Part One

STRUCTURED

The more structured the task, the more
spontaneous and creative will be the response.

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WHY STRUCTURE?

Structure is the backbone of dialogue education.

Dialogue education is a state of mind, moving us to listening, respecting, doubting, reflecting, designing, affirming, considering options, and celebrating opposites. At the same time, dialogue education is a structured system that evokes spontaneous and creative responses to the open questions in a learning design. As educators, we structure our teaching to ensure that learners learn. Structure means safety for the learner as well as accountability for the teacher. In these first chapters we will look at two specific structures: the seven design steps and the learning needs and resources assessment (LNRA).

Building backbone takes discipline and toughness. Structure in a learning design is one of the essential things that make learning happen. Without a structured design, you can have brilliant teaching but little learning. When the event is over, we do not want learners to say, "What a great teacher!" but rather, "Look at what we have just achieved. Look at how much we have learned."

The following *F concepts* are some of the uses of the structures of dialogue education:

Framing. Structures ensure quality learning when individual differences are at play in teams. Structures frame the learning so that each person can do each section accountably and the whole team can move forward without leaving any one member behind. *Learning tasks* (Vella, 2001) are central frames for teaching and learning in dialogue education.

Focusing. Structures focus dialogue so that no one member takes the group off onto an unrelated tangent. Part of the structure is timing:

the shorter the time, the higher the energy for learning. When a time frame is not set for a learning task, the focus is lost, energy is dissipated, and the learning of all is weakened. I have discovered that naming the *end time* of a learning task is most useful to learners. I say: "It is now 9:15. We will share your collected research at 9:45." This heightens the focus on the learning task and the specific content.

Freeing. Structure can free learners from fear and indecision. When a learning task is crisply set—"Do such and such with these particular resources and present your collective findings in this manner by four o'clock"—men and women get to work with confidence and a certain élan. When the guidelines are given, the boundaries set, the content clear and accessible, learners learn.

Forming. When structures are consistent and clear, learners get on with the work of learning along with the work of forming their team. They do not need to re-create the structures each time they begin a new process. Patterns of behavior emerge—including patterns for questioning patterns of behavior. Structures help learners form new theories, new groups and teams, a new personal response to unexpected situations. I liken sound structures to a box with three sides: open enough to allow flexibility and even a graceful exit, closed enough to work in and concentrate. The form or structure is a flexible mold for learners to use to shape new theory and new skills.

Frankly setting limits. A sound structure promotes honesty in the learning session. We will not, within two hours, teach the history of Western civilization or the anatomy of the hand. The structure is a frank admission of the limits of time and energy. It is a way to ensure honesty in the learning objectives.

Fusing. The diverse structures of dialogue education fuse all of the elements into meaningful learning. When a design is competent, professional, and well wrought, learners are so busy learning they do not notice these distinct elements. The structures (seven design steps, learning needs and resources assessment, learning tasks) are often invisible to learners, who are excited about their own achievements and the integrating "aha!" moments of learning they are experiencing.

Graduate students at the School of Public Health at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where for years I taught Health Education Strategies (dialogue education), often showed me their clinical practice designs with great pride, and they talked glowingly about the engagement and interest of patients whom they taught and of the indicators of learning they perceived. They rarely said: "Nice design for our graduate course!" or "Good learning needs and resources assessment!" Our purpose was learning, and that learning was happening. Teaching and learning fused as graduate students brought in from their clinical internships new theories and new practices appropriate to their contexts. Such creativity is an *indicator* not only of learning but also of the transfer of such learning to life. In Part Four, chapters Nine and Ten, we'll examine an evaluation structure that explains and demonstrates further the usefulness of these indicators.

Functional for learning. Structure is *not* a technique for organizing teaching materials so that a topic can be more efficiently covered. We often hear professors or teachers or trainers say, "This is what I will cover today." However, covering a topic is not what education is about, at any level. Structure is for learning, not merely for teaching. If the structure is not accessible to the learners, or if it obfuscates the content, or if it contains masses of data and information that the teacher hopes to pass on to learners, it is not the structure of dialogue education.

Frequently forgotten. These arguments for structure can be reinforced and corroborated by considering what a learning event looks like when structure is forgotten. A learned professor stands behind a lectern and offers brilliant insights on a subject dear to his heart; he reads from selected presentation slides that colorfully illustrate his topic. Or, conversely, a college class begins with the question, "Now, what do you want to talk about today?" Or a passionate preacher goes on and on, inspired by a line of scripture. Or an art connoisseur weaves through a museum, talking animatedly about his favorite paintings. Or a manager leads a strategic planning session with his staff by talking through all the steps in

the process himself. Or a training specialist, demonstrating a new computer program, speedily clicks through steps. You can recall for yourself your own personal experience of structureless teaching that frustrated you and that failed to lead to useful learning.

Structuring Content and Process

When a history professor sets out to teach a university course on East Africa in the twentieth century, she has to organize (structure) the content, of course. She will lay out a set of relevant readings and exercises in a sequence to develop the students' grasp of that content.

A health care professional—an R.N. with a graduate degree in nutrition—designs a community program for seniors on the subject of nutrition that aims at weight loss and weight control. She organizes (structures) the content and prepares a set of presentation slides to show in sequence.

A trainer whose mandate includes professional development courses for principals and administrators in a county school system is invited to design the annual principals' retreat, teaching all the latest legislation related to K–12 education, the issues raised on management in Jim Collins's book *Good to Great,* and a new computer program that all principals have to master. He organizes (structures) these three sets of content and decides to teach parts of each set every day for the four days of the retreat. He too prepares presentation slides for each of the three sets.

In contrast, the preparation of a dialogue education design involves structuring not only the content but also the entire process of teaching and learning. In the history professor's case, she will contact the students who are going to take the course and do with them an LNRA, discovering what they already know about East Africa, what they hope to learn, and what they need to know. She will use the seven design steps (see Chapter Three) to consider in depth who these students are, why their study of East Africa is occurring now, what kind of time frame is available, and where the course is being taught. She will lay out the content in sequence,

chronological or otherwise, and identify for each piece of content an *achievement-based objective* (ABO), designing what the university students will *do* with that content in order to master it. Then she will design a set of learning tasks for each of the class sessions in the course.

As the course continues, she and the students will identify indicators of their learning and of both possible and actual transfer of that learning to their other studies and to their lives. They may note indicators of the impact of this course on East African history on them and on current history as it is occurring.

The nurse-nutritionist in the health care setting who aims to teach seniors using dialogue education will meet all of these seniors at the senior center prior to designing her class to do an LNRA. She will design her classes using the seven design steps, laying out clearly who these seniors are and why they need to consider their nutrition patterns. She will select a site that works for the learners and for herself and a time frame that is appropriate for busy retired men and women. The time frame dictates how much content she can select. She will prepare that content in sequence and for each content piece, indicating an ABO showing what the seniors will do with the content to learn it. Her next step is designing a series of learning tasks for the seniors to do, in small groups or alone, during each session. She and the seniors will mark, as the course continues, the indicators of learning that they notice. They will together name indicators of possible or present transfer into their lives (and kitchens) and possibly cite the impact as it emerges and they see one another losing weight and looking and feeling healthier and more energized.

Because the content and the ABOs directly inform the separate learning tasks, some indicators of learning can appear as each task is completed.

This process of designing for dialogue education is demanding, challenging, time-consuming, and strenuous. You will not do it without recognition of the qualitative leap in learning it affords. As you read this book, you will be invited to do dialogue education in your own context.

The trainer designing the principals' retreat using dialogue education will survey all of the principals attending in order to do a comprehensive LNRA with them. Notice that he is also modeling dialogue education. He will consider their responses to questions about what they already know of the new legislation, of Collins's book *Good to Great*, and of the new computer program as he sets out to design—using the seven design steps—the four-day retreat. He will consider in depth who these principals are and why this time is important to them: what is the situation that demands their being at the retreat? He lays out the time frame for their meetings together and examines or selects the site of those meetings. He lays out three sets of content: legislation, Collins's principles and practices, and the skills involved in using the new computer program. For each of these content areas he names ABOs that show what the principals will do with the content. Then he designs provocative and compelling learning tasks to complete each ABO using PowerPoint, a DVD of Collins lecturing to managers at Harvard Business School, and the actual computer program for them to use. This teacher and his students will be invited to recognize and name indicators of learning, transfer, and even impact, as the retreat comes to a close.

In Chapter Two we will look at one particular structure used in designing accountable dialogue education: the learning needs and resources assessment (LNRA). Before we do that, consider these simple implementation challenges regarding *structure*:

Implementation Challenge 1A: Traditional

Consider a course you have recently taken or designed and led. Name one way in which a more precise structure and the F concepts offered in this chapter—framing, focusing, freeing, forming, frankly setting limits, and fusing—might have enhanced that course. Show how you might have used these F concepts in such a way that the course would have been more functional for learning.

Implementation Challenge 1B: On-Line

The structure of an on-line course is really all that the learner sees. Describe an on-line course you recently took that had a *sound* structure that helped you learn, and then describe one in which a less precise structure led to ambiguity and confusion.

A recent experience with the on-line course *Teaching Principles for Healthcare Professionals* at University of Detroit Mercy was challenging and fruitful largely because of the structure of the course on-line. Sarah Swart, course professor and designer, provided the entire syllabus upfront. Each session was carefully structured for step-by-step action, and each student kept her own logbook according to this rubric: Keep a log for each unit that contains the following information: unit name, time spent reading material, time spent working on assignments, time spent on other course activities, things about the unit that were unclear, things about the unit you found relevant, things about the unit that you found irrelevant.

A framework was provided for individuals to use, if they wished. Each week, two separate hours were structured for direct chat via the Internet with the professor. Such a structure proved functional both for learning and for teaching.

Implementation Challenge 1C: Your Context

Name three reasons why you would want to structure the design and implementation of your unique work in your own context. How could such structure be of service to your evaluation efforts? What devices can you design for yourself to support the use of such structure(s)?