

# More About Learning Conversations: Part 1

By David M Mills PhD

In order to give a sense of where I am coming from, I begin with the following excerpt from my doctoral dissertation, *Dimensions of Embodiment: Towards a Conversational Science of Human Action*. It is from an appendix entitled "A conversational Invitation to Conductive Reasoning" in which I invite the reader to replicate aspects of my research in their own experience. It includes some introduction to Learning Conversations, and also, I hope, illuminates the more-than-conceptual view I take of them.

While the descriptions in this and the following excerpt are mainly directed to the level of "personal" experience and action, and our discussion here will be at a more obviously "social" level, I hope that it will help to keep our attention on the ways that the second is grounded in the first.

I invite you to give particular attention to the three "Conversational Demonstrations" in Part 2

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## *Invitation to a Conversation About Conversations*

Oscar Wilde joked that sending a letter is a dangerous thing to do because the other person might send a letter back and then, "before you know it, you're in correspondence." In a similar way asking a question is dangerous. Some other person, or the world, or your own self, may answer it, and then before you know it, you're in conversation. This is particularly dangerous as such a conversation involves not only words, but feelings, actions and meanings, and therefore it does not stand apart from the processes of life but propels and channels them, often in surprising directions. Most of us have a habit of treating distinctions within our experience as separate things—mind and body, thought and feeling, knowledge and action. Then we struggle to get the "parts" back into relation with each other. Two and a half millennia ago, the philosopher Parmenides pointed out that when one begins with a false separation, anything can follow from it. I have observed in my own experience that when we make such a separation, we are continually getting things on the "wrong side." How then can we have a conversation about the rich multidimensionality of our experience while not losing track of its unity? Rather than looking at learning and knowing as intellectual things and movement, perception, emotions and the rest as other kinds of things, other "parts" of experience, for instance, can we have a conversation in which we take our experience as a seamless, dynamic whole in which all these aspects are constantly interwoven? Working across the mind-body "split" is not a matter of dealing with "both" (or rejecting the reality of "either") but of being explicit about our abstracting of dimensions from whole, embodied experience.

Merleau-Ponty described the kind of knowledge embodied in something like knowing how to type as "knowledge in the hands." I want to pursue the idea that, at root, all knowledge is like that, that life itself has a conversational quality in that the meaningfulness of what I actually do lies in the context of what I might have done instead and *how* I might have done it—and in what happens next.

## **What is a Conversation?**

Think of a conversation you have had, one that you would consider to be a "good example" of a conversation. What was it about that event that made it a "conversation?" What, in your recollection, were the essential features in the event that you find yourself referring to when you call it a conversation? Think of a number of

other events in which you have participated that were like that event in some way, but which you would not consider conversations. How do those events differ from the first? In other words, what was it about them that made them not-conversations? Do these differences reveal anything about what it was that was “conversational” about the conversation? Now thinking about your experience more generally, would you consider a discussion to be a conversation? Is an argument a conversation? Is a lecture? A dialogue? A debate? Whether your answer is yes or no to any of these or other candidates, the next question is, What are the relevant ways in which they are or are not *like* your prototype of a conversation? Perhaps some of these events might be parts of conversations, or vice versa?

After you have played with these a little you will be in a position to answer in a more concrete way the next question. What, fundamentally, *is* a conversation? What attributes would an event or process need to have for *you* to consider it to be “conversational?” When I play this game myself, I find that for me a conversation is basically an exchange, an exchange with a back and forth, ongoing quality. Thus for instance, a lecture would not be a conversation, though in conjunction with a tutorial session it might be part of one. A lecture with a question and answer period might be a conversation, although a rather unbalanced one. A dialogue might be a formal sort of conversation, whereas a debate might not be, if something is being presented but not exchanged. These are of course, bits of meaning drawn from *my* experience; yours may well be quite different. One of the underlying assumptions I am making throughout what follows is that meaning is always personal. It is nothing less than, as Laurie Thomas defines it, the relationship between knower and known, not merely some proposition about it, but the relationship itself. Thomas and Harri-Augstein have developed a paradigm of “conversational science” which is intended to go beyond the objectivism of a natural science paradigm and the subjectivism of a phenomenological personal science paradigm.[1] Thus when I refer later to learning or the embodiment of meaning as “conversational” what that means to *you* will be constructed in relation to such distinctions as those in your own experience which we have just conversed about. In my terms (and I hope in yours), though we are separated in time and space, we have just engaged in a bit of conversation. Strictly speaking, it will not be fully a conversation until you somehow record what you draw from these little experiments and send it to me so that it can have an effect on *my*

The fact that events can be better or worse examples of “conversations” leads to the possible conclusion that a conversation is not a thing, defined once for all, but that events may be more or less “conversational” in various ways—thus the choice of a conversational paradigm. I will be building my framework around three qualities of experience: continuity, dimensionality and conductivity. By the continuity of experience, a phrase borrowed from John Dewey, I am referring to the fact that experience is always whole, not just a unity but a dynamic unity. All of the various “aspects” or domains of experience are continuous and inseparable. All distinctions have, within the wholeness of experience, a kind of equal status. Such qualities as round or smooth or red are not more fundamental than such qualities as beautiful or frightening. What we might think of as physical qualities or cognitive or emotional qualities are not separable. There is no such thing as a purely physical, purely mental or purely emotional act or experience. The integrity of an event in your experience—what makes it, across all of its physical, emotional and cognitive dimensions, *this* experience, this conversation, for instance—is what I mean by the continuity of the experience.

By dimensionality I refer to the idea that the *meaning* of an experience can be considered as located in a personally constructed system of distinctions. Perhaps the simplest and most immediate example of such a distinction is that of directions in space. One of the things we can say about the location of an object is that it is somewhat north or south of some other object. We are thus using north vs. south to establish a dimension for locating the object. If we add east vs. west and up vs. down, we have made a “coordinate system,” that is, a system of directional distinctions that establishes a space in which we can then locate an object by saying that it is, for example, 10km north of, 5km west of, and 200m above some reference point. This sort of geometric space is a simple special case, and thus a model of the dimensional, “spatial” quality of all personal meaning. Every distinction establishes a dimension of meaning within the space of a person’s experience. If, for instance, we speak of a climate as being northerly or southerly, we are using a distinction, northerly vs. southerly, which is of a very different kind from north vs. south, but if we add to it other distinctions that might be made between climates, wet vs. dry, constant vs. volatile etc. we establish a space of what we can meaningfully say about climates. In fact, we might formally define making a distinction as recognizing “a difference within a context of similarity.” That is, I recognize a way in which something is different from some other things that are similar in some way. Thus it is both the difference and the similarity together that

define the distinction. “The way things are” is only meaningful in relation to some other way that they “might have been.” “North” has no meaning except in relation to something which is “south.”

It is not just what we can say, however, but how we meaningfully *act* in relation to a climate, or anything else, that is important to us. This is part of what I mean by the conductivity of experience. Meaning is always meaning in a context of action. To say that a mountain path is “steep” or “full of obstacles” is only meaningful in relation to my possible intention to climb it. It is not only what I “think” or even “feel” about climbing, but the very way I engage in the act of climbing, that is meaningful—that is literally “full of meaning” for me. What I am about is exploring the idea that learning is a reconstruction of meaning in all of these respects. Personal meaning is played out in action. The meaning of “conversation,” for example, is concrete in the “having” of one, that is, in the conversing.

## What is a Learning Conversation?

Asking a question, like making a painting or a dance, is a personal creative act. I once asked a question and was told in reply, “If you have to ask, you aren’t ready for the answer.” Aspiring learners are often given this answer, though seldom in such explicit form. In whatever form, such an answer most misses the mark in its failure to recognize that it is often just by asking the question that we *become* ready for the answer. Finding the next embodiment of the question, the slightly clearer expression of what we do not know, is itself our way of becoming able to grasp the answer. In large part, it *is* the process of learning.

Learning that is driven by the needs and purposes of the learner, rather than the expectations or skills of a teacher or the logical structure of the matter to be learned, can be described as self-organized learning. Within the conversational science paradigm developed at the Centre for the Study of Human Learning, Self-organized Learning is defined as “the conversational construction, reconstruction and exchange of personally significant, relevant and viable meanings with awareness and controlled purposiveness.” Simply put, a “learning conversation” is a conversation about learning in which the conversational quality of learning is explicit. Learning is always a personal matter and takes place in a context of personal meaning. It is the dimensional, constructed, quality of personal meaning that makes learning conversational. Thus the learning conversation is initially about the meaning we have constructed, as such, and if we persist in the conversation it comes to be about how we construct and reconstruct meaning. In other words, learning, defined as broadly as one wishes, is something we can learn to do better, and the way to do that is to become reflective about our learning. The learning conversation is a vehicle for carrying on that reflection and cycling the results back into our ongoing experience. Like many powerful methods, its basic structure is quite simple. It begins by producing a concrete *record* of a performance, event etc. and then *uses* that record as a lens for reflecting on our experience. Meanwhile, in the doing, it produces a personal language for carrying on the reflection. The purpose of the conversation is to clarify the distinctions that I am already making, and to elaborate my *system* of distinctions in order to allow me to engage in more richly varied or detailed interaction with my world, that is, to construct richer personal *meaning*.

[1]Harri-Augstein, S. and Thomas, L. (1991) *Learning Conversations*, Routledge, London.

[2]Kelly, G.A. (1963) *A Theory of Personality: The Psychology of Personal Constructs*, Norton, NY.