Human Inquiry
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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

# Dialogue as inquiry and intervention

Rajesh Tandon
*Public Enterprises Centre for Continuing Education, New Delhi, India*

The notion of inquiry as intervention in social systems has emerged only recently in the respectable academic circles. Action research has been the forerunner of such an approach to integrate inquiry and intervention (Lewin, 1947b). However, there is beginning to emerge some consensus among the action researchers (L. D. Brown, 1972) and participatory researchers (Hall, 1975; Tandon, 1979) that inquiry can be conceptualized and practised as an intervention process. Some illustrations of such a perspective have also appeared in recent years (Brown and Tandon, 1978). Dialogue as inquiry and intervention was first described by Freire (1970) and it has since been used by Freire himself and his colleagues. Dialogue presents a potent method of integrating inquiry and intervention, and it can contribute to the intermingled processes of knowing and changing.

This chapter presents a case from the two-year field work by the author where dialogue was used as inquiry and intervention simultaneously. Small and marginal farmers in a region of Western India were the participants in this effort. The next section presents an account of this inquiry.

## Inquiry with Marginal Farmers

### *Pre-encounter*

A non-governmental voluntary agency operated in an area that is primarily agricultural and economically backward. The bulk of the population is tribal

and owns small (less than ten acres) plots of land. Less than 2 per cent of the cultivated land is irrigated. Of the 230 villages in the area, only two have electricity. Since the area is hilly, only small (less than one acre) plots of land are available for cultivation. As of 1971, only about 14 per cent of the population was literate.

The agency started a programme for poor, marginal farmers in 1975. The agency identified one poor farmer each from 25 contiguous villages to act as 'peer group leaders' in their villages. These farmers were given training in techniques of modern agriculture, cooperative societies, and rural engineering. These peer group leaders were then asked to disseminate this new information and ideas among their peers in their villages. The peer group leaders were young, literate, and cultivated small (less than five acres) plots of land.

The peer group leaders were asked to organize their peers in the villages not only to disseminate the newly acquired knowledge but also to act as instruments of socio-economic and political change in the villages. The field staff of the agency maintained regular contact with the peer group leaders and organized their monthly meetings. Every peer group leader was asked to maintain a journal of his daily peer group activities and these were periodically checked by the agency staff.

Two years after the start of the programme, the author was approached by the agency to assist them in further strengthening the peer groups. The agency staff felt that despite their training efforts, peer groups were still not organized enough to take initiatives in their common interests. The author agreed to involve himself with these peer group leaders with a view to understanding the dynamics of rural situations in India and developing insights into the processes of rural change. He agreed to enter into a dialogue with these 25 peer group leaders during one of their next monthly meetings.

During the initial discussions with the agency staff, it became clear that the training provided by the agency had essentially been a cognitive input. Most of the knowledge and ideas had flowed from the agency staff to the peer group leaders. The latter had been passive recipients of these inputs. The author decided to join the next regular monthly meeting which would be a three-day event. It was felt that attempt could be made to engage in collaborative exploration of the peer group leaders' situation with a view to identifying what could possibly be done.

*First Encounter*

The meeting was organized in a village where the peer group leaders, some agency staff, and the author lived together and shared the responsibilities for preparing food and managing other living arrangements. After the initial introductions, the author clarified his role in the meeting. He emphasized that

his main motivation to join them was to enter into a dialogue with them about their situation and its implications. The dialogue was carried out in several sequences during the three-day period. An illustration of the dialogue is presented here.

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|---|---|
| Author: | Why have you become peer group leaders? |
| Participant: | (After a five-minute silence). Because we want to improve our villages. |
| Author: | Why do you want to improve your villages? |
| Participant: | (The same one). Because villagers are poor; they do not have enough to eat. |
| Author: | Are all villagers poor? |
| Participant: | (Some soft murmur followed by a tentative response from another participant). No. Except for one or two families, all others are poor. |
| Author: | Are you among those poor? |
| Participants: | (Many spoke together). Yes. |
| Author: | Why are you poor?<br>(This question led to a long silence. They looked at each other; a few talked among themselves very softly. The author repeated the question). |
| Participant: | (This person was asked by several of them to answer the question). We are poor because we are illiterate, ignorant, weak and lazy. |
| Author: | Do those who are not poor make you poor? Do you have any experiences of this?<br>(This led to a somewhat more active discussion among a few peer group leaders and several examples of personal experiences were shared. The ensuing discussion led to some tentative conclusions about what could be done. One of them was to get organized in order to have collective influence.) |

Towards the end of the meeting, each peer group leader identified three village problems that they wanted to act upon after the meeting. The author and the agency staff assisted them in planning how to solve those problems. It was agreed that the author and agency staff visit them in their villages. They also suggested that the author attend their next monthly meeting which could also be of three days duration.

The author, acting on his research interests, had designed a research questionnaire in consultation with agency staff. This questionnaire was intended to assess the level of awareness and information base of peer group leaders, their perceived level of influence upon other villagers as well as the various government and public functionaries external to the village. Several

demographic items were also included in it. It should be emphasized here that this questionnaire was based on traditional research assumptions, specifically relating to the nature of the phenomena and the methods of data-collection most appropriate for the same. The peer group leaders were requested to fill these questionnaires before, immediately after, and six weeks after the first meeting in which the author was involved. Again, the author was acting upon the research design learnt in the traditional research paradigm.

The first meeting left several discomforting elements. The meeting was a rather low-key event and many participants had maintained complete silence. In their conversations with agency staff, several peer group leaders mentioned their discomfort from the meeting. They had expected some tangible benefit from the author's presence, in the form of new subsidies or projects. They also had initial reservations about the author, being an urban stranger. They mentioned their reluctance to be frank in his presence.

The author himself felt fairly uncomfortable in that situation. The following excerpt from his personal notes gives a glimpse of the 'culture shock' that he experienced:

> It was during this visit that I experienced the sharp contrasts from the urban life that I was used to. It was summer then, and I was profusely sweating, only to realize that there was no electricity here. In the evening, it was suggested that we all take a bath. I was glad to hear that. When we reached the river, I started having second thoughts about taking a dip in that river. The water was dirty, but the whole village was bathing and washing clothes there. As if that was not enough, a herd of cattle walked into the river to cool themselves. The next morning, I realized that toilet facilities were an urban phenomenon and I had the option to use the open pastures anywhere. One after another, the rural context was devoid of things and facilities that I had taken for granted before. It was a disorienting and discomforting experience.

*Second Encounter*

The second meeting turned out to be a much more lively and exciting event. The primary focus of the meeting was to share and analyse the experiences of peer group leaders in acting on the problems they had identified in the previous meeting. The participants described in detail the methods adopting in solving those problems, the hurdles encountered from within the village as well as from utside, and the outcomes achieved. Most participants, along with the author and other agency staff, actively engaged in diagnosing the nature of difficulties encountered in, and possible remedies for taking collective actions

in, the villages. To illustrate, the presentation made by one peer group leader, Babulal, is quoted below:

> When I went back from here last month, I decided to improve the attendance in primary school. About 30 children in the village do not go to school at all. I suggested this to other villagers who generally expressed their inability to spare children to go to school. These children were assisting the family in obtaining bread twice-a-day. Then I went to the primary school teacher and requested him to create some new and interesting opportunities for these children so that they can have a brighter future. The teacher expressed his anger against the villagers, calling them 'dumb'. You know, we are operating in a situation where the villagers as well as the society continue to make us poorer and weaker. I would like to take this up as a challenge for my peer group. We will increase the enrollment in the school within a month.

Towards the end of the meeting, the author presented some of his concepts about problem-solving and strategies for collective action. His sharing of ideas and experiences was better understood by the participants then. It appears that the author, as well as the participants, had begun to feel comfortable with each other. Interactions between them became easier and greater reciprocity was visible. As the author became more comfortable in that situation, the participants were able to share their hopes and fears more freely. As the participants felt more comfortable with the author, he was able to present his ideas more easily. It was clear that the second meeting had been a more effective dialogue between the author and the peer group leaders, largely because mutual trust and comfort had been established between them.

*Post-encounter*

Along with agency staff, the author met the peer group leaders in their villages after the second meeting. This follow-up was primarily aimed at supporting the peer group leaders and their peer groups in their new efforts. The author was also collecting detailed notes about the events taking place in the field in order to satisfy his research interests. The follow-up visits provided opportunities to observe the peer group leaders in their own villages and to understand the dynamics of rural situation more closely. The relationships established with these peer group leaders during those meetings helped the author to move and nose around the villages more easily. Extensive field notes were made during these follow-up visits.

The author became aware of the daily journals being maintained by the peer group leaders as a source of research data during these visits. He collected

these journals and analysed them by coding the entries in six categories: active initiatives, planned initiatives, informed initiatives, collective initiatives, initiatives that showed influence on villagers, and initiatives that showed influence on government and public functionaries. As analysis of these coded entries showed that peer group leaders had shown significantly greater initiatives in all six categories in the two quarters after the first meeting in comparison to the eight quarters before that meeting. It appeared that the dialogue during the meetings empowered the peer group leaders and their peer groups both within and outside the village.

However, an analysis of the questionnaire responses showed a different picture. There was no change in any of the dimensions of activity or influence over the three time-periods in questionnaire data were collected. Moreover, the percentage response on questionnaires decreased over time. While all the 25 peer group leaders had filled in the questionnaire in the beginning, the completed response was about 70 per cent over the second administration and about 50 per cent over the third one.

The field notes of the author were consistent with the journal entries but incongruent with the questionnaire data. The field observations clearly indicated that dialogues in the two meetings had significant impact on the peer group leaders and their peer groups. To illustrate, the following field notes were made in the case of one peer group leader, Babulal:

> Babulal and his peers organised a meeting in the village to persuade villagers to send their children to school. After two months, eighteen new children had started going to the school. Twenty farmers used new variety of seeds for the winter sowing of wheat for the first time. The peer group had approached the Development Officer with complaints against the corrupt practices of the Panchayat (village council) head. On enquiry by an officer, these charges were established and the Panchayat head was suspended. The peer group had begun discussions about electing a new leader in the forthcoming Panchayat elections. They held several meetings within the village to evolve a consensus candidate. In the forthcoming Panchayat elections, one of the peers was overwhelmingly elected as the Panchayat head. By the end of a year after the first meeting, a strong peer group of fifteen members was operating in the village.

**Implications**

The above case highlights the close connection between inquiry and intervention. It indicates that the processes of understanding and changing

were taking place simultaneously. Dialogue as the principal method led to both enhanced understanding and significant changes. Dialogue becomes the vehicle for critical consciousness and praxis (Freire, 1970). Action and reflection together can generate understanding and bring about changes. Therefore, dialogue acts as a method to integrate inquiry and intervention. Several implications follow from the notion of dialogue as inquiry and intervention. The case presented above highlights some of these implications.

(1) *Dialogue as inquiry and intervention has mutual impact.* The traditional paradigm emphasizes distinction of researcher and subjects. They are seen as two separate parties; and inquiry is the process of researcher's knowing about the subjects. In the traditional research paradigm, the process of inquiry does not entail any impact on the researcher, nor on the subjects. However, this is not so in dialogue as inquiry and intervention. Both the researcher and the subjects learn from each other; they also learn together from the very situation that they are a part of and are engaged in analysis of. The interests of both parties are mutually inclusive and supportive in dialogue.

The case presented here demonstrates this point clearly. The dialogues during the two meetings had significant impact on the peer group leaders. Their levels of initiatives increased significantly and they had acquired greater collective influence in their villages. They developed an understanding of the dynamics of their poverty and made attempts to counter it. As the field notes and journal entries showed, the behaviours of peer group leaders after the two meetings reflected the impact that dialogues had made on their lives.

Similarly, the researcher was influenced by those meetings. The author experienced discomfort in the village situation and had to unlearn his urban stereotypes. Understanding and inquiry became possible only afterwards. In dialogues with peer group leaders, he obtained insights into their lives and rural situation. In jointly analysing the actions of peer group leaders, he developed an understanding of processes of rural change. His emotional and cognitive orientations were first challenged by the situation and then modified by dialogues. His personal notes and experiences of the first meeting reflect these impacts on the author.

(2) The second implication relates to the concept of validity in research. Simply stated, validity implies an authentic representation of reality. Traditional research paradigm emphasizes an elaborate set of criteria for validity. The dialogue as a method of inquiry and intervention negates some of these criteria of validity. *The data-collection process that is most relevant to both parties determines its validity.* When the data-collection process is disjointed from the context and content of dialogues, it becomes invalid. This makes it imperative for the researcher to be inventive about his methods of data-collection. The challenge to innovate such methods of data-collection can

be met most successfully in a collaborative effort between the researcher and the subjects. The researcher alone cannot set the limits of validity in such a research process. Consensual validation that is relevant and meaningful to both parties can facilitate innovation in the data-collection process.

In the case presented here, a questionnaire based on traditional research paradigm was one source of data-collection. Clinical and anthropological data from the daily journals and field observations were also analysed. While the former source did not indicate any changes in the peer group leaders, the latter were more consistent with reality. The questionnaire data were invalid as they were not an integral part of the entire process. Questionnaires were designed and administered primarily for the purpose of finding out the impact of dialogues. That was exclusively the researcher's need. But the participants did not see any relevance of the questionnaire to their experiences before and after the meetings. As one farmer put it, 'Why do you want us to fill the questionnaire? If you want to know anything, just ask me.'

While the questionnaires appeared disjointed and disconnected from their experiences, emotions, and actions, the daily journals were quite the opposite. While the questionnaires appeared to be unnatural, arbitrary, and external intrusions in their lives, the journals were accepted as an integral and ongoing part of their role as peer group leaders. Therefore, using journal entries to understand their hopes and fears, actions, and reservations became a valid source of information. It was the collaboration of researcher's needs and farmers' interests that resulted in the use of codified journal entries for understanding. Journal entries as a source of valid data became mutually relevant.

(3) As argued earlier, such a process of inquiry has substantial impact on people and their lives. To the extent that there is impact on people, value-neutrality of the researcher is a myth. *Dialogue as inquiry and intervention thus becomes a political and ideological process.* The ideological and political implications have two primary aspects. First, the initiation of inquiry depends upon the acceptance of the researcher's value-positions by those who are his relevant 'clients'. In this case, the author's beliefs and motives were ascertained by agency staff and marginal farmers before inquiry could begin. It is important to note that verbal statements of value-positions are not enough; behavioural congruence with those values needs to be established with the 'clients'. It was not enough for the author to tell the agency staff that he was for the rural poor. They believed it only when they saw the author in action.

The second aspect relates to the political consequences of ideological positions of the researcher. When the researcher's values are in alliance with one class, antagonists to the researcher also exist in the same social situation.

Thus, the researcher has enemies too, and this may have repercussions on the inquiry — from subtle sabotage to physical injury to the researcher.

Dialogues in this case resulted in increased organization and empowerment of marginal farmers. As some peer groups became active in the politics of Panchayat elections, they challenged those in positions of power. There were also some instances of political and physical confrontations. The author had his own fears of physical assault, based on his being openly identified with the marginal farmers, especially during field visits. Similar fears related to possible adverse repercussions on his employment if political influence was used by those whose power positions were challenged by the marginal farmers. As the process proceeded further, such fears intensified. While nothing noteworthy happened in this regard, it is important to underscore the political nature of such inquiry so that enthusiastic researchers do not find themselves surprisingly caught unprepared in the midst of a major political conflict. At the same time, researchers need to be cautioned so that they do not unwittingly act to subvert their own value positions by supporting the wrong side.

(4) When the processes of knowing and changing occur simultaneously, the researchers face a dilemma. If the situation under study undergoes changes by the process of study, then what is finally studied is something different from what was originally intended. *Dialogue as inquiry and intervention presents this dilemma.* The dialogue generates both understanding and change. To that extent, it contaminates the situation it purports to study.

In this case, the rural situation obtaining in the villages of peer group leaders was altered after the meetings. As peer group leaders took more initiatives and became more empowered, the village situation underwent changes. What the researcher and the farmers then understood was the changed village situation and the dynamics of change. It was then possible to understand why the earlier village situation was the way it was.

This indicates one method of studying under-organized systems. L.D. Brown (1979) describes under-organized systems as those which are characterized by lack of regulation and formal structures, unclear purposes and poorly defined boundaries. Dialogue as inquiry and intervention may be the only possible way to study such systems. Any attempt to study under-organized systems will make them more organized. Dialogue will certainly do that; therefore, it is through the process of organizing the under-organized systems that one can understand the forces that were keeping it under-organized. Dialogue as inquiry and intervention can help in that.