CONVERSATIONAL LEARNING
AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO
KNOWLEDGE CREATION

Ann C. Baker
George Mason University

Patricia J. Jensen
Alverno College

David A. Kolb
Case Western Reserve University

Chapter 4

Conversation as Experiential Learning

Ann Baker, Patricia Jensen and David Kolb

…Truth [is] being involved in an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline…truth is not in the conclusions so much as in the process of conversation itself…if you want to be in truth you must be in conversation.

Parker Palmer

INTRODUCTION

Grounded in the theory of experiential learning, this chapter proposes a theoretical framework for conversational learning, a learning process whereby learners construct meaning and transform experiences into knowledge through conversations. Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) provides a holistic model of the learning process and a multilinear model of adult development, both of which are consistent with what we know about how people learn, grow, and develop. The theory is called "Experiential Learning" to emphasize the central role that experience plays in the learning process, "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984). Another reason the theory is called "experiential" is its intellectual origins in the experiential works of Lewin, Piaget, Dewey, Freire and James, forming a unique perspective on learning and development.

The ELT model portrays two dialectically related modes of grasping experience – apprehension (concrete experience) and comprehension (abstract conceptualization) – and two dialectically related modes of transforming experience – intension (reflective observation) and extension (active experimentation). A closer examination of the ELT learning model suggests that learning requires individuals to resolve abilities that are polar opposites, and that the learner must continually choose which set of learning abilities he or she will use in a specific learning situation. In grasping experience some of us perceive new information through experiencing the concrete, tangible, felt qualities of the world, relying on our senses and immersing ourselves in concrete reality. Others tend to perceive, grasp, or take hold of new information through symbolic representation or abstract conceptualization – thinking about, analyzing, or systematically planning, rather than using sensation as a guide. Similarly, in transforming or processing experience some of us tend to carefully watch others who are involved in the experience and reflect on what happens, while others choose to jump right in and start doing things.

Insert figure 1 about here

The four learning modes illustrated in figure 1 constitute a four-stage experiential learning cycle, whereby learners resolve the tension of two dialectically opposite learning dimensions in a cyclical fashion. The cycle begins with immediate or concrete experiences that serve as the basis for observations and reflections. These reflections are assimilated into abstract concepts from which new implications for action can be drawn. These implications can be actively tested and serve as guides in creating new experiences.

Drawing from theory of experiential learning, in this chapter we propose conversational learning as the experiential learning process as it occurs in conversation. Learners move through the cycle of experiencing, reflecting, abstracting and acting, as they construct meaning from their experiences in conversations. As such, a theoretical framework based on five process dialectics will be proposed as foundational underpinning of the conversational learning. As participants engage in conversation by embracing the differences across these dialectics, the boundaries of these dialectics open a conversational space.

In the sections that follow, we will explore the role of the five dialectical processes beginning with a discussion of what is meant by a dialectical approach in the context of conversational learning. Our elaboration of these dialectics begins with the dialectic of the knowing dimensions of experiential learning theory – apprehension and comprehension. Next, the dialectic of praxis that incorporates the integration of intention/reflection and of extension/action is explored followed by an examination of the dialectical tension between the epistemological, discursive process and the ontological, recursive process. The fourth is the dialectic of individuality and relationality that contrasts conversation as inside-out and outside-in experiences. Finally, the dialectic of status and solidarity describes the ranking and linking dynamics that shape the social realm of conversation. The simultaneous interactions among these five dialectics will ultimately guide and sustain the act of learning through conversations. The description of the five dialectics will be followed by an exploration into the nature of conversational space that holds and sustains the conversation across these dialectics.

A DIALECTICAL APPROACH TO CONVERSATIONAL LEARNING

The proposed dialectical stance on conversational learning suggests that conversation is a meaning making process whereby understanding is achieved through interplay of opposites and contradictions. Traditionally dialectics have been viewed as a linguistic process that leads to generation of new ideas and concepts by one's awareness of a tension and paradox between two or more opposites. It involves stating a point of view and questioning it from other points of view, eventually seeking consensual agreement which in turn is ultimately questioned from still other perspectives. As the opening quote by Parker Palmer suggests, truth thus lies in the journey, not in an ultimate destination or having the final word.

Dialectical inquiry aspires to *holism through the embracing of differences and contradictions*. It begins with contradictions, or literally opposing speeches. By taking the most opposite imaginable point of view, one increases the chance of encompassing the whole situation. Thus, inquiry into the dialectics of conversation is a means of uncovering the assumptions and frames that cause a "tunnel vision" of the whole (Mitroff and Emshoff 1979). An inviting attitude about differences in opinion and perception is key to the process. Peter Elbow (1986) affirms this view as follows:

Since perception and cognition are processes in which the organism 'constructs' what it sees or thinks according to models already there, the organism tends to throw away or distort material that does not fit this model. The surest way to get hold of what your present frame blinds you is to try to adopt the opposite frame, that is, to reverse your

model. A person who can live with contradiction and exploit it, who can use conflicting models can simply see and think *more*. (p.241)

John Van Mannen (1995) in <u>Style as Theory</u> critiques paradigmatic organizational science as excessively focused on establishing a ruling discourse that obliterates or subsumes opposing ideas. He proposes a new brand of theorizing based on ongoing conversations that "plant, nurture and cultivate" and not on contentious and defensive debates that lead to polarization of differing views.

The five dialectics presented here are an attempt to describe similar dialectical contradictions at the level of the process that creates the content of the conversation. This dialectical process can open a conversational space within which opposing ideas can be explored, resolved or embraced through conversations. In light of its centrality to the concept of conversational learning, the notion of a conversational space and its relationship with five dialectics deserves close attention here.

The making of a conversational space can be equated to the autopoietic (self-making) process of a living system. The term autopoiesis first coined by Maturana and Varela in 1987, refers to a mechanism whereby a living organism whether physical, mental, or social becomes a self-organized, autonomous system by specifying its laws and determining what is proper to its existence. An autopoietic system is organized as a network of processes with two primary tasks at hand: to regenerate and realize the network of processes that enables its existence through their continuous interactions and transformations, and to specify the boundary of its realization as a concrete unity in the space they exist. It is important to notice that these are not separate sequential processes, but two different dimensions of the same phenomenon. On one hand, the

dynamic interaction of network processes is essential for the creation of the boundary of the system; on the other hand, a boundary is essential for the processes to operate as a unified system. As Maturana and Varela put it, "the organization of an autopoietic system is such that their only product is themselves, with no separation between producer and product. The being and doing of an autopoietic unity are inseparable, and this is their specific mode of organization." (p.49)

The conversational space defined by the five dialectics is similar to an autopoietic organism. On one hand, the five dialectics serve as a network of dynamic processes that opens up a conversational space where multiple conversations are generated; on the other hand, conversational space can be seen as a boundary that preserves the integrity of the dialectical processes that create those conversations.

A variety of external factors that act upon the internal dynamics of the dialectical relationships may disturb or support the integrity of the conversational space. It is also true that the nature of five dialectical interactions will largely determine the pattern and quality of conversations that are generated within the conversational space. These dynamic external and internal interactions and their impact on conversations will become clear as we proceed to discuss the five dialectics as a network of processes that opens a space for conversational learning.

APPREHENSON AND COMPREHENSION: CONCRETE KNOWING AND ABSTRACT
KNOWING

The dialectic of apprehension and comprehension is at the heart of dual-knowledge
theory whereby reality is grasped through two distinct, but inseparable modes of knowing:
concrete knowing and abstract knowing (Kolb, 1984). Concrete knowing is called apprehension
– an immediate, feeling-oriented, tacit, subjective process largely based in older regions of the
human brain that serve as physiological and emotional gatekeepers that monitor the emotional
dimensions of learning. Abstract knowing is called comprehension – a linguistic, conceptual,
interpretative process based in the relatively newer left cerebral cortex of the brain (de Bono,
1969; Gazzaniga, 1985). Learning is based on the complex interrelationship of these two
knowing processes. Thus, integrated learning occurs when learners engage simultaneously in
these two complementary modes of knowing.

William James articulates the conceptual underpinning of the dual knowledge theory in
his philosophy of radical empiricism (Hickcox; 1990; James, 1890). James's philosophy was
based on two co-equal and dialectically related ways of knowing the world – "knowledge of
acquaintance" based on direct perception (apprehension) and "knowledge about" based on
mediating conception (comprehension). In his own words, "through feelings we become
acquainted with things, but only by our thoughts do we know about them. Feelings are the germ
and starting points of cognition, thoughts the developed tree." (p. 222)

In radical empiricism, direct perceptions have primacy since all concepts derive their
validity from connection to sense experience. Concepts, however, have priority in guiding

human action because they often enable us to predict the future and achieve our goals. James (1977) further draws attention to the importance of this co-equal relationship as follows:

> We thus see clearly what is gained and what is lost when percepts are translated into concepts. Perception is solely of the here and now; conception is of the like and unlike, of the future, and of the past, and of the far away. But this map of what surrounds the present, like all maps, is only a surface; its features are but abstract signs and symbols of things that in themselves are concrete bits of sensible experience. We have but to weigh extent against content, thickness against spread, and we see that for some purposes the one, for other purposes the other has the higher value. Who can decide off hand which is absolutely better to live and to understand life? We must do both alternately, and a man can no more limit himself to either than a pair of scissors can cut with a single one of its blades. (p. 243)

For James, conversation is more than an exchange of concepts; it is perceptual process as well. That is to say, conversation is a sensual experience. Conversation is typically thought of as speaking and listening, but James would enlarge the realm of conversation to conceiving and perceiving that involves all the senses including emotions and feelings, touch, taste, and smell. His observation that rationalism and discursive thought are intrusive on the conversational experience is a warning to those who would study conversation as a solely discursive process that is unaffected by the experiential context in which it occurs. Different conversational experiences that take place in varied contexts enhance or restrict different senses and hence affect what is *heard* and *perceived* in the conversation. As many communication theorists have said, most of the meaning in communication is nonverbal. From the speakers' perspective, this

means that conversation is as much about showing as it is about telling. From the listeners'

perspective, this means that conversation is as much about perceiving as it is about hearing.

INTENSION AND EXTENSION: REFELCTION AND ACTION

Kolb (1984) articulates the central idea of experiential learning theory as follows:

Simple perception of experience alone is not sufficient for learning; something must be

done with it. Similarly, transformation alone cannot represent learning, for there must be

something to be transformed, some state or experience that is being acted upon. (p.42)

This view is crucial to understand the synergistic nature of the dialectic of apprehension-

comprehension and the dialectic of intension and extension as they represent two distinct but

interconnected learning processes. Learning is like breathing; it follows a rhythm of taking in

and putting out, of incorporating ideas and experience to find meaning and expressing that

meaning in thought, speech and action. Extending this idea by using a somewhat different

metaphor, Elbow (1986) identifies two sources for what he calls real learning; a process of

applying concepts and inventing new concepts:

These two roots of cognitive processes are complementary and the basis of real learning

from the most primitive to the most sophisticated. The reason they are so crucial is that

they represent the two directions of traffic across the border between verbal and

nonverbal experience. Where the first consists of constructing new experience from

words, the second, sensing functionally, consists… of constructing new words from

experience: searching for felt relationships among experiences in order to bring to birth

new implied concepts. (p.33)

Elbow's concept of verbal and nonverbal experience corresponds to the comprehension

and apprehension modes of "grasping" experience, while the two modes of traffic between them

represent the transformative dimensions of extension (action) and intention (reflection).

Freire (1992) describes the dynamic interplay of the dialectic of action and reflection as

follows:

As we attempt to analyze dialogue as a human phenomenon…Within the word we find

two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed –

even in part – the other immediately suffers… When a word is deprived of its dimension

of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle

chatter, into verbalism, into an alienated 'blah'…On the other hand, if action is

emphasized exclusively, to the detriment of reflection, the word is converted into

activism. The latter action for action's sake negates the true praxis and makes dialogue

impossible. (pp. 75, 78)

Freire's metaphor for traditional education, the "banking concept of education," where

the main focus is to deposit ideas in the heads of students describes a relationship between

teacher and student that scarcely can be called a conversation. The dialectic is so polarized

toward the student only taking in, that very little emphasis is given to students' expression of

his/her meaning making process through intentional action. Too many courses spend 15 weeks

inputting information to students and then asking them to express themselves by answering "A,

B, C, D, or none of the above" in an examination. Experiential learning approaches to education,

on the other hand, seek to develop a conversational space where the *praxis* between reflection and action is fully recognized (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 1997).

EPISTEMOLOGICAL DISCOURSE AND ONTOLOGICAL RECOURSE: DOING AND BEING

Conversational learning occurs within two distinct but interconnected temporal dimensions: linear time and cyclical time. The discursive process is guided by linear time, whereas the recursive process follows a rhythm of cyclical time. The discursive process is an epistemological manifestation of individuals' ideas and experiences that are made explicit in conversations. As such, epistemological discourse is a linear process of naming and describing individuals' ideas and concepts generated in conversations from past, present to future in a continuous flow of activities.

The recursive process, on the other hand, is an ontological and subjective manifestation of the desire to return to the same ideas and experiences generated in conversation. In this sense, ontological recourse is cyclical in nature where ideas and concepts acquire new meaning as individuals return to the same conversation to question and inquire about their experiences anew. As such, learners' ability to simultaneously engage in these two temporal dimensions will largely determine the depth and quality of learning generated in conversations.

A closer look at the interplay of epistemological discourse and ontological discourse will throw a light upon how these two processes manifest themselves in conversations. We shall discuss these processes individually beginning with epistemological discourse.

Insert figure 2 about here

As illustrated in figure 2, the discursive process follows a linear time progression from pre-course, discourse to post-course. Pre-course is a manifestation of previous conversations, which sets up the assumptive frame of the discourse. In this sense, pre-course serves as 'fore-structure" of the conversation (Hans, 1989), or "prejudgments"(Gadamer, 1989) that individuals bring into the conversation. Simply stated, in anticipation of joining a particular circle of conversation, individuals have assumptions and expectations about the experience they will embark on. These assumptions and expectations will ultimately influence and shape the discourse they are about to join and establish their positions in the conversation.

The discourse takes the sets of assumptions generated through pre-course and begins a process of *framing*, and then proceeds to elucidate the implications of those assumptions, a process of *naming*. A point to be highlighted here is that, the framing of a discourse is a tacit, apprehensional process while naming is a verbal, comprehensional process. Thus, the assumptions that make up the frame are often unconscious and tacit and are made explicit only through the naming process (Schon and Rein, 1994).

Robert McNamara's (1995) In Retrospect reports a tragic example of how difficult frame reflection is. He points out that while there were many policy debates, assumptions that framed these debates – the domino theory, that this was a war to contain Communism, or the idea that the war could be won with the European warfare tactics were never seriously questioned.

Returning back in time and questioning the framed assumptions afresh can avoid the situation described above. This is when ontological recourse makes its appearance in the

conversation. In his philosophical inquiry into the human conception of time, Hans (1989) offers

an insightful argument as to why human often fail to equally engage in discursive and recursive

processes in a given situation. According to Hans, humans tend to be primarily driven by linear,

epistemological dimension of the dialectic and shy away from the recursive, ontological end of

the dialectic. The accentuation of the linear time dimension, says Hans, is caused by the fear of

the *return of the same*. In returning to the same, one stands face to face with one's *being*, an

ultimate ontological state which manifests itself in the cyclical passing of time. This fear of *being*

evoked by the cyclical, recursive process drives humans to embrace the epistemological,

sequential progression of events where they find comfort in the absence of repetition.

Yet, the regular return with a difference is at the core of all understanding and it

ultimately guides humans to attain a higher level of consciousness. Freire (1992) describes the

understanding that is achieved through simultaneous engagement in the epistemological and

ontological dimensions of the dialectics as follows:

> To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn
>
> reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. (p. 76)

As such, the discursive process is at work when learning is grounded through the *naming*

of the world, whereas recursive process enters the scene as learners return to the subject that

reappears anew, claiming an in depth questioning and inquiry. In their studies of recursive

process in adult learning, Sheckley, Allen and Keeton (1994) similarly describe the manifestation

of the dialectic of discursive and recursive in the adults meaning making process. "Simply stated,

"what learners 'know' influences what they 'experience' and conversely what they 'experience'

influences what they 'know.' (pp. 60-61)

Finally, the end of the conversational discourse leads to post-course. Here there is a process of sorting what to keep from the conversation and what to throw away. The resulting story of the conversation becomes pre-course for future conversations, thus transporting the discourse into other contexts and the future. Thus, any conversational discourse is embedded in a complex network of previous and future conversations.

What was described thus far illustrates the dialectical relationship of the discursive and recursive processes that drives conversation. Conversational learning occurs within such distinct, yet intertwined linear and cyclical time dimensions that ultimately come together as flux of spiral movement, as new ideas are grounded through discursive process and questioned from different perspectives through recursive process of conversation.

INDIVIDUALITY AND RELATIONALITY: INSIDE-OUT AND OUTSIDE-IN

The tension between individuality, where a person takes in life experience as an individual process, and relationality, where life is an experience of connection with others, can be described as an intersubjective process whereby an individual maintains a sense of self while at the same time is aware of, and open to influence of others (Hunt, 1987, Jordan, 1991).

According to evolutionary biology humans have two biological prime directives – to preserve the self as an individual and to preserve the species as a whole. Guisinguer and Blatt (1994) argue that these two orientations are dialectically related, "…individuality (or senses of self) and the sense of relatedness to others develop in a transactional, interrelated, and dialectical

manner, with higher levels of self-development making possible higher levels of interpersonal relatedness and vice-versa." (p.111)

Carl Roger's (1961) reflection on his professional and personal life is an insightful example of someone whose selfless act of extending oneself to others is drawn from his very capacity and willingness to be himself:

> Yet the paradoxical aspect of my experience is that the more I am simply willing to be myself, in all this complexity of life and the more I am willing to understand and accept the realities in myself and in the other person, the more change seems to be stirred up. It is a very paradoxical thing – to the degree that each one of us is willing to be himself, then he finds not only himself changing; but he finds that other people to whom he relates are also changing. At least this is a very vivid part of my experience, and one of the deepest things I think I have learned in my personal and professional life. (p. 22)

Similar views are articulated by various scholars from the Stone Center devoted to the understanding of human development with a particular focus on the experience of women. Surrey (1991) proposes a self-in-relationship as follows:

> The notion of the self-in-relation involves an important shift in emphasis from separation to relationship as the basis for self-experience and development. Further, relationship is seen as the basic goal of development: that is, the deepening capacity for relationship and relational competence. The self-in-relation model assumes that other aspects of self (e.g., creativity, autonomy, assertion) develop within this primary context. That is, other aspects of self-development emerge in the context of relationship, and there is no inherent need to disconnect or to sacrifice relationship for self-development. (p. 53)

In Women's Ways of Knowing, Belenky et al. (1986) approached intersubjectivity through the concepts of separate and connected knowing. According to their study, separate knowing operates in a primarily comprehensive mode assuming autonomy, reciprocity, extrication of self, and doubt whereas connected knowing assumes relatedness, empathy, use of self, and connection. Their research further revealed a more intersubjective way of knowing where learning is a process of:

Weaving together the strands of rational and emotive thought and of integrating objective and subjective knowing. Rather than extricating the self in the acquisition of knowledge, these women used themselves in rising to a new way of thinking. As Adele described it, '*You let the inside out and the outside in.*' (p.134-5) [emphasis added]

Finally, Gadamer (1989) articulates the value of such this approach to conversation as follows:

When one enters into dialogue with another person and then is carried along further by the dialogue, it is no longer the will of the individual person, holding itself back or exposing itself, that is determinative. Rather, the law of statement and counterstatement in the end plays them into each other. Hence, when a dialogue has succeeded, one is subsequently fulfilled by it, as we say. (p. 104)

STATUS AND SOLIDARUTY: RANKING AND LINKING

The dialectical tension of status and solidarity opens a hospitable space where individuals engage in conversation with mutual respect and understanding toward one another. Relationships among

human beings, as well as other social animals, can be portrayed on a two dimensional,

interpersonal space of status and solidarity (Schwitzgabel & Kolb, 1974). Status here refers to

one's positioning or ranking in the group while solidarity refers to the extent to which one is

linked interpersonally with others in a network of relationships. The interplay of this dialectical

relationship will ultimately define and create a hospitable space conducive to conversational

learning. The underlying premise here is that some measure of both status and solidarity are

necessary to sustain conversation. Without status where one or more participants take initiative

or lead, the conversation can lose direction. Without solidarity where participants build upon and

link to each other, conversation can lose connection and relevance and not benefit from the

multiple perspectives and diverse expertise of each person. When one dialectical pole dominates

to the exclusion of the other, conversational learning is diminished. At the extreme, ranking leads

to an unanswered monologue from the top. With total solidarity, talk can be aimless and

repetitive.

Wilber (1995) offers an insightful discussion on this matter. In his mind, a living system

is made whole by a healthy interaction of hierarchy (ranking) and heterarchy (linking) of its

components. A normal hierarchy contributes to the wholeness and integrative capacity of a living

system. Its ultimate goal is the actualization of each individual member as a valuable contributor.

A normal hierarchy turns pathological when its functioning is based on force or threat that results

in a suppression of individual actualization undermining the good of the whole.

In a normal heterarchy, no element is given special importance or dominant position;

each element strives to equally contribute to the wholeness of the system. A normal heterarchy

becomes pathological when an individual element "loses itself in others – and all distinctions, of

value or identity are lost… Thus pathological heterarchy means not union but fusion; not integration but dissociation; not relating but dissolving. (pp. 23-24)

A similar view is offered by Miller (1986) who identified two fundamentally different types of inequality in relationships – temporary and permanent inequality. *Temporary inequality* permeates the relationship when the *lesser party* is socially defined as unequal for a limited period of time. In such relationship, the superior party will assist the *lesser party* to develop. This development, from unequal to equal, is the primary purpose of the relationship. For example, parents assist children to become adults, teachers assist students to become capable graduates and colleagues. The ultimate goal of this type of relationship is to end the inequality. In the second type of unequal relationship, permanent inequality, the goal is to enforce the inequality. Here, individuals or groups are permanently defined as unequal by ascription into categories such as race, sex, class, religion and by positional power. The nature and range of this unequal relationship are seen as being a "birthright" and it implicitly assumed by the dominants to be permanent.

Critical to the understanding of the dialectical tension being suggested here is the dynamic nature of the status and solidarity as they unfold in conversations. For example, a teacher or a leader may hold an expert status on a particular area of expertise in a given moment during conversation, however, his/her position is only temporary in that, the expert role is equally shared by other participants of the conversation as the need for different expertise and knowledge arises during conversations.

Freire (1992) writes about this balancing act of the status and solidarity among individuals engaged in conversation as follows:

But while to say the true word…is to transform the world, saying that word is not the privilege of some few men, but the right of every man. Consequently, no one can say a true word alone – nor can he say it for another, in a prescriptive act which robs others of their words. (p.76)

An exploration into several strands of scholarly thoughts brings us to the understanding of the nature of dialectic of status and solidarity as it shapes the hospitable conversational space. A hospitable space does not favor extreme status or extreme solidarity; it simply acknowledges their qualitative distinction as they bring life to conversations by the virtue of their own distinctiveness.

THE CONVERSATIONAL LEARNING SPACE

Making space for conversation can occur in many dimensions – making physical space as when a manager gets up from behind the desk to join colleagues around a table, making temporal space as when a family sets aside weekly time for family conversation or making emotional space through receptive listening. It is so easy to get focused on the structure of conversation, on what is said and how speech flows from one participant to another, that one fails to notice the bounded space that holds the conversation and allows it to occur.

The process dialectics described thus far, create a receptive space that holds the conversation. As we discussed earlier, the extreme poles of these five dialectic dimensions define the autopoietic boundaries of the space within which conversational learning occurs. When one pole of any of the dialectics dominates, learning through conversations is impeded and may

cease to exist. Some semblance of boundaries is necessary to preserve and make space for structures just as the process of structuring creates boundaries. The dual knowledge dialectic opens a space where speaking and listening creates conversation. Speaking without listening or listening without speaking is futile. Similarly, as Freire points out, reflection without action turns into "idle chatter" and activism by itself becomes action for action's sake. Discourse without recourse is brute force. Recourse without discourse – of course. Extreme individualism, "I touch no one and no one touches me," can result in alienation while total relatedness can lead to conversations that go nowhere. Totalitarian authority crushes other voices, while laissez faire egalitarianism can produce aimless talk.

Hence, conversational learning space can be viewed as a product of dialectic of boundary and structure – between boundaries that define and protect a space where conversation can occur and the internal processes and norms that shape the conversational interaction. The conversational learning as a self-organizing entity cannot exist without a receptive space to hold it. The conversation can be killed from within, as when for example, an authoritarian monologue crushes the spirit of other participants. Or it can be destroyed from without by strong rhetorical pre-course, prejudice, or prejudgment.

In conversation, the autopoietic process can be seen in the development of norms. As conversations progress, a normative value core that structures the conversation develops and at the same time creates boundaries that define the conversational learning space. These norms determine what can be said and not said, who has voice and who does not have voice in the conversation. At the same time, these norms create boundaries that define who is in and out of

the conversation. Those who do not know or refuse to either abide by or participate in changing the normative rules of the game are excluded from the conversation.

There is a paradoxical quality to conversational boundaries. Initially, it seems that boundaries inhibit or block conversation, and indeed conversation across boundaries is often difficult. However, the space created by the boundaries can create a space that is safe and hospitable enough for the conversational exploration of differences across various dialectical continua. "From this perspective, boundaries are not confines but 'shape-givers' that can provide us with healthy space to grow… boundaries are not prisons, rather, they serve an essential function to make our existence more alive and vibrant"(Wyss, 1997, p. 4).

REFERENCES

Baker, A. C., Jensen, P.J., & Kolb, D. A. (1997). In conversation: Transforming experience into learning. *Simulation & Gaming*, 28 (1), 6-12.

Belenky, M., Clinchy, B, Goldberger, N., & Tarule, J. (1986). *Women's ways of knowing.* New York: Basic Books, Inc.

De Bono, E. (1969). *The mechanism of mind*. NY: Simon and Schuster.

Elbow, P. (1986). *Embracing contraries: Explorations in learning and teaching*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Freire, P. (1992). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. NY:Continuum.

Gadamer, H.G. (1989). *Truth and method*. NY: Crossroad.

Gazzaniga, M. (1985). The social brain: Discovering the networks of the mind. NY: Basic Books.

Guisenger, S. & Blatt, S. (1991). Individuality and relatedness: Evolution of a fundamental dialectic. *American Psychologist* 49: 104-111.

Hans, J. (1989). *The question of value: Thinking through Nietzche, Heidegger and Freud*. Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Hickcox, L. (1990). *An historical review of Kolb's formulation of experiential learning theory*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Oregon, Corvallis.

Hunt, D. (1987). *Beginning with ourselves*. Cambridge, MA: Brookline Press.

James, W. (1977). Percept and concept: The import of concepts. In J. McDermott (Ed.), *The writings of William James*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

James, W. (1980). *The principle of Psychology*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

McNamara, R. (1995). *In retrospect: The tragedy and lessons of Vietnam*. New York: Times Books.

Maturana, H., & Varela, F. (1987). *The tree of knowledge: The biological roots of human understanding*. Boston: New Science Library, Random House.

Miller, J. (1986). *Toward a new psychology of women*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Mitroff, I., & Emshoff, J. (1979). *On strategic assumption-making. A dialectical approach to policy and planning*. Academy of Management Review, 4, 1-12.

Palmer, P. J. (1990). Good teaching: A matter of living the mystery. *Change*, 22(1), 11-16.

Roger, C. (1961). *On becoming a person*. New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Schwitzgabel, R. & Kolb, D. A. (1974). *Changing human behavior: principles of planned intervention*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Sheckeley, B., Allen, G., & Keeton, M. (1994). Adult learning as a recursive process. *Journal of Cooperative Education*, XXVIII, 2, 56-67.

Schon, D. & Rein, M. (1994). *Frame reflection: Toward the resolution of intractable policy controversies.* Boston: MIT Press.

Surrey, J. (1991). Self in relation: A theory of women's development. In J. Jordan, A. Kaplan, J.B. Miller, I. Stiver & J. Surrey (eds.), *Women's growth in connection*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Van Mannen, J. (995). Style as theory. *Organization Science*, 6(1), 133-143.

Wilber, K. (1995). *Sex, ecology, spirituality*. Boston: Shambala.

Wyss, E. (1997). *Exploring boundaries: A personal journal of culture-crossing*. Unpublished working paper, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, OH.

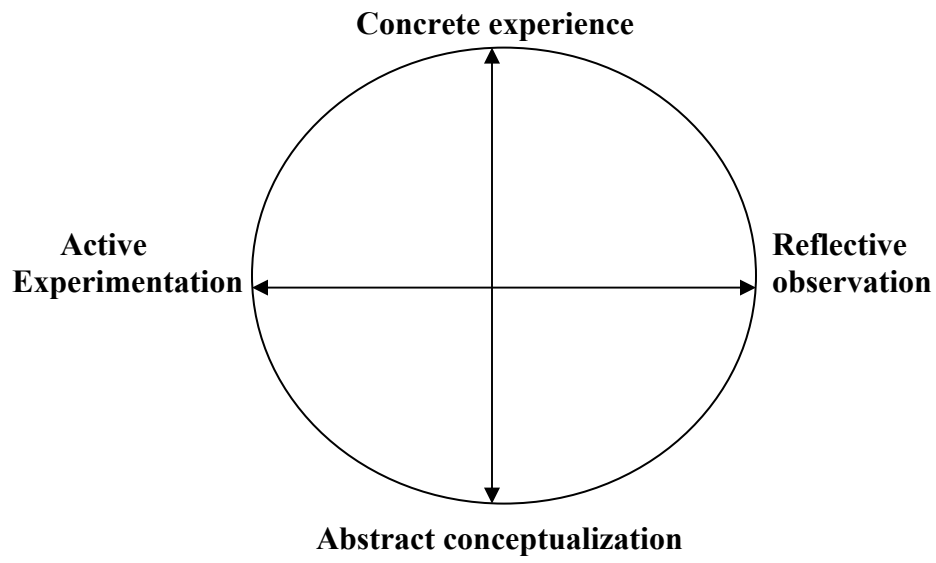Figure 1. The Experiential Learning Theory of development (Kolb, 1984, p.141).

Figure 2. The discourse/ recourse dialectic in conversation.