Practices of dialogue, dialogues in practice – with their problems

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Dialogue is an important concern in several research fields, including linguistics (notably with the work of French linguist Émile Benveniste; see Mosès 2001), communication studies (e.g., Anderson and Cissna 2008; Cooren 2010), cultural anthropology (Mallon 2008), human geography (Wright 2018), cognitive psychology (Wertsch 1980), sociology (Dornhof 2012), argumentation (Gilbert 2014), pragmatics (Weigand and Kecskés 2018), logic (Dutilh Novaes 2021), philosophy (Pauly 2022) and ethics (Stückelberger 2009; Létourneau, 2014), environmental governance (Létourneau 2021; see also Hallgren et al. this issue; Smithberger this issue). Across these disciplines, and within each of them, the meaning of *dialogue* varies greatly. It sometimes refers to exchanging information about the world participants in dialogue share (e.g., ten Cate 2004) or designates conversations with fellow human beings or with other, sometimes postulated, entities (for instance God; see Douyère 2012). At other times, the notion refers to the way people do things together and the interactional space where they act collectively (as in Cooren 2010).

Dialogue is also normative: the concept often assumes a proper way of interacting, without attempts to control or to appropriate the Other's words and doings (Arnett 2016; Gilbert 2014; Krippendorff 1989). It evokes an acceptance of the Other and respect for their freedom of choice (Levinas 1987; Johannesen 1971). In that sense, and following Buber (1958), dialogue emphasizes the "I-Thou" encounter between subjects (as opposed to monologue's "I-It" relationship between subject and object). When it adopts such "a particular quality of relating" (Stewart and Zediker 2000, 227), dialogue reveals differences between participants' worldviews and allows learning "about what is of fundamental importance to another" (Arnett 2015, 2). To welcome such learning, dialogue demands "openness to possibility and happenstance" (Poulos 2008, 117). This does not mean that disagreements have no place in dialogue. In the tradition inspired by Bakhtin, the agonistic and constructive dimension of dialogue take place together (Bakhtin 1981; Müller-Wood 2022), whereas many scholars have rehabilitated dissent as a required part of any attempt at mutual understanding through dialogue (Létourneau 2012; Sunstein 2005).

In connection to its openness to surprise, literature also recognizes that dialogue is creative (McNamee and Shotter 2004; Sanders 2012). Indeed, a lot takes place through dialogue: values are shared and confronted, identities are constituted and altered, relations are woven,

strategies are devised, knowledge is coproduced, errors become common, shared meaning is created and communities are built (Bourgoin, Marchessaux, and Bencherki 2018; Cooren and Sandler 2014; Koschmann 2016; Ritella and Ligorio 2016; Stam 2010; Tsoukas 2009). However, those communities, identities and other fragile outcomes of dialogue can also be weakened, damaged, threatened through that very same process (Bencherki and Sénac 2023).

While descriptive stances to dialogue have paid closer attention to what people concretely do, authors adopting a more normative outlook have tended to remain rather theoretical and have not paid as much attention to the way those normative expectations are expressed and dealt with concretely. In particular, with the notable exception of a previous special issue of *Language and Dialogue* on "When dialogue fails (and why)" (Müller-Wood 2022), researchers rarely look at the practice of dialogue itself to explain its success or failure with respect to normative expectations. In addition, to account for the creative dimension of dialogue, and to nurture its capacity to create the kinds of collectives and societies that participants strive for, we need to better understand its everyday accomplishment (Kuhn 2021; Martine and Cooren 2023).

Indeed, multiple professional publications exist that provide practical advice on conducting dialogue, whether in the classroom or in business settings (e.g., Fisher 2009; Isaacs 1999). However, while several academic disciplines have taken a "practice turn" (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, and von Savigny 2001; Simpson 2010; Taylor 1996), the study of dialogue has yet to steer towards a fuller understanding of its practical accomplishment. The few studies that have embraced such a turn have revealed that a practice perspective is not merely descriptive, but also reveals both the productivity and creativity that takes place *in* dialogue, as well as the practical and concrete consequences *of* dialogue (Schwandt 2001; Stewart and Zediker 2000). In that sense, approaching dialogue as a practice allows avoiding unnecessary distinctions and combining the descriptive, prescriptive / normative, and creative dimensions of dialogue. Looking at dialogue as it takes place within structured practices, including professional or institutional practices, reveals that dialogic exchange both affects and is affected by contextual exigencies, such as available resources, operational constraints and the plurality of goals participants pursue. Those exigencies may be more or less easy to question and to reframe in dialogue with and amongst partners expressing a myriad of possible positionalities: colleagues, subordinates, competitors, team participants, and the like (as an example, see Hallgren et al. this issue).

The articles in this special issue thus share the goal of looking at dialogue in practice, while reconciling empirical observations of its accomplishment with ongoing theoretical conversations and without losing sight of its normative aims. This means that they approach dialogue as a set of concrete, situated practices that have meaning beyond their descriptive function. They also recognize that dialogue is itself surrounded by yet other meaningful practices, for instance those related with teaching, negotiating, engaging with an audience, or any other activity in which dialogue is embedded. Two of the articles also emphasize moments when dialogue breaks down as revelatory of the otherwise taken-for-granted processes through which it normally operates (on studying breakdowns, see also Garfinkel 1967). Focusing on the conditions, the problems, the limits, but also the failures of dialogue, may indeed help develop a better set of practices *of* and *in* dialogue.

The theoretical development, as well as empirical illustrations of practices (and failures) of dialogue, that constitute this special issue all stem from work presented during the 2021 conference of the International Association for Dialogue Analysis, which took place online in November of that year. Participants to the conference shared and discussed their research with like-minded scholars with a similar interest on the study of dialogue in all its forms. As we will see in the following paragraphs, the articles selected for this special issue, following a broadly advertised call for contributions, open important theoretical and empirical conversations on contemporary issues related to practices of dialogue.

The issue begins with a theoretical paper signed by François Cooren, Frédéric Dion and Mathieu Balay who show the added value of considering the triadic nature of dialogue from an organizational communication lens. This thought-provoking paper invites considering acts of dialogue under a different perspective, at the junction of organizational studies and dialogue. The focus is here on “degrees of organizationality”: instead of keeping the currently held idea that adjacency pairs should be the norm of all readings and analyses of social interactions, the article suggests that a minimum of three steps is needed to be able to talk meaningfully of organizations as such. After a discussion of some previous work having treated the issue in the past, and with the help of short examples, they elaborate their proposal that the basic structure is triadic, in terms of initiation, reaction and closure. They then substantiate their theoretical claims though the thorough analysis of interactions that took place between street performers and passers-by, in

the case of impromptu hypnosis shows. The analysis reveals how actors co-orient themselves in their dialogue.

The next two papers begin our exploration of practices of dialogue in contemporary societal issues such as natural resources management and climate change. In her essay, Leanna Smithberger addresses the dialogical constitution of the moral universe of climate actors. Through a thorough analysis of the dialogues that took place at the 2019 conference "Science, Strategies and Solutions: Addressing Climate Change" in Tampa Bay (Florida, United States), she highlights how speakers mobilize three identity categories (scientist experts, elected policymakers, and practitioners) to position themselves, others, and the environment within a moral universe and, in turn, how these categories serve to orient as well as justify expectations and actions. Her work rightfully highlights how these identity claims are at the core of the dialogue on climate change that took place during the conference.

For their part, Lars Hallgren, Hanna Bergeå, Emily Montgomerie and Lotten Westberg are interested in moments when participants question the very frame of the conversation in which they are involved, i.e., the rules that constrain it. Their article scrutinizes data from several meetings concerning natural resources management in Sweden, and reveals how frames are questioned, how transgressions are pointed out and discussed, and how those frames are enacted, re-established, or changed through participants' talk and actions. While most often all participants act as if they accept the existing frames, the authors highlight moments when frames are repeatedly transgressed and questioned, even across several meetings, which indicates that frame negotiation is not settled once for all. This article makes an important contribution to understanding how the rules for essential societal dialogue, such as when governments and stakeholders negotiate natural resources, are made, upheld, and altered.

The next two papers deal with instances where dialogue might fail, and the practices that are enacted in these difficult conversations. They both highlight these practices in the specific context of talk shows. Through her in-depth analysis of a debate talk show on the future of Belarus, Alena Vasilyeva highlights how conflict is managed through dialogic practices. She mobilizes a communication design approach to show how actors challenge actions they find inappropriate and thus find a way to act as co-designers of the debate. The article illustrates how,

in difficult conversations, participants use various interactional resources to challenge others. Her work contributes to our understanding of the central role that identities, but also features of communication design, play in managing difficult conversations such as the one that took place in the talk show.

Through a meticulous analysis of discussions between participants to a TV debate show, including the show's host, Iveta Žákovská's article identifies some of the specific communicative practices that exacerbate conflict between the two camps. Here, dialogue seems to have been organized to produce failure as such. The article demonstrates that through violating turn-taking rules, overlapping interventions, asking loaded and repeated questions, reformulating, and many other precise practices, participants more or less wittingly impede dialogue among themselves. Žákovská powerfully relates those micro-practices with the broader issue of the erosion of dialogue in society, by drawing on the example of a debate over the legalization of same-sex marriage in the Czech Republic. As the analysis shows, such an important conversation could not take place in a respectful, dialogic format, even though the TV show's public broadcaster claims to foster democracy. Understanding why dialogue fails over crucial societal issue, thus, requires that we delve into the details of communicative practice.

Finally, in our conclusive paper, Vittoria Colla highlights the importance of dialogue in the teacher-parent relationship in the context of a child's education in Italy, a topic to which parents around the world can relate. She discusses practices for building the family-school partnership in parent-child homework dialogues. Parental involvement in close collaboration with the work of the schools, especially teachers, is obviously required. This study engages with current interactional literature on education, and uses a very precise methodology, to look at how such parental involvement takes place in an Italian context from a dialogic perspective. It analyzes how a parent, while helping her/his child to do the required homework, also gives flesh to the school-parent relationship dialogically. This process is revealed by studying several exchanges between parent and child, which give an empirical basis to the study. From this material, four different ways emerge by which dialogue takes place, one of them being by actualizing the voice of the teacher for the child. Shared values obviously play a part in prolonging and continuing the teacher's work in the home.

Our hope is that the six articles in this special issue highlight the importance of taking a practice-oriented approach to dialogue. They provide diverse examples of how dialogue is put into practice in various contexts and the challenges that arise in these practices. From street performers engaging their audience to parents helping their children with their homework, these articles demonstrate the multifaceted nature of dialogue and its problems. However, more than mere examples, the six articles also show that dialogue scholarship cannot hope to understand how its own normative expectations are actually lived up to in tangible situations, or how they fail to be upheld, without a deeper understanding of how dialogue is practiced in everyday life as people jointly shape their collective reality. Studying dialogue as practice thus reconciles its descriptive, normative, and creative dimensions.

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