Title:
Dialogue for Social Change or the Need to Revisit the Notion of Dialogue in Communication for Development and Social Change?

Abstract

Over the past years, the notion of dialogue has become central to the field of communication for development and social change (CDSC). The objective of this study was to a) better comprehend how dialogue has been used to define, understand and support processes of CDSC, and b) to explore the theoretical and practical implications of using these approaches. We analyzed more than 200 conceptual and research articles in the CDSC literature and concluded that dialogue has been approached primarily in three ways: dialogue as a model of communication; dialogue as an interpersonal communication event and acknowledgement of the other; and dialogue as a process of public deliberation. We discuss these approaches and then analyze the implications they have to research and practice in CDSC. We conclude by discussing challenges that CDSC has in the application of concrete dialogical perspectives, and raise questions about current views on dialogue and CDSC.
Introduction

The field of Communication for Development and Social Change (CDSC) seems to have moved past the intense debates that focused on the role of communication for development as a process of information diffusion and promotion of behavior change, or as a process that facilitates people’s participation, engagement and action for social change. While there seems to be increasing consensus on the notion of convergence –which takes or combines elements from each of those approaches (Morris, 2003; Melkote & Steeves, 2001; Waisbord, 2001; Rogers and Kincaid; 1980), after more than four decades, concepts such as horizontal communication, participation, production of meaning, active audiences, collective action, dialogue, and many other concepts that focus their attention on multiple and people-centered communication processes over the earlier emphasis on mass media communication, are central to research and practice in CDSC.

A concept that has garnered most attention and contributed to the transformation of the field of CDSC is dialogue. In this article, we examine how the notion of dialogue has been incorporated into the historical and contemporary discourses on communication for development and social change. Current research shows that over the past few years, communication scholars have intensified their interest on studying dialogue (Anderson & Cissna, 2008) and have striven to use it as a means to understand the dynamics of interpersonal, organizational, and mass communication processes in social contexts.

In the field of CDSC the notion of dialogue has been used not only with the purpose of pushing the theoretical boundaries of communication as a discipline, but also with practical intentions aimed at facilitating social and cultural change within a given community or society through dialogic approaches. However, after examining an important segment of the CDSC
discourse that subscribes to the idea of dialogue as an essential element of communication for development and social change, it is noticeable that dialogue has been approached not only in multiple ways, but also that those approaches are, at the very least, sometimes contradictory or mutually exclusive. Against that backdrop, we critically analyze the CDSC literature in order to a) better comprehend how dialogue has been used to define, understand and support processes of social change and b) to explore the theoretical and practical implications of using these approaches on dialogue. We first discuss how we understand communication for development and social change, followed by a brief description of our research method; we then discuss the three approaches that emerged from our analysis, and conclude by posing several questions that we believe have great relevance to the CDSC field.

**Understanding Communication for Development and Social Change**

Before we discuss approaches to dialogue in the CDSC field, it is important that we briefly explain how we understand communication for development and social change. In 1999 Gray-Felder and Deane introduced a definition of communication for social change that sought to move away from the more commonly used definitions of communication for development (Quebral; 2006; Servaes, 1999; Fraser & Restrepo-Estrada; 1998). Gray-Felder and Deane stated that communication for social change “on the other hand, is defined as a process of public and private dialogue through which people define who they are, what they want and how they can get it. Social change is defined as change in people’s lives as they themselves define such change” (p.8). This definition put dialogue at the heart of any notion of communication for development or communication for social change.

While some scholars tend to separate communication for development from
communication for social change, in some cases because of the ideological baggage that the concept of development carries (Escobar, 1995), in others because of the prescriptive notion of development processes (Rodriguez, 2004), or because of the disempowering nature of development (Melkote and Steeves, 2001; Wilkins, 1995), we tend to favor a convergence perspective. Rather than embracing a dichotomist point of view in which scholars have to choose between Communication for Development, and Communication for Social Change, we take a dialectical perspective that incorporates elements from both concepts. Despite the valuable contributions that scholars have made over the last years that have highlighted the need toward a greater focus on communication and social change, we argue that it is still important to consider the notion of development because underdevelopment –however development is defined- is still a persistent reality in several countries of the world, and because a number of initiatives that focus on improving people’s living conditions or exercise of basic rights are framed under the notion of development and need to be carefully examined.

When we refer to development we take distance from the hegemonic view that the literature on Modernization theories has suggested about development (Gumucio-Dragon & Tufte, 2006; Melkote & Steeves; 2001), in which groups or countries must follow certain stages in order to overcome underdevelopment. Rather than adopting this “developmentalist fallacy”, as Escobar calls it (2006, p. 656), we consider that the idea of development needs to be defined in relation to specific communities with particular needs. The discussion about development is still worthwhile only if we assume a critical reaction to the dominant models and embrace nonconventional and local models of development such as those “hybrid” models suggested by Escobar. A local and long-term vision of development can help us to decolonize what Mignolo (2005) calls a colonial matrix of power in order to include local forms of knowledge to achieve
social change. Having explained that, in the next sections we will approach CDSC from a holistic standpoint that includes both aspects of development and social change.

**Method**

We systematically analyzed more than 200 historic and contemporary academic texts that included conceptual texts, research articles and various contributions to the CDSC literature. We followed a three-step methodological approach. First we looked at all entries of the well-known Communication for Social Change Anthology (Gumucio-Dragon and Tufte, 2006), which includes a total of 185 texts and captures the historical and conceptual evolution of the field. We then identified and reviewed several key books and journal articles that focus on communication for development and social change. Thirdly, we selected some case studies that focus on the use of dialogue for development and social change. For each of the readings we included in our analysis we examined how authors approached the notion of dialogue and, particularly, definitions, objectives, scope, nature, possibilities of application, sources, and implications.

In our analysis, we followed steps that are commonly used in systematic qualitative reviews, with some modifications given the nature of our research (Hemingway y Bereton, 2009). These steps include a definition of an appropriate and relevant question; identification and review of the relevant literature (for instance, more than 100 texts included on the Communication for Social Change Anthology referred to issues of dialogue, public deliberation and public debate); assessment of the texts to be analyzed (for instance, we only analyzed those pieces that referred to dialogue directly or indirectly); analysis and combination of results, which included a meta-synthesis that led to the identification of three approaches to the notion of dialogue; and putting the results in context, which we did by 1) contrasting our results with key
philosophical and conceptual approaches to dialogue, and 2) using of examples that illustrate our findings. We, the authors, engaged in an iterative process with the data and among ourselves, through which we constantly refined our findings and eventually agreed to the three approaches we discuss on this paper.

Based on our analysis we argue that in the field of CDSC the notion of dialogue has been approached primarily in three ways: *dialogue as a model of communication; dialogue as an interpersonal communication event; and dialogue as a process of public deliberation*. In other words, CDSC has approached dialogue in relation to three dimensions: one dimension that views dialogue in connection with and as a critique of classical models of communication; one dimension that views dialogue as a form of interpersonal communication and acknowledgement of the “other”; and a third dimension that views dialogues as a component of public deliberation processes. In the following sections we introduce each one of these approaches; then, we discuss their implications and possibilities for research and practice in CDSC.

**Dialogue as a Model of Communication**

As we stated at the beginning of this article, the analysis of the literature on CDSC shows that the notion of dialogue is not homogeneous throughout the field. One of the meanings of this notion is constructed in relation to mass communication and, specifically, as a criticism to the kind of relationship that mass media generate between producers and audiences. Thus, in relation to media communication theories, CDSC scholars have approached the concept of dialogue as a particular model of communication directly opposed to the informational model of communication (Pietila, 2005). While the informational model views communication as transmission of information from one point to another, the dialogical model defines
communication as a horizontal process of co-construction of meaning. During the first decades of the last century, the CDSC field was dominated by American mass media theories according to which mass media were powerful channels of communication that not only facilitated massive transmission of information, but also made possible to change human behaviors.

Thus, throughout the 1940s and 1950’s, communication scholarship and practice were influenced by these ideas according to which a) communication is reduced to mass media communication, that is, to mass media production and consumption, b) communication is defined in terms of transmission of information, and c) that information allows politicians and leaders to change particular behaviors (Schramm, 2006). Through theories such as the hypodermic needle, the effect’s model, the informational theory, and the cybernetic perspective these ideas were adopted by scholars who applied them to overcome underdevelopment. According to these perspectives, mass media had a crucial role in social change because they could amplify the benefits of modernization, and disseminate strategic information so that people could change their traditional –pre-modern- behaviors and beliefs in order to achieve Modernity.

This conceptualization of modernization was directly related to how social sciences viewed development in the 1940s and 50s (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1997). Because history was conceived in terms of successive stages, modernization was defined as a process in which every society needed to complete a series of stages in order to become modern. Progress was seen as synonym of modernization and, therefore, as the final stage to which every society should arrive. As Beltrán (2006b) explains, because this process of development was exclusively approached from a materialistic standpoint, the indicators of progress and modernization were defined by economic growth as defined in capitalist, free-market contexts. Thus, media were presented as the adequate channels to help underdeveloped societies to continue their transit in the line of
progress. As long as new behaviors –innovations- were disseminated through media, people would have the opportunity to change and societies would become modern (Rogers, 2006). Communication, in other words, was approached in relation to the use of mass media to transmit information that could contribute to the development of societies.

This approach was criticized by several authors who argued that there is more than one model of development (Dissanayake, 2006) and that communication should not be restricted to both vertical and mass communication forms. As Fals Borda (2006) and Escobar (2006) explain, the idea of Development (with capital D) is a European hegemonic project that reduces its meaning to modernization and economic progress. There can be, however, other visions of development that emerge from local initiatives according to particular needs. In relation to those local scenarios the idea of communication goes beyond the problem of diffusion and transmission and focuses on interpersonal interactions and communitarian initiatives. In those scenarios not only mass media, but also dialogue is fundamental for development because this is a more direct and powerful way to communicate (Hamelink, 2006), and one that addresses fundamental differences in defining development, and unearthing basic flaws and limitations to modernizing approaches (Melkote & Steeves, 2001).

It is in this context of critique to the classical development approaches to communication and development that the notion of dialogue emerges in the CDSC literature. Freire’s (2006) concepts of horizontal communication and banking education are foundational in this discourse about dialogue. Freire’s notion of dialogue constitutes an important source for different scholars over the world because it liberates communication from its almost exclusive relation to mass media. Freire introduces a more personal dimension of communication in which there is room for love, humility, faith, and trust. Unlike mass communication forms in which few producers
talk to very large audiences whose role is limited to silently receiving information, dialogue implies feedback and critical consciousness among its participants.

By taking into account Freire’s ideas many scholars began to approach communication in terms of dialogue. Thus, a significant amount of the CDSC scholarship produced after the 60s uses refers to dialogue, even though not always in the same sense. Authors often speak of dialogue in terms of horizontal communication because it assumes equal conditions of its participants regardless of their different status (Heimann, 2006). They use this idea to create a differentiation with regard to vertical communication which, unlike dialogue, restricts democratic interaction based on egalitarian exchange of symbols (Beltrán, 2006a). The notion of horizontal communication is also employed to state that “communication is the art of creating meanings” (Kaplún, 2006, p. 148) in which all participants have the same responsibility and potential power.

Under this dialogical model, reception is no longer considered a passive task but an active role with responsibilities such as active listening, reciprocal exchange, and critical thinking. In terms of Slim and Thomson (2006): “speaking out is an act of power, and the act of listening demands respect for the speaker. But listening is also an art based on certain fundamental principles which are also at the heart of any notion of just and cooperative development.” (p. 455). It is not that communities have to carefully listen to policymakers, but the opposite idea: policymakers have to consult the opinion of the community with which they work. However, this idea of equality of conditions among individual communicators is not always approached in the same way. While some communication scholars define dialogue in terms of mutuality and reciprocity, others reject this interpersonal symmetry by stating that discourse cannot eliminate the power relationships that underlie any social action (Smith, 2008).
In addition to these characteristics, it is worth noting that the concept of dialogue is incorporated into the CDSC discourse not only to add the interpersonal component to the process of communication, but also as an attempt to include a practical component to interventions, programs, and social processes that seek to achieve social change. Several authors approach dialogue a concrete act and experience that can be applied to any development context and process.

Finally, the inclusion of the idea of dialogue within the scholarship and practice of CDSC adds an ethical component to development efforts. As Huesca (2006) points out, dialogue implies a moral commitment in which the other is approached as a human being and not as a tool to be exploited. In relation to this ethical dimension, dialogue can also play an important role in terms of making people conscious and critical about the information they receive and the contexts in which they live. This process, which Freire defined as conscientization, is widely followed by many authors concerned with problems of oppression, inequity, and power (Kivikuru, 2006).

Thus, the notion of dialogue is incorporated into the CDSC field as a way to show that “dialogue may be a key vehicle of influence leading to pro-social change” (Papa & Singhal, 2008, p. 1). The dialogical model emerges as an alternative approach to understand, formulate, and apply initiatives for social change. Under this dialogical model, communication not only goes beyond the emphasis on mass media production and the behavioral approach to communication; also, dialogue focuses on interpersonal exchanges of meaning for social change.

**Dialogue as Interpersonal Communication and Acknowledgement of the Other**

A second approach to the use of dialogue in CDSC literature deals with the philosophical
sources that underlie the conception of dialogue. The analysis of the literature shows that, overall, the works of three important authors constitute the theoretical foundations of the concept of dialogue: Martin Buber, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Paulo Freire. In this section we will briefly explain how these authors approach dialogue and how their ideas influence the CDSC field. However, in this section we will not concentrate on Freire for two reasons: first, we explained Freire’s influence on CDSC in the last section and second, because Buber constitutes himself a philosophical source for Freire.

Although neither Buber nor Bakhtin explicitly define dialogue, they did create a philosophical anthropology about the nature of the human being and his/her relation to the other. These ideas were later used by communication scholars to understand dialogical processes. The literature of CDSC shows that one of the most important contributions of Buber is related to his idea of the I – Thou relationship, that is, a relationship in which the other is not an it but a Thou and, therefore, a spirit which is as meaningful as I. In the I – Thou relationship, a relationship is not a set of data that individuals exchange, but an event between human beings in which “language is consummated as a sequence, in speech and counter-speech. Here alone does the word that is formed in language meet its response” (Buber, 1958, p. 99). Based on conceptualizations like this, communication scholars began to think of communication as a profound encounter between human beings in which the boundaries between the I and Thou become blurred because of the profound communion between them. Buber’s perspective liberates communication of its connotation of transmission of information and places it at the center of the human interactions.

Buber’s definition of the other as a human being (and no longer as an element, machine, or individual) has important consequences in the way in which interventions and processes of
social change are conceived by many authors within CDSC. The other is no longer seen as underdeveloped and ignorant, but he becomes a human being with the same status of the policymaker or the developed country. In Buber’s terms it means that the other is no longer an *it*, but a *Thou*: “We cannot approach others with what we have received, and say ‘you must know this, you must do this’. We can only go, and confirm its truth (Buber, 1958, p. 106). This notion of respect for the other and his/her worldviews becomes very important in the literature about communication and social change. Several authors criticize the hegemonic models of development and social change and argue the importance of including the other in the design and implementation of pro-social change processes.

With a similar philosophical view of the human being, Bakhtin also emphasizes the importance of the interlocutor because the word is always addressed to someone else. Unlike Saussure who approaches language as a system of signs (signifiers and signifieds), Bakhtin claims that meanings are not produced by association between signifiers and signifieds, but they are always co-constructed between speakers. In Bahktin’s (2001) words: "A word is a bridge thrown between myself and another. If one end of the bridge depends on me, then the other depends on my addressee. A word is territory shared by both addresser and addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor" (p. 1215). Meaning is neither in the word used by the speaker, nor in the audience who reads or listens to that word; instead, meaning is in the dialogue between speakers.

Dialogue is not an exchange of ideas between speakers, but a web of meanings in which speakers use words with multiple intentions and diverse connotations. Although several communication scholars have reduced the notion of dialogue to a simple exchange of words, this concept is much more complex than that. Communication is a dialogue in multiple levels:
between the multiple meanings of a word, between the word and its context, between the word and its speaker, and between speakers. Dialogue is, in Buber’s words, “real meeting” (1958, p. 26); that is the reason why, according to Bakhtin (2001), “any true understanding is dialogic in nature” (p. 1226). It is this duality of the word what constitutes the internally dialogized character of language (Bakhtin, 1981).

However, after being extrapolated to the field of CDSC, both Bakhtin’s and Buber’s ideas have been reduced to a mutual exchange of words between speakers. Moreover, communication scholars have used the notion of dialogue to refer the interpersonal dimension of communication and to state that this type of interaction can have a significant emancipatory potential (DeTurke, 2006). Some of them have even claimed that dialogue is a powerful form of communication because through it speakers can easier persuade to their interlocutors. In other words, the notion of persuading others supersedes the true nature of dialogue. This is a common occurrence in many areas of CDSC work wherein a carefully designed strategy that includes an interpersonal communication or counseling component focuses on making sure that a specific message is understood by the client, user or member of the target audience. Although Bakhtin’s and Buber’s perspectives are directly opposed to this idea of persuasion, this transformation of the idea of dialogue shows the way in which this concept has been often incorporated into the CDSC field. Regardless of this transformation, the literature about communication and development shows how important the ideas of Bakhtin, Buber, and Freire have been because they have allowed scholars to go beyond media-centered perspectives and embrace a new view the other.

**Dialogue as a Process of Public Deliberation**

The approach to dialogue that communication scholars have used differs significantly from
the views that Buber, Bakhtin, and Freire have put forward. Rather than approaching dialogue in
terms of intimate communion, there is a strong tendency to define dialogue as a conversation
between two persons or two groups with different ideologies, interests, or worldviews, whether
in interpersonal or group contexts or through mediated public spheres. In a very interesting
article about the linguistic origin of the word dialogue, Wierzbicka (2006) explains that this
particular understanding of dialogue emerged after the Cold War in response to the need of
having a constructive and diplomatic discussion between countries with different ideologies such
as the United States of America and the Soviet Union.

This view of dialogue is, as Wierzbicka states, completely new because it emerges in direct
connection with political and diplomatic problems. As she claims: “at a time when the future of
the globe seemed, to many, to depend on the relation between two superpowers and their two
spheres of influence, the idea that it could be important for the representatives of the two sides to
talk came to be heard more and more frequently in public discourse. But what genre of ‘talking’
could have seemed possible at that time? Not ‘discussions’ and not even bilateral ‘talks’” (p.
680). Dialogue became that appropriate genre to achieve mutual understanding. In this section
we examine how scholars have added this new approach to the CDSC field in order to
understand problems of communication, development, and social change.

Our analysis reveals that despite specific details, dialogue is understood by a wide range of
authors as a talk, discussion, or conversation between groups with different perspectives about
the same issue. In addition, dialogue is approached as a medium to overcome problems, to
negotiate, to make decisions, and to reflect about a given problem. The following excerpt by
Parks (2006) constitutes a good example of that type of definition of dialogue: “process through
which people are able to identify obstacles and develop communication structures, policies,
processes, and media or other communication tools to help them to achieve the goals they themselves have outlined and defined” (p. 819). It is through dialogue that a given community can identify its problems and decide what should be done to overcome those (Jacobson & Kolluri, 2006).

Thus, the notion of dialogue becomes very closely associated with the concept of collective action “in which members of a community take action as a group to solve a common problem” (Figueroa, et al., 2006, p. 589). In the same way, the definition of public deliberation incorporates the essential objective of dialogue, that is, a discussion that involves multiple points of views with respect to a given problem. The following definition of public deliberation by Hartz-Karp and Briand (2009) shows this connection between both concepts:

“[P]ublic deliberation’ is widely understood to be a pragmatic, inclusive form of discourse in which citizens collectively—even cooperatively—analyze a ‘problem’; establish criteria by which to evaluate public responses to it; identify multiple options that reflect different sets of values or value-priorities held by members of the public; weigh arguments for and against each option in light of the criteria established previously and, through an indefinite period of continuing discussion… approach a measure of agreement that (ideally) most participants can accept as a collective ‘decision’ (p. 127).

As Heidlebaugh (2008) explains dialogue becomes a “model and metaphor for public deliberation” (p. 28).

Dialogue is seen as a tool of deliberative democracy because it allows citizens to construct the concept of community and public reason (Kim & Kim 2008). In this sense, dialogue is the main medium for collective action, deliberative democracy, and even for communication activism (Jovanovic et al., 2007). This is the reason that explains why many authors within CDSC use the notion of dialogue in relation to the concept of public sphere and argue that the former makes the latter possible. In this sense, for example, many authors have employed Habermas’ ideas to state the importance of “dialogic consensus’, or temporal agreements among
actors in the communication scenario” (Barranquero, 2006, p. 921). Habermas is also used to explain the important role that shared knowledge plays in the communicational process (Cisneros, 2006).

Because of this connection between dialogue and resolution of conflicts, several scholars also define dialogue as an intrinsic tool of democracy. Through dialogue, participation becomes a real characteristic of development actions because it allows different voices to be heard and to be equally considered (Jacobson & Kolluri, 2006). Dialogue is even suggested by some authors as most appropriate instrument to measure democracy (Downing, 2006). Unlike war or violent actions, dialogue is constructive in the sense that it seeks to arrive at a decision with which all of the involved parties agree. Needless to say, dialogue is conceived as an alternative to war because it implies rational discussion rather than physical confrontation; however issues of power are ever present in those dialogic interactions.

In addition, the idea of dialogue is a fundamental element of an approach or subfield – depending on how one wants to look at it- within CDSC referred to as participatory communication. The main tenets of participatory communication are to democratize communication processes so that community members can engage in activities of production of messages and meanings, design of projects, decision making, and so on (Jacobson & Kolluri, 2006; Gumucio, 2003; ). In that sense, dialogue is the driving factor of participatory communication. For instance, Figueroa et. al. (2003) suggest how in a participatory communication process dialogue should lead to agreement and common visions in order to move forward in the process; otherwise, there is a need to go back to the previous point and re-engage in dialogue. Further, several influential articles produced within the CDSC field define participatory communication in terms of the possibilities of dialogue that individuals have in a
given social process (LaFever, 2004).

All of these characteristics underlie the definition of dialogue that characterizes this third scenario. This line of thinking seems to focus on dialogue as a form of conversation or talk. In other words, in describing dialogue, authors almost always put it at the same level of talk or conversation. In the same way, concrete experiences of dialogue are cited by several authors as talks between members of different groups (Black, 2008; Jovanovic et al., 2007; Adams et al., 2007). The difference between conversation (or talk) and dialogue seems to be in the polemical character of dialogue. Dialogue, in this sense, is a conversation between groups or people whose worldviews are in conflict. Adams et al.’s (2007) definition of dialogue constitutes an example of this approach: “[Dialogue] as the context where differences are welcomed and where participants are encouraged to remain in the ‘tension’ between holding their position and being open to the viewpoints of the others” p. 112). Again, it begs the question of why dialogue is operationalized in the form of talk or conversation, instead of a process that seeks to bridge opposing views on a subject matter. Is this a matter of choice of words, or is it a more profound limitation in terms of how to apply principles of dialogue?

The following experience constitutes an example of the way in which the idea of dialogue is approached and applied in a concrete and real project (Jovanovic et al., 2007). The experience is related by four communication scholars at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro who studied and participated, for about eighteen months, in the Greensboro Truth and Community Reconciliation Project (GTCRP). The objective of the project was to “help the citizens [of Greensboro] engage in dialogue about what had been an ‘undiscussable’ event for nearly 23 years: the killing of five people and the wounding of ten others by members of the Klu Klux Klan (KKK) and neonazis during a social protest on November 3, 1979, against the growing
influence of the KKK” (Frey & Carragee, 2007, p. 13). According to the authors, besides other components (interviews, fund-raising, surveys, message design, etc.), dialogue constituted the base of this project because it was through a “dialogic partnership” with diverse community members that Jovanovic and their colleagues supported their ideas of communication activism, community action, social change, and participation.

In the concrete, real, and practical dimension of this project, dialogue was materialized as conversations and talks among different kinds of agents who had different perspectives, narratives, and approaches about the facts and the agents involved in the tragedy of 1979. Thus, people with different perspectives got together to express “tensions through dialogic communication” (p. 94). This dialogic communication was materialized in conversations and talks whose objective was to go beyond a single and dominant narrative by considering different approaches, interests, and worldviews of the other (the black, the worker, the neo-Nazi). Thus, this case shows how, in relation to a particular and concrete project, dialogue becomes conversation or talk.

Another example that illustrates the challenge of defining dialogue is provided by a project that one of the authors is currently involved in. The goal of the project has been set as “facilitate critical reflection, and dialogue and public debate in order to contribute to the exercise of human, sexual and reproductive rights of youth and adolescents”. Key specific objectives then focus on decision making, gender-based violence, and respect for sexual diversity. One of the real challenges of this project is to assess the type of critical reflection and dialogue that is being generated, and the nature of the public debate. The communication components of the project, which include TV dramas, call-in radio shows, school activities, and social mobilization activities, amongst others, will certainly facilitate dialogic spaces in line with our second
scenario. However, scenario one will be more difficult to achieve, or at the very least, to assess. Partly, this difficulty is the result of the lack of a more explicit definition of dialogue, an issue that seems to be common in our review.

On this approach to dialogue social change is to be achieved through collective action, deliberation, democracy, communication activism, and participation; and, according to several works we analyzed, all of these processes are facilitated through dialogue. The question, as we will argue in the next section, is the extent to which it is possible to equate all of these complex processes, interactions and dynamics to a conversation.

Dialogue for Social Change or the Need to Revisit the Notion of Dialogue in CDSC?

Over the past four decades the CDSC field has transitioned from a focus on Development to an expanded focus on Development and Social Change. Our analysis of the CDSC literature, however, also suggests a new transition from the idea of Communication for Social Change to an emphasis on Dialogue for Social Change. As we have documented, there is a considerable amount of interest on the concept of dialogue and, in that context, the notion of communication becomes blurred. From all of the articles examined, it is not clear what the difference between dialogue and communication might be. Moreover, the emphasis on dialogue has other theoretical, conceptual, and political implications. In this section we briefly discuss those implications.

Regarding the first approach to dialogue, that is, dialogue approached as a model of communication, the main implication is the creation of a dichotomy of communication theories in two main perspectives: mass communication and interpersonal communication. In relation to CDSC that dichotomy implies that development and social change can only be accomplished by
choosing either mass media strategies or interpersonal communication. This has led scholars to take sides on what many see as a false dichotomy. While this dichotomist vision does not allow scholars to see intermediate positions, there has been an increasing trend toward convergence models of communication that admit the role that both perspectives, plus other forms of communication and interaction, play in CDSC. Indeed, the introduction of the dialogical model into the range of communication and media theories that feed into CDSC has constituted a significant improvement for and contribution to the field.

Regarding the approach to dialogue as an interpersonal event, the main consequence has been the reduction of Buber’s and Bakhtin’s ideas on intimate communion and understanding of the other to a basic exchange of words. However, there is a significant positive consequence related to the incorporation of Buber’s and Bakhtin’s philosophical anthropology into the CDSC field. Almost all of the authors we analyzed explicitly claim the importance of approaching audiences, communities, or individuals as human beings and, therefore, as Thou and not as objects to be dominated, converted, exploited, or informed. In a communicative act all of its speakers are equally active, responsible, and important. This perspective also influences the way in which development and social change are understood, that is, not in terms of a model to be imposed, but in relation to a negotiation that involves local knowledge (Mignolo, 2005) in order to decide the better way to overcome social problems.

Regarding the third approach, that is, dialogue as a key process in public deliberation, there are several implications that can be mentioned: the strong connection between democracy, participation, and dialogue; the role of dialogue in collective action and public deliberation; and the importance of dialogue in relation to initiatives of social change. Because we already explained all of these characteristics, in this section we focus on one of the risks that
communication scholars take when the idea of dialogue becomes the focus of all discussions, campaigns, and initiatives. As we mentioned, most of the authors we analyzed claim that processes such as collective action, deliberation, democracy, communication activism, and participation are achieved through dialogue. Within the CDSC literature we commonly find claims such as: “collective action is achieved through dialogue”; if there is dialogue, then we have participation”; “democracy is only possible in societies where dialogue is permitted”; and “deliberation is essentially a dialogical process”.

Dialogue is the core process in this varied set of social actions; and dialogue is generally defined in terms of conversations between groups with different worldviews. In this sense, it is worthwhile to ask to what extent conversations can be the exclusive instrument to achieve social change. Dialogue is indeed a valuable alternative to violent actions and to any kind of totalitarianism. Moreover, dialogue is indispensable to achieve social change. However, dialogue is not the only element to be considered when thinking about social change. As Sonderling (2006) points out: “simplistic models of dialogue misrepresent the complexity and social character of communication and development…. The problems of underdevelopment overdevelopment are rooted as much in non-communication factors as they are in information related factors” (p. 553). A romanticized approach to dialogue makes us forget that dialogues themselves emerge in political contexts and, therefore, they are subjected to power relationships. This de-politization of dialogue reduces it to a mere discursive phenomenon isolated from economic and political conditions. In Cloud’s words: “A politics of discourse, even where the project is grounded in the critic’s commitments, assumes that those who are oppressed or exploited need discursive redefinition if their identities rather than a transformation of their material conditions as a primary task” (Cloud, 1994, p. 157).
Many reflections have been put forth about the need to approach communication in terms of dialogue in order to have better results in matters of social change. However, we did not find as many analyses about the nature, scope, methodology, and contexts of this practice. The lack of profound reflection can lead scholars to a reduction of this important concept. Once again Sonderling (2006) points out this idea in a clear way: “The concept of communication as platonic dialogue is static and does not capture the logic of communication as agonistic social practice and the complexity of interaction between the actors involved in implementation of development at grassroots levels” (p. 554). Probably the notion of communication as dialogue is not as static as Sonderling claims, but we, as communication scholars, need more analysis in order to incorporate it into a broader context in which dialogue is not presented as an isolated element, but as one dimension among many others (economic, political, social, organizational, etc.).

The idea is not to reject the notion of dialogue and its importance for development and social change. That would be counter to our own views on the role of dialogue in CDCS. Rather, the challenge is to 1) use of dialogue in its true sense; 2) define clearly how we understand and use dialogue in a particular CDSC process; and 3) integrate dialogue into a broader system in which the dialogical dimension is one among many others that help leaders, communities and individuals contribute to improvements in society. Moreover, the challenge is to seriously study this notion in order to know how we can extrapolate the discourse of dialogue to real experiences, and how we can more clearly apply and evaluate its application in those concrete scenarios. For instance, what are some of the metrics or indicators that one could use to assess how dialogue is contributing -or not- to a particular process of development and social change? These metrics or indicators can certainly be thought of in terms of process, or, if possible, in more measurable terms. However, they key issue here is to be able to assess whether progress is
been made. The risk of not doing that is too great. As we have seen in previous sections, the
notion of dialogue can be easily, and has been, re-defined and, in some ways, co-opted, some
might argue, so that the essence of dialogue as a process that can facilitate social change can be
easily lost. We have witnessed similar actions with words that are also essential to CDSC, such
as participation and empowerment.

**By Way of Conclusion**

In their Communication for Social Change’s anthology (2006), Gumucio-Dragon and
Tufte define communication for social change as “a way of thinking and practice that puts people
in control of the means and content of communication processes. Based on dialogue and
collective action, [Communication For Social Change] is a process of public or private dialogue
through which people determine who they are, what they need and what they want in order to
improve their lives” (p. xix). This definition is an example of what we found in most of the
CDSC literature, that is, the central place that scholars give to dialogue when talking about social
change. Regardless of this approach as a model of communication, an interpersonal event, or a
process of public deliberation, dialogue has become one of the most important categories of the
CDSC field.

However, although the notion of dialogue is becoming more prevalent in the literature
and to a certain extent in the practice of CDSC, there are still many questions to be solved: what
is the relationship between public debate and dialogue? To what extent do all of these dialogical
perspectives materialize in concrete and meaningful processes of social change? How can we
and should we evaluate dialogue? Is dialogue something to be measured? Besides conversation
and talks, what other elements do define what is dialogical and what is not? What is the
difference between dialogue and communication? Addressing these questions is critical to a better understanding of what dialogue means in the context of CDSC, so that leaders, policymakers, and organizations involved in this field can successfully use it as an action for social change.

We have ended this paper with more questions than answers. However, we strongly believe that answering these questions is vital to the growth of the field and that scholars in CDSC have both an obligation and a challenge to address these issues. By raising these questions we hope to contribute to an ongoing reflection in the CDSC field, and generate enthusiasm among researchers and practitioners to explore these issues further.
References


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