

Group Voice Dialogue Facilitation Process

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Abstract

The author adapted the traditional way of presenting Voice Dialogue to allow for the active participation of a group of between 3 - 12 people in the facilitation experience. Until now the traditional way of introducing Voice Dialogue in a group setting has limited the activity to only two persons - the facilitator and the facilitated - with the entire group observing. Using this interactive approach to group work, each of the participants can become active by expressing and experiencing one or more of the energies of the sub-personalities (selves) as first embodied by the main person being facilitate. Each person in this group experience is

supported in practicing separating from those inner parts within their own personality.

Keywords

Group facilitation, Voice Dialogue facilitation, Archetypes, Group Voice Dialogue Facilitation, Aware Ego Process, Selves, Voice Dialogue in large groups.

Introduction

Drs. Hal and Sidra Stone introduced their method of working with 'inner selves' or sub-personalities in their original book, "Embracing Ourselves". In it, they describe the interaction between a skilled facilitator and a subject who is exploring his/her own inner subpersonalities (selves) through an interactive dialogue. This dialogue includes talking, observing and noting body language, the energetic field and relationship with the facilitator and environment, and silence - holding presence for the self being explored. The process continues by helping the subject develop non-judgmental awareness of the self *as only a part* of their whole potential identity. This leads to the development of what the Stones

term, an “Aware Ego Process’ (AEP), an experience that allows for greater freedom of *and from* ones’ inner selves. Subjects become more conscious and accepting of the parts they’ve been highly identified with and those that they have ‘disowned’. Developing an AEP is the overall goal of the Voice Dialogue method.

Since 1985, I’ve been first a Voice Dialogue subject, then student, then facilitator and later, teacher. I am also an author. The most common way to learn Voice Dialogue is in a group process in which one person is facilitated while others observe. A great deal of learning can be had simply from observing. Still, because it is passive, it is also common that observers lose focus and attention – occasionally someone may fall asleep during certain parts of the session. Observers sit in the background, rarely a part of the process itself unless the subject spontaneously engages with observers or the facilitator suggests that the subject or one of the selves notice the observers. Neither of those instances includes any verbal interaction; the energetic experience is typically one in which the observers hold neutral or positive regard for the self being facilitated.

Observing participants might later report their reactions to the selves they witnessed being facilitated. They would note the selves in them that had some form of positive or negative reaction to the selves that were being facilitated. Participants have reported the benefit of simply recognizing that they have a particular self, or selves dynamic in them as well, and it's helpful to observe another person do the work so that they are free to be an outside witness to the selves.

As a teacher, this process of group teaching has sometimes felt limiting since observers, generally in a passive learning mode can either:

- 1.) fall asleep or get bored,
- 2.) get inducted into a 'self' reaction with the selves they are observing,
- 3.) get into a rational or psychological analysis of the selves they've witnessed,

I've also often been in the position of demonstrating Voice Dialogue facilitation to large groups of people (10 -30) in which I am the only facilitator available and so cannot give everyone a direct experience of Voice Dialogue facilitation over the course of a week's training. Without the

facilitation experience of Voice Dialogue, learning remains intellectual rather than experiential and energetic.

I've also been briefly introduced to a variation on Voice Dialogue facilitation that was developed by Genpo Roshi, a Zen priest, which he calls "Big Mind". In his method, he leads large audiences through a process in which he serially inducts them into various, defined selves. He asks the audience to confirm that they're in the self and then to answer to questions he poses to the self he's collectively invited to be present. People in the self are invited to randomly respond to these questions. This method can indeed introduce the whole group to the energy and message of selves. However, my observation that it does not actively develop the Aware Ego Process in the individuals who are participating. Perhaps because he is a Zen Buddhist teacher, Genpo Roshi's value orientation has thus far seemed to be oriented to transpersonal energies, not the AEP.

I'm continually interested in addressing how to help the subject separate more fully from selves even as they are embracing *all* the selves as part of our humanity. How can

facilitators better support the Aware Ego Process, first by supporting the experience that these are simply selves/ aspects/ parts, without any of them being ultimately and fully 'who you are'? I realize that no one can *make* a person wake up to this. The question before me has been: how can we as Voice Dialogue facilitators create more favorable conditions within the facilitation process for the aware ego process?

With all of these limitations and questions in mind, I have developed a new way to apply Voice Dialogue within group settings. This structure allows most if not all members to actually become part of the facilitation experience while enhancing the development of the Aware Ego Process for everyone involved.

While I have been somewhat aware of the existence of other psychological methods of group work: Family constellations (Hellinger), Gestalt (Perls) and Psychodrama (Moreno), I have never studied nor directly experienced any of those approaches. To my knowledge, what I describe below is the first time this particular method has been used in Voice Dialogue facilitation.

Method

I describe below how I conduct the Group Voice Dialogue Facilitation method, which builds on the traditional form of Voice Dialogue facilitation developed by the Stones.

First, someone volunteers to be the central subject. I'll call this person "Pat". Their facilitation topic will determine the selves the group will explore together. Next I ask all the remaining group participants to closely witness exactly how the selves reveal themselves as they are being facilitated, since any one of the other group members can be called into the process to represent that self later on in the process. I ask them to take careful note of the exact words and phrases the self uses, to note the spacial position, any gestures and the overall body language. I ask them to note the sound and volume and the emotional tone (or absence) of each of the selves being facilitated. Knowing that they will be active participants in the facilitation process immediately engages their full and on-going attention.

I begin the facilitation process as usual. Because the

process will take more time, I keep the facilitation of any of the individual selves shorter. I'm more interested in knowing how this self operates, what its' core belief/feelings are, what it 'looks' like, how it feels to be itself and what its basic motivations are in terms of vulnerability. In these cases, I'm less interested in long historical narratives or painful reminiscences, preferring just one or two examples of its representation in this person's life. This allows more people the freedom to temporarily identify with the self while they're volunteering, rather than remain aloof to or play-acting the energy because they don't share the stories of the person being facilitated.

I often start the facilitation session by talking to a Protector self who keeps this person safe in life and who might have some concerns to raise about being facilitated in general, in public or in this group format. I find out what are the kinds of situations they feel most compelled to protect against and what their method of protection is. The protection is often some instinctual expression and/or psychological version of 'fight, flight, freeze, fake'. This inquiry also has the added advantage for the facilitator of clarifying what the primary selves are, if there has been any uncertainty.

When I'm done facilitating this Protector, I return the subject to their original position and I take a moment to anchor them as best we can into an Aware Ego Process. The Aware Ego Process is a fluid state in which the person is non-judgmentally aware of a particular self without being identified with it nor rejecting of it. At the same time, the person is also conscious of that self's energy and to some degree, able to adjust its intensity. Developing the capacity for an Aware Ego Process is the main goal of Voice Dialogue practice. Then, I invite someone from the group to come and take the exact position of the self we just facilitated. Let's call her Mary.

Now, I instruct the first subject, Pat, to stand next to me and simply observe as I do a brief re-facilitation of that self again through Mary, the volunteer. What part of Pat are you? What is your way of being in life? What is most important to you? As I ask these questions, Mary is replicating, to her best ability, the self she had just observed. What happens now is quite useful. Mary actually gets into the energy field of that self and feels it as both hers and the other person's (in this case, Pat's).

I might then ask the self, “Do you also live in Mary and how so?” Here, I allow this self to expound a little on how it lives in Mary; this makes it more real for Mary now. She can recognize, “Yes, I really do have that self in me as well; this is not just play-acting on behalf of Pat.” After a few minutes I thank her and instruct her to stay put, continuing to silently and physically hold the energy and position as best as she can. If need be, she can adjust her physical stance to allow her to continue. Then I ask the subject (Pat) to return to ‘the middle’ – her original position.

Whether vulnerability has been expressed or not, I ask another volunteer (Jan) to come and sit at the feet of the Protector to represent the underlying vulnerable self that the Protector guards. I use the information that the Protector shared to help clarify what kind of vulnerability this self feels as the Jan models it and I will coach this Jan into this field. My experience is that, having witnessed the Protector, this third volunteer-participant can readily move (at least to a degree) of this kind of vulnerable self. I do instruct him or her to keep it within their own comfort level of intensity. I ask yet another person (Grace) to come and stand in the position of the witness. I remind the subject (Pat), “Whether you are

conscious of this or not, your non-judgmental awareness is always there, always available, witnessing everything that happens within you.” This new volunteer, Grace, stays in this position for the duration of the facilitation. I now have 3 volunteers representing different aspects of the person I’m facilitating: Protector, a Vulnerable self and the Witness.

Next I move to identify and work with a primary self that is implicated in the dynamic that Pat is working on. I facilitate that self long enough to get its essential feel, embodiment, perspective and message. One common question I ask is, “What are you concerned would happen to this person if you weren’t there sufficiently?” This gives us a sense again, of the underlying and specific vulnerability that this primary self attends to. After completing a dialogue with this primary self, I bring the subject (Pat) back to the center and help her, as needed, to begin to separate from that primary self.

I then invite two new volunteers (Raul and Lek) to represent that system (the primary self along with its underlying vulnerable self). Once again, I’ll interview those selves via the volunteers. “What part of Pat are *you*?” “What do you do?”, etc.. The volunteers are doing their best to represent

what they have observed the selves saying and doing. If the vulnerable self hasn't been actually facilitated yet, the volunteer can usually empathically imagine the feeling state of it, and represent it energetically. Once more, Pat simply observes the energies being replayed as she sits in the middle seat. Depending on the nature of the material Pat is working on, she'll decide if she's ready to be the first to be facilitated in the vulnerable self who lies under the power of the primary self.

The group and I continue to explore whatever other selves are involved in the overall conflict or tension. We look for what is both implied and missing. I facilitate the other selves who clamor for a voice. Each time afterwards, new volunteers come in to re-enact the selves they witnessed as I do a brief re-facilitation of them. Pat, the main subject is soon surrounded by living, energetically coherent representatives of the selves that they've been living as and pushing away from. Additionally, everyone in the group is able to witness the various and very different vulnerable selves that are alive within and underlying in this psychic dynamic.

Using this method, I've had up to 11 volunteers surrounding the subject, sometimes as few as 3 (if the group is small). At the end of the overall facilitation of the main subject (Pat), I point to each one of the volunteers in the order that the facilitation happened and ask, "Who you are again and what do you want Pat to be aware of about you?" (They repeat it briefly and as energetically coherently as possible.) If necessary, I coach the volunteers to remind them of key statements that were originally made and the energetic tones that were expressed. I point to the witness, who remains silent as I remind the subject, "Pat", that there is always the capacity within her to simply pause and notice non-judgmentally, whatever occurs within.

Next, I'll ask the "Pat", "What happens for you when you see all these selves again so clearly?" "What do you know now that you didn't know before?" "Is there anything you'd like to adjust within yourself?" I encourage her to visually check in with all the selves represented as she considers her answer. If I sense that she is getting re-inducted into a self, I'll motion her to pause, and I'll point back to other selves for her to include in the AEP.

Next, I ask all the volunteers to release the self they've been holding, and walk around the room, shaking it off. Let it go! The main subject (Pat) stays in place. This is a good time for a bathroom break, and I encourage them to remain in silence. Their silence protects the container of our experience. Once everyone has returned, I instruct the volunteers to move one position clockwise, taking on a new energy. If there are more people in the room, I might ask some of them to change places with one of the volunteers so that they can also participate. It's a good idea to have the exiting volunteer come and stand also in the witness position—even if there are now several people doing so. I also give clear instructions on what it means to be in the witness position: no judgments, no opinions, no preferences, no reactions, simply seeing and being present to what is happening. They can sit or stand, depending on what helps them maintain this mindful concentration.

“Watch,” I tell Pat, the main subject. Again, going in the original order, starting with the Protector, I ask, “Who are you and what do you do? How do you take care of her?” “What does it feel like to be you?” I point to the vulnerable self underneath the Protector and say to Pat: “This is the part of

you who can feel very unsafe, fearful, who perhaps has been traumatized. Your Protector works both to keep this part safe and keep you from feeling or being conscious of this vulnerable self.” I continue around the room, very briefly interviewing each self for its key message, including and ending with the Witness space. “These are selves, parts who have felt like *your* selves, but they’re everyone’s selves. (By now, everyone in the room understands this.) What is ‘yours’ is the *story*, the biographical particulars, which is different from the sub-personality, which is archetypal and commonly shared.”

Finally, I release all the volunteers from their roles.

Depending on the time and group energy available, I’ll either conclude the training, or do this process one more time, rotating positions. In conclusion, I give the main subject, Pat, another opportunity to share what her experience of this has brought.

Afterwards, we take a break and when we return, all of the volunteers discuss their experience of having channeled the various selves. I ask them what it was like to hold the awareness of the self being both theirs and not theirs. I also

ask them to notice how relatively easy it was for them to first pick up and then let go of (separate from) the different selves. I explore with them the value of this experience by posing a question. “Was this because you thought these selves weren’t yours? You were aware of being in an energy, then you decided (with me) to let go of it. This is what we are learning to do in any given moment. This is an Aware Ego Process: awareness, energy of selves, choices. Does believing that they are not yours make it easier to let go of them? And are they yours too?” These questions usually lead to a provocative group discussion.

Observations

This Group Voice Dialogue Facilitation process allows for spontaneous adaptations, depending on the size and nature of the group. Within the Group Voice Dialogue Facilitation process, a blend of teaching and facilitation is useful, specifically around inducting people into the energies of selves and pointing out the continued possibility of the witness, if we pause in the moment and shift from judgment to simply noticing what is present. Everyone begins to benefit from the insight of how the selves exist both

archetypally (universally) and uniquely (locally) through each person's biography. This helps everyone, not just the main subject, to begin to separate from and embrace the selves worked with.

Each time I've utilized this method in a group, it has been very successful at meeting all my goals:

- The whole learning group is fully engaged during the whole facilitation
- Everyone involved has a direct experience of and separation from selves
- The AEP is more fully realized, not only for the main subject, but for all the volunteers as well.
- Participants experience the universality of selves, which makes them both more acceptable and easier to separate from.
- Participants share in the energetic embodiment of selves, learning the reality of them, not just the idea of them.
- By bringing in a unique vulnerable self who is an animating trigger for each of the power selves, participants understand better the complexity of their

psychic drama and develop a heartfelt sense of compassion for their own multi-faceted being.

- If a subject had a vulnerable self that they hadn't developed yet a strong power /protector side for, this group process helps them better induct it when a volunteer, who easily has that self, comes and represents it. I can then have the main subject, if they're ready, *follow* the volunteer who demonstrated the energy first.

Considerations

It can't be overstated that this method needs a *very* experienced and skillful facilitator to manage a group process like this. Without a sufficiently trained and experienced Voice Dialogue facilitator, this process could feel unsafe or confusing for some of the participants (the subject or a volunteer) because many energies have been brought into consciousness at once. The Group Voice Dialogue facilitator is holding and orchestrating many different energies (powerful and vulnerable) simultaneously. He/she must to be alert, grounded and mature enough in his/

her own inner work to be able to safely track and facilitate the broad range of selves that could emerge. He/she has to be competent to manage a safe-enough 'container' for all the participants. I also recommend that before using this method, the facilitator should already have sufficient familiarity with the participants to assess their ability to go into and out of the energies. The primary goals are to keep all group members safe and support their Aware Ego Process as well.

This form of group facilitation is clearly a 'marathon' session, taking typically 2.5 – 3 hours) and involving many participants. As stated above, it is sometimes necessary to take short 'bathroom' breaks at points when the main subject has returned to the aware ego position and the facilitator releases the volunteers from their roles. These breaks also can help volunteers further separate from the selves they've been representing.

Participants need to have a basic understanding of the Psychology of Selves and the Aware Ego Process before engaging in this method. That said, I have conducted these group facilitation sessions midway through week-long

foundational courses, to great advantage of everyone. This Group Voice Dialogue Facilitation process immediately applies the theory and puts it into visible practice. I first developed this method while teaching in Thailand where I had no facilitation staff to assist me. Even with some participants needing language translation, it worked well. Participants were able to clearly pick up on and represent the energies of the selves in an impactful manner for themselves and the main subject.

Conclusion

This Group Voice Dialogue Facilitation process offers a unique new way to fully engage a group within one person's facilitation experience in a way that benefits everyone. All participants in the process have the opportunity to directly experience a variety of inner selves and thus also the opportunity to witness them as selves (not 'me'), to embrace them as part of their being while also dis-identifying with them. Everyone has the opportunity to move into the experience of selves as 'a me/not me'. All participants are given the opportunity to develop their Aware Ego Process in this group method.

It has also clarified my own way of relating to selves, seeing them more from an archetypal perspective. I find that when the facilitation interview focuses too much on historical life material, subjects have more difficulty separating from the self. The primary selves can become more 'solidified' through the linear, cause and effect biographical narrative: "This is who I am because this is what happened to me in my life."

Having the focus stay more on the current expression of the self (it's feelings, ideas, energy, purpose, mannerisms) and having multiple people step into and out of that very same energy, shows clearly to all participants that these selves follow universal patterns of behavior and perceptions. This allows participants to more easily dis-identify *from* selves.

From an archetypal perspective, well revealed through the group facilitation process, participants can recognize that these archetypal selves have been in the foreground of their experience in multiple periods over the course of their lives – even to the extent that the person is habitually possessed by these energy patterns. In fact, this Group Voice Dialogue

Facilitation method can use both perspectives: linear cause and effect (biographical model) and archetypal. These selves always exist in everyone's psychic life, actually or potentially. They can become more or less apparent at various times in our lives. When they are manifested in any one person, they are colored by the particulars of that persons' life circumstances.

For example, Pat (and each of the volunteers in the group facilitation) has a boundary Protector (archetypal) but *how* it expresses in Pat or the others reflects the familial, cultural and environmental conditions that they each have lived with. This latter reflection is also a manifestation of what the Stones term 'the psychic fingerprint'. This refers to the unique fate and soul code or disposition that each person is born with. See also my article "The Psychic Fingerprint". A question for the experienced facilitator becomes, which model (archetypal or biographical) helps *this* person in *this* moment to more easily embrace/separate from selves?

This Group Voice Dialogue method of working has shown itself to be very helpful in recognizing the difference between the personal story narrative and archetypal form. Any person

can step into the field and feel the energy/form, and message of the self, first expressed by the main subject, later repeated and elaborated on by the subsequent volunteers.

I have found it helpful for subjects to differentiate between the archetype and their historical narrative. Doing so can aid in the separation from the self-as-pattern. The Group Voice Dialogue Facilitation method described above brings significantly greater awareness to *selves as pattern*, simply by seeing a number of people take on the energies and their central raison d'être, *be them* and then relinquish them. The main subject initially experiences that the volunteers are recapitulating their own facilitation of a self, but as the process is carried on through other people, everyone gradually realizes that they all have these selves. The selves are no longer experienced as so personal and unique 'to me'.

The main subject also has a greater opportunity to more objectively witness the selves when they are repeated by the other volunteers. This is deepened when s/he sees more than one volunteer take on a self for them, as the volunteers

rotate gradually through the different selves. At the same time, for the volunteers, they get to voice and feel a number of different selves, that originally seemed as if they belonged to “Pat”, but which they soon recognize as belonging to them as well, albeit with a different narrative history.

From an archetypal perspective, better revealed through this Group Voice Dialogue Facilitation process, these selves are recognized as being not ultimately the results of our biographical stories. They are humanly inherent and it is within our potential to become conscious of them. Through the Aware Ego Process, we can live more consciously through them, as a medium for our life experience.

Again, while utilizing group participants within a therapeutic session is already described in other psychological methodologies, *this* form is new to Voice Dialogue practice.

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