

Conversational Learning methodologies



Challenge-Texts_2

Grail Formators Training Golegã 2016

Will we become humanized? And turn ourselves into storytellers?
Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo¹, 2005: 179)

1. Valuing the *not-knowing knowing*

In his book on Meister Eckhart the Dominican theologian Marcel Braekers addresses a reflection on our knowing, inspired by Eckhart's mysticism. It is a knowing that does not know, according to the author a fundamental attitude in everyday life, in the relationship with others, in study as well as spiritual life.

Will this also be an important attitude in the "formation work" in the Grail?

The following is a part of the introduction Braekers wrote to his book:

The 'not-knowing knowing' does not mean: be aware that we do not know much, as scholars realize after many years of research. In the conceptual pair that I propose, the first element, the 'not-knowing' is an intrinsic description of the second, the knowing. It means a knowing undressed of its own knowledge. It is a mental attitude that a person takes after having acquired much knowledge by study as well through experience. Put in another way: it is a force of the spirit, an intuition, an ability to transcend the knowing itself - or, rather, to set aside the self in order to surrender to what is happening. This is the moment when the person shuts down the own knowing and experience, in order to be touched by the abundance of what is happening at the moment (Braekers, 2007: 7)².

It implies an emptying, a loose attitude that according Braekers "Eckhart will pursue two important concepts: *Abgeschiedenheit* [separate from] and *Gelassenheit* [let it go]" (Ibid .: 68). Are not these concepts and challenges this attitude to those who deal with training and formation work in the Grail?

¹ 2005: 179)

² Braekers

2. Valuing experience

Berk (1999: 149 -151)³ mobilizes the concept of Socratic learning in order to remember that "learning is the process in which the learner acquires meaningful experiences. (...) Being open to something depends on the question whether a person is, yes or no, pregnant of this something." What is crucial for learning does not depend on the value of the content, but on the attitude of the person who is, yes or no, open to the content of this something, open to the novelty of this content. This happens when the person can discover the meaning of the information received, when he or she is able to give a value judgment. "The 'new' is always 'the-new-to-me'." So it's important never to make an abstraction of concrete experiences of participants in our formation programs, because when this happens, says Berk, "we are not talking about anything" (ibid .: 151).

3. Learning based on experience

In a world of manuals and guides on "how to" is important to think first about the 'why to do this or that'. Why to use the methodology of *conversational learning*?

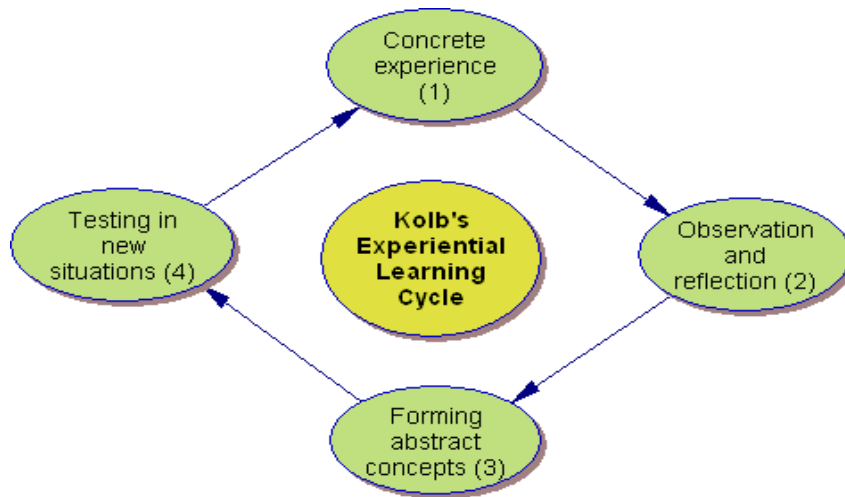
The methodology of conversational learning is based on the *experiential learning cycle* of Kolb⁴, who developed his ideas in the 70s of the twentieth century. The model was published in 1984. Kolb sees learning as a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. You can start the learning process at any stage, but it is important to respect the direction of the cyclical movement: The model consists of four phases:

1. Concrete experience
2. Observation and reflection
3. Forming abstract concepts
4. Testing in new situations

In this cyclic process, learning is not only a receptive and reflective activity, but also an experimental activity, in which observation and reflection form a unit with the action. Paulo Freire defines this *praxis* as an indissoluble unity of action and reflection.

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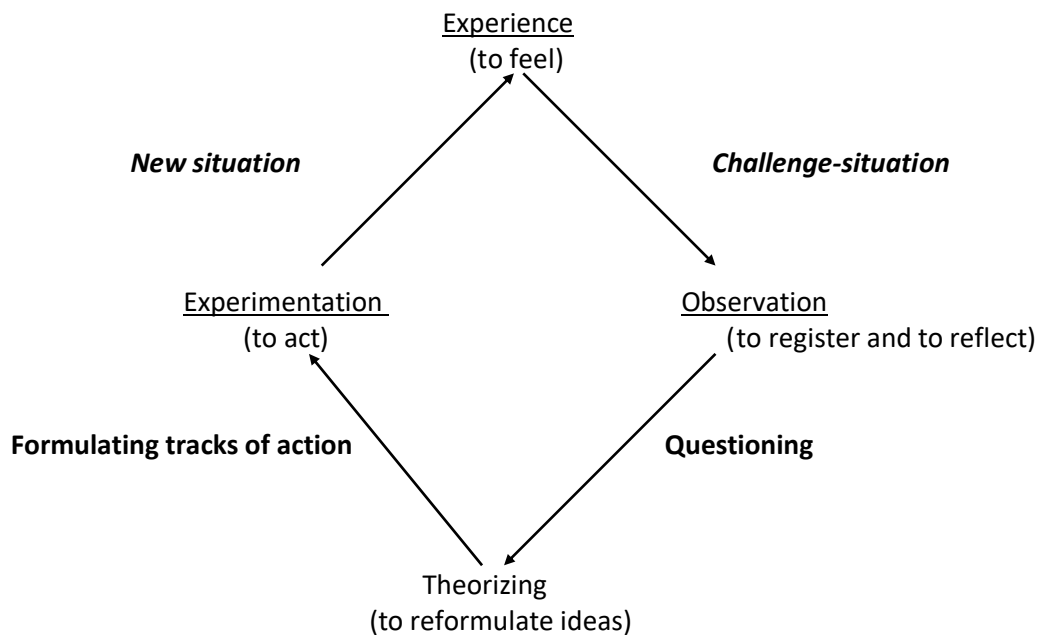
⁴ In <http://www.learning-theories.com/experiential-learning-kolb.html>



Prein (1988: 15)⁵ adapts the model, reformulating partially the phases:

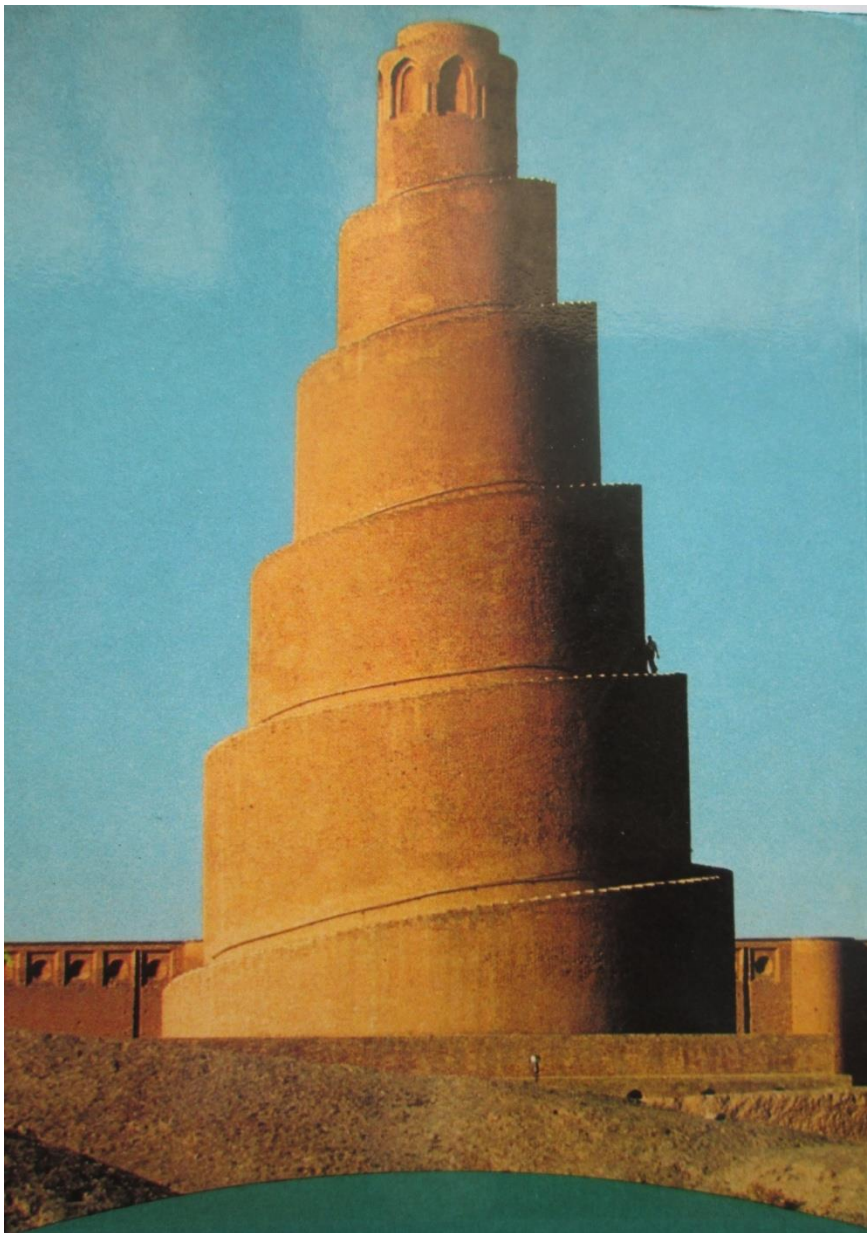
1. Experience (to feel)
2. Observation (to register and to reflect)
3. Theorizing (to reformulate ideas)
4. Experimentation (to act)

Introducing now the four phases of the Paulo Freires conscientization process (**Challenge-situation, Questioning, Formulation of tracks of action and New situation**) into the experiential learning cycle of Kolb as reformulated by Prein, we can use the following model:



The "why" of the experiential learning process is related to the desire to provide a more "complete" learning process. In this process there is room for both learning through inventorying practical experiences, as for the more abstract work of formulating concepts, as for sharing of information and experimentation in new practices. Each new learning cycle permits to deepen the reflection on the experience and the acquired knowledge.

Maria de Lourdes Pintasilgo used the metaphor of climbing the ziggurat, to suggest this non linear, but cyclical process of learning.



Which "Ziggurat" experiences do we have in our lives?

4. Valuing the narrative knowledge

Dufour distinguishes two major modes of discourse, narrative knowledge and demonstrative knowledge. The last one implies verification, experimentation and demonstration, while the narrative knowledge mobilizes an infinite background of legends, tales and stories that constantly renews itself "to the extent that the subjects take turns over time in the exercise of speech" (Dufour 1996: 32)⁶. The demonstrative knowledge allows to produce knowledge always valid everywhere, while the narrative knowledge "lets you produce multiple and unique knowings" (Ibid.:40). A part of this infinite background of narrative knowledge influences the development of values and attitudes, which in turn shape the "stories" which, in learning contexts, each participant tells in order to express their experience and the meaning of it. Every word of some importance may be "an inexhaustible source of incomprehension, of deception and manipulation" (Nijk 1978, quoted in Koning, 2006: 23)⁷, so it is to be expected that formation work has generally a great complexity.

5. Valuing narrative learning

In the conversational learning methodology it is possible to maintain and to explore the tension between the two knowledge approaches, through the participation of all persons in the exercise of the word. This makes it possible to mobilize the background of their "stories", by putting them in the context of a common knowledge act, while gradually revealing the reality in comparison with other ways of thinking, acting and intervening in the world, both in the private as in the public space. The confrontation between multiple and unique knowledge constructions enables the reformulation of concepts and the construction of knowledge more "valid everywhere".

In this narrative learning methodology it is important to distinguish the following underlying aspects: a hermeneutic one, when it comes to counting, formulating and recognizing intentions, objectives and results; "a critical-analytical aspect when it comes to question the story by analyzing its political-cultural context, that may be 'regulatory' or 'emancipatory'; a pragmatic aspect consisting in the formulation of alternatives and create perspectives of action "(Nijk, 1978 cit. in Koning, 2006, p. 35).

We propose the subordination of theoretical and technical learning processes to the fluid space of narrative learning through the methodology of conversational learning.

How do we value this type of learning?

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6. Creating white spaces

Creating a white space in learning contexts means:

- leave things vague as long as necessary;
- wait for what will emerge.

Creating white spaces means putting temporarily in the background modes of learning normally used in academic and professional contexts and valuing existential background knowledge. It implies slowing down the "production" of scientific and technical knowledge and stop in order to talk about what moves us in the world today. The result may be the mobilization of "some moral sources of our civilization" (Taylor, 2009: 106)⁸.

In order to objectify and question our own "stories", produced in the light and the shadow of the above mentioned infinite background of "texts", we need to become aware of our feelings, to "slow down our hearts" and free ourselves from prejudice, stereotyping and imposed value judgments, constructed and transmitted to us over time through generations.

The words each person speaks can contribute, or to the of ways of thinking and acting which maintain the status quo, or to more critical ways of thinking and acting.

The conversational learning methodology allows us to create contexts in which more critical voices can be heard, voices so often "lost" or suppressed in the plots of the texts of dominant "stories".

Also Ine van Emmerik refers to the importance of a non-linear understanding of the learning process, as proposed in the conversational learning methodology. "This learning tries to do justice to the plurality of human life, in which knowledge is sought for the here and now of *this* situation, in *this* case for *this* human being [...]. It makes an appeal to the hidden curriculum vitae [...]; there where the existential knowledge about morality and what it means to be human is hidden." And she asks: "But how can we explore this practice, how can one read a hidden curriculum vitae? It requires the skill to read the white between the lines of our own life "(Emmerik, 2012: 84)⁹.

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7. Promoting active listening

In the conversation that aims to provide learning it is essential that there is listening. It is a skill that needs to be mobilized to prevent that there is only a "passive apprehension" of those who wait patiently until the speaker stops, meanwhile preparing the "answer" (Prein 1988: 82-83)¹⁰. It implies checking that we "caught" the ideas and feelings of those who spoke in the right way. It also implies that possible misunderstandings are corrected before continuing the conversation.

It is important that whoever facilitates the session promotes not only talking but also listening. The facilitator will try to repeat in other words what was said when it is unclear. In an empathic way, he or she will show the implications of what has been said and devolve underlying feelings and values and may invite the person who spoke to say something more to clarify what was said.

The role of those who facilitate includes also inviting the person who talks too long to leave space for other people who have not had the opportunity to be heard. It also means accepting the person who spoke, in the sense of including him or her in a register of affection, without immediately making value judgments about right/wrong, good/bad, etc.



8. The methodology of conversational learning

With the methodology of conversational learning, the group context of learning becomes more complete and more complex, not only due to differences in views and knowledge, but also because of the diversity in learning styles and the "sources" of information mobilized: lived experience; observation and reflection; theorizing and action.

Kolb also identifies four learning styles which correspond to the phases of the cycle. According to Kolb, each person combines two of these four styles, through which he or she learns "better":

- Divergence (learning by observing the lived experience);
- Assimilation (learning through reflection, conceptualization and theorizing);
- Convergence (learning through action, applying concepts and theories);
- Accommodation (learning through experiencing during action).

The conversation is a powerful means to detect and objectify systems of conflicting beliefs, for example, the ideas that people have about gender roles. Despite the disagreements between people, you can learn together, create new knowledge and develop new ways of seeing the world. The experience of overcoming barriers, tensions, divisions and respecting differences during the conversation, is in itself a fundamental learning because transferable to other contexts. This pragmatic way of learning can contribute to the well-being of people, both within organizations in the public space, as in life contexts in the private space.

With the conversational learning methodology, the conversation can flow in a "safe" environment, because it is kept within the "borders" that define this space. The conversations allow the inventory of different interpretations and enable the development of new perspectives and new common understandings. In order this to happen it is important to be sensitive to the differences between people, differences between contexts in which they move, differences in attitudes and beliefs.



9. The "borders" of the conversational space

The conversational learning process provides a fluid, however structured, educational space. An adequate space to deepen awareness, to analyze preconceived ideas and make circulate new insights. It is a space where people can "slow down", discuss and reflect on their experiences. Talking together in order to "find new ways" and "let emerge new knowledge". And by doing this develop a critical look at the reality, promoting the construction of innovative practices.

The more diverse are the perspectives expressed during the conversation, the more attention should be given to this space, so that it can be a receptive space that allows creating a common base in the middle of the dialectical tensions.

To better structure the space of conversation, Baker, Jensen & Kolb¹¹ distinguish five dimensions to delimit and to define its borders. Each dimension is a dialectical tension presented on a continuum whose poles are valued in a non-hierarchical way. The integrative approach enables living with the tension along the dialectical continuum. And we learn from what comes up in the space between the poles.

The poles need to be kept in balance, so that it is possible to appreciate the diverse contributions of the people participating in the conversation. For this to happen it is necessary to address the tension between the poles not as dualistic phenomenon (the 'right' and 'wrong' in opposition), but as an integrating structure, which allows to address the range of possibilities between the poles.

The five dimensions are:

1. Apprehension (concrete knowing through experience) and Comprehension (abstract knowing resulting of study);
2. Intention (reflection) and Extension (action)
3. Epistemological Discourse (cognitive knowledge) and Ontological Recourse (tacit knowledge);
4. The individual and the relational, to allow the production of *connected knowledge*;
5. Status (ranking) and solidarity (linking).

1. Apprehension (concrete knowing through experience) and Comprehension (abstract knowing resulting of study)

It is important to start the learning process with the sharing of our experiences, which means "to tell" and "to take notes". Only after this we can take distance from our experience and reflect critically, promoting understanding and constructing an integrated knowledge.

To support the understanding, we can confront the experience and the reflection on the experience with theoretical support texts, or so called "challenge-texts". This makes it possible to question, to support, to extend or to reconstruct the ideas of those who participate. The reformulation of ideas allows us to enter differently in action, start something new and transform practices. The new practices will, in turn, be transformed into new experiences that can be observed and reflected, questioned or grounded theoretically, and thus lead to other forms of action.

2. Intention (reflection) and Extension (action)

The spaces where group awareness or training work is done are predominantly spaces for reflection. When the reflection process is done in short-term actions, such as the workshops with a duration of 3 or 6 hours, the action or experimentation, which is the next phase in the process of learning from experience, happens only after and outside the group process. In this case participants will not act together, but changes may be introduced in the personal contexts of life and work. Therefore it is important, in the last conversation of a workshop, to encourage the participants to define actions in which changes may be introduced. Changes related to the insights obtained in the workshop.

3. Epistemological Discourse (cognitive knowledge) and Ontological Recourse (tacit knowledge);

What matters is to mobilize the knowing, both cognitive as tacit and put it at the service of a deeper act of knowledge when, in conversation, the "knowledge reality" of the group is gradually revealed. This reality manifests itself in forms of divergent or convergent thinking, acting and intervening in the world.

In addition to the appreciation of the contributions of all persons involved in the exercise of the conversation, it is important to stress the importance of the role of the facilitator. The facilitator accompanies the group in the finding of the "right measure" in the appreciation of the type of knowledge present in the group. In order to balance the epistemological discourse (cognitive knowledge) and ontological recourse (tacit knowledge) it is necessary to take into account the two major risks in managing this tension. The first is the risk of "getting locked up" in the sharing of experience. We have to work with and against the experience, in the sense of questioning it. The second is to silence the experience with the transmission of information and theoretical knowledge, not rooted in experience. The facilitator has the task to provide

a bridge that allows a better understanding, based on both the discourses emerging in the conversation.

4. The individual and the relational, to allow the production of *connected knowledge*;

It is important that there is room for individual contributions in the presentation of experiences, during reflection and production of knowledge. Each person should be able to participate with his or her knowledge, but it is necessary to frame the contribution of each person in an effort of inclusive production of knowledge, so that no one gets left out as a spectator of what is said by others in group. Also here the adequate intervention of the facilitator is crucial.

5. The need for both status (ranking) and solidarity (linking)

In order to be "visible" and "seen" each human being needs to be with others in a space where, through speaking and acting, he or she can be heard. The person gains a 'position' in the group, which corresponds to a need, but this "ranking" should be in balance with the other pole of the continuum, which is the "linking", the power to connect with the other group members for the production of knowledge. Individual interests should not harm ties and solidarity between people who share the conversational space. Hannah Arendt¹² introduces the idea of "second birth": it is fundamental to think that the human being (in order to have the "status" of human being) needs to participate in the world, and thus contribute to the construction of human plurality. Her words constitute a deeper "justification" of using the conversational learning methodology:

It is with words and actions that we are inserted in the human world; and this insertion is like a second birth in which we confirm and assume the original and singular fact of our original physical appearance. It is not imposed by necessity, such as labour, nor governed by utility, such as work. It can be stimulated, but never conditioned by the presence of others in whose company we want to be; its impetus comes from the beginning, from the world when we are born and to which we respond starting something new on our own initiative (Arendt, 2001: 225).

¹² Arendt, Hannah (2001), *A condição humana*. (*The human condition*). Lisboa: Relógio D'Água.

10. Scheme of a conversational learning session

Workshop of 3 hours:

Conversation 1 (whole group) (45 min.)

Each person has some minutes to speak answering the following questions:

1. Question a?
2. Question b?

Conversation 2 (small groups of 3) (45 min.)

Reading of challenge-texts

Sharing of experiences

Coffee break (30 min)

Conversation 3 (whole group) (45 min.)

2 Fishbowls each of 20 minutes (5 minutes pause in the middle)

Question: Which important insights did we share in our small groups?

Conversation 4 (total 45 min.)

Questions to be commented/answered by the different participants/groups:

Example: Which perspectives of “action” in relation to shared leadership can we formulate to be introduced in our work situation?