we were assisted and critically reviewed by a project group. This group was composed of a staff member, one of the managing directors and a psychologist of the Conservatoire, the co-ordinator of the injury-prevention programme at the Dance Academy and several interested students and teachers from both schools.

The project's aim was to systematically address health-related problems of musicians and dancers. Although there were no records available of the amount and type of injuries that occurred, the project group was convinced that this was a serious problem. The psychologist at the Conservatoire told us, for example, that she had seen almost 60 percent of the school population. Yet despite the severity of the situation the subject was surrounded by taboos. At the Dance Academy certain protective and preventative measures had already been taken including body-awareness lessons, regular consulting hours and curative care, but the incidence of injuries remained high and prevention was still largely ignored in the regular curriculum.

During our first meeting we – the evaluators and project group – agreed that these problems were not caused by a lack of medical knowledge about health risks. Rather, injuries were the result of certain habits and teaching practices that were no longer sufficient given changes in the working environment of performing artists. As evaluators we assumed that teaching practices were grounded in relatively stable and culturally inherited narratives (Bakhtin, 1953/1980). In this particular setting this involved stories about what made a good musician or dancer and how they should be trained to become good professionals. We felt that we could facilitate a process of reflexive dialogue in the schools by organizing a series of story workshops. In this process we would adopt the role of process facilitators creating conditions for a dialogical process. By collaborating together, the school communities might deepen their understanding of how students, teachers and experts experienced the teaching and pressures of performance.

This article is in two parts. First, I will describe the evaluation we conducted at the schools. I describe in detail the reflexive, dialogical evaluation process, and the design and methods used to collect stories. I discuss how story workshops were organized and illustrate the conversations that unfolded within different communities using the example of a story workshop held with a group of jazz-ballet students. The second part of the article focuses on several issues and reflects on questions relevant to this special issue on dialogue and/in evaluation. Finally I draw some lessons from this experience with dialogue that might be useful to other evaluators.

Part 1: An Integral Case Description

Before the evaluation started we – the evaluation team and members of the project group – presented its design at a meeting with the Board of Directors of both schools to get their support. We also informed students about the project with a flyer and held presentations at meetings with teachers and artistic directors to ensure their participation.

The evaluation project developed in three phases. The objective of the initial phase was to gain an insight into lived experiences and stories that reflected how the students, teachers and experts experienced the teaching practices and the role of self-care and prevention in the schools. The objective of the second phase of the project was to stimulate critical reflection on the inherited standard story or myth and to generate alternative ideas in both schools. During the third phase of

the project we passed on this new, publicly articulated understanding and tried to engage as many people as possible in reflexive dialogue about the myths that had been passed down from one generation of students to another.

Collecting Personal Stories and Reconstructing Myths (Phase I)

One of my colleagues worked for 3–4 days a week at the schools for a period of one year. She attended classes regularly, went to special body-awareness lessons and consulting hours, and to concerts and other student performances. This ‘prolonged engagement’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1986) enabled her to build up a relationship with the various communities within the school and to gain an insight into common patterns of interaction. In order to deepen our understanding we also read several (auto) biographies and interviews with dancers and musicians published in newspapers and popular media. We met as an evaluation team once every two weeks to discuss methodological considerations, such as how our particular position and research agenda would influence our interpretations.

Important sources of information during this phase were in-depth interviews. In order to get a broad spectrum of meanings we talked in each school with two students and two teachers with a different specialization, an expert and one of the directors. Almost all the respondents had experienced more or less serious injuries themselves. Interviews were informal and guided by the issues raised by respondents. We started with broad opening questions, such as ‘What does it mean to be a student/teacher at a music/dance school?’ and ‘What happened when you were injured and had to stop (temporarily)?’. The stories in response to these questions appeared to be rich in detail and credible in terms of being authentic (Lincoln and Guba, 1986). All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Our interpretations were presented to each respondent in order to give them the chance to comment on our findings. This ‘member check’ enabled us to check the trustworthiness of our findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1986). With one exception, all respondents used this opportunity to let us know that they recognized themselves in our account and to elaborate on what they had told. Aya, an ex-dancer and posture teacher at the Conservatoire, for example, responded to the way we had connected her experiences with accounts of other professional dancers who felt their lives were completely dominated by dance. Aya explained she felt ambivalent about this. While she had always felt an external pressure to perform in a more classical dance curriculum, this changed when she started taking lessons at a modern dance school in Paris. She experienced more freedom and began to feel intrinsically motivated to devote lots of time to the profession. There was one person who withdrew her account from publication because she felt it was too critical about her teachers. Although we realized important information might get lost, we respected this decision.

As we analysed each personal story – we conducted a narrative analysis of its themes and language – we were struck by its richness, authenticity and uniqueness. At the same time there were also many similarities in the way students and teachers made sense of their experiences. There were also many striking parallels between the stories of students at the Dance Academy and those at the

Box 1. Dominant Myth

Performing artists are individuals who experience their profession as a way of expressing themselves personally. A life without dance or music is simply impossible. The highest goal is to reach the top. Not the personal top, but the absolute top within that specific profession. One has to start very early, preferably before the age of ten and iron discipline is required. Success means that alcohol, cigarettes and drugs should be kept to a minimum, and dancers should constantly watch their weight. Complete dedication to the profession is a must and this means that other aspects in life are of minor importance.

The master-teacher's authority must be accepted. This is particularly the case in the Conservatoire where every student is taught on a one-to-one basis. The student should be compliant, other students are considered competitors and rivalry is necessary to win the struggle.

Caring for one's body and health are of secondary concern. The body only receives attention when injured or tense. It is no more than an instrument ('You have a body' versus 'You are a body'). Self-care is minimal. Preventing problems requires time and the benefits seem insignificant in proportion. The time spent on the body keeps one from what really matters, namely dedication to the profession.

Heavy demands are made on students during their studies to prepare them for the rigorous life they will have in the future. This is seen as a way of selecting the best students. It means that they have to control/toughen themselves when injuries occur and that they must learn not to expect too much from teachers. Pain is a common fact of life.

Conservatoire; in ordering their experiences in a meaningful way they relied on a collectively formed myth. This myth is reconstructed in Box 1.

In a myth, opposing goals and values are connected in a meaningful action framework. In this case the highest goal is formulated in terms of reaching the absolute top. This is accompanied by struggle and the hero is the one who, despite physical constraints, reaches the highest rung on the career ladder. The anti-hero is someone who ends up as a teacher at a provincial dance or music school. Important values are perfection, discipline, compliance, rivalry and creativity. It is this masculine discourse and myth that forms the identity of students. At a very young age students learn to adjust their personality to group norms. The myth also determines the rules of interaction between students, and between students and their teachers. It reflects and sustains the power relationship in which the student is (or is said to be) dependent on the teacher. This unequal and not very democratic relationship is continued in professional practice: in the orchestra, players are dependent on the conductor; and dancers are dependent on the choreographer who chooses the dancers he or she wants for each performance (Krasnow et al., 1994). Fred, a classical-ballet teacher and ex-dancer, puts it like this: 'As a dancer you are always dependent, I find that very difficult. You are always dependent on that person [choreographer], for a role.'

Myths, according to Trice and Beyer (1993: 105), have high degrees of seriousness: 'Myths are dramatic, rather vague, unquestioned narratives . . . They deal with matters that are very serious or sacred in a culture' (p. 79). The irony

and humour one often finds in daily organizational stories are completely absent. A myth contains an explanation that is hard to question and is well protected against debate and argument. Myths have a lot of authority and they legitimate action. The myth we reconstructed was deeply embedded in the cultural values of the group and it had a lot of power among the students and teachers in the communities within the school.

Destabilizing the Organizational Myth through Reflexive Dialogues in Story Workshops (Phase II)

The objective of the second phase of the project was to stimulate critical reflection on the inherited myth and to generate new ideas. We organized a series of story workshops between students and between teachers in both schools. With the exception of the teachers at the Conservatoire, the groups of students and teachers (again selected on the principle of variety) we approached were willing to participate in these workshops if they did not take too much time. We therefore planned workshops within regular meetings and lessons. The groups that attended the workshops were small, but sometimes as many as 12 people turned up. In the workshops, participants were invited to respond to story fragments from the intermediary report. The stories presented were selected because they reflected various perspectives and issues of concern. They were rewritten and edited so that they could be read within a short period of time.

In a workshop participants were invited to respond to story fragments that represented at least two points of view. We deliberately decided to give students the stories of another student and of a teacher or (para) medical expert. The teachers received the story of a student and an expert. This idea is grounded in the method of rotation. Participants in rotation change roles in order to reposition themselves temporarily and to see things from another point of view. They are forced to leave their own territory for a while and this enables them to absorb other aspects that might be useful when they need to interpret events and take action. Participants may develop sensitivity for the other's 'rationality' (Gergen, 1994: 77). Rotation may heighten the awareness and mutual understanding of participants and open the way for unknown roles and relationships (Abma, 2000a).

Teachers at the Dance Academy, for example, were confronted with two stories concerning the relationship between teachers and students (Abma et al., 1998: 86-7). The German modern-dance student, named Johan, told one story. Margot, the co-ordinator of the injury-prevention programme, told the other. Johan said he had had a hard time interpreting the posture corrections of his teachers and he explained what happened when he discovered he had sprained his 'hamstring'. The massages he received from the physiotherapist made him aware of his tense body and that he 'wanted too much'. At the time Johan was still struggling to become more assertive during the regular lessons. In our account we cite Johan: 'She [a teacher] told me do it again and to think about it. I said - that was one time when I really spoke up - "Give me some space!". When I spoke to her in this way, she was really taken aback at what I had said. Really it was just getting too much for me.' At the end of Johan's story we raised several questions we had

formulated ourselves. Did Johan go too far? Was he obstinate? Does the teacher ever work with students who show they feel suffocated by the teacher's authority? Margot stresses that injured students often find it hard to follow medical advice when they begin regular lessons again. She identifies all kinds of communication problems. In our account of her story we raise the following question. Does the fact that the teacher evaluates the student play a role in the troubled communication? These questions were meant to stimulate reflection and to provoke thinking among participants.

We felt it was important to create safe and comfortable environments in which participants would be open and show respect for each other's stories. Two evaluators facilitated the workshops. One gave a short introduction to the project, our role, interests and the goals of the workshop. Permission was sought to tape the conversation. Participants agreed when we promised that they would be able to respond to our interpretations before anything was published. After a short reading pause of five minutes everyone was invited to introduce him or herself and retell their stories in their own voices. The second evaluator would record names and reactions. The initial responses reflected what participants found important and formed a good starting point for exploring the different meanings embedded in the stories. We then went on to ask questions, such as how do you relate to this story, what do you recognize and what do you miss? After one or two hours we would end the workshop.

It is not possible to record all aspects of the rich dialogues that took place during these workshops. However, the conversation we had with a group of jazz-ballet students, in Box 2, may provide some insight into the type of dialogue that took place.

The above conversation gives an impression of the conversation that took place with one group of students but the issues raised are very similar to the issues brought up in the other groups too. A recurring theme is the dilemma of whether or not to approach your teacher if you have a problem or should you try to solve it yourself. Reasoning along the lines of the dominant myth, most participants agreed with Linda that students were responsible for their own health. One should not bother teachers about such things as posture, one's state of mind or other health matters. Students showed they were afraid to express their emotions. Like Tamara not everyone was happy with the distanced relationship. Several participants suggested that the culture, which I have called the 'inherited myth', did not take into account or sufficiently acknowledge that students need support from their teachers and classmates.

Whether students should respect or exceed their own limits was an issue that also recurred in other story workshops. Some students and teachers relied on the inherited myth and stressed that it was necessary to go beyond one's limits to develop professionally and get good grades. Pain is the price that has to be paid. Janice was certainly not the only one to exceed her limits, and Toni's fears were no exception. During the conversations there were also students and teachers who criticized the myth. Like Tamara these were often participants who had themselves experienced the risks of exceeding their limits. They emphasized that pain signals should be treated seriously so problems could be

Box 2. Conversation among Jazz-Ballet Students in a Story Workshop

When we enter the room we find a noisy group of students, who are obviously having fun. We reshuffle the chairs in the form of a circle and then Margot, who is their mentor, introduces us to the group.

Margot will not actively participate in the workshop. She is very interested in the student's experiences and when we talked about the safe environment necessary to get honest responses she persuaded us that her relationship with this group was very different from the one they have with teachers. Margot is not in the position to judge them. The students are not dependent on her for their degrees. Furthermore, she is their mentor and she wants to know how she can help them.

One of us gives a short presentation, first in Dutch and later in English because there are several foreign students. We distribute the story fragments of the student, Johan and the dance co-ordinator, Margot – in English and Dutch – and after a reading pause, we invite the participants to respond in the form of a few statements.

Four responses concerned the communication between students and teachers and we decide to talk about that topic first. Tamara says in her statement that teachers do not really communicate. When we invite her to explain what she means, she says that the teachers don't know the students personally and that older teachers in particular often act in an authoritarian way.

One of her classmates responds as follows: 'You should not expect personal attention from a teacher. Things should not be too easy otherwise you may start feeling he or she will accept anything from you.'

Tamara replies she understands that there needs to be some distance, but she is very disappointed that teachers do not take a personal interest in students.

A conversation begins to develop about the way they relate to teachers and whether or not they will ask questions or talk about their problems. A third student says: 'It's very personal. Maybe she [points in the direction of the person sitting opposite her] finds it easy to ask about injuries or to be honest about pain, but it may be very different for me. It all depends.' Everyone agrees personal preferences are important. All the same, they recognize that most of the teachers with whom it is easy to talk are the ones who do not put themselves on a pedestal.

The conversation then shifts to Johan's story. Rachel says she recognizes his account and the feelings one has when one cannot practise because of an injury. She relates about a painful experience she has just had. At the end of her story Janice replies that she can imagine that Rachel feels afraid because she may have to leave again. She shares her struggles with the pressure to perform: 'I do everything I'm supposed to do although I know it is not good for me (...) I do not want to stop, because I am afraid they will think I don't turn up because I don't want to study'.

Linda doesn't agree: 'You are now studying at a higher school for arts, *you* are responsible, not the teachers.' But the other students say they recognize Janice's fear that teachers and classmates will think negatively about them if they start to talk about injuries and difficulties.

Toni explains: 'You're always thinking about the degree you will get in the end.'

When one of us asks if missing a few weeks will result in a poor degree, she replies: 'Yes that's what I feel.'

prevented and that students should become more assertive in their relations with their teachers.

The group of jazz-ballet students did not talk so extensively about prevention, an issue that had come up in other story workshops. Perhaps they were too shy to bring up the subject while Margot, as the co-ordinator of the injury-prevention programme, was present. In other groups some participants followed the dominant myth, saying that the school and its teachers had no responsibilities as far as prevention was concerned. However, there were also participants who felt that prevention should become an integral part of the curriculum. A group of classical-ballet students said that the injury programme solely focused on reducing symptoms. They had had positive experiences with a more active prevention of injury during regular dance lessons. Some were critical of focusing on physical aspects alone and emphasized that prevention should include the student's whole being.

Further Enlarging Reflexive Dialogue (Phase III)

In the last phase of the project we passed on these experiences and tried to engage as many people as possible in reflexive dialogues about the inherited myths. We tried to catch their imagination and generate new images for the future. In order to realize these aims we deliberately chose to present our findings in a format and style that would give readers a 'feel' for the setting and enable them to engage in a dialogue on the meanings embedded in the text. A collection of stories and the flow of meanings that emerged through conversations seemed appropriate. Stories are powerful tools in reflection. One can compare this process to learning from friends (Forester, 1993). Friends tell us 'appropriate' stories that touch us by their specificity, they reflect something about ourselves. Such stories work like a mirror. They help us see things more clearly or in a different light. They remind us of things that we may have forgotten or to which we are blind. Different stories reveal different perspectives, place the reader's point of view in context and create a reflexive turn (Abma, 1998; Barone, 1999).

Given our purpose we decided not to end our evaluation report with conclusions and recommendations. Alternatively we presented four scenarios. These were visualized in a two-dimensional scheme. The underlying values formed the two dimensions. The horizontal dimension related to development (absolute top/individual growth) and the vertical dimensions to responsibility (individual/collective). Every scenario was labelled with a metaphor that captured its essence. The inherited myth at the Conservatoire was, for example, conceptualized as the 'survival of the fittest'. Each scenario was further elaborated in terms of the practical consequences it would have for the school.

Part 2: Issues and Reflection on Practical Considerations

The dialogical-evaluation approach followed in this project is an elaboration of Guba and Lincoln's 'negotiation' approach (1989). Its aim is to heighten the personal and mutual understanding, and as such there are parallels with Schwandt's conception of evaluation as an educational enterprise (Schwandt, 2000, this

issue). Dialogue is understood as a conversation about lived experiences embedded in stories that are told by concrete people. With its focus on personal experiences there are links with Kushner's (2000) personalizing evaluation approach. The evaluator acts as a process facilitator creating the conditions for a genuine dialogue between different persons. In this part I will further outline this approach considering issues of concern, selection and inclusion of participants, essential characteristics of dialogue, what constitutes a 'good' dialogue and how to organize a dialogue under less-than-ideal conditions.

Issues of Concern

In this project we took an interest in the *lived experiences* of participants: their feelings, projections and desires as well as what they have learned in their practice. Experiences do not have an inherent meaning, but gain meaning through the telling of stories. Stories can help us gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences and meanings, and are appropriate vehicles for reflexive dialogues because they are relatively open and can be interpreted in many ways (Bruner, 1986). In our project we focused on stories about what it was like to be a musician or dancer and what happened when students had an injury and had to stop (temporarily). We searched for variety and then we focused on stories that had, as yet, received little attention in the schools. In the story workshops we concentrated on relationships between teachers and students, and the values basic to teaching. In these conversations the dominant myth became the subject of critical discussion. Reflexive questions that had not been raised before such as 'How is it possible that I have had two injuries in one year?' and 'What will happen to my body if I continue this way of life for years?' were publicly addressed. Participants talked also about the role of self-care and injury prevention.

Another dialogue focused on the evaluation process. In advance of the evaluation we talked with the project group about the design and who should take part in it. Other methodological issues (the relevance and amount of in-depth interviews and participative observation), ethical considerations (how to protect the privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of respondents) and financial aspects were also discussed in advance. Later on we renegotiated our course with this group, and decided to place more emphasis, for example, on the psychodynamics that made it difficult to change the behaviour of students and teachers. In the last phase the project group actively participated in discussing how results should be disseminated.

Selection and Inclusion of Participants

In the evaluation we tried to include as many people interested in the project as possible. We not only ensured including experts but actively negotiated to involve students and teachers as well. Given asymmetrical power relationships it was not possible to bring different social groups directly together. Teachers examine students, and the grades students receive determine their future. From our experiences in the first phase of the project we thought students might not be willing to talk about their personal feelings or make critical remarks when their teachers were present. We therefore invested considerable energy in trying to

create a safe environment by creating homogeneous groups of students and teachers. They responded to each other indirectly by reading each other's stories.

As far as the expression of ideas is concerned, one important factor we had not foreseen was the communication barriers created by language. There was one group that was particularly difficult to work with. It concerned a group of modern-theatre students, three of whom were foreigners who could not speak or understand Dutch and were only able to communicate in very simple English. Soon we discovered they had problems following the conversation. We faced a dilemma. In order to engage the foreign students we had to repeat and translate questions and remarks. However, this slowed down group conversation and interruptions affected the flow. After half an hour we gave up. This example shows that language can create a barrier in dialogues, especially when time is a constraining factor. In retrospect, such problems should be considered in advance; for example, in this case we could have considered allocating this special group extra time for dialogue; we could have chosen a different group of students or we could have organized a dialogue with foreign students in their own language.

Greene (1997) has suggested that evaluation projects need to be sanctioned by dominant decision makers and key stakeholders. In this project the directors of the Conservatoire and Dance Academy not only approved the project but some of them were actively engaged in the project group. Their active engagement helped to prevent dialogues becoming isolated. Reports also proved to be an excellent way of weaving together conversations between different groups and at different levels in the organization.

Essential Characteristics of Dialogue

House and Howe (1999) envision a democratic evaluation approach in which dialogue is characterized by an *argumentative rationality*. Participants bring opinions and arguments to the fore, which are tested and compared with factual evidence, and emotions and other non-rational elements are 'cleaned away'. The dialogue we have in mind is one that is informed by a *narrative rationality*. People with a name and face listen to each other's experiences, share personal stories, inquire into the layers of meaning buried in these stories, contribute and add other, related experiences and reflect on underlying values and assumptions. This type of dialogue does not converge: it diverges.

While House and Howe (1999) relate dialogue to rational deliberation, I relate dialogue to reflection (see Preskill and Torres, 1999). Reflection means that one is willing to pause in a conversation, to spend time and be willing to explore more deeply what seems to be essential for the participants. This requires time and slows down conversation. Silence provides a foundation for inquiry and reflection (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998). A reflexive dialogue requires the following skills: listening, suspension of judgement, respect for each other's point of view, inquiring into underlying assumptions and willingness to change (Ellinor and Gerard, 1998). A genuine dialogue also requires a particular ethical stance and attitude towards the other. Bakhtin (1953/1980) speaks in that regard of 'answerability' and Buber (1932) of 'attentiveness'. This attentiveness expresses itself in openness to hearing the other's otherness – that which is radically different from one's

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Box 3. A Group of Classical Ballet Students in Discussion

'A touchy subject', someone whispers when we ask a group of classical-ballet students how long they would go on dancing if they were in pain. A heated discussion then broke out.

Jeanette: 'When I feel pain I would rather go on and ignore the pain than sitting aside stretching. You can always dance through your pain'.

Her classmates begin to shout and yell all kinds of statements to show their disapproval: 'Then you are acting in the wrong way!'; 'It is just not right to continue when you feel pain'; and 'Going on while you know it isn't sensible? It is a matter of taking responsibility. You may be afraid you will fall behind, but it is a matter of taking responsibility for yourself.'

Jeanette: 'It depends on the price you are willing to pay. Take Alexandra for example [a famous dancer]. She is 40 and has the knees of an 80-year-old. But at least she has had a wonderful career. You have to be willing to pay that price.'

own 'self' – and in giving answers that are specific and focused on the receiver. The skills and attitude just mentioned are not always enacted in the conversations that usually take place in organizations. An example:

The above vignette nicely illustrates the character of a debate. Participants do not share stories, but opinions. There are two parties – Jeanette versus her classmates. They are trying to persuade each other. Note the unfriendly atmosphere and how participants judge each other. Instead of trying to find out why Jeanette is exceeding her pain limits, her classmates try to correct her. They do not listen, and interrupt each other. They do not seem to be interested in each other's point of view because they think they already know what the other party is thinking. When we urge participants to talk about their own experiences the conversation changes. Francisca begins to tell the group how she suffered from serious back pain, that she has been socialized to think it was always possible to do more and how hard it was for her to learn to accept her limits. Jeanette recognizes this and is willing to show her own mixed feelings and struggles. She says she has learned how important it is to her that she is satisfied with herself. She thinks it's not right to go on setting higher and higher limits or trying to do things that are just not feasible. On the other hand she has a dream about her future and she is working very deliberately towards that vision. 'Perhaps', she asks herself out loud, 'that dream should be adjusted and I should be satisfied with what I can do.' The climate within the group had changed significantly and become more emphatic and respectful. The winning–losing atmosphere had been replaced by a desire to inquire into such things as the role of training, ambition, confused feelings and underlying values. As a result, Jeanette and several other participants changed during the conversation in the sense that they began to see themselves differently.

What Constitutes a 'Good' Dialogue and Outcomes

Quite often it is thought that a 'good' dialogue results in consensus (Guba and Lincoln, 1989) or a fusion of horizons (Widdershoven and Sohl, 1999). There are

several shortcomings in this definition. First of all, the search for consensus may lead to a denial of meanings, and hence to voices and people who do not recognize the constructed dominant idea and consensus. Secondly, consensus is not required for communication or action (Hosking and Bass, 1999). We can co-ordinate our actions without reaching consensus. Alternatively I propose to define a 'good' dialogue as an ongoing process of constructing meaning resulting in a heightened self and mutual understanding. Negatively formulated this means that a 'bad' dialogue is one where certain ideas and meanings are systematically excluded.

In terms of outcomes the presented project facilitated a public dialogue on a subject that had not until then been discussible. The organized dialogues created a platform to share experiences that were taboo. The director of the Conservatoire spoke in that regard of a process of 'coming out'. She was very impressed by the openness of a famous piano player who agreed to publish a personal story on how a serious injury had affected and changed his career. She expected that his story would have a positive effect on the whole school culture in terms of publicly sharing experiences that were kept private before.

In addition the dialogues enhanced the personal understanding and reflection. People began to think and look critically at themselves. They started raising doubts and expressing concerns. The project also raised the mutual understanding. A dance student told us in response to the draft of the final report that she found it interesting to see the conversations among teachers and students placed alongside each other. She suddenly realized that teachers confront similar problems as students. As teachers they are, however, reasoning from a different perspective. She had, for example, not been aware that teachers might experience difficulties in noticing problems among their students, because not all health problems are immediately visible. Likewise teachers gained a better understanding of students. A dance teacher, for example, said the report helped her to imagine the doubts and uncertainties of students. The report stimulated her to explain in advance how and why she would correct students.

Still another sort of outcome was related to the understanding of the school culture. The staff member in the project group said that as the underlying values and metaphors of the current teaching practices had been gradually made clear she had gained insights that had given her considerable cause for reflection. The Director of the Conservatoire expected that the report would play an important role in deciding the agenda to be followed by the Board of Directors at the school. The evaluation report was also presented to the Board of Directors of the Dance Academy and became the basis for a collaborative meeting that was held between the boards of both schools at which learning and a definition of future action were central.

Dialogue under Imperfect Conditions

I have already referred to various practical problems which may obstruct the organization of genuine dialogues when circumstances are not ideal. I have talked about the implications of the different languages spoken by participants, the limited time available for active participation in such a project and the dominant

organizational culture. The size of the groups is another important aspect. Given the time available for a workshop – one to two hours – six people seemed to be the ideal size for one- or two-hour sessions. However, sometimes we ended up with a group of 10 or 12 people. As a result we could not always engage everyone during the whole process and fully attend to and probe into everyone's story.

The willingness to join and participate is another issue that has to be considered. Greene (1997) noticed that participants are only willing to join in a group discussion when the conversation is meaningful to them. Our experience supports this observation. Only those who were interested in health issues wanted to participate. It was hard to motivate those who benefited from the reproduction of the dominant myths, such as the teachers at the Conservatoire. The status quo reinforces their authority and prestige as top artists and thus their hierarchical relationship with their students. Why should they engage in a process that might eventually lead to them losing status? We found it workable – although not completely satisfying – to focus on those teachers who were interested or already convinced of the value of self-care and prevention. The question of how transformative conversations can be initiated with those who do not need to listen deserves more attention, if we want to foster transformational learning processes in situations where unequal power constellations prevail.

Conclusion

In this article I have presented a reflexive, dialogical evaluation approach. Its aim is to enhance personal and mutual understanding of participants, but it may also, as we have seen in the case example, be beneficial in terms of reaching a deeper understanding of the organizational culture. In this approach 'evaluation' does not take the form of applying criteria to judge the merit and worth of a programme or practice. The approach should, however, be considered as an evaluative inquiry given the following characteristics: (a) in the dialogical process values and criteria emerge; (b) in the process the evaluator uses social science methods and analysis; and (c) the evaluation process has implications for the evaluated practice.

The project in the two performing-arts schools illustrated this approach. One important learning experience was that multiplicity could also serve as a good source of reflexive dialogues. Bringing in other, external voices like those of the students, for example, can stimulate multiplicity and make people re-think their own priorities, values and points of view. Organizing multiplicity often implies conflict and the quality of dialogue will be enhanced if evaluators further refine their conflict management repertoire (Abma, 2000a, 2000b). A second learning experience was that stories offer a way of reaching a deeper understanding of lived experiences and are an appropriate vehicle for reflexive conversations because of their openness and ambiguity. Thirdly, it is important to notice that the narratives inherited from the past and actual power constellations always influence dialogues. An evaluator cannot deny these standard-stories and has to engage stakeholders in order to 'anchor' new ideas. Fourth, engaging clients and key decision makers appears to be an important strategy and helps prevent

dialogues becoming isolated. Fifth, communication skills are context-bound and evaluators should be careful about who they include and how to include them. Engagement in dialogue consists not only in the mere appearance of representatives in a given group, but rather in the fostering of a setting where the voices of (groups of) people with an interest can be heard with their full force and resonance. But despite the risk of a dialogue that echoes the voice and language of dominant actors and several other cautions (Abma et al., this issue), I believe that, with today's need for means and insights in living in a plural, multi-voiced world, a reflexive dialogical approach to evaluation may help to enhance the understanding across differences in voice, language, images and vocabulary.

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