The Art of Dialogue

prof. dr Noelle Aarts

Inaugural lecture upon taking up the post of Personal Professor of Communication and Change in Life Science Contexts at Wageningen University on 3 September 2015

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1   Introduction

Esteemed Rector Magnificus, colleagues, family and friends, ladies and gentlemen

When we are faced with a complex and contested issue, it is nowadays common to call for a dialogue. Some recent examples out of many:

To stop radicalisation of Muslim children, teachers are advised to become engaged in a dialogue with children who demonstrate 'risky' behaviour.

In relation to the economic situation in Greece, Christine Lagarde, chief of the International Monetary Fund, argued: "We can only arrive at a resolution if there is a dialogue".

The 'Science in Transition' initiative of the Royal Dutch Academy of Science holds that a dialogue between science and society is essential if science wants to maintain a serious position.

Recently, the Dutch government decided to start a national dialogue about our contested Black Pete.

We see similar calls in relation to the life science challenges on which we work in Wageningen, such as adapting to climate change, organising food security and food safety, searching for new forms of energy, developing and protecting nature, curbing obesity, and so on.

"We must find a new way of engaging society in the development of knowledge", stated our Wageningen University President Louise Fresco last year, when she presented her idea of organising 'Wageningen Dialogues'. And she is right, as Wageningen academics are not the only ones who are working on life science issues. Politicians, farmers, activists, artists, private sector parties, youth, indigenous people,

religious organisations, and many others also have opinions, are developing relevant knowledge, and are trying to find solutions to the problems they see. In the end, all these parties depend on others to realise outcomes, and hence need to exchange ideas and cooperate to some degree. This usually takes place through numerous informal and formal conversations, including – possibly – dialogues.

Following Jeffrey Ford, I understand conversations as *"the speaking and listening that goes between and among people"* (Ford, 1999:84). A dialogue can be considered as a special form of a conversation, defined by quantum physicist and dialogue practitioner David Bohm as *"a stream of meaning flowing among, through and between us"* (Bohm, 1990:1). The main characteristic of a dialogue, as compared to conversations in the form of a discussion or a debate, is that nobody is trying to win. Whereas a debate assumes that there is a right answer and that someone has it, a dialogue starts from the idea that all participants have pieces of the answer and that together they should make them into a workable solution. A dialogue invites collective thinking and inquiry, nicely summarised by Isaacs (1999) as 'the art of thinking together'.

According to the literature (Bohm, 1990; Isaacs, 1999; Pearce and Littlejohn, 1997; ter Haar, 2014), this would imply that participants recognise and respect differences, and that they are willing to connect and to adapt. In a dialogue, people supposedly:

• express their uncertainties and dilemmas,
• make their assumptions explicit,
• listen to one another without judgment,
• develop new shared meanings, and
• co-construct institutions to facilitate the process.

This would then result in what Martha Nussbaum (2006) calls *consensus overlapping*: parties with different views accepting solutions for different reasons.

However, research shows that it is extremely difficult to become engaged in a conversation that deserves to be called a dialogue. When doing my PhD, 20 years ago, I had my first experience of how difficult it is to foster a dialogue between people who think differently. I studied conversations between farmers and nature conservationists about nature and nature policies in the Netherlands. An important conclusion at that time was that these conversations often created more conflicts than solutions, increasing rather than bridging the distance (Aarts, 1998).

More recently, Pieter Lems found Dutch water board project leaders struggling and failing in their conversations with farmers, geared towards finding support for their

policies (Lems et al, 2013). Conversations not only resulted in bad relationships with the farmers, but also caused tensions within the water board, as project leaders failed to accomplish their mission.

Christine Bleijenberg (Bleijenberg et al, 2015) studies conversations between civil servants and citizens about new developments in their neighbourhoods. She found that citizens, when they felt that their arguments were not being taken seriously by the civil servants, simply did not show up for the next meetings, marking the end of what was supposed to be a shiny, happy participation process.

I guess many of us have had experiences with conversations that unintendedly created or worsened problems rather than achieved a productive agreement (Stone et al, 2010; see also Lems et al, 2013). Yet, we know that problem solving and innovation depend on the ability to create bridges between stakeholders with different backgrounds and interests, on people's capacities to cooperate and communicate, and on the wider social structures and institutions that enable or constrain such (Klerkx and Aarts, 2013; Leeuwis and Aarts, 2011). Both formal and informal conversations at different levels, taking place every day, play decisive roles in these processes. This makes conversations an important research topic. Hence, the aim of my chair is to achieve a more in-depth understanding of what is actually going on in real-life conversations relating to contested life science issues – this in the context of our globalised network society in which:

• everything is connected,
• causes and consequences are, more often than not, interdependent,
• the role of previously dominant institutions is decreasing,
• management expectations are still sky high, and
• social media generate even more unexpected dynamics.

At the same time however, the world appears to be fragmented and increasingly polarised, making it even more urgent to understand what actually happens in conversations.

I will continue by identifying mechanisms that help to understand why conversations develop as they do and why it is so difficult to achieve a dialogue. I will reflect on how micro-interactional dynamics relate to macro structures and discourses in society. And I will say a few words about what this all means for further research, for practitioners for whom conversations form an important part of their work, and for the education of our students. However, as a dialogue is considered to be important to realise change and innovation, I will first elaborate on the role and significance of

conversations in processes of ordering and re-ordering society, and thus position my research in broader discussions on communication and change.

2   Communication and change: towards shifting conversations

In most fields, including more conventional communication science, change is understood as the result of intentional activities in which the deployment of a certain set of instruments will result in a desired outcome. Communication, defined in terms of sender, message, medium, and receiver, is regarded as one of the instruments for achieving change. These conceptualisations of change and communication are suitable for relatively simple and non-conflictive situations that indeed allow us to consider the future as plannable and predictable: we have a means, we have an end, and we go straight in that direction. When, for example, I ask one of my students to turn off some lights because I want to show a YouTube film in class, this message, assuming that it is heard and understood, will probably indeed result in what I planned and expected: a dimmed room.

A dynamic approach to change and communication
Many changes, however, come about in a much messier manner. It is not uncommon for crucial turns in our life to be preceded by quite trivial choices and a string of coincidences. This may have been the case with the choice of our life companion, the job we currently hold, or, at a more societal level, the transition towards sustainable agriculture or towards the use of renewable energy resources.

A chaos and complexity perspective to change helps us understand why relatively insignificant events can sometimes have unexpectedly large consequences, whereas major events may not have any expected effect (Aarts, 1998; Burnes, 2005; van Woerkum et al, 2011). Instead of resulting from a single cause, change often results from an interplay of developments that take place simultaneously and reinforce one another towards a tipping point. What is easily considered to be the cause is often no more than the well-known straw that breaks the camel's back (Coleman et al, 2007).

Interdependence and interaction
Moreover, whether it is a marriage, a food crisis, obesity, or urban unrest, change cannot be understood only by the behaviour of an involved individual (Elias, 1970:148), nor only by coincidences and trivial choices. Mutual interdependence between people and the way in which this is formed in numerous interactions ultimately determine the course of things. People's changing activities and behaviours must therefore be understood and explained from the social bonds they have formed in interaction. In the words of Norbert Elias:

"from the interdependence of people comes an order of a very specific nature, an order that is more compelling and stronger than the will and reason of each individual person" (Elias, 1982:240).

The essence of a team sport may illustrate what I mean. Take soccer: there are rules and regulations and individual talents, but the course of the game is ultimately determined in the interactions between the players at the moment that the game is played and is therefore, by definition, unpredictable.

Change, therefore, is better described as the result of a dynamic interplay between ambitions, circumstances, and interactions (Aarts, 2009). We have, for instance, the ambition to climate proof the Netherlands, but in order to accomplish this we have to deal with circumstances that will entail all kinds of obstacles, but also opportunities, and all of this is revealed and dealt with in numerous conversations between all kinds of parties and persons.

An implication of this contextual and interactional perspective on change and communication is that it becomes more important to analyse and understand the process through which change comes about. As the Dutch soccer guru Johan Cruyff argues: a soccer player who is doing a good job has the ball at his feet for about 6 minutes during the 90-minute game. We tend to focus on these and other exciting moments, for instance when a goal is scored. However, it is much more important to focus on the 84 minutes in which the player does not have the ball at his feet, because in these minutes the more exciting moments are being prepared. If the focus is only on the ball, Cruijff says, both player and coach will always be too late to influence the result!

So, my focus is on the process, on how things become, on the mutual dependences between causes and consequences *and* between people from different backgrounds and interests, shaped and reshaped in interaction, and on how people deal with these things in conversations.

Shifting conversations
In conversations, people construe images of the world around them in terms of contexts and meanings that people themselves consider to be important.
Change both becomes visible and is produced in what Ford (1999) calls *shifting conversations*. Conversations are therefore a potentially powerful mechanism through which change and innovation come about, making them an interesting and important research object.

With this dynamic, interactional, and performative approach to communication and change in mind, I will now focus on the course of conversations about complex and contested life science issues, and explore why a proper dialogue is so difficult.

3 Understanding conversations for change and innovation in life science contexts

Little is known about the mechanisms and strategies that actually influence the course of conversations in life science settings, leading to deadlocks in discussions between dissenting actors or, conversely, to new, promising, and shared perspectives. Building on past and ongoing research of what actually happens in real-life conversations, I have identified a number of interrelated mechanisms that play decisive roles in the course of conversations. These are:

• selective perceptions and strategic framing in meaning making interactions,
• self-referentiality and its consequences for meaning making in interaction,
• one-dimensional listening,
• dichotomisation and other polarising strategies that people apply in order to legitimise their frames and framings,
• communication dynamics in wider social networks.

I will briefly discuss these mechanisms.

Perceptions and framings

When people in conversations are confronted with new information, whether this is text or an image, they immediately start constructing a story in their heads that forms the basis for their responses. We construct stories by combining and mixing up images, pieces of stories we heard before, specific associations, and so on. These stories are of interest because they consist of all kinds of implicit and explicit frames that tell a lot about people's backgrounds, experiences, feelings, values, knowledge, identities, and interests.

Although not always consciously, people in interaction actively construct specific frames in order to accomplish specific goals. As Entman (1993) puts it:

"To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993:52).

Framing is thus not merely a reflection of someone's background and earlier experience, it is a strategic act. Depending on specific situations, frames are produced, reproduced, and transformed in interaction. In other words, not only do we talk about reality in conversations, we also do something with reality as we talk about it (te Molder & Potter, 2005). Moreover, as we try to achieve substantive goals and, at the same time, regulate our identity and appearance in interaction with others, most conversations are multi-layered (Goffman, 1974). Thus, many things are at stake in a conversation, organised and expressed by the framings of the people involved.

When farmers and nature conservationists, for instance, discuss the implementation of nature policies, their framings of 'nature' are not the same. Each party's framing not only mirrors, but also justifies their own daily practices in relation to nature. Consequently, farmers strategically frame nature as everything that grows and blossoms, including their crops and their livestock, whereas nature conservationists usually frame nature with an emphasis on biodiversity, which is what they aim for. Citizens, in turn, construct different nature frames, depending on specific situations. When a citizen is visiting an exotic national park, a '*nature is exciting and beautiful*' frame will dominate, whereas a '*nature is dangerous*' or '*nature is annoying*' frame is applied when that citizen is confronted with natural disasters, scary insects, biting mosquitos, or an unknown forest by night.

The way people frame a situation thus gives direction to both problem definitions and solutions. These active and outcome-oriented dimensions of framing help us to understand why it is not easy to achieve common framings: as frames have great strategic value, people in conversation try to convince their interlocutors of the value of their own frame, rather than adopting a new frame that would not fit their existing context and interactional purpose.

Self-referential social systems
To further understand how strategic selections come about, Luhmann's (1984, 1990, 1995) theory of self-referential social systems is relevant (see also Brans and Rossbach, 1997). Luhmann (1990) builds on the work of biologists Maturana and Varela (1987) and argues that all living systems – including the cells that comprise our bodies, individual persons, and also organisations like our university or any social network – have a very strong inclination to reproduce themselves in forms varying from offspring, to identities, opinions, and ideas. To this end, they pick up those elements from the environment that define and maintain their own existence. The perception of the environment is thus determined by the system's own internal logic, rather than by the features of external information (van Herzele and Aarts, 2013).

Outside reality is reduced and transformed to the point where it becomes of internal relevance, which means that it can be handled or regulated (van Herzele and Aarts, 2013).

It is widely recognised that governments in particular function as self-referential social systems: what happens in society tends to make sense to them only insofar as it fits into categories specified in government rules and policies. If I am suffering from a severe lack of sleep because the neighbours' dog barks loudly every night, and I go with this complaint to the municipality, probably not much will happen. If I translate my complaint in terms of the maximum number of allowable decibels within a certain time limit, the municipality may become sensitive and address my complaint. With this act, both the government and I are actively reproducing the governmental system (Wagemans, 2002).

Citizens, in turn, use self-referential strategies when reconstructing governmental information in such a way that it reproduces their own everyday life-worlds. This is illustrated by a study of small forest owners discussing environmental policies in Flanders, undertaken by Ann van Herzele and myself. In these discussions, the forest owners never referred to the objectives of the policies, only to what the policies meant for them (van Herzele and Aarts, 2013), as we see in these pieces of a conversation among forest owners about governmental policy measures in Sint Niklaas, Belgium:

Speaker 1: "Because nothing is allowed anymore and you have to pay a huge amount. You have a piece of land with trees on it and that is cadastral income ... and then there is a shed on it where you can eat and store your grass mower ... And then you have to pay again for a second residence".

Speaker 2: "Very rich people who have a villa somewhere in Spain or the like… where they go on holiday ... but an ordinary human… a hard working human who can afford a little forest... that is quite something!... And if he is still limited by the government because he can't place anything on it … then I find it a sad affair … because for these people this is a dream" (Sint-Niklaas, April 30).

The forest owners co-construct realities that serve and reinforce their own point of view, increasing the distance between the government and themselves by framing the policies as unfair.

Clearly, an effective dialogue between two or more self-referential social systems, each reducing and transforming information so as to confirm and maintain their own system, is difficult.

One-dimensional listening
Our studies of discussions about contested nature show that people not only select when talking, but also selectively listen with the aim of accomplishing their goals. To gain insight into listening strategies, Scharmer's typology is useful. On the basis of an analysis of numerous interactions between people within organisations, Scharmer (2009) has identified four listening strategies that affect the course of conversations:

1 Downloading	Listening by selecting what is already known and what confirms people's existing opinions. Downloading clearly fits a self-referential attitude.
2 Object-focused listening	Listening by focusing on new information. Ideally, journalists as well as scientists are object-focused listeners. However, we all know that many journalists have their story ready before they call you to confirm it. We also know that scientists love to work with hypotheses, often with the aim of confirming them.
3 Empathic listening	Listening without judgment by trying to grasp the perspective of the other and even critically consider one's own perspective. Clearly, empathic listening is not easy; it is a skill that may require intensive training. Cultural anthropologists, psychotherapists, and professional coaches are trained to listen empathically, but this does not guarantee that they apply such if they themselves have a stake in the conversation.
4 Generative listening	Carefully balancing different types of listening out of which new understanding will emerge among participants.

Not surprisingly, Scharmer (2009) found that downloading is by far the most common listening strategy in conversations, whereas empathic listening, which is considered conditional for a constructive dialogue to take place (Bohm, 1990; Isaacs, 1999), is rare. In sum, our limited listening capacities and dominant listening behaviour form a third obstacle to achieving a constructive dialogue.

Dichotomisation and other polarising strategies
As mentioned earlier, our research indicates that interactional strategies such as framing often have, intentionally or not, a polarising effect, putting the opponent at an even greater distance. Polarising strategies may include blaming, insulting, exaggerating, using disclaimers ('I am not a racist, but...'), using what Christine Liebrecht calls intensifying language (Liebrecht, 2015) ('an incredible number of

people'), and making things bigger by connecting independent events or phenomena. An important polarising strategy we often encountered and which we are further exploring at the moment is dichotomisation: dividing something into two radically opposed categories.

A recently published study that I undertook with Ann van Herzele and Jim Casaer (van Herzele et al, 2015) on discussions in various contexts about the return of the red fox and the wild boar to Flanders shows that discussions in various contexts unfold along a restricted set of dichotomous positions, which were:

Belonging versus not belonging	*Do the animals belong in our nature in Flanders or not?*
Opportunity versus threat	*Are the animals useful or do they pose a threat?*
Intervention is needed/nature controls itself	*Do we need active management to control the animals or does nature eventually balance itself?*

Dichotomisation was a major pattern in the discussions. For example, the **judgment** of 'belonging' (versus 'not belonging') again rested on a dichotomous **definition** (the phenomenon is natural or artificial) of dichotomous **facts** (the animals came by themselves or were brought, they were present or absent in the past). So, if previously present species have come back on their own, it is seen a natural phenomenon and this makes them acceptable as belonging in Flanders, and thus also worthy of protection.

The literature shows that dichotomies are attractive because they are easily applicable devices for expressing and resolving complex policy disagreements. The simple binary logic of a dichotomy forces a choice between two alternatives: the negation of one of the two leads automatically to the conclusion that the other is the case: if something is not true, it must be false (Macagno and Walton, 2010). In everyday communication, dichotomies have – in our culture – become a standard way of expressing ourselves and making ourselves clear. They help us to make sense of complex and contested issues, as we have found in numerous formal and informal discussions about nature and nature-related policies in the Netherlands (Aarts et al, 2015).

However, dichotomisation also plays a crucial role in blocking conversations, as it forces acceptance of two dimensions, in situations in which both dimensions and poles coexist (Lewis, 2000) but also when different shades of grey between poles

deserve to be explored. Belonging or not has many dimensions. Sweet chestnut trees, for instance, were introduced to the Netherlands by the Romans some 2000 years ago, and this makes them an alien, not belonging species. Nevertheless, as sweet chestnut trees are totally integrated in our forests' ecosystems and have reached a balance with other species, they could belong to our Dutch landscape from an ecological perspective. In other words, accepting ambiguity and paradoxes leads us to consider new reasons and arguments, in this case for keeping the sweet chestnut tree in our forests, or not.

Bonding and silencing

Until now I have focused mainly on patterns emerging in conversations. It should, however, be realised that much of what is spoken in everyday talk is the product of repetition, the reappearance of what has been said before in different social contexts (Ford, 1999). In other words, in talk about complex life science issues, a lot of *discursive re-circulation* (Hook, 2001; van Herzele and Aarts, 2013; see also Giddens, 1984) takes place, because the interactions through which people construct and communicate meaning fit into broader configurations of social relationships.

We should thus take into account that people and their conversations are part of wider social networks and configurations. People are social beings, and connecting to others is the only way to fulfil the fundamental need to belong. Because people mostly feel comfortable with what they already know and with people who agree with them, they tend to interact mainly with likeminded people, especially when they feel threatened by those who think differently. This is reinforced by groupthink, the mechanism that makes people withdraw into their own group and close their minds to what is happening outside, as well as to deviant opinions and perspectives that may exist within the group (Janis, 1982). Groupthink results in what Noelle-Neumann (1984) calls *a spiral of silence*: to prevent social exclusion, people tend to conceal dissenting opinions. Silencing frequently happens in organisations (like our university), and also in complex collaboration processes taking place in interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary settings, as found by Nick Verouden. Although functional from different perspectives and for several reasons, silencing also contributes to not discussing different viewpoints within and between groups, and may simultaneously prevent the discovery of common ground between opposing groups, as Verouden's research shows (Verouden, van der Sanden and Aarts, under review).

As a result of unplanned self-organisation of likeminded people, the US, and also the Netherlands, have become what sociologist Richard Sennett (2012) calls an intensely tribal society, consisting of homogenous communities that indeed constantly seek confirmation from within and hardly have contact with one another. Tribalism is

characterised by solidarity with people like ourselves and aggression against those who differ (Sennett, 2012:3), resulting in ever-growing polarisation between groups.

The processes of connecting among likeminded people, defined by Robert Putnam as *bonding,* make processes of *bridging* between members of different networks – or speech communities from a communication perspective – even more difficult, as differences become more and more established and fixed (Putnam, 2001). The social networks that arise from bonding have, in turn, an enormous impact on our behaviours, as Christakis and Fowler also found in different studies of health-related behaviours (2007, 2008), concluding that even happiness is contagious and your friends can make you fat!

In spite of being largely free to choose our behaviours, we tend to choose what others choose, whether it comes to where to spend our holidays, what study programme to follow, the clothes we wear, or whether or not to grow a beard.

In short, society is spontaneously ordered and re-ordered through discourse and practices in multiple interacting networks (Ford, 1999; Hajer and Laws, 2006, Leeuwis and Aarts, 2011).Without being centrally steered, people organise them-selves into structures via a series of interactions in which they align, imitate, and conform towards uncontested realities, and the role of social media in these should not be underestimated. Such kinds of processes at the level of groups and network configurations tend to limit the space for shifting conversations, and thus for realising innovation and change by means of dialogue.

Social movements
However, deviant opinions that are silenced within a specific likeminded speech community may meet similar silenced opinions from other speech communities and become a new social movement – and discourse – that will further develop and expand in relation to what is happening in the wider environment. Examples are movements fighting for the rights of women, homosexuals, or refugees in different countries, environmental movements, right extremist groups in Europe, or the waves of protests and rebellions in the Arab world that we witnessed in 2010. Gradually or suddenly, a tipping point can be reached at which previously silenced discourses become dominant, paving the way for new directions and developments. An example of such a process is the discussions about 'safe energy' that took place after the Fukushima nuclear disaster, following the earthquake and tsunami in Japan in 2011. At first, this event led to increasing attention on solar and wind energy. In Germany, as long as solar energy was subsidised, people have indeed invested in it, more so than in the Netherlands. This also shows the importance of the institutional context in shaping how discussions and practices evolve.

Assuming that conversations indeed have the potential to contribute to structural change by generating or accelerating tipping points, more research is needed to identify patterns in discursive dynamics by combining frame analysis at a micro level with a quantitative analysis of semantics used in oral communication and written texts. Again, the role of social media in these processes is of great interest. Such coupled analysis is, for instance, being done by PhD student, Tim Stevens, who studies peaks and trends in discussions on social media about contested livestock breeding issues in the Netherlands. Tim searches for patterns in discursive practices that explain whether and how these peaks and trends result in new policies and innovations at different levels.

All in all, it can be concluded that conversations are of utmost importance, but we do seem to miss chances for making progress and solving problems, as we are not really good in conversations and therefore these often result in undesired side-effects, in conflicts, or in no effect at all. Underlying our difficulties in effectively engaging in a dialogue is the problem of coping with differences and diversity, and that is a fundamental problem, because we simply have to. As Jeffrey Ford argues:
"In the absence of people's willingness to speak and listen differently, there can be no conversational shift and no organizational change" (Ford, 1999:488).
Therefore, although we should not have illusory expectations, it remains essential to organise encounters between people who think differently, and to develop skills to constructively deal with differences and diversity in conversations.

4   The Art of Dialogue

"L'enfer c'est les autres" (Hell is other people)
Jean Paul Sartre, 1943

Accepting differences and diversity

From a dialogue perspective, it is not differences but the notion of a one single truth that leads to conflict. Last year, Hedwig te Molder revealed in her inaugural speech how scientists in particular, when interacting with society, tend to behave as if they have a monopoly on the truth: "*these are the facts, you better deal with them*" (te Molder, 2014), without taking into account all kinds of ambiguities and what te Molder calls hidden moralities that may be at stake. The more science presents itself as arriving at one single truth, the more it will clash with society (Bohm and Nichol, 2004). As Bohm and Nichol argue: "*If scientists could engage in a dialogue, that would be a radical revolution in science – in the very nature of science...*" (Bohm and Nichol 2004:44). In this respect, The Wageningen Dialogues form a highly exciting and relevant endeavour that deserves our full support!

Revisiting democracy as playing field for dialogue

Willingness to speak and listen differently would imply that people accept differences and diversity and are ready to openly discuss diverging viewpoints, as well as underlying assumptions and interests. The notion of the relevance of capitalising on differences and diversity for effective decision making is of course not at all new. More than 2000 years ago, for instance, the Greek philosopher Aristotle introduced the city as a *synoikismos*, a coming together of people from diverse family tribes, arguing that:

"... similar people cannot bring a city into existence" (Aristotle, cited in Sennett, 2012:4). Some 100 years ago, organisation scientist Mary Parker Follett wrote her book *The New State* in which she argued that...

"to be a democrat ... is to learn how to live with other men" (Parker Follett, 1918: 22–23). Political scientist Chantal Mouffe (2000), for instance, considers conflict and diversity as the main starting point for what she calls radical democracy, arguing that, when accepting that we live in a society in which people are free to have their own opinions, it is unavoidable that opinions clash (Mouffe, 2000). Again, it is not conflicting opinions that are the problem, but the way we communicate about them, or stay silent.

Mouffe's radical democracy has similarities with the notion of deep democracy, developed by Myrna Lewis in South Africa, suggesting that diverse voices and frameworks of reality are important and thus need to be considered in order to understand a problem or a phenomenon in its entirety (Mindell, 1992; Lewis, 2000); this contrasts with a more conventional approach to democracy in which the voice of the majority counts. The effect of such approaches to diversity and differences hinges on stakeholders' ability to become engaged in constructive dialogues.

Towards conversational responsibility

My ambition is therefore to develop building blocks for training in the art of dialogue, for practitioners for whom conversations form an important part of their work, for facilitators of such conversations, and for our students. Wageningen students are already widely recognised for their academic and practical life science knowledge, and it would be great if they could add the art of dialogue to their skills.

An important principle is that such training should not simply present normative and wishful-thinking ideas about how conversations should evolve (see Habermas, 1981; Bohm, 1990; Isaacs, 1999; Pearce and Littlejohn, 1997). Instead, it must be based on empirical research of how real-life conversations actually evolve. More research is still needed for a more in-depth understanding of:

- patterns in communication that lead to impasses, conflict, and polarisation, or to bridging and convergence, including mechanisms, strategies, and contextual conditions underlying these patterns,
- how self-referentiality is established, maintained, or broken in conversations,
- the role played by social media in shifts in opinions, discourses, and practices, and
- how institutional contexts shape the way discussions evolve and how discussions shape institutional contexts.

A second principle is that this training involves learning by doing. Participants should not only be exposed to theoretical insights, but also be encouraged to use these insights to reflect on patterns in their own discursive behaviour, including revealing their underlying assumptions, norms, and values that play a role, and the multiple goals they themselves try to achieve.

A third principle is that we should not only focus on barriers to dialogue, but also learn from positive experiences. In society, good practices, based on unconventional and creative thinking, can be found. An example is the communication about the current development of the North–South subway line in Amsterdam, nicely described by Mieke Muijres (Muijres and Aarts, 2012). As many of you probably know, this project was nearly stopped midway through, because of a total lack of trust and support from Amsterdam citizens.

In 2009, a new communication team completely reversed the one-sided way of informing people and promoting the subway. Instead of making communication plans behind a desk, this team is constantly present in the street, talking and listening to citizens, taking their concerns into account, and trying to solve problems on the spot. The excavators play an important role in the conversations. And with the aim of creating mutual understanding, citizens are invited to visit the construction site underground whenever they want, and even to make use of it for fancy parties, photo shoot sessions, fashion shows, and so on. The result of these creative strategies for interacting, involving, of constantly having an eye for what is actually going on, and building relations by means of numerous everyday conversations is that – at least today – the construction process is far less contested and even embraced by citizens who live near the construction sites. This example teaches us that we should take into account *where* to organise a dialogue and *among whom*, that we should value informal conversations, and, most importantly, that organising encounters and recognising opposing opinions help stakeholders to come to solutions that they can live with.

Clearly, conversations make a difference. In my view, the time is ripe to develop *conversational responsibility*, which means that people in general become willing and

able to reflect on, and take into account, both the motivations and the consequences of their speaking and listening behaviour (Ford, 1999:494).

Conversational responsibility also means that we use language in a careful and responsible way. Talking about 'illegal people flooding our country', instead of 'refugees from Syria searching for a safe place to stay' is not without consequences. It influences how audiences experience things, the opinions they have, and the decisions made at different levels. For this reason, the American Associated Press (AP) has recently decided not to use the term 'illegal people' anymore as it criminalises and dehumanises refugees who have the international right to be protected.

Conversational responsibility means that we realise that our conversations are never non-committal: whether it is about GMOs, about livestock breeding, about the return of wildlife, or about refugees trying to reach fortress Europe, our seemingly unimportant everyday conversations in the end shape macro structures and developments in society in ways that no one may have intended (Kim and Kim, 2008) – the kind of unintended consequences to which Norbert Elias was referring when he argued that from the interdependence of people comes an order that is more compelling and stronger that the will and reason of each individual person (Elias, 1982).

A word of thanks

Esteemed Rector Magnificus, colleagues, students, family, friends, ladies and gentlemen,
With its emphasis on core issues of life and its mission to "Explore the potential of nature to improve the quality of life", Wageningen University is an absolutely exciting and challenging work environment. I feel it as a great privilege to be part of it. And I thank the university for its trust in me.

I thank my colleagues at the Strategic Communication Group and at our CPT (Communication, Philosophy, and Technology) section, including our great support staff, headed by our irreplaceable Vera Mentzel, for offering an inspiring and cosy working environment, and especially our chair Peter Feindt for his kind support.

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Actually, the idea of focusing on the art of dialogue, as a deepening of my interest in conversations for organisational change, which was the subject of my inaugural lecture in Amsterdam, results from numerous conversations with communication practitioners who feel that, to be effective in our 21st century, globalised society, a serious investment must be made in developing dialogue skills.

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'When faced with complex and contested issues, it is nowadays common to call for a dialogue. However, research shows that it is extremely difficult to get engaged in a conversation that deserves to be called a dialogue in the sense that nobody tries to win and that participants are open to developing new common insights. Whereas communication is the only way to connect to people who think differently, research shows that people mainly communicate with like-minded people, resulting in single truths and polarisation between groups. Preventing this requires conversational responsibility: people need to anticipate the possible wider impact of their utterances, and use language in a careful and responsible way.'