Reinventing the wheel? A comparative overview of the concept of dialogue

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ABSTRACT

The concept of dialogue has always been a mainstay in the research literature on public relations. However, the fields of corporate communication and, more recently, business management have focused on different aspects of the notion. Despite such increased research interest, the concept of dialogue yields a range of analytical perspectives; this is due in part to the fragmentation of academic study, whereby scholars pursue parallel lines of inquiry that never intersect in interdisciplinary exchange.

Therefore, the twofold purpose of this article is to explore the concept of dialogue in the context of business: on the one hand, to offer an interdisciplinary account of dialogue based on a model of analysis shaped by the five key dimensions of the concept; and on the other hand, to use the model to trace which perspectives are articulated in the related theory. In short, the article works towards a clearer understanding of the management implications that stem from the conceptualization of dialogue.

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1. Introduction

Over the last thirty years, the concepts of dialogue and commitment to interest groups – stakeholders – have emerged as key research and professional issues in the business context. A context marked by ongoing crisis or constant risk, more critical, demanding and organized citizens, and the economy of intangibles have variously been cited (among other reasons) to account for the need for a change in management decision-making strategies, in which dialogue plays a key role. As the Melbourne Mandate of the Global Alliance (2012) records, a new culture of listening and commitment and responsible action is required if organizations are to retain or restore their social legitimacy.

However, the conceptualization of dialogue has been a complex phenomenon since the emergence of public relations as a field of academic inquiry at the turn of the twentieth century. The milestones in the development of the concept of dialogue have included (1) a fragmentation of theoretical approaches due to a range of research across different, albeit related, fields (public relations, business management and corporate communications), which has led to (2) separate analyses of discrete ideas in the absence of interdisciplinary study and exchange, prompting, in turn, (3) ongoing redefinition of the same phenomena. At times, different fields of study have proceeded along parallel lines of inquiry, failing to find points of intersection that might enrich our understanding of what is already in itself a very enabling phenomenon (dialogue).

Table 1
Dimensions and principles of interpersonal dialogue.

DIMENSIONS	Principles in a business context
Listening	Discover the interlocutor's interests, demands and views
Openness to the other	Take individuality and specific character into account
Search for truth	Move beyond particular interests
Change-oriented outlook	Openness to reimagining and changing one's *modus operandi*
Response	Put mechanisms in place to account for why things are done

The purpose of this article is to move beyond such limitations by offering a comparative, interdisciplinary reading of the issues involved. To that end, the model of analysis proposed here describes five key dimensions of dialogue so as provide a comparative overview of the theoretical development of the concept in three fields: public relations, business management and corporate communication.

The article reflects on the particular characteristics of each field of inquiry; at the same time, however, the comparative approach offers a more enabling theoretical account of the issues. The different perspectives shape an international and interdisciplinary focus, and disclose the polysemic nature of dialogue as a concept.

Both the structure and the content of the article are deliberated. The debate concerning the definition of dialogue has been more intense in the theory of public relations over the course of the last thirty years. Since the 1990s, in light of stakeholder theory, management theory has located the interrelationships and dialogue among stakeholders at the heart of improved decision-making. Finally, corporate communication is the natural habitat for the study of communication business contexts, in particular, how decision-making processes may be enhanced and relationships with publics in general be improved through the strategic management of communication.

The analysis undertaken in each field of inquiry is summarized in relation to a select list of scholars and topics, a summary of the key issues in each area that may later enable a comparative overview (see Section 3). The conclusions presented here include ideas that scale back the theoretical fragmentation involved thus far, as well as recommendations for strategic management.

Thus, the hypothesis in this article is that dialogue is a multifaceted process comprised of multiple dimensions that lead to different degrees of involvement, which from a practical point of view calls for differentiated management strategies in relation to stakeholders, positionings and corporate strategic priorities. From a normative perspective, this connotes a management philosophy that is open to the demands of the context. The methodology used to confirm this hypothesis is an interdisciplinary theoretical approach based on comparative analysis.

2. Model of analysis

The etymology of the word "dialogue" is Greek; it is composed of the prefix *dia*, meaning "through", and *logos*, meaning "word". Dialogue concentrates thought and enriches ideas by linking them to one another. Cortina (1986) and Lacroix (1964) characterized dialogue as a journey from what is near to what is fundamental or original.

Communication is a relational process, the purpose of which is to understand what is being talked about as well as with whom one is talking. "Who" is a key aspect of the concept of dialogue: dialogue enacts a personal encounter. Therefore, the model of analysis proposed here frames the issues involved from the perspective of interpersonal communication. Other scholars who explored the meaning of dialogue have taken a similar approach (Cissna & Anderson, 1998; Cortina, 1986; Isaacs, 1999; Lacroix, 1964).

In the Socratic-Platonic tradition, dialogue rests on questions and responses, and unfolds in such a way as to lead the interlocutor towards knowledge and understanding of the truth. In light of this framework, the table below outlines the dimensions encompassed by interpersonal dialogue. These dimensions may yield enabling implications and applications for the study of organizations (Table 1).

According to Isaacs (1999), "at the heart of dialogue is a simple but profound capacity to listen" (p. 83); similarly, Llano (1992) averred that "listening is the most important part of dialogue" (p. 25). During the dialogue process, the endeavour centres on the effort to understand the positions adopted by the other person, even when these positions are not shared, an ongoing commitment to interpretation, "a turn towards the other" (Cissna & Anderson, 1998). Dialogue also involves the ability to incorporate critical voices, to listen to their concerns and respond to their demands. The concept of dialogue calls for a commitment to the process as such, beyond meeting a pre-established goal. Dialogue affords an excellent framework within which differences and similarities, new ways of appreciating reality and reaching mutual understanding may be set out, rather than focus exclusively on one's own interests. Moreover, as Buber (1923) noted, dialogue invites people to treat "people as people", while Isaacs (1999) uses the term "respect".

Thus, dialogue is way of understanding and generating a vision of reality that acknowledges and incorporates the plurality of viewpoints of the people involved in the situation and the different dimensions shaping the phenomena. Understanding implies that issues and circumstances are seen in context, within the network of relationships and factors that may have a bearing on them. In a collective process of reflection, understanding requires a shared definition of the problem. Dialogue springs from the flow of dialectical thinking, the open questions that prompt the life of society.