

More About Learning Conversations: Part 2

By David M Mills PhD

Three Conversational Demonstrations

1. Drawing Distinctions: three, two & one card draw, and anticipations

The most straightforward way I have found to explore the concept of dimensionality is with a deck of ordinary playing cards. The dimensions of meaning and the relationships among them that emerge are concrete, and yet easily substituted for in other, more personally relevant, contexts. The “trivial concreteness” of this game of cards is both an advantage and a disadvantage. Some people find it difficult to “relate to” the whole operation. It may not be easy to *care* how a card is distinct, except in the context of an actual game. We could just as well use a set of “cards” representing a set of personal experiences of yours. If you find it helpful, think of some personally relevant context and let it rest, as it were, just “off stage.” Simply notice whatever parallels emerge as you continue. You might then want to repeat the process formally using your own bits of experience in place of the cards. Now, on with the “game.”

Find a deck of cards, shuffle, and draw three cards. Now simply ask, What is some way in which two of these cards are similar and the third card, different. Can you name the similarity? Can you name the “opposite” attribute that makes the third card different? One important note here. It is common to use the word “attribute” as a synonym for “property” and to think of the attributes of a thing as possessions of the thing; they are *its* attributes. I use “attribute” rather than “property” simply because “attribute” is also a verb. These are not qualities that belong to the thing; they are the qualities that I *attribute* to it. It is my way of keeping in mind that the qualities of the objects in my experience are not *in* the objects nor *in* me, but are somehow *between* us.

Draw three more cards. An alternative way of asking the question is, Which card is the most different? Can you name the difference? Can you name what it is about the other two cards that makes them less different? Draw three more cards. Ask again, Which two are more similar, or which is the most different? That is, similar or different in some way that you haven’t already used. You have now just made explicit three dimensions of meaning within your experience of a deck of cards, what within Personal Construct Psychology are called constructs. These dimensions are just the ways in which you might anticipate that the next card you draw will be similar or different from the previous one. They are the dimensions of what you can meaningfully say about the card. One dimension that usually comes up quite early on is red vs. black. Now suppose I offered to give you £5 if you correctly predict whether the next card would be red or black. You of course have a 50% chance of being correct. But suppose instead I offered to give you £1 for every correct prediction you made about the next card. In that case the more things you can say, that is the more dimensions of meaning that are available in your experience of the cards, the better your chances of getting a significant amount from me. In just this way, in “real life,” the higher the dimensionality, the richer the experience. It should be noted that this

exercise is probably something of a cheat since you have already had experience with cards like these. A “strict construction” would say that the meaning of each of your dimensions is really only in relation to those three cards. Thus knowing which of the available distinctions will be significant, that is, useful in distinguishing among other cards, is itself a matter of anticipation, and always relies somewhat on previous experience with “things of this sort.” The point is that a given card is “meaningful” precisely in terms of the ways in which it is like or not like other cards, and these have to do both with past experience and present purpose. A bridge player and a poker player may draw quite different sets of dimensions from the same cards. Also, suppose I had handed you a different set of cards and the first two trios contained strange symbols and colours on them. If the third trio of cards were two red and one black, would you then feel so sure that red vs. black was a significant distinction?

Continue drawing three cards at a time for a few more rounds. Now draw one card, but just before you do, what significant things can you say about it? Some distinctions are “obvious,” such as that it is either red or black, either odd or even. Some, such as high or low value, face or numbered card, may be less obvious than they seem. In some people’s meaning some curious dimensions can sometimes arise. For example, some have an arbitrary, or conventional, “stipulated” quality. Is an ace a high or low value card, or does it belong with the face cards or the number cards? It depends on the game you have in mind when you come up with that distinction, but it is definitely one or the other. But speaking of high vs. low value, what about a 10? an 8? Where is the boundary between high and low? It might not be easy to say. Also, not all distinctions may apply to all of the cards. Is the queen of hearts odd or even? Another curious distinction that sometimes comes up is two cards in sequence vs. not in sequence. It is a perfectly reasonable distinction, but it really applies not to that one card you are about to draw, but rather to its relationship with the one after that.

Look again at your trios of cards. Notice if you have limited the *kinds* of distinctions you are drawing. For instance, are you only finding distinctions to do with how the cards look? What about how they might be used in various games? Or even how you *feel* as you look at them? There are always more distinctions, and more kinds of distinctions, possible than seems evident. When I speak of the dimensionality of meaning, I am referring to just this quality. It is not that there are any ready made dimensions of meaning waiting for us to experience, but that experience is always differentiable in just the way you have been doing with the cards. The distinctions are always *yours*; they are between you and the cards; they have always to do with your intention in drawing them, and within the continuity of experience there are always other distinctions that you might have drawn instead. One more point: we do not in general *have* these distinctions and then *use* them; they are dimensions *within* our experience. Of course, suppose I asked you to sort the deck into four piles such that for each card you could say three things about why it was in that pile and none of the others. In that case consciously (or unconsciously) drawing some distinctions useful for the task, and then consciously (or unconsciously) using them is just what you probably would do. We might say that the world is not differentiated, but differentiable, though we are so good at differentiating that it often appears the other way round.

Next draw two cards. How many ways can you find in which they are similar? How many in which they are different? This task is of course much easier now, in the context of all of the dimensions you have drawn from the previous trios, than it would have been at the beginning. In a sense, a third card is implicit in the context of your prior experience with the deck. That is, “they are both red” is a significant similarity because you know that there are other cards that are black. They are both rectangles with trimmed corners, but that is a trivial similarity. Since it is true of *all* of the cards it is of no use in distinguishing them, and so it has no “significance,” (and I would have refused to give you a pound for predicting it). “One is a diamond and the other a heart” is a significant difference because you know there are other diamonds and other hearts in the deck.

Finally, draw one more card. How might that card have been different? Of course, there are an infinity of possible ways, but which ones are significant in the context of the deck? The deck provided the context of similarity within which the ways in which that one card might have been different can be significant distinctions. Imagine someone giving you a quick glance at strange looking deck, handing you one card, and asking you that same question, How could this card be different? You would have a much more difficult time. This is just the situation we find ourselves in whenever we have only one experience to reflect upon and nothing to contrast it with. As we will find in a while, our own, largely kinesthetic, sense of ourselves is just such a situation in which if we always act the same way we have no way of appreciating how we might be instead, and so it is difficult to give our present state any meaning beyond “normal.”

We have stayed with these cards so long because they are such concrete and yet “trivial” instances of what I am claiming about experience at large. The operation itself illustrates other aspects of experience as well. As I am describing these little explorations I am dealing with abstractions—distinctions, attributes and such. You, however, are dealing concretely with physical cards. “Draw three cards” is something I am imagining, but for you it is a complex physical action as well. *That* experience has a much wider dimensionality and also embodies the continuity of experience. Just as I can make and use distinctions about the mathematical or colour attributes of the cards, I can make distinctions among the physical, mental, emotional, social etc. dimensions of the experience itself. And just as “dimensionality” refers to a kind of openness or availability for differentiation in my experience (and not to any kind of prior dimensions), “continuity” refers to its unity as a whole experience. We can converse about your explorations with the cards in physical or intellectual or whatever terms we like, but the experience itself has its own integrity, its own continuity. We may think of drawing a card as a bodily act and drawing a distinction as a mental one, but those are already extreme abstractions. But then, abstracting is itself an act, with its own continuity. Let us use the cards once more to make this concrete in your experience.

Draw one more card. How do you like it? If you could have a “better” card, how would it be different? By now you have ready to hand several useful dimensions abstracted from your experience with other cards. In answering this question you are adding another aspect to the matter of drawing out the dimensions, the aspect of preference. Not only do you have a

preference as to where you might want your chosen card to be “located” on any particular dimension, diamond rather than club, perhaps, or even numbered rather than odd, but some dimensions themselves matter more than others—maybe you really don’t care what colour it is as long as it is a face card. Ordinarily these acts, of differentiating and of choosing, are thought of as mental (though in the second case we might admit an emotional component) but of course you don’t become a temporarily discarnate being while you perform them. You are still probably sitting, still holding the card, still perhaps looking over your trios of cards spread in front of you. It is just that the dimensions of how you are engaged in these aspects of your present experience are not obviously relevant. “Choosing” however, is ambiguous. When magicians say, “Pick a card,” they don’t usually mean, “decide which card you would like.” It is a request to physically reach forward and pull a card out of the deck. But then the usual phrase is, “Pick a card, any card.” Let us combine meanings and “pick a card, a particular card,” or perhaps, “pick a card, any card meeting certain personally chosen criteria.” In order to end up with a “better” card in your hand you require two things, a way of knowing what better means to you and a *means* for somehow getting such a card out of the deck and into your hand. Try this now. Decide what would count as “better,” then devise a plan for selecting such a card and then carry out your plan.

You should now have in your hand a card that is in some way more to your liking. What did you observe as you made your selection? How did deciding on your criteria “feel?” What kinds of dimensions did you include in your plan? For instance, if you turned the deck over to look at the cards, did you care about the quality of how your hands moved as you did so? In a sense the plan was present as a set of dimensions within the act of physically acquiring the new card. This is once again what I mean by the continuity of experience, the wholeness which gives rise to its potential for many different differentiations, in how we act as well as what we can say.

What we will do next is explore some ways of attending to some of the “felt” rather than “thought about” dimensions of such experience.

2. “*Interlace*”

Fold your hands on your lap, fingers interlaced. Notice that one thumb is on top of the other, and that each finger of that hand rests on top of the same finger of the other hand. If you do this several times you will probably notice that the same hand is always “on top.” Switch your hands so that your fingers are interlaced with the other hand on top. Notice how that feels. This is a simple demonstration of the unfamiliar feeling that comes from doing something in a non-habitual way. I would like you to take the matter a step further and elaborate some dimensions of that unfamiliar feeling. In other words, what are the ways in which the “feeling” of having your hands folded one way is different from the other. Note that this is like the “draw two cards” example earlier. The meaning of each quality that you observe in the unfamiliar mode is precisely in its contrast with the “opposite” quality in the familiar mode. Also these distinctions, these ways in which it feels different do not lie in an intellectual processing of the kinesthetic or emotional qualities of the experience. They are distinctions between the feelings themselves;

the *meanings* are kinesthetic or emotional rather than cognitive. There are no restrictions on the kinds of differences you may notice. They may be “in your hands” or they may be about feelings elsewhere. They may seem quite far from the obvious, such as, “I find myself thinking about my mother.” They may be emotional, perhaps surprisingly so. One young girl felt so angry whenever she folded her hands the “wrong” way that she refused to continue with the experiment.

See if you can find three or four different differences. Go back and forth between the two modes of folding as many times as you need. In each case, see if you can name each end of the distinction beyond “familiar vs. unfamiliar,” something like “comfortable vs. insecure,” for example. The labels you decide on are not important in themselves. They are merely what Kelly called “convenient word handles,” and so drawing a distinction is not less “successful” if you cannot find a suitable word for it. I have found in practice, though, that the very attempt to find a satisfactory label draws my attention to the quality within my experience in a much more detailed way. In any case what I mean by the dimension of meaning is the “way it feels different” behind the labels. You may find a particularly clear instance of this if you choose a label which feels almost but not quite right, and then find a “better” one. What that label “means” is just the “what about the feeling” that makes the second label fit it better than the first.

Suppose when you first folded your hands I had only asked, What does that feel like? This is, of course, just like the “draw one card” case, and involves the same difficulties. Most people have trouble saying much of anything beyond, “It feels normal.” In a sense, what you have just done is to make explicit a few of the dimensions of what “feels normal” actually means in your own concrete experience. Now unfold your hands and fold them again. Which fingers are on top? Most likely the same ones that were on top the very first time; that is still your habitual mode of folding your hands. To do it otherwise requires thought and attention, and may be difficult even then. Unfold your hands once more. Think about the “unfamiliar” folding and fold them again. Was it easy or difficult? If you managed it, how does it feel now?

One more experiment: unfold your hands. Think again about your three or four pairs of attributes, and think in particular about the qualities of the “unfamiliar” mode that made it different. Now keeping these ways of being different in mind as a guide, bring your hands together in the unfamiliar way. What happened?

3. Dimensions of “Grace”

Think of the most graceful animal or person you can remember. Recall as vividly as you can some episode of observing that individual in action. What was it about the action that you mean (or are referring to) when you say it was “graceful”? Think of some contrasting episodes of observing individuals who were not graceful. How many ways can you find in which the graceful was different from others? The meaning of “graceful” in your experience, at least these bits of your experience, is constructed of these ways in which the concrete episode of graceful is different from the other episodes. For instance, if a significant attribute of grace for you is

“moves smoothly,” that takes its meaning in relation to how it might have been instead. Thus the usefulness of finding contrasting experiences; that is where you find the “opposite” ways of moving that give “smoothly” its personal significance. One point of all this is that once we have abstracted these dimensions from our experience—which we usually do in a completely inattentive way—they become “abstractions” and it is all too easy to lose the connection between them and the whole personal experience whose meanings they represent.

Try the same exercise again, this time beginning with a time when you *felt* graceful yourself. What new dimensions of your meaning of graceful come from considering the matter according to how it feels as well as how it looks? Do any of the dimensions you found in the “interlace” conversation seem to apply? Make some movement, moving forward from the back of your chair or standing up, for instance. Repeat the same movement, but just before you do, think about the dimensions of your meaning of graceful which you just found. Now keeping clearly in mind the “graceful” end of each of these dimensions, as you did before with the unfamiliar hand folding, make the movement “gracefully.” Observe what happens. This may bring you back to the continuity I spoke of earlier. Concepts, feelings, movements etc. are all abstracted from whole experience. They are the dimensions drawn into the foreground of meaning against the background of dimensions that collectively become “everything else” as in “everything else being equal...”