

From “Developmental Theory” to a Dialogical and Dialectical Epistemology: Introducing Three Modes of Structured Dialog with Clients

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In this text, I focus on the central relevance of interviewing skills for being able to lead a structured developmental dialog in the sense of the *Constructive Developmental Framework* (CDF), whether social-emotional or cognitive. I want to make it clear that the certification as a *Master Developmental Consultant/Coach* at the Interdevelopmental Institute (IDM) is not a certification in practicing “developmental theory”, but rather an independent discipline derived from it, namely, *a dialogical and dialectical epistemology*. Developmental theory per se is taught at IDM only in applied courses which serve as a basis for learning the CDF epistemology, and in this sense are mere teasers for learning to think and listen developmentally, dialogically, and dialectically. What matters is not the theory, but its applications in work with human resources (“human capital”). This has always been the focus of IDM teaching.

Abbreviations:

CDF = Constructive Developmental Framework (Laske); DCR = Dialectical Critical Realism (Bhaskar); DSF = Dialectical Schema Framework (Basseches); DTF = Dialectical Thought Form Framework (Laske); IDM = Interdevelopmental Institute (Laske).

When I started writing my two books on *Measuring Hidden Dimensions* in 2005, it was clear to me that the most progressive part of Kegan’s and Basseches’ theories is found in the empirical interviewing methodology they grounded their theories in (and have remained entirely silent about ever since). Rather than engaging primarily with the abstract concepts these theorists put forward, what interested me primarily was how through an **interviewing dialog** evidence could be gathered about individuals’ and groups’ present way of meaning and sense making. This is because understanding individuals’ *frame of reference* (in NLP the “map”) is the crucial thing in human resources work.

What I saw as the gold of developmental theory, namely the interviewing required to obtain developmental evidence by listening to individuals, laid buried until CDF came into being in the year 2000, and still remains buried for the majority of developmental practitioners after 15 years. This is because of the huge amounts of “theory” and ideology that have been heaped upon especially Kegan’s conceptual interpretations of interview-based empirical findings, without any clear reference to the empirical basis of his insights (even in his own later work).

My prior training equipped me for focussing on interviewing in a unique way. My reading of both theorists (who were my teachers) derived from several different sources: being a composer

and musician; my schooling in dialectical philosophy in the 1960's and in psychological protocol analysis (H. Simon) in the 1970's, the organizational interviewing I practiced as member of a big US consulting firm (ADL) in the 1980's, as well as my training as a clinical psychologist (Boston Medical Center) in the 1990's.

As a result of my training in these various modes of dialog with clients and patients, in my two books I moved, I would say today, from developmental theory to a new kind of epistemology (theory of knowledge), one that is based on dialog and thus has the potential of becoming a broader social practice, in contrast to argument-based dialectical epistemologies such as Adorno's and Bhaskar's which put themselves at risk of remaining elitist.

In this short paper, I want to highlight some of the outstanding features of this transition from developmental theory to dialogical epistemology that occurred in CDF. Eventually, this transition allowed me to bring together the main tenets of the Kohlberg and the Frankfurt Schools, something nobody had either consciously attempted, or stumbled upon, before.

While others read especially Kegan's, but also Basseches', work for the sake of constructing either abstract or applied theories of adult development or bolster their notions of "human nature", I was most impressed by the qualitative research on individuals they had done. They had wanted to explain how adult consciousness develops over the life span, knowing that knowledge about this development could be of momentous importance for working with people in a practical and emancipatory way. Through their empirical work on what I call *social-emotional* and *cognitive* development, respectively, they had indirectly also provided key insights into why it is that adult development has a huge impact on how people deliver work in the sense of E. Jaques. All three researchers shed much light on the vital issue of *frame of reference* as something that determines not only how one lives, but also how one delivers work. Their lessons still have not been understood in organizations in which people are still talking about "competences" as if they were not merely the tip of the iceberg of human work capability.

In short, I found myself aiming for a new *theory of work* that would go beyond Marx, who never thought about the internal workplace from which work is delivered (Laske, 2009).

In focusing on interviewing and the scoring of recorded interviews (which I always saw as inseparable), I implicitly took to heart what is conveyed in the quote below by my teacher Adorno:

Social analysis can learn incomparably more from individual experience than Hegel conceded, while conversely the large historical categories, after all that has meanwhile been perpetrated with their help, are no longer above suspicion of fraud.

...The individual has gained as much in richness, differentiation, and vigour as, on the other hand, the socialization of society has enfeebled and undermined him. In the period of his decay, the individual's experience of himself and what he encounters contributes once more to knowledge, which he had merely obscured as long as he continued unshaken to construe himself positively as the dominant category.

Theodor W. Adorno, Minima Moralia

In this quote he basically says that rather than be guided by abstract concepts about development (such as “stages” and “phases”), one can gain deeper insight by delving into the frames of mind of individuals, as he himself did in “Authoritarian Personality” (1950).

Given my psychological training, I thought that the main issue in teaching CDF-interviewing as a dialog method would lie in making clear the separation between the focus on “how am I doing” (a psychological issue) and either “what should I do and for whom?” (the social-emotional issue) or “what can I know about my options in the world?” (the cognitive one).

This triad of questions for me defines the mental space from within which individuals deliver work and lead their life, without ever quite knowing how to separate them in order to reach full self insight.

Serendipitously, I got to know Bhaskar's work just at the right time, when I was in the midst of writing volume 1 of Measuring Hidden Dimensions and preparing for volume 2. Reading his “Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom” (1993) challenged me to reflect on the DTF-dialectic I had been teaching, but also to reflect on its relationship to my teacher Adorno's work. Although a declared enemy of ontology which he accused of sealing the oppressive *status quo* of capitalist society, Adorno had viewed social reality, as well as the human mind, as intrinsically dialectical. He demonstrated that view in the analysis of musical works, but also through philosophical text analysis in both of which he was a master.

I noticed right away that Bhaskar's MELD, the four moments of dialectic, were not only a step beyond Hegel and Adorno, but also equivalent to Basseches' empirically derived and validated four classes of thought forms, and that Bhaskar's ontology was only feebly developmental and epistemological, mainly in his theory of eras of cognition and types of epistemic fallacies. His main issue was to overcome nominalistic post-modernism which is a flat denial of any kind of ontologically real world, and do so for the sake of human freedom. In this endeavor,

epistemology – where the freedom was to be experienced -- had only minimal chances to revolutionize itself.

I began to see that, from Bhaskar’s vantage point, the CDF-based cognitive interviewer was centrally dealing with “epistemic fallacies” and “category errors” committed in society, and that the interviewer’s central task was therefore to “reproduce” these errors, that is, show them to be fallacies by interpreting arguments found in texts. Bhaskar was very aware of the stark consequences for society of these errors, which he saw as supporting oppression. As I did in CDF, he saw that category errors people make in society derive from their strictly logical thinking (analytical reasoning). These errors lead to gross distortions of the reality of the world people are dealing with in their work and life.

In my cognitive interviewing, I constantly encountered THE epistemic fallacy according to which the world is reduced to what is presently known about it (“epistemic fallacy”), with the benign neglect of pervasive absences. Taking into account Bhaskar’s distinction between the *real*, *actual*, and *empirical* worlds, I began to see that individuals who could not rise beyond this fallacy, and thus could not transcend the actual world – what the real world appears to be, rather than what it is – were surely stuck. In the CDF view of work capability that meant also that they were not as effective at work as they could be.

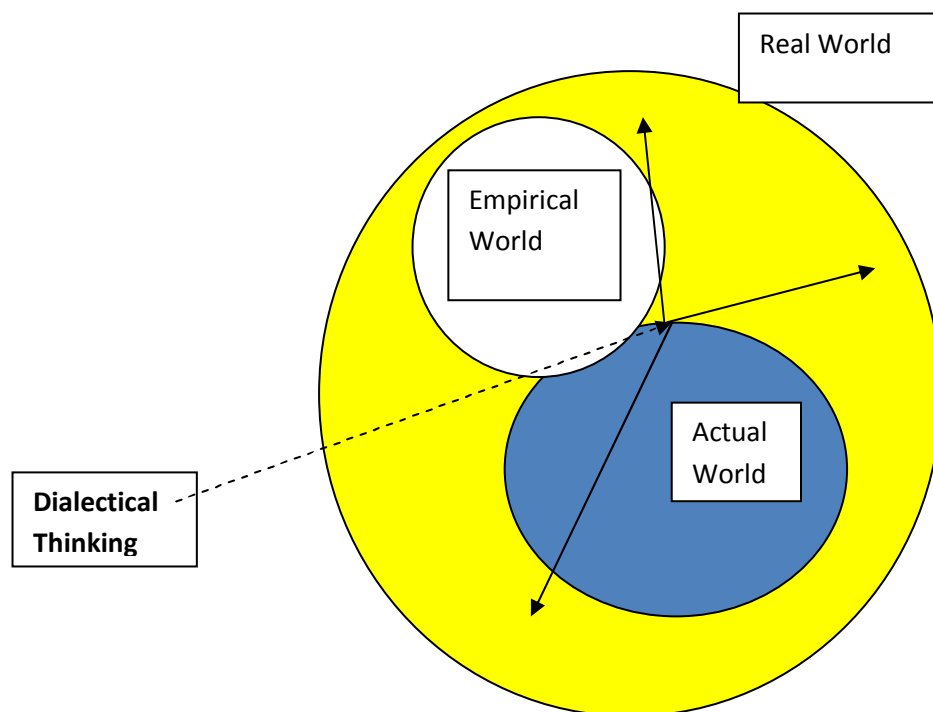


Fig. 1. The Three Worlds distinguished by R. Bhaskar’s *Dialectical Critical Realism*

Fig. 1 says that it is only through dialectical thinking, itself located in the actual world, that we can transcend both the empirical and actual worlds and gain insight into the ontologically real world. This, for me, indicates the relevance of learning dialectical, “deep” thinking.

When thinking further about CDF in relationship to Bhaskar’s work, I came to the conclusion that I had already delivered a piece of the epistemology that DCR, if not waylaid by integral ideas, would require. Bhaskar’s ontological postulate of four moments of dialectic, once it was viewed in terms of Basseches’ *Dialectical Schema Framework* (DSF; 1984), meant that a trained CDF-user could through empirical inquiry (interviewing and scoring) help individuals move from the actual world –the world of immediate sense perception, of TV and of downloading – to the real world in which problems like organizational survival and global warming have to be tackled.

While Bhaskar really had no good tools for dealing with the language-suffused world of organizations and with global issues requiring action in a concrete and effective manner (except for notions of social agency), I more and more came to see CDF not only as an epistemology, but pragmatically as a set of dialogical tools – whether social-emotional prompts or dialectical thought forms -- ready-made for intervention in organizations and institutions for the sake of culture transformation and related goals. This was an obvious realization since the interviewees in IDM case studies were mostly executives representing organizations. They taught us the category errors and fallacies that hindered them from being as realistic as they could.

For this reason, in a conference presentation devoted to Bhaskar’s work in London this year, I proposed that his “dialectical critical realism” (DCR) could (or even needed to be) enhanced and concretized by CDF/DTF, as shown below:

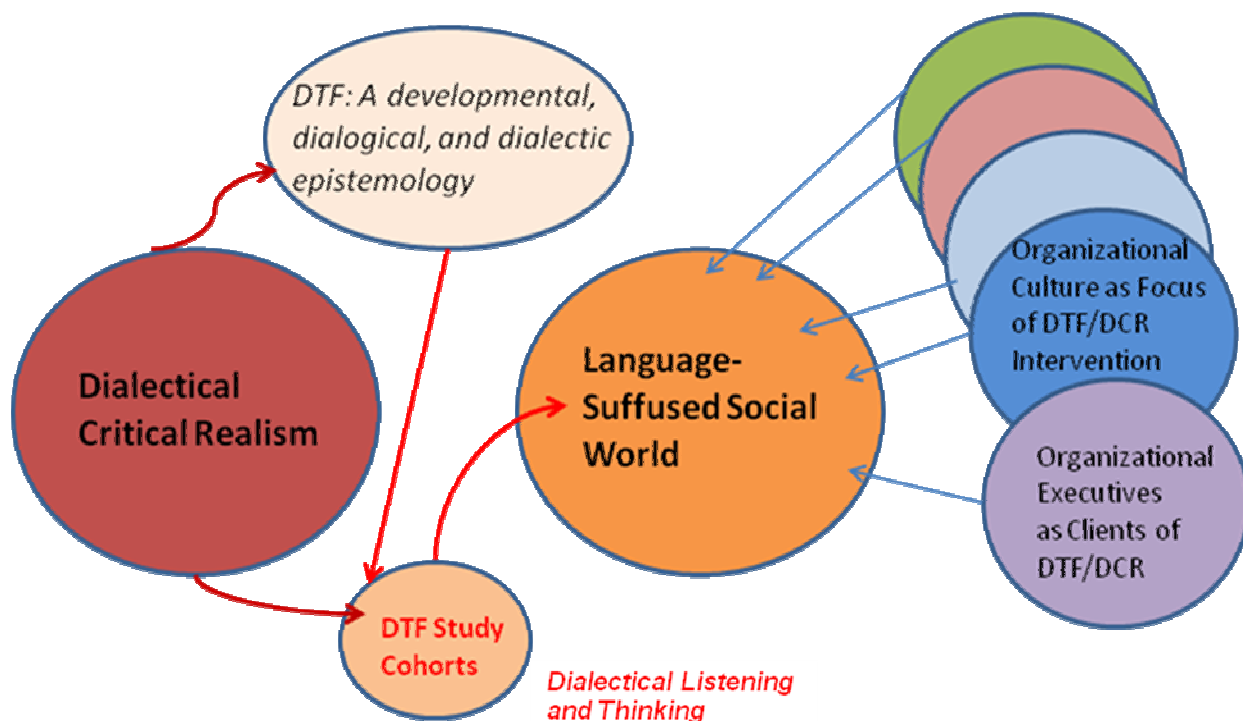


Fig. 2 Transfer of dialectical critical realism as an academic discipline into the language-suffused social world

As indicated in Fig. 2, I see IDM study cohorts whose members graduate with 3 case studies (and in the future also with a team project) as being able to engage with the epistemic fallacies and category errors committed by executives and their teams, and more broadly in society as a whole. By way of their interviewing and scoring skills, such graduates know (“can hear”) what in the language-suffused world of organizations needs to be transformed one person at a time, for these organizations to survive or thrive in an ecologically reasonable way. Clearly, mere “coaching” would not do. What we needed was to meet clients where they presently make sense of their work and the world, and this could only be done by thinking in adult-developmental terms. One might then be able to painstakingly show them where they commit category errors and fail to see absences that will shortly blossom into revolutions in their business and/or life.

How could IDM graduates be taught to act as dialectically thinking mentors of organizations, and as agents of culture transformation in business? Following Brendan Cartmel’s work in CDF-based socio-drama, I began to refer to CDF-users as *inter-developmental interlocutors*. By this somewhat fancy term I mean that they are educated as developmental and dialectical thinkers simultaneously, and thus are able not only to spot how clients are presently making meaning and

sense of their world, but also are able to assist them in moving from the actual world they are submerged in into the real world which they are only dimly seeing, mainly in the form of, for them, overwhelming change. In this mentoring process, graduates would themselves develop themselves as adults “inter-developmentally”.

Here is a full definition of what I mean by “inter-developmental interlocutor”, whether coach, consultant, teacher, or what not:

Who is a developmental thinker

- As a developmental thinker, s(he) understands her own level of meaning making and dialectic-thinking fluidity.
- She is therefore compassionate with others relative to their developmental profile.
- She uses three very different modes of dialog:
 - Attentional support
 - Interpretation
 - Enactment

And also a dialectical thinker

- As a dialectical thinker, she knows her own epistemic fallacies and category errors.
- She is curious about the present dialectical thought-form structure of her and others’ thinking.
- She provides scaffolding for moving from the actual to the real world, using empirical evidence.
- She is focused on dialog, not argument.

Epistemologically, dialectical and developmental thinking go together.

Fig. 3 The linkage of developmental and dialectical thought in consulting

Learning from the later Basseches, now speaking as a theorist of psychotherapy in its diverse modes (Basseches and Mascolo, 2009), I began to understand that what I was teaching my students, and was myself doing better and better in my own coaching and work with teams, was based on consciously separating three dialog modes, shown below:

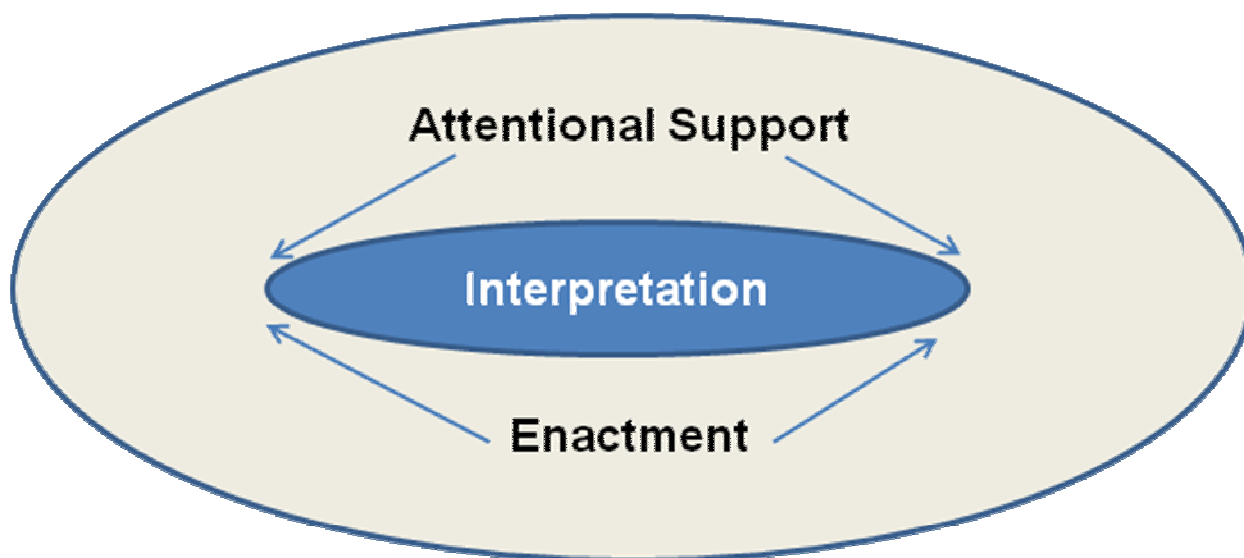


Fig. 4 The Three DTF Dialog Modes deriving from interviewing

Basseches and his co-author show in their 2009 book “Psychotherapy as a Developmental Process” that all psychotherapies are based on the selective privileging and coordination of three distinct dialog modes, and that psychotherapies differ in their emphasis on one or the other mode. In my view, the authors thereby also point, at least indirectly, to coaching and consulting, -- other forms of dialog used in the language-suffused world.

I would give the following brief definition of these modes of CDF-based dialog:

1. When giving **attentional support**, the interlocutor is focused on *listening* to the client, conveying deep interest in what is on his/her mind, and if need be reinforcing the client’s feeling and/or thinking. No CDF interview can be done without this stance, nor can any feedback or any other consulting be engaged with effectively. Attentional support is also the primary mode an interlocutor uses in any social-emotionally grounded consulting activity. But clearly, this mode is supported, even in dealing with meaning-making only, by interpretation, and in coaching possibly by enactment (e.g., modeling a “higher” stage of meaning making).
2. **Interpretation** is a broad field, since one can interpret moods, feelings, thoughts, frames of reference, ideologies, category errors, epistemic fallacies, almost anything expressed through speech, as well as text. So what is meant? Clearly, social-emotional interpretation differs from psychological and cognitive interpretation, and these differences are exactly what students are learning at IDM.

In contrast to the social-emotional interview, the cognitive interview is focused on interpreting base concepts, not socially influenced feelings. We can interpret clients' concepts or lack thereof in terms of DTF, and use thought forms as mind openers and mind expanders, to broaden interpretations clients propose. We do so in order to deal with client's category errors (e.g., switching them from context to process) and epistemic fallacies (e.g., pointing out that the world is not equivalent to what the client knows about it). In this endeavor, attentional support as well as enactment balance interpretation, the latter by leading clients from thought to action, "enacting a concept" (which could be a new strategy) in the real world.

3. **Enactment** is the modeling of how a concept, interpretation, higher social-emotional stage or healthier psychological disposition can be realized in life and/or work. The way enactment is used social-emotionally, psychologically and cognitively differs, of course. By pointing clients to the financial or other consequences of specific strategic alternatives, Jan DeVisch, for instance, has demonstrated that enactment can easily become the central mode of a dialectically oriented consulting, especially when it is skillfully supported by the other two modes (see Jan DeVisch's book 2010, 2013; . http://interdevelopmentals.org/publications-Jan_de_Visch.php).

It seems to me that in terms of the distinction between these 3 modes, social-emotional and cognitive interviewing based on CDF have their own idiosyncratic structure. Social-emotional interviewing is largely focused on giving *attentional support* to the way the interviewee selects and interprets so-called prompts, while cognitive interviewing, when done well, is based on the *enactment* of Bhaskar's four moments of dialectic (extensible to individual dialectical thought forms). In both cases, the remaining two modes of interview dialog serve as obligatory supports for the privileged dialog mode chosen.

If we now think about what it means to use DTF in these three complementary modes, we can say it would look as shown below:

Attentional Support	Interpretation	Enactment
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. You parse what is being said in terms of Bhaskar's four moments of dialectic, and their associated DTF thought forms, in "being with" the speaker(s). 2. You subordinate yourself to your client in humble inquiry, to better understand his/her thinking. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. You select "base concepts" to probe for absent dialectical thought structures. 2. You use DTF thought forms as mind openers, mind expanders, not just listening tools. 3. You challenge MELD category errors and epistemic fallacies "head on" by questions and commentary. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. You model for the client what it means to remedy a particular category error. 2. You also incite the client to re-think what s(he) said in light of dialectical absences you pointed out. 3. You move from thought to action, modeling what actions might follow from a specific dialectical base concept or set of concepts.

Fig. 4 The Three DTF Dialog Modes Explained Further

(MELD is a reference to Bhaskar's four moments of dialectic, which in CDF correspond to classes of thought forms CPRT)

Every CDF-interlocutor, when consulting to clients or coaching them, uses these three modes in a different relationship with the other two: some interlocutors prefer attentional support as the primary mode (e.g., those who only use Kegan), while others will focus on interpretation (following DTF), or use enactment in psychological or strategic feedback.

What dialog mode an individual privileges in his or her work, as well as in coaching or consulting, is both a psychological and adult-developmental research issue. An immature individual will be incapable of lending others true attentional support, having nothing to go by than his or her ego-centrism or "competence". Such a person will feast on a narrow set of ideological concepts, perhaps with religious fervor, and will indulge in a kind of enactment that is poorly supported by humble inquiry and attentional support. To experience the "tell and do" world in which most professionals live, you just need to listen to members of a start-up company.

The three dialog modes are simultaneously intervention modes. They contribute to a meta-theory of coaching, whatever the approach of the coach may be taking. "Coaching Schools" tend to be characterized by the predominant dialog mode they teach (e.g., NLP chooses interpretation).

These modes are also central in *team coaching* and *group hosting*, which can be especially effective when based upon insight into the deep social-emotional structure of a particular team or cohort, outlined by the CDF team typology (http://interdevelopmentals.org/team_maturity.php).

For instance, in an upwardly divided level-2 team where most team members are at Kegan-level 2 and a minority is a Kegan-level 3, enactment is powerless without attentional support, and interpretation of concepts is most likely fruitless. Whereas in a downwardly divided level-5 team, where the majority of team members acts from Kegan level 5 and a minority from Kegan level 4, both social-emotional and cognitive interpretation are powerful tools to which the other two modes can be subordinated. Here, the enactment will largely come from the team itself since its *task process* is no longer overwhelmed by the developmentally rooted assumptions structuring the *interpersonal process*, as is the case in immature teams and cohorts where “relationship” is king and psychological defenses abound.

In my view, one can do justice to CDF as an epistemology only when one knows what dialog mode one is presently using, when to use which mode, as well as when to switch from one mode to another in real-time. Being conscious of what mode one is using at any time is actually the only way of skillfully subordinating the two remaining modes to the one presently employed, something that is best learned through social-emotional and cognitive interviewing (<http://interdevelopmentals.org/certification-module-a.php> and <http://interdevelopmentals.org/certification-module-b.php>).

There is, of course, a risk to be aware of, namely that of slipping from dialog into argument, as the “tell and do” world in which we live constantly tempts us to do. By taking this step, you change your epistemology. You are now the one who knows it all. But as you also know, you can’t change the world by way of arguments (which are always only right or wrong, omitting absences, and thus pinned to the present.) If you think about it, the three modes outlined above are the three pillars of any process consultation dialog, in whatever discipline and for whatever purpose it may be used, academic or organizational.

Clearly, you want to meet your client where the client is since other ways of meeting the client are ineffective. This you can do only as a developmental thinker who is taking the client’s frame of reference, and thus developmental level, into account. On the other hand, your client wants to be “understood” by you by way of dialog with him or her. To “understand” somebody professionally, you need to use a dialogical epistemology putting asking over telling, and if this epistemology is going to be developmental and dialectical, you need to learn what Kegan stages and phases of dialectical thinking empirically “sound like”. You need to have experienced these epistemic structures in real time, in work with clients. And this, again, can best be learned from developmental interviewing as originated by Kegan and Basseches, and today taught at IDM.

The more mature the client you are dealing with is, whether it is an individual or a team, the less you will have to focus on the interpretation of meanings and feelings, but rather will be able to deal with concepts, or lack thereof (in the client's speech). That means you need to have an understanding of Bhaskar's four moments of dialectic, in CDF concretized and extended by way of dialectical thought forms.

If you can embrace all that, as you begin to learn to do in an IDM case study, you have become what I call an *inter-developmental interlocutor*. You can call yourself "consultant" or "coach", or whatever, that's just a practical interpretation of the term. To arrive at this destination, "sweat comes before virtue", as Hesiod says.

You need to want to sweat it out.

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