

Better Thinking in a Global World: The IDM Approach to Teaching Dialectical Thinking Through DTF

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Abstract

The article describes a methodology for teaching dialectical thinking that is based on Laske's *Dialectical Thought Form Framework* (DTF; 2008). It outlines the historical origins of the framework; reasons for its focus on understanding others' thinking documented in transcribed speech; its capability to assess the phase of dialectical thinking development of individuals; procedures of dialectical thinking rehearsal; and the components of the associated IDM certification program.

Introduction

Momentous events regarding the global development of thinking occurred between 1978 and 1993. Their outcomes have been systemically gathered in volume 2 of my Measuring Hidden Dimensions (2008; <http://www.interdevelopmentals.org/publications-MHDv2.php>) fifteen years later. I am referring to M. Basseches' research aimed to put dialectical thinking on an empirical basis (simultaneously demystifying it), and R. Bhaskar's incisive review of the dialectical tradition from Plato to Sartre in his book "Dialectic: The pulse of freedom". In addition, A. V. Miller published a superbly accurate translation of Hegel's "Science of Logic" into English, the world's lingua franca (1999). What, after Adorno's and Horkheimer's death in the 1970s had seemed a lost tradition had been revived.

Between 1998 and 2008, forty years after studying with the Frankfurt School founders, I put in place DTF, the *Dialectical Thought Form Framework*. The methodology is based on the integration of M. Basseches' empirical studies in the development of dialectical thinking (1978-1984) with R. Bhaskar's systemic review of dialectical traditions (1993) since Plato. By connecting these two strands, in my view I deepened Basseches' work in a philosophical, and Bhaskar's work in an empirical, direction. Based on having taught DTF for a decade, this fall (2011) IDM introduces a certification program for dialectical thinking, in addition to the developmental assessment and evidence based coaching programs the Institute already provides.

There is no Dialectical Thinking "in general"

There is a temptation to speak of "dialectical thinking" in general, but to no avail. There is no such thing. Nor is dialectical thinking simply "meta-systematic", a term borrowed from the formal-logical tradition. Since Plato, many dialectical traditions have formed, more recently that of Adorno ("Frankfurt School"), Sartre ("Existentialism") and Bhaskar ("Critical Realism"). DTF does not aim to replicate or replace them; it re-energizes them.

IDM's *Dialectical Thought Form Framework* (DTF) is as idiosyncratic as other dialectical schools have been. Like its creator, it is a child of its time, and is specific to recent research in adult developmental and philosophy. On account of its historical roots, the dialectic taught by way of DTF has the following characteristics:

- It continues innervations of the Frankfurt "Critical Theory" School: to find "truth" in a world mediated by global commerce.
- It is empirical, --- based on listening to, and analyzing (or "thinking aloud about"), recorded or written down human speech seen as evidence of individuals' thinking in natural language, as prompted in dialog.
- It is focused on what is absent, missing, distorted, suppressed, camouflaged, hidden, lied about, not known, kept behind barricades of formal logical thinking, etc.
- It is a tool for exploding "personal experience" — turn it on its head, make it's certainty suspect, put it in question, broaden it to what is common ground with others, create a bigger picture of what is focused on by an individual in a moment of real time.

- It is not restricted to the social world but is active in the physical cosmos (see Bhaskar) –
- thus the difference between *Quadrants of Dialectic* and *thought forms*, -- a weak human attempt to keep up with the cosmos by making conceptual efforts.

It requires systematic training, as we offer in the 3-step certification program described below.

Learning dialectical thinking at IDM

To be certified in dialectical thinking students take three courses (40 CEUs):

1. an introduction to dialectical thinking (12 hrs)
2. an action-learning course in using dialectical thinking (16 hrs)
3. a hands-on course in using dialectical thinking in a particular specialty, such as coaching, leadership development, or other (12 hrs.) Below are some reflections on how dialectical thinking can best be learned and made one's own, which derive from my life long practice of it.

Dialectical thinking – the peak of human cognitive development

Cognitive development in adults is today considered a critical and lead developmental line, but outside of IDM's DTF there is a paucity of methodological tools and approaches to assess it with any degree of reliability or even credibility. Applications of insight into, and findings about, adult cognitive development touch many commercial, political, pedagogical and ecological endeavors now under way. Many of them have the potential to add great value to business activities in evident ways (see the list of applications below). Their relevance for personal development as well as the "business case" for dialectical thinking is therefore a strong one.

As shown in volume 2 of my *Measuring Hidden Dimensions* (2008), cognitive development after 25 years of age naturally veers toward holistic and systemic thinking. At the same time, for such thinking to become dialectical, thorough training is needed. As M. Basseches has demonstrated, dialectical thinking is an extension of formal logical thinking that develops in phases, not stages, beginning in late adolescence. It is a universal gift to mankind, first championed in a high time of discovery by Socrates and the late Plato in the 5th century BC. The discipline of dialectical thinking is found in both East and West. In the latter, it has a distinguished, although intermittent, history starting with Plato, and comprises recent thinkers such as Hegel, Marx, Adorno, Horkheimer, Sartre, and Baskhar.

The defining criteria of thinking dialectically do not lend themselves to distinguishing discontinuous world views in the sense of "stages", but phases of dialectical thinking development can be encapsulated as different "frames of reference". In each higher phase, an increasingly larger set of patterns Basseches called "schemata" and I call "thought forms" is used by the thinker, and these thought forms are increasingly coordinated and integrated with each other, on account of which highly complex thoughts can be built. Such thoughts help do justice to the complexity of the world into which we have been thrown. The phase of dialectical thinking a person is in provides a succinct definition of his/her present Inquiring System.

Fluidity of thinking

Dialectical thinking can best be assessed in terms of the fluidity of thinking beyond formal logical thinking that is commonplace among adults. Bereft of logical thinking dialectical thinking is pure fiction since it "rubs against" formal logic to bend it to its purposes: understanding the transformations of holons (organized wholes). This it does by creatively using *preservative negation* which violates the logical principle of excluded middle ("A is always A, and is never B"). Thus, dialectical thinking is a way of freeing individuals' *sense making generator* from the monopoly of formal logical constraints.

Fluidity in dialectical thinking is succinctly measured by DTF. Such fluidity measures a person's "freedom of thought", the mental space available to the individual to seek freedom from convention, coercion, and conformism. Because dialectical thinking specializes in understanding transformations, it is sometimes also referred to as "transformational thinking", but this term is too

fuzzy. As shown in my volume 2, fluidity varies with epistemic position (King & Kitchener 1994, Laske 2008) and, indirectly, social-emotional level, both together defining the “stance” (positioning toward the world) required for exercising transformational thinking. Due to the stance required for thinking beyond formal logic constraints, dialectical thinking is not for everyone.

Why teach what is developing naturally?

If dialectical thinking is a natural outcome of phases of adult development after age 25, why does it need to be taught? Does teaching it promote the speed and degree of complexity of such thinking? Answers to this question depend on one’s empirical experience with assessing social-emotional versus cognitive development. Using CDF, I have found that Kegan is right in saying that individuals are subject to their stage of meaning making, but I have not found this to be entirely true for cognitive development: *construct awareness* in the strictly cognitive (in contrast to S. Cook-Greuter’s social-emotional) sense can be assessed as well as taught with some success.

Following the Frankfurt School model

I have encountered the notion that to think dialectically one ought to begin by analyzing one’s own thoughts. But what is meant by “dialectically” and what are “one’s own thoughts”? Since no dialectics “in general” exists, where is one to begin in such self analysis? Even within DTF [using thought forms], analyzing ones own thoughts lives off a very fuzzy “object”.

Some think that meditation can provide a grasp of “one’s own” thoughts, but meditation does not have a conceptual, but rather a social-emotional, focus. It is divorced from the social common ground that makes an individual what it is. In meditation, it is “my thoughts” that are analyzed, but not *thinking* in a language-suffused world, as Socrates demonstrated in the Athens market place. In analyzing one’s own thoughts, there is residual self-fixation quite contrary to the open world of reality approached dialectically that the ancient Greek thinkers taught us.

This is why it is more promising to analyze others’ thoughts documented by transcribed speech and, with experience in text analysis, in open conversation and dialog.

It is for this reason that in teaching dialectical thinking at IDM we follow the model of the *Frankfurt School* where text analysis embedded in conversation about texts was focal in learning the craft. The learning model followed there was exceptional. Two philosophers, Th. W. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, founders of the Frankfurt School, engaged in conversation during a seminar on Hegel (“Philosophisches Hauptseminar”), and students followed their interpretation of Hegel texts, learning from the conversation and from Hegel’s Logic simultaneously. Students increasingly partook of the conversation the two philosophers were having, and eventually grew to peers with them in their understanding and practice of dialectic.

At IDM, we have retained the *text analysis focus* of learning dialectical thinking and have, by necessity, replaced the conversation between the two philosophers by verbal interchanges between two cohort subgroups analyzing and discussing structured cognitive interviews in the sense of Basseches. The resulting conversation is one between the student presenter of transcribed cognitive interview fragments, on one hand, and members of the cohort including the instructor, on the other.

Since cohort members do not know the individual interviewed, a balance is created between two foci: what the interviewer “heard” and probed during the interview, and what cohort members “hear” when reading the transcript of selected fragments of the interview (selected by the presenter). Here, less is more. Cohort members have the advantage of starting from a blank slate on which interview content is incidental and can easily be put “in brackets”, to focus solely on thought structure. To do so is typically more difficult for the interviewer and presenter of an interview since s(he) retains a knowledge of the interviewee, and may find it more difficult to detach from that knowledge. This can be a hindrance to objectivity since cohort discussion is

focused on the *structure* (not the content) of what has been said by the interviewee in response to probes of the interviewer, not the interviewee per se.

Administering and evaluating cognitive interviews as the royal road to learning dialectical thinking

The use of transcribed interviews in learning dialectical thinking is not accidental. Structured interviewing is a particular kind of conversation that invites the use of dialectical thinking, at least the use of thought form classes, if not individual thought forms. Because it is an interchange between two thinkers, one leading the other, it is seen at IDM as a primary training ground for learning to practice dialectical thought forms.

Interviews are structured conversations whose speech flow documents “how the interviewee thinks”. The content (information) that appears in interview fragments could have been conceptualized and formulated by the interviewee in many different ways (in fact, in at least 28 different ways if we think of the set of dialectical thought forms). Thus the cohort, whose members together evaluate cognitive interviews, is tasked with discerning the highly specific way in which a particular interviewee shaped thought content in response to a schooled interviewer’s probes.

In light of the constructivist notion that what is thought “about” (thought content) is *constructed* by a speaker/thinker, a dialectical analysis of thought content has the purpose of **understanding the sense making generator** – in contrast to the *meaning making generator* – **that generated the interviewee’s speech**. This generator can be accurately captured by using the methodology deriving from Basseches’ work (and refined in my 2008), according to which it is the number and degree of coordination of dialectical thought forms that determines an interviewee’s present fluidity. Although transcribed interviews are favored materials at IDM (since they document the phase of dialectical thinking development of an interviewee), a page from Hegel’s logic, a published article by Bernanke or Wilber, or any other text deemed worthy of dialectical scrutiny can be used as an equivalent.

A new IDM Program starting in the Fall of 2011

Since dialectical thinking is not taught in the North American or even European education system, people’s propensity to think dialectically is presently somewhat diminished, compared to earlier centuries. What Adorno called the *administered society* has no interest in promoting dialectical thinking, although it has resigned itself to tolerating “critical thinking”, a shallow version of it based on formal logic, and “meta-systemic” thinking promoted by cognitive theorists based in formal logic.

Despite this situation, the present generation, enmeshed as it is in global warming, demographic and political revolutions the world over, and a commercial climate stifling individual creativity, is showing signs of tiring of logical thinking as the principal medium of inquiry, for better or worse. *The notion that everybody has the resources to think dialectically, and indeed is naturally gifted to do so, needs to be resuscitated, not only for professional pursuits.*

For details on the IDM program, see <http://www.interdevelopmentals.org/pp-DTF-certification-program.php>.

Program components described in detail

The DTF Program, first of its kind, comprises three steps.

Step One: Introduction to DTF

In this module, students are introduced to the DTF Manual contained in volume 2 of Laske’s *Measuring Hidden Dimension*, for the purpose of learning to focus their attention on the structure of thought, in contrast to its content. They do so in interaction with others they interview and are interviewed by. They learn procedures for leading structured conversations for the purposes of

cognitive interviewing, coaching, psychotherapy, and related pursuits, and the use of thought forms as mind openers.

To provide a historical and theoretical background, students are also taught the basics of DTF dialectical thinking: -- the trajectory of cognitive development over the life span according to research, the history of the Western dialectical tradition (delivering models of adult cognitive development), the operationalization of dialectical thinking through thought forms by Basseches, the meaning and content of the four Quadrants of Dialectic, their representation in the human mind as classes of thought forms, the epistemic preconditions of dialectical thinking,

Step Two: Dialectical Thinking Intensive

This step is focused around a practice module. It presupposes the introductory course as a theoretical background. As described at <http://www.interdevelopmentals.org/pp-dialectical-thinking-intensive.php>, the course comprises 8 2-hr practice sessions. It follows an “action learning” model in which the instructor acts as coach helping the cohort interview and converse with a volunteer member discussing a problem s(he) is encountering. **It is the task of the coach to focus both interviewer and interviewee in terms of a “base concept” present in the interviewee’s speech, and to call out thought forms that could elaborate it and are either present, or could be present, in the interviewee’s speech flow.** In this way, the coach is focusing the cohort on the emerging “text” the interviewee’s sense making generator is delivering to everybody’s ears. The action learning procedure is anchored in a real-world problem the volunteer has chosen to be having; it unfolds as a *consultation to the interviewee’s ongoing mental process (process consultation)*.

It is the task of the members of the cohort other than the instructor/coach and volunteer/interviewee, to partake of the conversation with the latter one after the other, or in an open forum. There is no passive audience; everybody is engaged either as a speaker or listener. Interviews are no longer than 15 minutes. After each interview, cohort members share their listening experiences, critique the interventions they saw and heard occurring, and deliberate about more effective interventions that might have been used.

The Intensive is structured in terms of *the scope of dialectical thought forms scheduled for rehearsal in a particular session*, as follows:

Session 1: Review of the structure of dialectical thinking and its difference from formal logical thinking, of classes of thought forms, and of individual thought forms

Session 2: Practicing structured interviewing using the template of the *Three Houses*

Session 3: Practicing Context thought forms

Session 4: Practicing Process thought forms

Session 5: Practicing Relationship thought forms

Session 6: Practicing transformational thought forms

Session 7: Bringing all four classes of thought forms together in interviews, conversations, and interview evaluations

Session 8: Review and wrap-up.

Step Three: Selected Applications

While the intensive provides a substantial rehearsal of DTF thought forms, it does not explicitly address specific issues in well circumscribed domains. For this reason, but also to promote a further deepening of DTF dialectical thinking, the third step consists of immersing oneself in dialectical thinking within a specific domain of professional discourse. In this step, the instructor is an expert in a particular domain. The following specialties are candidates to be offered:

- a. cognitive interviewing

- b. cognitive-developmental coaching
- c. leadership development
- d. talent management
- e. management consulting
- f. business strategy development
- g. innovation and change issues
- h. decision making dilemmas
- i. culture building
- j. conflict resolution (mediation between stakeholders)
- k. innovation and change issues
- l. political-ecological debate
- m. text analysis and text authoring

Credentialing

After partaking in the three modules of the program described above, participants earn the **IDM Certificate in Proficiency in the Dialectical Thought Form Framework**. The certificate is associated with 40 CEUs acquired over 5-6 months.

Study materials

Upon registration, students receive the following materials:

1. A set of slides entitled "Introduction to DTF"
2. Volume 2 of Laske's *Measuring Hidden Dimensions* which includes the Manual of Dialectical Thought Forms.
3. Article: "On the autonomy and influence of the cognitive line: Reflections on adult cognitive development peaking in dialectical thinking"

Slides specific to a particular application (step 3) will be provided in time.

CONCLUSION

As Socrates put it, dialectical thinking is a way of "remaining friends with oneself". This modest, self directed characterization – which made complete sense in the ancient Greek world because "self" was not an individualistic concept -- does not by far exhaust the potential of such thinking today. We are closer to the truth with Bhaskar's notion that dialectical thinking represents "the pulse of freedom" in a social community.

The freedom Bhaskar refers to, in my view, is foremost one from barriers to understanding the human condition at large, defined as it is by the fact that humans are deeply embedded in nature, and that their evolution is part of nature which, at the same time, they increasingly control. Thus, human agency, for all its value, is a two-sided sword. When the double-sided nature of that sword is recognized in light of *thinking*, a "better" world becomes at least a faint possibility.

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