

## Faculty Prerequisites for Dialogue-Based Education

Dialogue-based education has been slow to gain general acceptance among instructors in agroecology and organic agriculture, as elsewhere in higher education in agriculture. We facilitated a dialogue-based workshop in Lyon, France in August, 2012 with university instructors from 13 European countries to identify prerequisites for implementing this learning strategy. Results included a mapping of questions that teachers need to consider before launching a major modification of class procedures. We organized these into structural and personal issues to be resolved at institutional and individual levels (Lieblein and Francis, 2012), and conclude with specific recommendations on how to implement changes in classroom methods.

For more than a decade, we have explored how to use experiential learning in agroecology, using examples of complex and integrated systems on organic and biodynamic farms. Agroecology was defined as the ecology of food systems (Francis et al., 2003), and we focused on student-centered learning through steps on two related learning ladders (Lieblein et al., 2007), with the goal of learning and research for responsible action (Lieblein and Francis, 2007; Lieblein et al., 2012). The modern foundation for dialogue comes from the british physicist David Bohm (2004), and emphasizes an open, explorative and listening approach to learning. The principles of dialogue-based education have been summarized by Vella (1980) and described as transformative learning, or a means of popular education through participation.

“Dia” means “through”, and “logos” translates as “meaning”, thus a dialog creates a flow of meaning, and creates one way of taking energy out of differences and channeling it toward ideas that have not been created previously. Dialogue is a creative, multi-way mode of talking together between two or among more people, clearly different from a one-way lecture to transfer knowledge from teacher to student. Dialog initiates sustained collective inquiry that challenges the processes, assumptions, and certainties that structure much of our everyday experience (Hannevig and Parker, 2012).

Assuming that change needs to start within ourselves, we facilitated an interactive workshop with 24 instructors from 13 countries, all currently teachers in European universities. We provided one key question, then time for individual reflection, and two methods for structured response. The question was: If we are to move from a linear mode of education to an education that is based on dialogue, then what would that require from us?

We introduced the concept of dialogue, in contrast to a linear mode of education based on knowledge transfer. A three-step process was introduced: five quiet minutes of individual reflecting and writing down ideas, an exchange of ideas in small groups, then discussion in a plenary session while we recorded issues on a white board creating a mind map of ideas. The guidelines for group dialogue included:

- Listen – without thinking about response
- Reduce the urge to defend old positions
- Be curious and suspend certainty and judgment
- Abandon a need to hear only what you agree with
- Ask: Am I willing to be influenced?
- Suspend a need for specific outcomes
- Leave teaching roles and administrative positions outside
- Slow down to allow for silence and reflection

Based on discussion following these rules, groups chose three important issues to share in plenary session related to dialogue-based education.

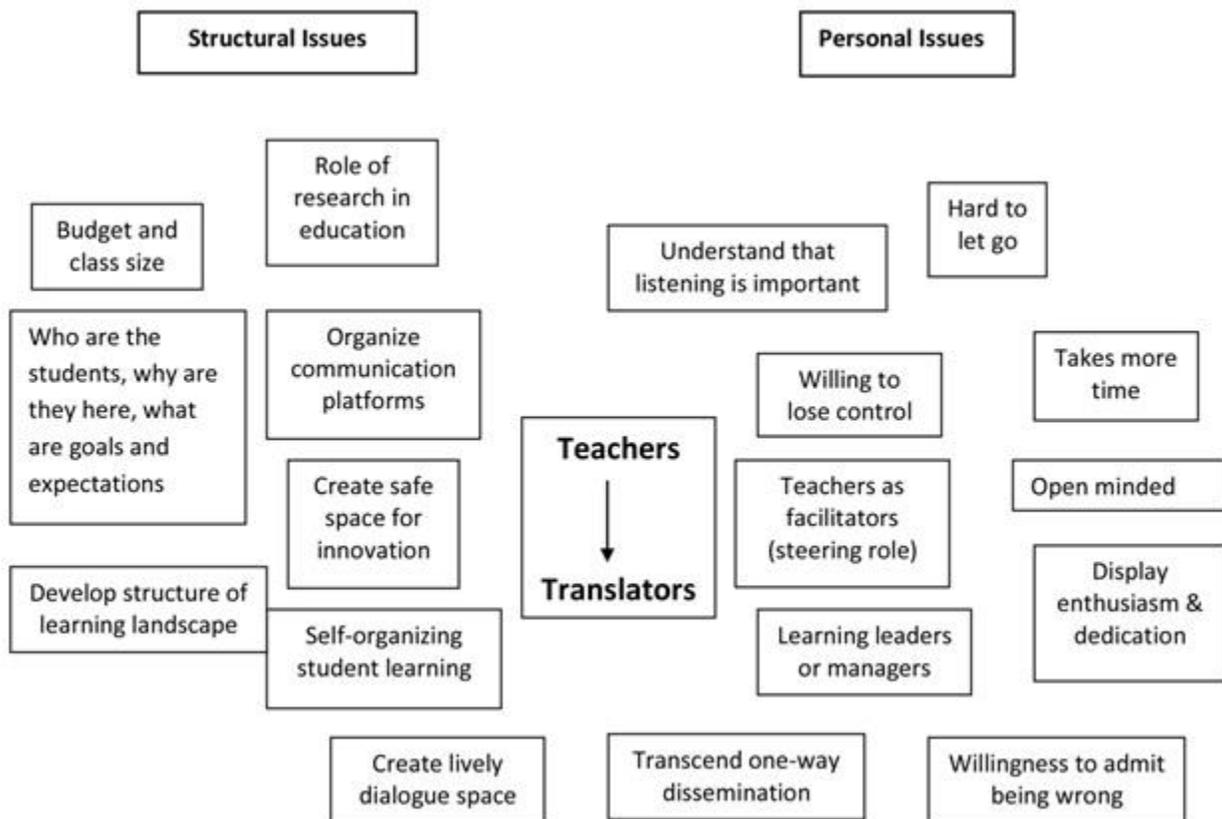
Workshop participants reported that a dialog-based mode of education will require us to make several changes to stimulate participation by students and infuse them with a sense of ownership in the learning agenda. As stated in their words, these changes would require that we:

- Train ourselves as teachers in dialog.
- Create a clear framework to structure dialogues & avoid superficial chatting

- Give up overt authority over the learning agenda to empower students.
- Recognize prior experiences of students and what they bring to the group.
- Value humility, as a “learning leader” or facilitator, and give up the “sole source of knowledge” mentality.
- Be patient and respectful, clear and concise
- Provide safe space for new and creative ideas, insist that everyone suspend judgment on new ideas, and encourage further exploration.
- Integrate new actors – policy makers, consumers, farmers – into the learning process.
- Drop conventional thinking about roles and positions
- Move out of faculty “knowledge silos” and accept new roles as catalysts for learning.
- Become more open-minded and willing to take risks, showing a willingness to “lose control”.
- Cultivate diversity in class and have discussion without reaching consensus
- Create a lively and tolerant dialog atmosphere
- Focus on the process of identifying and describing complex situations, without jumping to conclusions and priorities
- Move the learning process toward exploring opportunities and visions
- Find creative ways of enabling dialog-based learning with large student numbers and small budgets.

We later organized these into structural or university issues and personal or individual issues, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Issues identified that could be prerequisites for conversion to dialogue-based education: structural or university organizational issues and personal or individual issues.



The structural organization of a class and activities may be more easily dealt with, although limited budgets, appropriate facilities, present infrastructure and administrative procedures may have to be overcome. Such issues likely can be resolved without posing a personal threat to instructors' integrity or questioning successful past performance. Issues include class size, available budget for off-campus activities, and relating research more closely to education. On the other hand, issues such as willingness to "let go" and potentially lose a degree of control, called by some a pedagogy of no mercy (Freire, 2000), may be less palatable. To see oneself as an effective facilitator rather than as an authority figure could be threatening to an instructor's self image and perceived status in the classroom, as well as in the academy in general.

In the plenary session we heard that perception of the value of dialog-based education is vitally important for a change from a linear mode of teaching to an interactive, participatory mode. If a shift is perceived as vital and necessary, this provides a platform for changes at the individual level – a move out of the comfort zone, give up some control, and easily accept multiple sources of knowledge. Some issues may be more threatening than others. It may be easier to become a good listener, find more time for planning, and be enthusiastic in class than to let go of authority and admit being wrong. When an individual shift has taken place, there are other ways of dealing with institutional barriers. When status quo dominates, then the structural, institutional barriers will be used as excuses for not making any changes in our personal approaches to teaching.

Dialogue-based communication as a foundation for creating an energetic and stimulating classroom and discussion-based learning environment has been explored in the Norway MSc course in agroecology, and also in several venues including ENOAT annual workshops. In each of the last five years, results of similar activities have been summarized in the workshop proceedings. Near-universal positive comments from participants about the value of dialogue-based interactions, and projections of how these could be used to benefit student learning in agroecology and organic agriculture, apparently has not been implemented in other courses. We urge our colleagues to report on successes and frustrations with these types of methods, and hope the process will lead to new and creative learning environments.

As one participant summarized the experiences from this workshop:

*"At the beginning of the session I was just so tired after listening to all the presentations, and thought I had no ideas and nothing to offer. But after a while the ideas started to come and I had plenty of new ones, and at the end I was full of energy and not tired at all".*

Such a reaction articulates well the vision and rationale for dialogue-based education: creating empowered, energetic and knowledgeable students. Our main conclusion from this workshop, and from conversations with individual teachers in the academy, is that the obstacles for moving towards this educational strategy include an uncertainty about methods and fear of losing control when moving from the comfort zone of the known to an unfamiliar and unknown approach. Giving the method a try in our classes can help remove these obstacles.

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