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Pre-Conference Workshop: Making Progress Visible for Learners of Solution-Focused Dialogue

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Abstract

The dialogic orientation quadrant (DOQ) is introduced as a new tool for learning and teaching Solution-Focused dialogue. Written excerpts illustrate its intended use as a functional analysis of how the coach contributes to the client curating their narratives. It further encourages readers to use it as a tool to observe their own sessions as well as other videotaped conversations.

Introduction

It started with two questions:

- “How do you know that your clients/learners are making progress?”
- “How do you know that their progress has anything to do with you?”

Of course, I do not suggest that we are solely responsible for their progress, for claiming either blame or fame, yet these two questions seemed to stir up good dialogues among those who attended the pre-conference session.

The idea of making progress visible whether we are working with clients or learners may not be new, but the practice of observing interactions, instead of interpreting internal actions, is gaining more precision and rigour in recent years. In my case, learning the Microanalysis of Face-to-Face Dialogue (MFD)¹ is transforming the way I learn, teach, practice, and research almost daily.

MFD and the many mentors I encountered in my study informed the model shared in the session and this article. As well my clients and learners also shaped it, as they generously shared their feedback of using the model in their life after our session was long over.

The model has the well-intended name: “Dialogic Orientation Quadrant”. Many people have started to call it DOQ as in the case of giving a nickname to a poor dog with a bad name, and I am quite fond of it.

The Name: Dialogic Orientation Quadrant (DOQ)

The good intention behind the name starts with the word *dialogue*. Differentiated from *discussion*, where conversation topics are often broken down or analysed for the purpose of

¹ MFD is the detailed and reliable examination of observable communication sequences as they proceed, moment by moment, in the **dialogue**. Bavelas, J. B., Gerwing, J., Healing, S., & Tomori, C. (2016). [Microanalysis of Face-to-face Dialogue. An Inductive Approach](#). In C. A. VanLear & D. J. Canary (Eds.), *Researching communication interaction behavior: A sourcebook of methods and measures* (pp. 129-157). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

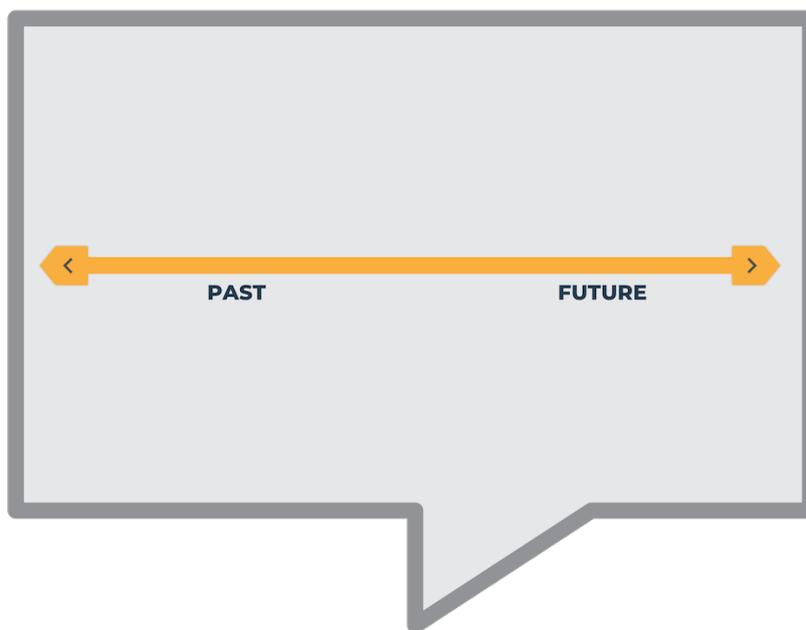
decision-making, dialogue provides a generative and divergent process within and between people for meaning-making. The shared meaning serves as a glue or cement that interlocutors can build on, and this process is indeed minute but not insignificant. This understanding of dialogue is consistent with the ideas of David Bohm and William Isaacs, yet the distinction of dialogue and discussion is clearer on the theoretical level.

The second part of the name, *orientation*, suggests that our role is to *orient* our clients' attention. It was a less clumsy choice than other words like 'move' or 'shift', often overused to explain what we do in coaching. We use language as an intentional tool to support our client to curate, not just narrate, better stories of their lifeworld. Moreover, our orienting - whether to positive content or negative content - seems to influence how our clients curate their narratives² as illustrated by Smock Jordan et al. (2013).

The Model

Guiding Post #1: The Timeline

The model has simple guiding posts: the *timeline* and the *content*. The timeline axis spans horizontally from the past as far as the past can go and the future similarly. This timeline seems inherent in people's narratives whether it is a professionalised conversation or other ordinary conversations in the marketplace.



Take, for example:

"So beginning up to this time I had a plan put into place, it required saving more money for my trip than I would typically save. And then there were some things that came up, and so you know, time went by really quickly and I wasn't able to do that, and yet I am going on the trip [smile]. So I have this unsettled feeling around it, some concern and some worry, I'm trying to put it away because I know that I'm committed to it, and in fact, I'm going in two days. But

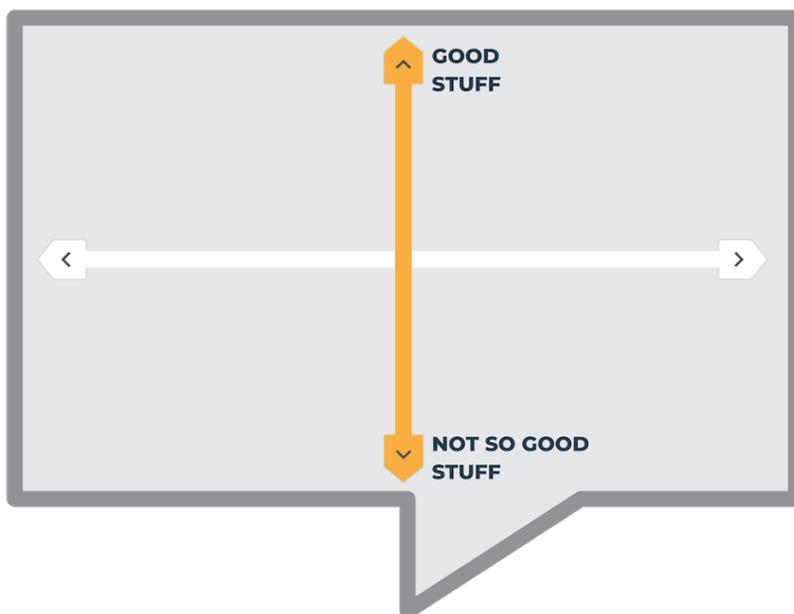
² Smock Jordan, S., Froerer, A., & Bavelas, J. B. (2013). [Microanalysis of positive and negative content in solution-focused brief therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy expert sessions](#). *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 32, 47-60.

when I come back from my trip, it's definitely my priority to work on changing the situation being more organized, um, and managing finances better." (Excerpt from The Guilt Trip, 2019)

Some are more obvious than others and you can easily spot a few utterances that seem to point to their past or their future.

Guiding Post #2: The Content

The content axis runs vertically in this model. In conversations, especially ones a bit more polarised, the content of people's narratives could be mapped on a spectrum between *good stuff* and *not-so-good stuff*. As you can imagine, the good stuff is what people want to see continue, increase, and grow in their life: interactions, moments, experiences, thoughts, decisions, attitudes, feelings, and hopes etc. that people want more of in their life. The opposite end is the not-so-good stuff that people want less of. Borrowing from the work of MFD, the *good stuff* in the content axis is termed *Positive Content* and the *not-so-good stuff*, *Negative Content*.

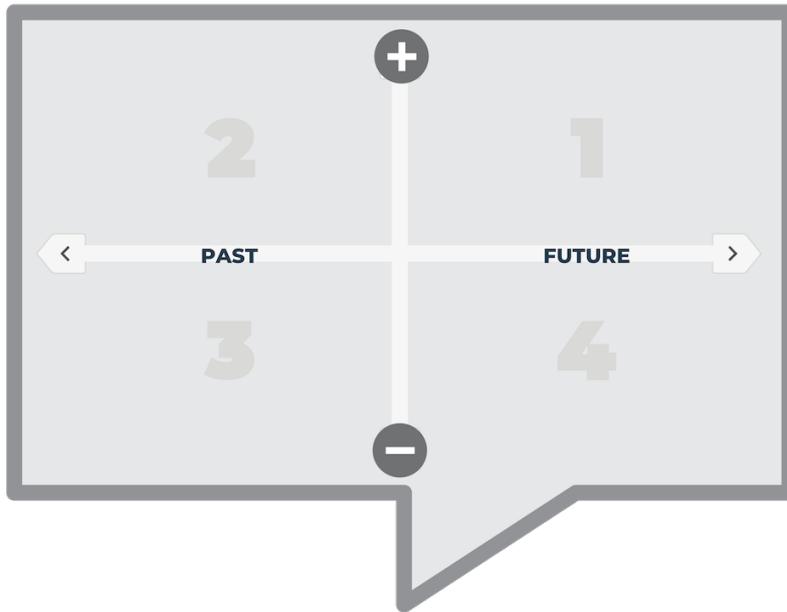


Going back to the earlier excerpt, what do you remember or notice as some things the client wants more of or less of? What does the client seem to care about? What did the client actually say that they want?

As you may have noticed, mapping the content of others' narratives may not be as clear as the timeline. It is a highly contextual and value-laden activity to determine something "good" or "not-so-good", and only looking at written texts here void of other audible and visible acts of communication may add to the ambiguity. The intended use of this axis is simply to aid one's understanding, of where the client might be in their narrative or where our questions might take them, similar to Korzybski (1933)'s claim: *"it is a map after all, not the territory"*.

The Quadrant

Putting the timeline axis and the content axis together, we have a quadrant model. For now, the sections can be referred to as Positive Future (Q1), Positive Past (Q2), Negative Past (Q3), and Negative Future (Q4).



Often times in a presentation or a shorter facilitation, this version of the quadrant is enough for learners to get the gist of it. Many have commented, on their feedback and follow-up communications, that this quadrant was the most useful part of their learning, and many have also modified this simple model to their contexts rather easily. For those of you who may care to know a bit more detail about the model, here are the names of each quadrant:

Quadrant 1: Preferred Future³

Quadrant 2: Resourceful Past

Quadrant 3: Troubled Past

Quadrant 4: Dreaded Future



³ The term, preferred future, is commonly used in the Solution Focused model. The DOQ adopts the term from the work of Iveson, George, & Ratner (2012).

The Intended Use

The intended use is as a simple heuristic when teaching and learning Solution-Focused Dialogue. It can be used as a mapping tool of the client content, and it also can be used to show the interactional functions of practitioners' responses to the client's content. For the purpose of this article, here are four possible uses:

Use #1: Spotting the Opportunities

As the popular saying goes in the Solution-Focused communities: "We are not problem-phobic nor solution-forcing." I translate this in the context of the DOQ model as all the quadrants are *possibilities*, or *opportunities* as Taylor & Simon (2014) would call them. There are many response options in an interaction, and this map seems particularly useful in illustrating what some of the opportunities we see in the client's narratives are.

Use #2: Exploring Potential Response Options with Learners

Hearing the opportunities in the clients' narratives is the first step in listening. The next step is for coaches to decide on their responses. Some responses may be simple formulations, questions, silence, or a simple nod or a stare. Using the *Listen-Select-Build* process of Solution-Focused conversations (De Jong, 2013)⁴, exploring many response options and their rationale with learners often leads to useful insights about presuppositions and tools of co-construction.

Use #3: Studying the Functions of the Coach's Contribution

Remember the second opening question: "How do you know that their progress has anything to do with you?" And remember the title of the session that it is about making progress visible. The DOQ may be used to study how the client's narratives change throughout the session or over several sessions. This model seems to be particularly useful in capturing the rhizomatic process of dialogues by looking at how audible utterances function in the interaction. It may help to illustrate the confluential nature of a dialogue, and especially the coach's influence and contribution to the client's curation process.

Use #4: Making the Learning Progress Visible

One of my favourite uses of this model is in coach training. Our learners usually start their course with a baseline video where they videotape their own session, coaching someone they just met for the first time. After each day, they produce another video session, and they compare their own tapes to their earlier session and their baseline video using the transcripts and the videos. Often times, their discovery of their own progress is both awesome and awful as some say. As an ongoing tool for self-revision and supervision, the DOQ has even become a research method for learners, teachers, and coaches alike.

For example, here's an interaction between coach and client on Day 1:

1. **Coach:** *"Thank you for being here. You mentioned earlier about how this trip to Asia was stressful because of money management. Can you tell me more about it?"*
2. **Client:** *"So beginning up to this time I had a plan put into place, it required saving more money for my trip than I would typically save. And then there were some things that came up,*

⁴ De Jong, P & Berg, I.K (2013) *Interviewing for Solutions* (4th Ed.) Belmont. Ca: Brooks/Cole

and so you know, time went by really quickly and I wasn't able to do that, and yet I am going on the trip [smile]. So I have this unsettled feeling around it, some concern and some worry, I'm trying to put it away because I know that I'm committed to it, and in fact, I'm going in two days. But when I come back from my trip, it's definitely my priority to work on changing the situation being more organized, um, and managing finances better."

3. **Coach:** "OK. What exactly is stressing you out about the money management? Because your trip is going to happen, right? Do you think you will still enjoy the trip?"
(Excerpt from *The Guilt Trip*, 2019)

Do you see why this particular case was called The Guilt Trip? As you might have spotted in the selection that the coach made, the coach introduced, preserved, and further encouraged clients' negative content such as stress in various forms – stressful, stressing out, etc., in their formulations. The embedded presuppositions in the questions also indicate that this session is rather problem-focused.

And here's the interaction between coach and client on Day 2:

1. **Coach:** "Hi, Jen!"
2. **Client:** "Hi, how are you?"
3. **Coach:** "I'm so glad you're here."
4. **Client:** "I'm glad to be here too."
5. **Coach:** "Cool. So I am wondering today what are your best hopes from this conversation?"
6. **Client:** "Oh, I'd like to gain some perspective around hum, organisation with a project that's come up at work. [yeah] It's a project that wasn't something I had planned for, it's sort of on top of everything else that I'm doing, but it has a big impact if it doesn't go well and it's something that I don't have a choice about."
7. **Coach:** "Ok. So you are talking about perspective? More perspective?"
8. **Client:** "Perspective, hum, I'd like to gain, just, get my head around it right now. I'm really floating around with how to get more organised etc."
9. **Coach:** "What does it look like for you being more organised for this project, that is so important to you?"

What differences did you notice in these two excerpts? What do you think of the coach's responses? What happened to the client's narrative in the Day 2 session? Do you notice the keywords, phrases, and other clues for what the client says that they want to see increase in their life? As many of you can identify, the Day 2 session seems to be a lot more solution-focused, and how did this happen? And the surprise part of these two sessions is that they were conducted by the same coach before and after learning the quadrant model!

Check-in: If We Were Sitting Together

Now that you have learned the model, I am sure you have ideas and insights. Suppose that we are sitting together to check-in after one year, here are some aspects I am curious about:

- "Since our session together, what's been particularly clear, useful, better, different, or interesting?"
- "How have you incorporated your insights into your life (personal and professional) already?"
- "What else would you like me to ask you?"

There are many other emerging ways to use the quadrant as people are experimenting with it in their own contexts. And it will be lovely to hear about how you are using it in your practice. It was truly my delight to participate and contribute to the SOLWorld community, and you can reach me at learn@briefcoaching.ca.

And that's all, folks.

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