1.

What is Dialogue?

The definition of dialogue

In everyday language, "dialogue" usually means communication between two or more people. Often, the word dialogue is used when there is an emphasis on the high quality of the conversation. In such cases, the word may evoke notions of politeness, being proper, or denoting attentive listening and depth. These notions do not, however, sufficiently cover the characteristics of dialogue. We can define dialogue in a more precise way.

In this book, dialogue means a conversation where there is an effort to gain better *understanding* of the *topics* at hand, *other people*, and *oneself*. According to this definition, dialogue aims towards *learning*.

People can uphold their crucial ability to learn from one another through dialogue. This type of shared learning also seems to create other valuable aspects in groups and communities. It builds mutual trust between people, which makes

living together safe and smooth. With dialogue we can also creatively process various complex issues and develop new ideas which are required to solve them. In addition to this, dialogues enhance the most important values of democratic societies – especially equality and liberty.

Most people have had memorable experiences of conversations which have been interesting, deep, moving, and have opened up new points of view. This type of conversation may have arisen spontaneously among friends after a movie, theatre performance, sports event, or art exhibition. This may have occurred in a workplace coffee room, in a locker room or with family at dinner. What is typical for these moments of conversation is that they have been unplanned and are fleeting. Afterwards it may be difficult to remember what made the conversation so exceptionally significant.

Such conversations do not have to remain a product of chance, but can in fact be deliberately aimed for. At the same time, we can strive to improve our own *conversation skills.* This does not merely apply to dialogue, and we can also develop in debate, negotiation or for instance storytelling. Developing conversation skills requires us to recognise the key characteristics of the type of conversation we are aiming for and what kind of skills these conversations require. Debate and negotiation require different kinds of skills while dialogue has its own requirements.

The characteristics of dialogue can be specified by concentrating on its three main aspects: an understanding of topics, others, and oneself. With each of these we can specify what kind of learning we're aiming for in dialogical conversation.

In dialogue we focus on the *meanings* that the participants give to the *topics* at hand. The conversation can be about all

kind of things: physical places and items, singular events, work instruments, psychological phenomena, moral values, and scientific facts. The meanings are what people understand these things to be. What do we mean when we talk about "courage", "love", "a good work environment" or "the failure of last summer's vacation"?

People form their most fundamental meanings for different topics through their own culture and the community in which they have grown up. To make sense of the world, each individual adopts the ways that have been used in their own communities, for example through their community's language, traditions, stories, buildings and items. Though general meanings may be the same for different members of the community, individuals also give differing meanings to things.

In my book *Dialogue in Democracy,* I offer an example of different meanings that can be connected to a very common thing: a forest.

> Different people can only have a partially shared meaning for "forest". For a child who has grown up in a city, "forest" can mean a dark and scary place, where one can easily get lost. For a hunter it is integrally connected to the trails of game, hideouts, campfires and quiet moments of stakeout. An artist sees there countless shades of green, a forester sees trees that are growing and trees that need to be cut down. For many indigenous people, forests are home to gods, whereas a biologist sees a forest as an ecosystem.
>
> *Dialogue in Democracy,* p. 72–73

The participants' principal meanings for the topics or phenomena being discussed are at the core of dialogical conversations. The goal is that the meanings of "courage", "love" or "a good work environment" are shown in such a rich and intricate way that all of the participants can learn something new about the topic.

We do not usually aim at dictionary definitions for such meanings, but rather inspect them in the context of the situation. The goal is to increase understanding in a way that serves the needs of the group at hand. These needs are defined by what these people are aiming to *do together*. Because of this, the type of understanding aimed for in dialogue can be very different, depending on whether we are having a one-off conversation about "vegetarian diet" with a group of citizens or if the dialogue is about "dangerous situations in coronary bypass surgery" between a group of surgeons and nurses who work together every day.

In dialogue, we are interested in how *other people* experience the world and how other people experience things *similarly or differently* to ourselves. The meanings people give to topics are impacted by many factors, such as ethnic and cultural background, gender, religion, education, profession, social class, and wealth, as well as factors from the individual's history such as where they live, where they work, and their family. There is no shortcut into other people's worlds of experience, because each individual has a countless number of completely unique experiences. These individual experiences can be significantly different from the usual way of perceiving things within one's own reference group. No one is solely a stereotypical representative of their own nationality, gender or profession.

Through dialogue we can understand what is desirable and valuable to different people, but also what they find threatening or harmful. At the same time, we learn important things about different groups of people and the differences between the people in these groups.

Dialogical conversations also increase understanding of *oneself*. We are often unaware of many of our own beliefs, needs, perceptions, values and assumptions. We become more aware of these aspects when we listen to how others experience the world. The different ways that people perceive the world help us to see ourselves more clearly. This does not happen on its own and we need to give in to dialogue with our whole persona regardless of our role in the conversation. Increased understanding changes our way of experiencing the world and ourselves. It shapes us as living – embodied, sensing, feeling, and thinking – beings.

One of the most important aspects of the self-awareness generated by dialogue is the recognition of *one's own limitations and fragility*. Dialogic conversations reveal to us how poorly we understand even those close to us, not to mention those who come from different backgrounds and live in different life situations. In the course of discussions, we can also connect with many emotions that are often unconscious and suppressed. Annoyance, anger, disgust, guilt and shame may unexpectedly surface during dialogue discussions. Unlike many other situations, dialogue gives us the opportunity to pause and examine these emotions and their causes and consequences in our own experience.

At its core, dialogue is not a mechanical skill that we can learn such as swimming, cycling, or playing chess. The skill of dialogue is always dependent on a personal *ethical attitude*.

What defines dialogue ethics? At the core of a dialogical attitude is the fundamental belief that each person is unique and valuable. All individuals have a point of view that is uniquely theirs and cannot be replaced by anything else. Because of this, each of us holds a piece of reality that is never the same for anyone else.

Mikhail Bakhtin studied the dialogicality of Dostoevsky's novels and defined the ethical foundations of dialogue by emphasising that each person's inner depth is unpredeterminable. By this he meant that no individual can be completely described and explained by definitions given by other people from the outside. There are always endless new sides to people and some of these sides may even be concealed from people themselves. The characters in Dostoevsky's novels often encounter each other in extreme life situations: at times of death, crime, suffering, shame and guilt. They need to ask others and themselves who they are as people. According to Bakhtin, even Dostoevsky as the writer of his works cannot completely control the consciousness of the characters he created. The characters in his novels seem to act as independent beings that even the "all-knowing" writer cannot control and define completely. Giving in to dialogue means letting go of control of other people and also oneself. It is a step into the unknown.

Dialogue ethics relies on the belief that reality as a whole cannot be grasped by a single individual. The world and the people in it change constantly, and each of us can only grasp a glimpse of this change. Because of this, we need each other if we want to gain a view of the reality in which we live that is as broad and multifaceted as possible.

This ethical attitude brings us to the most important foundations of dialogue: *equality in the conversation setting*

and *the freedom of expression of the participants*. In a dialogue, the input of each participant is equally significant. Each participant brings their own unique view to the dialogue, and as the conversation progresses surprising perspectives may arise. In dialogue, we also strive to secure the freedom of all participants. Each participant can speak freely about what they want, how they want, and the conversation is meant to progress freely within its own internal development.

It is no coincidence that the core values of dialogue – equality and freedom – are also the cornerstones of *democratic societies*. The oldest remaining examples of dialogues are from the first democratic state we know of: Classical Athens. In the works of Plato and Xenophon in particular we find descriptions of the dialogical conversations of their teacher, Socrates. Descriptions of Socrates are very diverse, and, from what we know, he seems not to have written anything himself. Many texts convey the ethical attitude that directed Socrates' actions and this is especially clear in the way that he engages in conversations with other citizens of Athens.

Socrates always seems ready to have a conversation about the values that guide the lives of Athenians. He challenges military leaders to think about what courage is. With young men he discusses friendship. During a banquet he engages in playful dialogue about the essence of love. In the *Meno* dialogue, Plato describes how Socrates includes a young slave in the conversation to prove that all people are capable of understanding certain universal truths. One of the most impressive descriptions is Plato's dialogue *Crito* which covers Socrates' last moments in prison awaiting his execution. Socrates' friends led by Crito come to persuade him to flee abroad, because they consider him innocent. Socrates is also

convinced that he is innocent, but he does not want to flee, because he wants to stay loyal to his principle of abiding to laws absolutely. Even in these last moments he invites his friends to a dialogical discussion to test his own and his friends' beliefs.

This example of Socrates embodies the radical nature of dialogue ethics. Having the view that each person has their own unique but limited point of view of the world also leads to the idea that people benefit from constantly testing the validity of their own views. This type of constantly renewing self-reflection can be best implemented together with others. Everyone has something unique to contribute to shared learning, regardless of their age, level of education or status in society.

Differences to other types of conversation

Living among others requires a variety of conversation skills, not only dialogue – which is not necessarily a good fit for all situations. In many cases, it is more useful to start a debate or to promote matters through negotiation. Dialogue, however, has a special status among different types of conversation. It forms the basis for us to be able to act together in a meaningful way in different communication situations. It is therefore essential to clarify the differences between dialogue and three other particularly demanding types of conversation: debate, negotiation and seeking unanimity.

The central basis for *debate* is that the participants in the conversation try to prove through argumentation that their

own point of view is better than that of their counterparts. The goal of debate is thus to find the best argument.

Debate can be considered successful if all parties have been able to present their own arguments in a clear and comprehensive manner. An excellent result is achieved if the arguments presented by one party have been deemed by all to be better than those of others.

CARL: *We need to continue downsizing our activities because our company is running out of money.*

JANE: *I disagree. According to our last balance sheet we made a profit. I think that is a clear sign that we can stop downsizing and we can even hire some new employees. I remember that three years ago we decided that we would evaluate the situation once more when the company became profitable again.*

CARL: *You are right. We did agree to that.*

In *negotiation* we try to find a solution or agreement. This usually requires outlining different options and fitting different factors together. In equal negotiation we strive for solutions which satisfy all parties. This usually requires compromises, which means that the different parties need to be ready to let go of some of their own demands to promote the common good.

In negotiations which progress well, the different parties are familiar with each other's values and needs, so each negotiator is able to present various options for all to consider. The best negotiations lead to completely new options which can combine even the conflicting demands of different parties.

NINA: *Some residents want more plants in the yard, others call for more play areas for children. There are also demands for more parking spots. We cannot have all of these. Are there any suggestions for how to solve this?*

JASMINE: *I have understood that many want both more parking spots and more play areas for children. But I consider this quite a bad combination because new parking spots will increase traffic in the yard and this can be dangerous for the children.*

MARCO: *Good point. Since we need to choose, I would rather have the new play area than the parking spots. What do the rest of you think?*

OLIVER: *I am ready to let go of the parking spots that I wanted, but then we'd better make sure that the new plants look amazing!*

NINA: *We will try our best.*

Many groups that spend a lot of time together, such as families, work communities and ideological associations, aim for *unanimity*. Finding consensus is easier when the participants in the conversation have similar values and they are ready to cut back on their own comfort and freedom for the harmony of the community.

RACHEL: *I don't want to go camping this summer. I want to be with my friends and stay in town.*

TIM: *I get so bored in town, 'cause all of my friends go to their summer cottages. Camping is fun 'cause we're in nature and we always see something cool.*

INGRID: *Should we think about renting a cottage somewhere close by? Rachel could get into town quickly and could invite friends over. Tim could find nice nature trails close to the cottage.*

TIM: *Yeah.*

RACHEL: *It needs to be somewhere with good connections into town.*

INGRID: *I think we can find a cottage like that.*

On a broader societal level, unanimity is not always necessary. In a diverse and pluralistic society, it is important that unanimity can be found and maintained for values that are important for the functionality of the society. Unanimity is also needed for central shared rules in a society's operations, such as how those in power are chosen and how disagreements between people are solved.

All the types of conversation described above – debate, negotiation and seeking unanimity – demand a sufficient amount of understanding between the people participating in the conversations. This requires dialogue. The best arguments cannot be found if the debaters talk over each other. Negotiations run into dead ends when the other party's true values and needs are not known. Only deep mutual understanding can give way to unanimity.

In many everyday encounters, different types of conversation can be mixed and this can be natural and even practical. Problems arise when we need to be able to operate together as well as possible. At its best we can learn to use different types of conversation flexibly depending on the situation. We can learn to switch from dialogue to debate and debate to negotiation and back to dialogue when needed. This is smiliar, say, to how a group can know the differences between different team sports and can play either football or floorball and switch from basketball to volleyball.

Becoming skilled in dialogue can help us increase "dialogicality" in many situations that we face in life and in the

relationships we form with other people, even if we do not take part in an actual "dialogical conversation". Dialogicality manifests as listening to people more closely and being more sensitive to different perspectives. It also means being able to respond more aptly to what other people bring up from their own world of experience. In this way, dialogue and dialogicality can become a style of interaction which supports people's coexistence in a broader sense.

Understanding and trust

We need dialogue perhaps more than ever before. We live in a world plagued by many extremely complex issues. Ecological crises, growing inequality, and conflicts involving the threat of weapons of mass destruction are examples of problems which affect all of humanity. At the same time, in many societies individuals and groups have become alienated from each other and may not even share the same basic understandings of reality. Conversation culture has become more heated and angry year by year. Thus, processing complex issues has become more difficult than ever before.

Finding shared directions for solutions is challenging when complex issues, opposing perspectives and strong feelings all come together. To solve issues in a peaceful and creative way, we need exceptional efforts to reach dialogue and the ability to act in dialogue skilfully.

Today's biggest issues cannot be solved by any one person. Climate change, biodiversity loss, population growth, poverty, refugee crises, terrorism, rearmament, tax havens and

fake news are such complex issues that solving them requires the creative combination of different knowledge, skills and perspectives. Solutions cannot be found merely among the top of society or within the elite. The most difficult problems on our planet affect all people and communities. They must also be solved in many ways on all levels of society – from kindergartens to governments. Solutions must be developed in such a way that the understanding we gain of people and these topics flows through different facets of society and upholds continuous shared learning.

It is difficult to imagine how this kind of combination and flow of understanding might work without dialogue. To solve these issues, we must understand what they are about. We also have to understand how different groups and individuals see these issues. Ultimately, we must also identify our own role and responsibility in solving and figuring out these shared issues. We need to maximise the understanding of all three dimensions – topics, others and self – if we want to overcome the difficulties ahead of us.

In difficult times, people's *trust* for one another is tested. Rapid changes in society, instability in the world, future threats, and increased hostility between people are all factors which erode people's trust in life and each other. Now when we need to come together to solve the biggest issues humanity has ever faced, we are losing our ability to seek security and help from each other. Humanity's violent and war-filled history shows us that trust has never been overflowing. Today loss of trust may lead to the destruction of our species.

Dialogue is not a straightforward solution to the lack of trust in our societies and it is not the only way to build trust.

Dialogue does however have great potential to generate trust, as understanding and trust seem to increase together. When we better understand each other, we are also better able to trust each other. When people trust each other, they are more prone to open their experiences to others. This again increases mutual understanding. Dialogues can start positive cycles of understanding and trust.

Dialogue does not only enhance trust in *relationships between individuals*. An increase of dialogue in communities also generates *generalised trust*: despite our disagreements and tensions, we also have ways to solve difficult issues. This type of generalised trust is what our societies lack at the moment. Many have completely lost faith in the democratic system and its ability to get society through serious crises. Several groups of people also feel that their concerns are not heard in decision-making. This leads to political apathy and, increasingly, to a search for violent or authoritarian solutions.

Though dialogue can be considered to be at the core of democracy, in reality dialogical practices have not yet taken a significant role in democratic societies. I believe this is due to the *radical nature* of dialogue. Treating all participants as equally as possible and respecting their freedoms at a maximal level is not always easy in practice. It also threatens many established power structures.

Maximising equality and freedom can never be perfectly attainted, but even working towards this can have positive effects. If a person participating in a dialogue has the experience of being treated equally to others and their views having significance to others, it is likely that this will increase their trust in others and in their community's means of solving and processing matters together.

Currently only few people have the opportunity to engage in dialogical conversations and develop their dialogue skills. What dialogue is and how it differs from other types of conversation is not yet general knowledge. Therefore, it is difficult to evaluate how different communities and all of society would function if dialogue were a basic skill of all citizens and if it were used – alongside debate and negotiation – broadly in all areas of life. The dialogical revolution is yet to come.

Creativity: appropriate play

To conclude this section on the features of dialogue, I want to emphasise one more crucial aspect. In addition to understanding and trust, dialogue can generate novel *creativity* when the conversation contains *play*. I do not mean that dialogues should be fun (though they can be) or that dialogue requires some kind of playful methods to succeed (though these types of methods can be very useful in certain situations). By play I mean that we want to create a free and equal setting for *experimenting together.* In this case, play is a particular state of mind of the participants in the conversation that guides their actions in the dialogue.

The philosopher Roger Caillois defined six central characteristics of play which also depict the playful dimensions of dialogue. These are 1) freedom, 2) a separate time and space, 3) uncertainty, 4) unproductivity, in the sense that play is not motivated by trying to create something useful, 5) being governed by rules, and 6) imagination, meaning

the possibility to move outside the immediate realities of life.

Based on Caillois' views, we can say that dialogical conversation is always fundamentally *voluntary for all participants*. Successful dialogue usually requires a *separate time* and *place*. We cannot know beforehand how the conversation will progress and what may arise, meaning that dialogue requires *giving in to uncertainty*. Dialogue *freezes* if there are predetermined *demands for results*. Dialogue is not, however, an arbitrary conversation but is directed by certain *rules* decided on together, aimed at creating *equality* in the conversation setting and maintaining the direction towards *shared learning*. Dialogue's maximal freedom comes forth when the participants can *experiment and explore* any train of thought or imagination related to the topic – these can also overcome existing realities through imagination.

Elements of play may arise in dialogue unintentionally. It may not require any more than one participant to begin to think about different possibilities for others to go along with this experimental play. Then those within the conversation can participate in shared imaginings of "could it also be like this…".

JOHN: *I have been thinking about what would happen if we looked for a new space for our association somewhere outside the city centre.*

MORGAN: *Wouldn't that mean saving some money? We could use that money for more space for our members. We could finally get some comfy couches.*

OLIVE: *Then we could maybe also get new members to join our activities. What area of town could we move to?*

Many adults feel that play is awkward and inappropriate – this says something about our society. When we look at children, we find it obvious that play is a natural way for humans to explore the world, develop thinking and other skills. However, at some point in becoming adults most of us lose fundamental parts of our ability to play. We no longer know how to apply this creative attitude to the world and to different situations.

The consequences are devastating. We try to solve difficult issues in rigid and unimaginative ways. This leads to losses in intellectual vitality, feelings become dulled and imagination circles around the same old tracks. Not appreciating play delivers a death blow to creativity.

We should note that play has a central role in two of the most demanding activities which require creativity: art and science. In a certain sense, being playful is the core of creating science or art. A painter compiles together different colours and lines in various experiments to reach their desired big picture. Science labs are like full-time play parks for adults where people try to inspect, experiment and find how substances, measuring equipment and the concepts and theories which direct them can best fit together.

In most dialogues, participants are of course not required to have the creative abilities of artists and scientists. The creativity of dialogues among work places, schools, neighbourhoods, free-time groups and political institutions is usually more mundane. It is the ability to look at a situation simultaneously from many points of view and to try new ways of seeing things together. Even in these instances, creativity requires play.

Physicists David Bohm and David Peat have described the significance of play in dialogue in their work *Science,*

Order and Creativity. They write about play especially in the context of science, but their ideas can be generalised to apply to all types of dialogical conversations:

> It is the very nature of this play that nothing is taken for granted as being absolutely unalterable, and that its outcome and conclusions cannot be known beforehand. In other words, the creative person does not strictly know what he or she is looking for. The whole activity, therefore, is not regarded as a problem that must be solved but simply as play itself. Within this play it is not taken for granted that new things must always be different or that they can never in any significant way be related to what came before. Indeed, it could be suggested that the more different things are, the greater may be the importance in seeing how they are similar, and likewise, the more similar things are, the greater may be the value in perceiving their difference.
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> *Science, Order, and Creativity*, p. 38–39

2.

Speaking from Experience

The dimensions of experience

The view of dialogue that I present is based on an approach from the philosophy of experience, which is especially influenced by the theories of John Dewey, William James and Henri Bergson. A central premise is that only by listening to the *individual experiences* of the participants in the conversation do we gain the greater understanding and learning towards which dialogue aims. Why is it important to talk about experiences in dialogue? What are experiences? The answers to these questions bring us directly into the core of dialogue.

In short, we can say that experiences consists of *individuals' interactions with their environment*. We experience something all the time, and experiences leave their mark on us.

Let us look at this through an everyday example. When I wake up in the morning, I feel tired. Because of this the rainy

In the second part of this book, I will discuss the facilitation of dialogical conversations. Many dialogues benefit from a facilitator. The facilitator's role is to ensure that the core elements of dialogue are actualised, meaning that the conversation is directed at increasing understanding and the participants are in as equal a setting as possible. Being a dialogue facilitator is at its best interesting, rewarding and fun. In some situations it can also be distressing and frustrating. In the same way that we can develop as dialogic conversationalists, we can also develop our skills in facilitating dialogue. First, we will approach the role of facilitator from the perspective of the responsible use of power and group facilitation skills. Then we will discuss the frameworks for dialogical conversations (participants, topic, time, and space) and its stages (planning, preparation, attuning, deepening, and concluding). Finally, I have gathered some facilitation methods which have proven to be beneficial in practice and which help the facilitator to use dialogical questions, pay attention to quiet participants, limit speech if necessary, handle emotions and conflicts, and increase the playfulness of dialogue.

8.

Facilitation Acts

Dialogical Questions

Some of the most important tools for a facilitator are questions which promote the dialogue. With questions, the facilitator starts the dialogue, opens up new directions, and concludes the conversation. Well-formed questions help the participants to engage in the dialogue in a way that is mutually supportive, which helps them to process even difficult topics that arise and to gain deeper understanding together. Poor questions in turn may fall flat, make the participants close up, or bring the conversation to a head. So, it's important for the facilitator to develop their question skills.

There is no clear definition for which types of questions best promote dialogue, but there are some general guidelines which help to prompt questions that are effective for most situations. The questions the facilitator asks should be *genuine*. They should arise from authentic interest and a want to understand the topic and the participants better. The facilitator

should steer away from rhetorical questions and giving advice, or judgements disguised as questions, which are not actual questions but rather ways of presenting one's own views in the form of a question. It is better for the facilitator to introduce their own views directly and not hide them as questions.

Open questions usually promote dialogue. An open question is one that cannot be answered simply with a "yes" or a "no". Such an example being: "What do you think of young people's opportunities for free time activities in this municipality?" Put as a closed question, this would be: "Should there be more hobbies for young people here?" Open questions give the participants the opportunity to choose which direction to take the conversation.

The facilitator will often need to ask the participants to say *more or elaborate on their own experiences.* It may be especially helpful to ask about those dimensions of experience which have not yet been discussed. Then you can ask: "You said a lot about what you were thinking in that surprising situation. What emotions were going through you in that moment?"

The *guidelines for dialogue* (chapter 3) described in this book offer a lot of material for dialogical questions. Questions do not always have to be questions in the grammatical sense. The facilitator can also merely encourage participants to speak about a certain topic or point of view. Here is a list of some possible questions and advice which the facilitator can use to take the dialogue forward in accordance with the guidelines:

LISTENING

"Tell me more"
"Tell me more about xx."

JOINING OTHERS

"How is what you said now connected to what others said earlier?"
"Who would like to continue from here with their own experiences?"

ASKING AND ADDRESSING

"What has been going on in your minds as you have listened to the conversation thus far?"
"What do you want to ask the others at this point?"

COMMON LANGUAGE

"What do you mean when you talk about xx?"
"Is it clear to everyone what is meant when we talk about xx?"

EXPLORING DIFFERENCES AND TENSIONS

"I notice that you disagree on this matter. Could you both tell me more about why you see things like this?"

SEARCHING FOR THE HIDDEN

"Is there something we haven't brought up yet?"
"Do any of you who have not spoken for a while have *something* to add to the conversation?"

EXAMINING CONNECTIONS AND THE BIGGER PICTURE

"What do we agree on? Where are the differences?"
"How do these things which have come up in the dialogue connect to each other?"
"What new things do we understand now?"

Especially when the facilitator asks about difficult or sensitive matters, they should support their question by saying something about why it came to their mind. By opening up their own experience behind the question, the facilitator takes their place as an equal amongst the participants. They show themselves to be one experiencing being among others in an effort to improve their understanding and learn new things.

PATRICK *(facilitator): Carla, you mentioned that getting cancer also gave way to feelings of shame and guilt. I think it would be good to hear more about this, if you feel like you want to tell us. I am asking because understanding these sort of emotions is important for us as we try to develop our ward's care practices.*

CARLA: *I could try to say something. I might not be able to without a few tears…*

PATRICK: *That's perfectly fine. Say as much or as little as you want to.*

The facilitator should pay attention to how the participants react to the questions and how the questions seem to affect the conversation. In this way the facilitator can learn about the consequences of their facilitation acts during the dialogue and improve as a facilitator. Sometimes the facilitator's questions can be so vague or complex that the participants do not know how to answer them or end up talking about something completely different and off topic. If the facilitator notices that their question creates confusion or even offence to the participants, this can be addressed directly and openly. A skilled dialogue facilitator also knows how to

use questions about questions, such as: "Do you think this is a reasonable and understandable question?", "What sort of question should we continue with?"

Noticing the silent

The participants in a dialogue differ in their levels activity. The facilitator's task is to make sure that the quiet and shy participants also have the opportunity to express themselves in the conversation if they wish. A participant's silence or restraint does not automatically mean that they are not an active participant in the conversation. One can participate in a dialogue by listening intently. It is, however, important for the facilitator to offer space to those who do not speak as much as others. By regarding these quieter participants, we maintain the equal setting of the dialogue and also promote increased understanding for all participants. The foundation of dialogue is the notion that all people have a unique view of the world, and everyone can have important aspects to add to increase shared understanding.

The facilitator should state at the beginning of the dialogue that they will also pay attention to those who are not as talkative as others. This can also mean that the facilitator can "even-out turns" and give priority to those who have not yet been able to speak. In this case it is important to justify that paying attention to the quieter participants and giving everyone a turn is primarily based on maintaining the equality of the dialogue.

THELMA *(facilitator): I want to say something about the way in which I will be facilitating this dialogue. I will try to give enough space to everyone to have a say. This means that if necessary I will be giving more space in the conversation to those who have not talked much at that point. I do this because I try to ensure that all participants are equal.*

If the facilitator suspects that some participants may be nervous about speaking, they can give the quiet participants some time to prepare for their own turn. "Now we have heard from some of you. Soon I will ask those of you who have not yet spoken to say something about what's on your mind."

If the group is big or the atmosphere is tense, the facilitator can ask the participants to discuss in pairs or in small groups for a moment. After this the facilitator can ask those who have not yet spoken much during the dialogue to speak.

Limiting speech

In many conversations there are participants who speak often and for long periods. These people may take up a lot of space in a dialogue and some of them may even forcefully try to affect what is discussed. The facilitator's task is to help these participants find their place in the dialogue. The facilitator must also try to make sure that these participants do not take up too much space from others or independently define the contents of the conversation. Some participants can be very dominating and they may even challenge the facilitator's role as the leader of the conversation and as a

user of power. Working with these people is one of the most challenging tasks of a facilitator.

At the beginning of the dialogue, the facilitator should reserve themselves the right to *limit the number of contributions* and also *limit their length*. This right to limit speech can once again be justified by ensuring equality in the dialogue. There needs to be sufficient space for all participants in the conversation. If some people take up a lot of space, the facilitator can redistribute space in turn to others in the name of equality.

Usually it becomes clear quite quickly if there is a participant in the dialogue who speaks a lot and uses a lot of turns to speak. The facilitator should act on such a setting as soon as possible. The facilitator can politely ask such a participant to condense their contributions and may also refuse a new turn from them if necessary.

ELLEN *(facilitator): Joanne, I will not give you a new turn right now. First we will listen to what others have to say. Keep in mind what you wanted to say and we can return to it when we have listened to others first.*

The contributions of those who speak a lot can also be limited by using dialogue facilitation techniques (see chapter 7, Planning and preparing). Structuring dialogue with discussions in pairs, chains, or the aquarium automatically evens out contributions and also often limits their length. In this way dialogue can offer opportunities for participation from those who speak less.

Participants who take up a lot of space and talk a lot can awaken uncomfortable emotions in many of us – feelings

such as annoyance, anger, and embarrassment. If the facilitator has these kinds of emotions, they should keep in mind the ethical foundations of dialogue and remember their role. The facilitator's task is not to teach anyone to behave better, but to help *all participants* develop their dialogue skills and to act in the way that dialogue requires them to. Many people who speak a lot often seem very confident and may act condescendingly towards other participants. If possible, the facilitator should help these people increase their self-awareness in dialogue. No one can be forced to do this, and there is no reason to do this through "teaching" or "humiliating" ways. Instead, one should trust that the dialogical situation in itself offers opportunities to people who easily tend to dominate the conversation to observe their own actions and their impacts and to learn from them during the dialogue.

Working with emotions

The most significant and sometimes most challenging situations in a dialogue are those where the participants experience strong emotions. Because dialogue strives for broad understanding through rich experiential discourse, emotions are naturally part of the conversation. Emotions are always present in dialogue, but strong bursts of emotion are rare. Working with such powerful emotions requires deliberation and delicacy from the facilitator.

Emotions show how the person feeling them *interprets* the situation in which the emotions arise. The facilitator should

keep in mind that emotions are always connected – either directly or indirectly – to things which the individual considers valuable. Emotions also thus constitute *information about values* and are connected to matters which an individual considers important in their own life. A powerful emotion arising in dialogue (be it joy, sadness, anger, or anxiety) is a sign that the conversation is dealing with something that is very important to the person who is feeling these strong emotions. Thus, it is usually useful for the facilitator to show that they have noticed both the emotion and the significance of the matter.

MATTEO *(facilitator): It seems to me, Uda, that the decision we made in last week's meeting has angered you.*
UDA: *I haven't slept properly ever since.*
MATTEO: *Ok, it's good that you brought it up. Let's talk about this some more and then listen to how it looks to the rest of you.*

A sudden emotional reaction during a dialogue can upset the other participants, but the emotional outburst may also come as a surprise to the person experiencing it. In these situations the facilitator can help this person to analyse what in the situation caused this emotion and what it conveys about their values. Dialogue offers an excellent opportunity for the participants to become more aware of the different dimensions of their own emotional experiences and the layers which have hitherto been unconscious. In their own speech, the facilitator can emphasise the opportunity which dialogue offers to understand the background of one's own and others' emotional experiences. This also enables a better understand of the information contained

in these emotions. In particular, the different parties in a conflict will need help and encouragement to dare to talk about difficult emotions, but they will also need support to restrain themselves from acting in a way that is overly guided by their emotional responses.

It is important that strong emotions do not start to completely define what can be discussed in the dialogue. After addressing strong emotions, the facilitator should ask what the other participants have in mind. The facilitator should stress that everyone can raise thoughts and feelings which are different to those that have just been discussed. In this way, dialogue can maintain its freedom, which is built on the freedom of expression of all participants and the freedom of the conversation to move in even surprising directions.

ERICA *(facilitator): We have now heard from Matt about how he found our team's last season difficult. How about the rest of you? Apparently, many others have also struggled, but we can of course also talk about different experiences from last season.*
ERIC: *I've got to say that last season was one of my best. I have developed a lot as a player and have been really excited about that.*

Disagreements

The facilitator's skill is tested when emotional disagreements arise in the dialogue. There are moments when a dialogical conversation can reach a dead end. In these situations, the facilitator should remember two things: dialogue does not need to solve anything, and the progress of the conversation

is the responsibility of all the participants. Disagreements are a valuable part of dialogue and often they open a path to deep shared learning.

If the facilitator knows beforehand that the topic of the conversation will easily bring up disagreements between the participants, they should be prepared in advance and think about how to address the tensions between participants. In such a case, it is good to state at the beginning of the conversation that disagreements may arise in the dialogue. At the same time, the facilitator can remind the participants that the dialogue is not meant to solve anything specific, but is intended to increase understanding of the topic at hand, of others, and oneself. The facilitator can also explain how they will act when the disagreements begin to show. When they arise, the facilitator can emphasise the importance of *calm listening, respecting others* and *shared learning*.

AMIR *(facilitator): If it looks like you strongly disagree on this matter, I will do as follows: I will make sure that everyone can speak in peace during their turn and I will ask everyone to listen without interrupting others. I hope that you will speak directly, but respectfully and properly to each other even though you disagree. During this dialogue we do not need to solve who is right and who is wrong. We are here to learn. That is how we try to understand the conflicts between people and the experiences which affect them.*

Sometimes disagreements suddenly burst forth during the dialogue. In such a case, the facilitator should pause the conversation for a moment and verbalise their observations. "Let's pause here for a moment. I can see that there is some

sort of disagreement between you." Verbalising usually helps the participants see that the dynamic of the dialogue is changing, and this can make it easier for those participants who are not a part of the disagreement.

When a disagreement has been acknowledged, we can discuss whether the participants are willing to analyse the situation and if they want to explore these matters to gain a better understanding of the causes of the disagreement and its nature. If the participants are willing, then the whole group can take a moment to explore the disagreement (see chapter 3, *Exploring differences and tensions*). The facilitator's role is to help the differing parties explain their own experiences and those views which affect the disagreement. This process can be concluded by asking the participants whether or not the dialogue has improved their understanding of the disagreement. It may again be necessary to remind everyone that the goal is not to reach a solution but to learn together. Sometimes the solution can be found in the dialogue on its own – often because this is not the deliberate goal!

If the participants' mutual tensions grow strongly and the disagreement is in danger of becoming a quarrel, the facilitator should quickly intervene. Dialogue should function so that even the most difficult matters can be addressed in a way that does not exacerbate the participants' emotions to the point that they are unable to listen to one other and thereby unable to increase their understanding. If a quarrel arises, one option is to propose a short break from the dialogue. The facilitator can also instruct the participants to write down their thoughts on paper and speak for a moment in pairs. After this the facilitator can ask the participants to share their thoughts with everyone once the atmosphere has calmed down.

Dialogue can also reach a point that feels like a dead end, and the participants are simply unable to continue the dialogue for some reason. Emotions are running high and things just seem to have become too messy. In these situations, the facilitator can suggest ending the dialogue. At the end of the conversation we can, however, still gather our thoughts on the situation, and assess if, for example, we have at least achieved a greater understanding of why the topic has been so difficult to discuss. We might also think about whether it would be sensible to continue the dialogue at a later stage and with what group. It is important to keep in mind that dialogue is not always the best method to deal with conflict situations. The understanding generated in dialogue can, however, help us to see what other methods may help us to move forward.

Play

The facilitator can promote the use of the playful potential of dialogue. This often requires encouraging the participants to move into the realm of play, guiding them to adopt a playful frame of mind and helping them to maintain the playfulness as the dialogue moves in new directions. The example set by the facilitator is crucial. They often need to act as the "main player" and use their own imagination and wit to push play forward in the dialogue.

Elements of play usually show up in dialogue in one of two ways: they are either decided upon together or the dialogue begins spontaneously to show playful characteristics. Agreed playfulness is usually needed when dealing with issues that

are difficult to understand or when trying to outline different options. Whether it is a school class trying to plan an autumn outing or a work community thinking about moving to new premises, play is just as much needed. Play is also required when professionals from different fields gather together to solve challenging issues, related for instance to ecological crises, financial instability, or tensions between different groups. Play helps participants to distance themselves from the surrounding circumstances and habitual ways of thinking and to inspect the topic of the dialogue from novel points of view.

ETHEL *(facilitator): I suggest that soon we will explore together two imagined futures. In the first future we take a significant loan and in the second we implement strict savings. Let's begin with the first. To begin, we won't limit ourselves to any precise numbers and let's just start off with what would be possible if we took out a big loan. Who will start by sharing where their own thoughts and imagination lead with that future in mind?*

The facilitator's most important task in play is to make sure that the conversation stays true to play's natural *freedom* and *consistency*. These two main characteristics of play are in a state of tension with each other. Full freedom would not care for the restraints of consistency, yet extreme consistency would destroy freedom. The facilitator must thus find a balance between freedom and consistency to simultaneously maximise both. The facilitator must encourage the participants in the dialogue to freely follow the prompts that come to their minds (usually thoughts, emotions, and images), but they must also make sure that there is sufficient consistency in the conversation. In practice this can be arranged

by agreeing on the baselines which can define the direction of the conversation and by helping the participants with their own creative contribution to the development of the agreed-upon baselines.

ETHEL: *Sam, you briefly mentioned that more money would also help us better prepare for future changes. Could you say more about this?*

SAM: *I haven't thought about it much. I just thought that loaned money could also be used for something else than just securing our current operations.*

ETHEL: *If you try and follow your imagination for a bit, could you tell us what we might use extra money for?*

SAM: *Well, I have some crazy ideas. Like maybe we could all go together somewhere once a year, for a week to some remote place and use that time in peace to develop new ideas for the future.*

NICKY: *We don't have any time for something like that now. We could ask an important partner to come with us to a remote event like that. Even for just a couple of hours. To think of some ideas together.*

ETHEL: *Does anyone have any other thoughts about this?*

OLEG: *I think we could always go to different kind of locations. Sometimes we could be in a forest and sometimes in a busy city. It would be interesting to see how different physical locations would affect our group and what we talked about.*

Playing in dialogue is fundamentally *experimenting together* (see chapter 4). The participants in the conversation try to figure out, with the help of their imagination and inferences, what might follow from certain conditions which have been set together. Play in dialogue also embodies the most

important values of dialogue: freedom and equality. Each participant can take the experiment further in the direction of their choosing. The nature of play also includes the opportunity for each participant to suggest new directions and ask others to take the path that they have opened.

The experimental nature of play can unlock many locked-in situations, both in the way things are perceived and in the relationships between participants. At its best play increases people's mutual understanding and trust almost without us even noticing.

The most important results of play are the *ideas* it generates. Because play moves freely between many different options, it enables experimenting with new combinations. In our regular lives we often keep the different areas of our experiences strictly separate. Work and hobbies, our professional role and our private lives, childhood and adulthood, scientific facts and the aesthetic values of art are just some examples of divisions which are often overcome in playful dialogue. When the experiences of different individuals can flow freely and be combined in a variety of ways with the free flow of others' experiences, an endlessly rich supply can be found in dialogue which can be utilised by all the participants.

The fruits of play in dialogue are not necessarily reaped during the conversation. Often, the ability to play revived in dialogue continues to work in the minds of the participants even after the dialogue has ended. Play continues in people's internal dialogue, which is enriched by the views of their "playmates". Sometimes it is that internal play of thoughts which brings the most creative of epiphanies.

It may be that it is our ability to play that proves to be our most important resource in facing and resolving the crises

that threaten our lives. More than any other activity, play helps us to work together as equal and free individuals. Engaging in play together makes our abilities blossom – sharpening our intellect, sensitising our emotions, and stimulating our imagination. It makes us powerful in creativity but keeps us human.

The Facilitator's Checklist

SPEAKING FROM EXPERIENCE

- Encourage participants to talk about a wide range of their own experiences: perceptions, thoughts, emotions, memories, and images.
- Pay attention to the things that are at the focus of participants' experiences. Also, try to listen for things that emerge from the fringe.
- If necessary, act as a role model and share your own experiences related to the topic of the dialogue.
- Guide the participants also to talk about the experiences that are emerging in the here and now.
- Encourage participants to bring out their own inner dialogue. If appropriate, share your own inner dialogue that took place during the discussion.