

A SELF-ORGANISING GROUP IN DIALOGUE

by Anthony Blake

This is a personal report on what happened at the 1994 meeting of The School of Ignorance and what it meant to me. As far as possible, in the spirit of the school, I have tried to avoid generalisations and theoretical conclusions, but I have not quite succeeded.

Twenty people, highly skilled in group processes, development programmes, transdisciplinary conferencing, political negotiation, etc. gathered at Minton House, Scotland to spend three days in dialogue together. Minton House is just next door to Findhorn but is not formally part of the well-publicised Findhorn community. Roughly half the people were new to these meetings, five of which had taken place over the last several years, at irregular intervals and with various membership. The group was fairly balanced between men and women, though men were in the majority. There was no agenda per se and no leader or 'facilitator' assigned.

It was a very international group, including German, French, Russian, Israeli, Palestinian, Canadian, USA and other nationalities. Some of them had travelled very far to attend and, for the most part, participants financed themselves. Only two of the people were 'locals', in contrast with former meetings, and the overall level of commitment was probably more substantial than before. Most of the participants knew each other through a rich context of mutual associations. I was the exception, in not having met or worked with any of the participants before.

The title of the group - The School of Ignorance - was the only, but sufficient, orientation in the context of networking and previous contacts, together with the participant list. Meeting mostly as a total ensemble in the round, from Friday night to Monday lunch-time, the people talked with each other for up to ten hours a day.

All the participants had had long and diverse experience of the usual phenomena of misunderstandings, neurotic projections, fixed ideas, wasted insights, distractions, etc. that come up in groups. Some of these surfaced during the meetings but did not overcome the way 'through meaning'. [1] The maturity of the group showed in the natural adoption of an etiquette of non-interruption and attentive listening. As we learned at the end, on previous occasions there had been single individuals who threatened neurotic sabotage; but this was entirely missing on this occasion. Attention was almost entirely on 'the work', the task in hand, that no-one could define.

We do not know, or could not say, whether anything was at work besides the interactions and dialogues of the participants. There was a certain feeling of questing for something that was an 'answer' but would not look like an answer; something that would be relevant to the problems and anguish of the world (Rwanda, Bosnia, the Gaza Strip, etc.). There was a general consensus, almost taken for granted, that very little in the way of intentional 'developmental' programmes was working. The real, chaotic complexity of the event was integral to its value - another reason for the avoidance of clear-cut conclusions.

1. Membership of the group was by invitation only, with some cross-checking between previous members. Those who were present had managed to find a way of being there (time, money, etc.). It was a highly contingent process.

2. There was hardly any breakaway activity - 'let's stop talking and do something different'. At some point, it was generally accepted that what we were doing was talking and that was what we were doing.
3. A lot was done at dinner, meeting in small numbers around a bottle, etc.
4. Everyone spontaneously changed their position in the circle from session to session and sometimes during the sessions.
5. There were some very individual contributions. For example, one person made a little shrine, struck a bowl, read poems, used the I Ching, burned incense, etc. Such contributions were not distracting.
6. The group allowed itself to go right to the edge of distraction without falling off. No-one could tell exactly what distraction was or what the 'rules' were.
7. There were specific issues brought into the spotlight such as the value/threat of Internet. But discussion of these was aligned to upping the degree of 'illumination' they afforded.
8. The reality of a spiritual dimension was generally accepted, with no-one pushing their version of it beyond a certain point.

One of the most significant emergent phenomena from this self-organising group was that of intensive dialogue between two or three, supported by the attention and facilitation spontaneously offered by the rest of the group. Between three or five - according to different perceptions of value - of these dialogues arose during the course of the meetings. It was as if the whole group was concerned with extracting, distilling, bringing into the light, an 'essence' from the exchange. It had little to do with coming to any 'agreement'. Only certain kinds of exchange were useful in this way. In these, the people felt concern, even pain, and their beliefs were brought into question; there was passion, sometimes anger, and yet a total respect for each other; there was an involvement that was total. Those in facilitation were not concerned with the usual 'process interpretation' [2] but were themselves involved in the dialogue: sometimes taking sides, or offering another side, all the time dedicated to ensuring that the intent of what was being said was recognised and clear.

Such events emerged spontaneously and no-one was credited with making them happen. Someone getting angry and passionate - for example, to say: "We've hardly done anything! We're not where it's at!" - might 'inadvertently' release a dialogue between two other people. It was unpredictable.

Significant were some expressions, attempts, to indicate the 'presence of the divine'. All were respected, but not passively. There was always a degree of challenge to any statement. One kind of challenge, for example, was to 'make it happen, now'. Another kind was to remind of the obverse, the demonic side; almost to say that one person's divine light could be the very devil. Sometimes, very careful, very precise explanations of the 'presence of the divine' went on; and questions, 'what does this mean? how does it work?'.

There was an important awareness of the lower-level issues as lower-level - the male-female split came up as an issue and had some effect, but was superseded and left behind. It was implicitly, and then explicitly, recognised that such issues were not the real meat of the situation. Going 'through meaning' implies a thread woven through the tangle of interchange. It seemed to me that a kind of story, or drama - maybe more than one - was

coming to expression, interspersed with other episodes not so strong. But, it was impossible to treat these other episodes as not-relevant. What was coming into expression was not at all like a single concept but something that could only be articulated through the uncertainties of the total interchange. It had to be done as well as thought.

One of the participants made pictorial and verbal notes, but that was his self-chosen work, permitted by the others. There was almost no regard for 'conclusions'. There was a general understanding that each of us had become 'informed' by the event so as to be more effective in what we did afterwards. [3]

It must be understood that very little theory was introduced or 'applied' during the meetings, though some ideas of 'integrative structure' (my term) were offered to the group by a few of the participants. No structural idea, method or theory was ever adopted. What seemed essential was for every member to apply themselves totally to the situation, however they might be able. Thus, one person made observations and comments consistently in precisely measured tones; another wandered the room responding to the dynamic of the moment, yet another spoke close to tears, and so on.

Self-organising systems are systems with many autonomous parts, enclosed in some way, out of the interactions of which (within the enclosure) spontaneously emerge various patterns or orders. This is an extraordinarily interesting process when the autonomous parts carry individual intentions. Then, we go beyond the bounds of physical systems into the complexities of human communication: mutually defining reality and creating new meanings. It is possible to offer some 'rules' or 'qualities' of engagement in the process of self-organising dialogue that seem to help its meaningfulness.

1. listen impartially
2. accept the 'being' of the person speaking, their integrity in their own terms
3. challenge any statement made for the sake of truth
4. obey and support the implicit requirement of enclosure for the group as a whole
5. recognise different levels of intensity, or quality, or immediacy, or meaning
6. facilitate the higher levels by whatever means: affirm, negate, mediate, enhance, refine, expand, clarify, question, stay silent as needed
7. actively put oneself into the situation as it is and risk oneself concretely in action
8. bear the pain of contradiction in oneself, encompassing as much as possible
9. do not accept any one terminology or framework to be adequate to the description of what is going on, or even any combination of them
10. do not have any specialisms of role such that anyone is fixed in a role or there are any fixed ideas about roles
11. make the dialogue as natural, individual, immediate, concrete, direct as possible
12. allow the possibility of there being an integrative mode of dynamic, conflicting, complementarity (without it having to be specified) coming from a 'group consciousness'

A question of concern to all, and one being worked at through the three days, was how to make a direction to be followed when there was no agreed finite task? The question is subtle, since it seems to call upon and yet reach beyond our various judgements of significance. One member could feel that there was no meaningful direction whatsoever or, if there were, that no movement had been made along it. Another could feel almost the contrary, that progress had been inexorable. [4] However, these very differences were themselves part of the complexity of the process. I believe it to be the case that most of us felt that we could not put the 'right direction' on one side and the 'differences' as in opposition on the other side.

Quite early on, one of the group began to argue that there could be 'the solution' (to the central problems that concern us in the group and in the world at large) coming to us and that we would not accept it. Another member took exception to any idea of a perfect answer. Similar themes entered time and again into the exploration of 'divine presence' - which someone stated as 'something infinitely better than this'. But there was never any 'agreement' or 'resolution' of these issues. Somehow, it went beyond agreeing or disagreeing.

Similarly, we knew that insights reached at one time or event were being lost at a later time and yet they were not, as if there were another kind of memory. It was true that in the start of every new session it was always somewhat like starting the group up all over again. There was never on hand any apparent dynamic memory of what had transpired in the previous session. Nevertheless, it is remarkable how much can be reconstructed of the course of events, the interchanges and so on, as a living stream of meaning.

I believe that it was felt that any attempt to 'define the process' (the desirable process) necessarily precluded this description as a guide to be followed in an explicit way. This was something more - possibly - than not wanting someone else's scheme to be imposed on oneself. We did create events of a high degree of structure, but the emergence of this structure came from the meaning of the event. To set up 'general' structures did not seem to be useful, because it would have inhibited the concreteness of the event. All of us were steeped in archetypal forms but we did not wish to choose any of them in particular. So, some of us had a strong desire for structure while inhibiting any move to put it in place. We had to work from this contradiction.

Similarly, as I said at the beginning, some of us wanted to do something of relevance to the suffering of the children in Rwanda, while remaining extremely sceptical of all our good intentions and development programmes. Yes and No at the same time.

Contradiction and concreteness, then, seem the main criteria for going in the direction of meaning. The quest for structure remains, but this is the structure that belongs to reality, not to our conceptions of it. Implicit in the experiment is the possibility of a group consciousness that is capable of seeing and acting by real structure in a way that escapes the individual mind. By saying this, I find that I have been seduced into making conclusions.

It is not even possible to say that this meeting was a 'good thing' - simply because it begs the question which was at its core. The truth is that, simply, we have to do things together, we have to meet and talk, and no general method will ever 'work'. Contingency and conflict are integral to what we can do. [5] But, in bearing contradiction in ourselves, individually, we seem to be able to make something possible, something of another order to the usual lies and confusion. This is the 'price of admission' to a mode of operation that must already be there, permeating all human dialogue, but unnoticed in conceptual thought.

In communicating with some of the participants after the event, it seems to me that the most common experience can only be described as a feeling. This may be disappointing in regard to explicating cognitive structures but does not exclude this. [6] The type of feeling we (some of us) have is, I believe, of such a nature that it is intimately allied to cognitive insight as it might arise in the moment. It is a feeling that will draw in experience and develop new meanings; and it may well serve us as a guiding companion on our various journeys into the 'unknown country' that lies ahead.

I am deeply indebted to all those who made the event happen. Thank you all.

Afterthoughts (tentative and speculative)

Any systematic analysis of the Meeting would be difficult for many reasons. In particular, it would require extensive material on the content of the discussions as well as on the various episodes of process. One of the strongest impressions I received - echoing what I have been faintly groping for over exceedingly many years - is of process and content as becoming one. This does not mean that the content was the process! Far from it. If anything, the reverse. The tendency to look at process as something in itself apart from the content is, I believe, on the whole misleading. What is being spoken of and how are really not divided at a triadic level of discourse, or the why.

We also face the subtlety of the questions: what was the world we shared in? who made it so? Forty years ago, Solomon Asch framed 'the conditions for effective dialogue' and these have hardly been bettered. They hinge on the production of a 'shared psychological field' by talking about the 'same world' and recognising the basic similarities between humans. Bohm talks about the 'informational field' of the dialogue group, which is nearer to what I want to understand.

The Meeting acquires a world primarily through what I call monalogue - not monologue - or monadic discourse. Monalogue is not just one person speaking - it is everyone speaking one at a time. This may seem a trivial point. It is not. I am struggling hard to offset the legacy of systematics in its external and 'classical-observer' form. The real monad is a collection of spirits all doing their thing. In time and space they have to speak one at a time (and some say more than others). Monalogue brings the 'people' into a compresence in which the informational field can manifest. I am supposing that this field in itself is intelligent. If, for example, we gather to pay attention together to means of solving or alleviating certain world problems, then something is attracted to us. We need not picture it as 'outside' of us - it is up to us how to picture it. But if, for example, we say that all that we will ever find is in our own brains, then we still have the question of access to this stuff! It may be that we cannot access what is really valuable if we are in isolation. It may also be true that this dialogue action, whatever it is, does provide the means of access.

When two people engage we have a dyalogue. In monalogue, nobody is really addressing another person. Everyone who speaks is representing the whole world of discourse. This ceases with dyalogue. The world is split - however it is split at that moment, in that way. Those involved are caught up in the dyad they are making. The energy level goes up, and they become a centre of attention for others in the monad. If the discourse does not simply repeat itself, a peculiar kind of creativity emerges - because the two involved have to find ever new ways of expressing their side of the polarity. This is the hardest thing to maintain. Sometimes it can be helped by others in the group. A point is reached when it is hardly possible for the participants to recognise the dyad with which they originally began.

Another thing can happen, a progression that takes us into triologue. At a certain moment in a dyalogue, someone else can intervene in a strong way - to point out the meaning emerging between them - something they cannot themselves do. It may seem inappropriate, but I am intrigued by the tradition that regards the erotic act as not fulfilled without the third. Sometimes, the third is simply the witness but, at other times, the third person takes a physical role. The very fact that there are others present heighten the dyalogue. When a third person also engages, it is a risky act. How should he speak? His is the task of pure meaning. He has to say what it means. But, as soon as he does so, the dyalogue can cease. It is very rare for the dyadic pair to continue - into another realm.

This successiveness of events is typical and sometimes makes it difficult for the participants

to grasp the wholeness of what is happening. Put simply, everything that is 'built up' has to be forgotten or put aside just in order for something new to happen.

In my own work I have defined certain 'conscious roles for triologue' and I have some of my students experimenting with them. A takes the role of asking questions, B of giving answers and C of expressing meaning. They act in the sequence A-B-C-A etc. No 'back and forth' is allowed. Some of the results are extraordinary though in a way difficult to define. Some exchanges remind me of Heidegger's 'Conversation on a Country Path' (between scholar, scientist and teacher) in *Discourse on Thinking* (although the people in question had never read Heidegger). There is, evidently, some distinctive form of mentation engendered by this method.

I have also made some tentative experiments in simply setting dialogue into motion and pointing out the bare forms of monologue, dyalogue and triologue - leaving it to the participants to notice or make use of these forms as they appear. In this respect, I think that having the forms in mind makes a difference; but it is essential that the people do not try to make them happen or spend time discussing how they should be implemented. The ideas themselves do all that is necessary. Those that I have mentioned are mere exemplars of the richness of the informational field. It may seem perverse for me to say this, but if there is one rule that should always be applied, whatever the set of ideas, it is that they should be forgotten when it comes to the Meeting itself.

Whenever such ideas are, on the contrary, brought into expression and made explicit - it will always seem that people reject, ignore, subvert and otherwise throw them away as irrelevant to their situation. That is fine! When they have been put aside, they can do some useful work. In an important sense, what happens when someone brings in a 'guiding idea', such as some conceptual structure of roles, is that this puts him or her outside of the monologue: the intrinsic immune system then gets to work to fight off the invader. It's quite different when someone says: "My God! Did you see what just happened? This is fascinating. What does it mean?"

There is here involved some fundamental question of authenticity. This is something very strong. When we agreed to participate in a group without leaders or agendas, this agreement was substantial - and it did not include being sold any system or method as we went along. This is terribly difficult to write about in cold blood, because there were variety of positions about this, and also a very deep concern with the issues. The point is that all the participants felt and sensed almost instinctively when the bonds of the primordial agreement were being broken.

If three people agree to do triologue, then that is OK, that is what they have agreed to do. It is perfectly possible for people to come to new agreements in the course of fulfilling an old. I had this within my own experience in the group when, through the helpful assistance and heart-felt counsel of another member, I saw that I had permission to speak in a certain unusual fashion. The emergence of such new agreements are extremely important. They can empower new lines of enquiry and ways of approach. Without them, these same things turn into distractions.

It gets a bit mystical when I now go on to say that triologue brings in dialogue-agents of another order. Triologue is the step beyond 'people'. People are confined to monologue and dyalogue. In triologue we get beyond asserting and denying. These may still remain, but as a role. If our Meeting came to fruition, it would realise a synergy with a greater present moment. An Idea would be generated that goes out into the world at large and exerts an influence. It has to be an Idea, since this neither asserts nor denies! That is why we may feel that nothing conclusive came out of the Meeting, or only impressions carried variously

by its participants. We spoke of the Divine Presence. There is also the bringing to birth of the Idea.

Now, I believe that an Idea is essentially triadic. That is part of the reason why I am still chary of metaphors - because they are sub-triadic. An Idea encompasses its own limitations and alternatives. Somehow! In a sense, nobody can 'do' anything with it. That is its significance. It is both extensive and intensive, etc.

These descriptions are derived from a symbol known as the enneagram, a nine-fold structure depicting transformative processes in three 'dimensions'. The third dimension or realm is sometimes called 'harmonious reconciliation' - though that is too weak an expression. The whole character of the third phase is reconciliation. I can put it simplistically by saying that the first dimension is that of monologue, the second that of dialogue and the third that of triadialogue. The culmination is a folding of the triadialogue back into itself as a higher unity. Here we have what I mean by the Idea. It is then entirely intensive in the experience of the participants, maybe just like a feeling as I suggested at the end of my report.

The notes recorded during the sessions were at the level of monologue. What is in the feeling of the participants is connected with dialogue. This can be explained in terms of dialogue providing energy and interest. What eludes us as people is triadialogue in which realm the Idea is born and comes to being.

The phenomenology that could have been recorded would have been very rich. For example, we have to have both a time-based sequence of events and also a recurrent pattern of events. In respect of these both, we participants came to life at certain critical 'locations' in our various ways. We participated in certain events and not others and we participated in various roles and not others. These performances must have come out of all our experiences in the larger context, and these were 'driving' us. That is why the Idea can, in principle, address the larger issues. As I understand it, the Meeting was an enactment of a world action. We brought the world into the Meeting in ourselves.

I've spent some time on an enneagram of world views and it grows more and more fascinating, with no end to it. The interesting thing is to see the dual play of two quite different tendencies, crudely: each view is being pulled into a deeper integration while reacting against the proceeding one. This dual play is that of the triad and the dyad. We could envisage making a description of six views or orientations for the Meeting, in which various of us tried to put together our various views (on the views!)

This would then unfold into a dramatic story. The recurring problem is that any specification of the positions raises all sorts of alternatives and confusions. If we had to justify the enneagram, say, as well as our interpretations of it we could never do anything! And then we are back to where we started.

All this leads me to suppose that the 'informational field' has intrinsic properties of structure that do not need to be 'put' into it. This, maybe, is what people come together to discover, or to renew in themselves. The coming together in groups always takes place within a context of other interactions, largely of a more dispersed kind. The archaic form of 'recapitulation' (or renewal) was that of story. As that of 'revelation' (or discovery) was prophesy. It remains up to us to inspire ourselves towards the discovery of what we really mean.

Notes

[1] The 'way through meaning' comes from the word dialogue in Bohm's interpretation as dia, 'through' and logos, 'meaning'. Some of the participants knew Bohm's theories but these were not made explicitly the basis of the work.

[2] Usually, the facilitator offers comments on the process of the exchange rather than on the content. In this case,

however, process and content were not separated. To an outsider, it would have simply looked like an argument in which others were joining in.

[3] However, one member did venture the suggestion that it would be interesting and valuable to see if we could work in a group of 50-100 people. The 'lore' in this field has the consensus that self-organising groups cannot work with a membership of more than six or seven, which was the number of the first meeting in the series. In succeeding meetings, the numbers gradually rose to that of the present event. Actually, there is growing resistance to the idea of working with a group of 50-100, and a desire for another meeting of the same size first. It remains uncertain to what extent numbers count in this area. Maybe, there are other factors to do with e.g. the spirit of friendship and respect

[4] The arising of such differences is easy to understand, since we have the many (various people) coming together to act as the one (the group), so that the idea of group purpose is self-contradictory on its own level, and fragmented at the individual level. We can, if we wish, make a leap into some idea such as that of 'group mind' and accept that it operates under its own logic and that we can learn how to participate in it more or less consciously, with more or less understanding. But this consciousness and understanding may not require any such concept as that of 'group mind'!

[5] Certain things can be done only by doing them, not by thinking about them. This is not 'blind'. Thought can only think and is 'blind' in its own fashion. Similarly, there are things that can be thought and not done. In my view, the group came very close to some different understanding of the relation between 'doing' and 'thinking' than the usual one. One way of putting this is to say that understanding itself became more attached to doing than to thinking. This reversal of roles is often a sign of a significant evolution. Thus, we went into doing to improve our thinking, rather than going into thinking to improve our doing.

[6] I myself have been helped in the development of my theory of 'monologue', 'dialogue' and 'trialogue'. The feeling experience of the event is what I call an intensive recollection of the event, rather than the extensive one that would appear in written notes.