

Modelling the process of dialogic communication in public relations: A role-based approach

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Abstract

This paper takes Kent and Taylor's (2002) call to develop a dialogic theory of public relations and suggests that a necessary first step is the modelling of the process of dialogic communication in public relations. In order to achieve this, extant literature from a range of fields is reviewed, seeking to develop a definition of dialogic communication that is meaningful to the practice of contemporary public relations. A simple transmission model of communication is used as a starting point. This is synthesised with concepts relating specifically to dialogue, taken here in its broadest sense rather than defined as any one particular outcome. The definition that emerges from this review leads to the conclusion that dialogic communication in public relations involves the interaction of three roles—those of sender, receiver, and responder. These three roles are shown to be adopted at different times by both participants involved in dialogic communication. It is further suggested that variations occur in how these roles are conducted: the sender and receiver roles can be approached in a passive or an active way, while the responder role can be classified as being either resistant or responsive to the information received in dialogic communication. The final modelling of the definition derived provides a framework which can be tested in the field to determine whether variations in the conduct of the roles in dialogic communication actually exist and, if so, whether they can be linked to the different types of outcome from dialogic communication identified previously in the literature.

Public relations is based on the conduct of communication between organisations and their stakeholders.

There is nothing new or startling in that statement: from the earliest dawning of its critical self-awareness as a distinct discipline, public relations has concerned itself with the management of communication between organisations and those on whom their success or failure depends (e.g. see Crabbe & Vibbert, 1986; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). Even recent developments emphasising the importance of relational perspectives on public relations acknowledge the core role played by communication (e.g. see Bridges & Nelson, 2000; Ledingham, 2003; Toth, 2000). Bilateral communication—such as that between an organisation and its stakeholders—is often referred to as dialogue or dialogic communication (Baxter, 2005; Stewart, Zediker & Black, 2004). In recent times

there have been calls to reflect the importance of this communication type in public relations by developing a dialogic theory of public relations (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

The Kent and Taylor approach to developing this theory is founded on the precept that “dialogue” means a particular type of outcome resulting from what they refer to as “dialogic communication ‘procedures’” (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 32). This outcome is characterised by its ethical and mutually-satisfying nature. They are not alone in adopting this perspective. They follow the lead of others such as Pearson (1989) in presenting dialogue as an inherently ethical outcome of communication. The Dialogue Group—comprised of academics and theoreticians interested in the particular phenomenon of communicative interaction—draws heavily on the work of Bohm (2006; Bohm, Factor & Garrett, 1991) and also uses the term “dialogue” to mean such co-creation of meaning between participants. However, they acknowledge it is one possibility among many, and distinguish it from other variants of this form of communication by capitalising the term “Dialogue” (The Dialogue Group, n.d.). The qualities of supportiveness and genuineness that characterise this type of communication are clearly apposite to the type of phenomenon Kent and Taylor (1998; 2002; Taylor, Kent & White, 2001) call dialogue, but how useful is their application of that label in their search to develop a theory of dialogic public relations? The problem with Kent and Taylor’s use of the term “dialogue” may be a simple issue of nomenclature; if they had used another label for the outcome they had chosen to focus on¹, they could legitimately have situated their proposition within a broader discussion of the role of dialogue in public relations. However, that solution still does not answer the very real and valid call they make for the development of a dialogic theory of public relations.

There can be no doubt that communication between two participants is sometimes balanced, highly collaborative and respectful, producing ethical and mutually-acceptable consensual outcomes. But this clearly does not encompass all the different types of communication possible between organisations and their stakeholders, nor the range of potential outcomes resulting from such communication. Such variations are widely acknowledged in extant literature: Arnstein (1969) devised an 8-rung ladder typology reflecting different types of outcome resulting from different types of communication between organisations and stakeholders. The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) (2000) has developed its own spectrum of 5 variations on the theme of such interactions. These typologies all acknowledge that the process of communication between organisations and stakeholders can be conducted in very different ways, and with very different outcomes. What is needed for public relations is a theory that encompasses these variations in both process and outcome, and presents them in some way that acknowledges the veracity and legitimacy of each. Discussion about the relative merits of any variation can then be conducted within a consistent and inclusive frame of reference.

As a first step toward developing an inclusive theory of dialogic public relations, this paper proposes modelling the process of dialogic communication—Kent and Taylor’s

¹ The choice of focus on this particular type of outcome is similar to Grunig and Hunt’s (1984) marked preference for the two-way symmetric model of public relations, with which Kent and Taylor’s version of dialogue would appear to have much in common.

(2002) “procedures”—that leads to the different types of outcome. Such a model would suggest where in the process of dialogic communication these differences originate; and subsequently provide a method of operationalising the influencing of these differences. The model would be important for three reasons.

- **Description.** It would provide a consistent frame of reference for describing the different types of dialogic communication that occur between organisations and stakeholders. This is a vital first step in aligning discussions on different types of dialogic communication.
- **Prediction.** It could be used to suggest in advance the type of dialogic communication most likely to occur between an organisation and its stakeholders. This is important in terms of managing participant expectations and increasing the transparency of the dialogic process. A predictive model of dialogic communication is needed by organisations to enable them to effectively engage with their immediate communities and other stakeholders.
- **Direction.** A comprehensive and accurate modelling of the process of dialogic communication between an organisation and its stakeholders can be used to identify where resources might best be directed to increase the likelihood of a certain type of dialogic communication happening. It will enable organisations to identify both where they are situated at the present in terms of their dialogic practices, and where they would like (or need) to be. The model will then enable the service providers to plan and operationalise the changes they need to make in order to bring about any desired or necessary change.

It is proposed that this paper will follow Kent and Taylor’s lead in using the adjectival form of the word dialogue—i.e. “dialogic”—to describe the type of communication being studied. However, in this instance this is not automatically taken to refer to the one form of outcome given preference by Kent and Taylor. Instead, the task of developing a model of the process of dialogic communication in public relations will begin by firstly seeking to define dialogic communication in such a way that it reflects the multivariate nature of the concept.

To begin the modelling of the process of dialogic communication, it is first necessary to develop an appropriate definition of the concept of dialogic communication. This definition must encompass not only the specific communication outcome which formed the focus of Kent and Taylor’s initial foray into the area, but also those other outcomes that do not fit this profile, as identified in the extant literature. It should also encompass the possible variations in the process of dialogic communication itself, not just its outcomes. The development of the definition of dialogic communication is presented in this paper as a series of steps. This allows the inclusion of each element to be clearly acknowledged and justified.

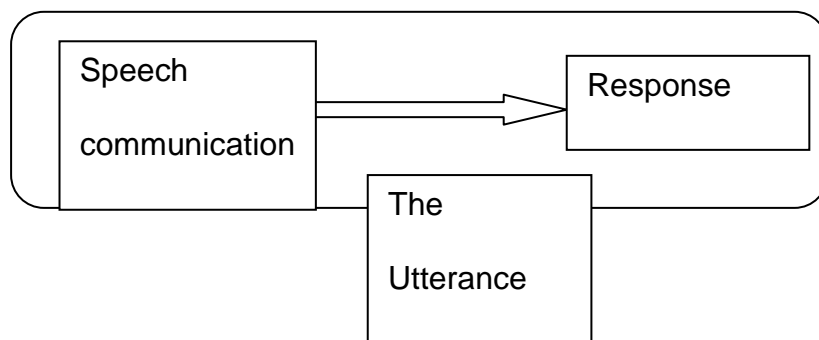
The initial source of inspiration for the definition of dialogic communication is the work of the 5 major philosophers of dialogue: Buber, Bakhtin, Bohm, Freire and Gadamer. Each has a slightly different interpretation of what dialogue means, and how it is enacted.

Buber’s work on the philosophy of dialogue in the mid-20th century marked the beginning of a concentrated study of the concept by academics from a range of fields, including theoretical physics and education. Buber was among the first to conceptualise

dialogue holistically—i.e. seeing dialogue as a phenomenon whose whole is greater than the sum of its part(icipant)s (e.g. see Buber, 1965). He acknowledged the duality of the roles of participants in the development of his classic *I-Thou* binary (Buber, 1958; 2004).

Gadamer’s interest in dialogue stemmed from his focus on language as the means of transferring information about the world, through which the world is also created (e.g. see Gadamer, 1989). Thus, language is the means of establishing relationships between individuals and the world they inhabit. He identified that such language is made up of both verbal and non-verbal exchanges of information.

Bakhtin took a similar view of dialogue on a macro scale. He understood dialogue as instances of speech communication and responsiveness or reply, labelling the whole event as “the utterance” (Bakhtin, 1981; 1986).



Bohm (Bohm, Factor & Garrett, 1991) saw dialogue as “a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us” (p. 27). Stewart, Zediker and Black (2004) conclude that Bohm’s position is that “dialogue must be understood as a holistic process enveloping interlocutors, rather than as the sum of interactions between fragmented participants” (p. 24). Bohm Garrett (2006) and others (Bohm, Factor & Garrett, 1991) are advocates of a concept they label Dialogue (note the capitalisation). “Capital D” Dialogue is a very specific form of group interaction “in which collective learning takes place and out of which a sense of increased harmony, fellowship and creativity can arise” (Bohm, Factor & Garrett, 1991, p. 2). As the Dialogue Group (n.d.) puts it:

In Dialogue [sic] we are interested in creating a fuller picture of reality rather than breaking it down into fragments or part, as happens in discussion. In Dialogue we do not try to convince others of our point of view. There is no emphasis on winning, but rather on learning, collaboration and the synthesis of points of view.

Ballantyne (2000; 2004) adopts a similar position in linking the use of dialogue to the creation of shared or common platforms of knowledge between organisations and their customers in the marketing context. He perceives this as being inherent to the relationship marketing function—a territory whose “ownership” is hotly disputed by public relations—and notes the recent renaissance of interest among academics and practitioners alike in the conduct of dialogue within this framework.

Coming from a background in education, Freire saw dialogue as the archetypal exercise of democratic interchange between citizens in preference to the domination of oppressor over oppressed (e.g. see Freire, 1990). Freire’s perspective positions dialogue as an inclusive, transformative event.

Although it may be argued that dictionary-like definitions have no place in an academic conceptual paper, it is nonetheless beneficial to consider the derivation of the word “dialogue” in order to further clarify the concept as it is used in this paper, and to identify elements that are relevant to the developing model of dialogic public relations. Reference sources (e.g. Soanes & Stevenson, 2005) trace “dialogue” back to two ancient Greek words: *dia*, meaning through or across, and *logos*, meaning word or thought. Thus “dialogue” could most literally be translated as the transmission of ideas. Implied within this is the presence of two participants, one conveying an idea and the other being its recipient. Varey and Ballantyne (2005) suggest an alternative interpretation of the source for the word dialogue. They also trace its derivations to Ancient Greece, but link it to the word

dialegethai . . . meaning to think and speak about something in such a way that the thing the speakers were talking about was recognized as different, and in talking together, the speakers were able to move toward a new intellectual understanding. (p. 16)

This again suggests a duality of roles within dialogue that could be broadly categorised as iterative occurrences of sending (talking) and receiving (thinking). A synthesis of the main ideas consistently represented in the work of these dialogue philosophers reveals a common thread—the existence of two participants in the communication. In public relations, these would be most often an organisational representative and a member of a public. It suggests that the two participants have specific roles in this interaction, and these roles are categorised and defined by the sending out and receiving of information. Therefore the first version of the definition of dialogic communication is:

Dialogic communication is the sending and receiving of ideas between two participants.

This initial identification of the most basic premise underpinning dialogic communication provides a crucial insight. Dialogic communication is generated out of the interaction of two participants behaving in certain ways—in other words, two people adopting specific roles in the process. This focus on the significance of the roles involved in the process of dialogic communication is an important point of difference from other theorising about communication in public relations, which instead often addresses the concept of the message in the sender–message–receiver flow—its creation and how to enhance its effectiveness (e.g. see Hallahan, 2000a).

This first element of the definition of dialogic communication for use in public relations reflects the logic that states the communication must begin with the sending of a message or information—i.e. that the sender function (the speaker in Bakhtin’s view; the “I” in Buber’s perspective) is the initiator of the information flow (see also Thomlison, 2000).

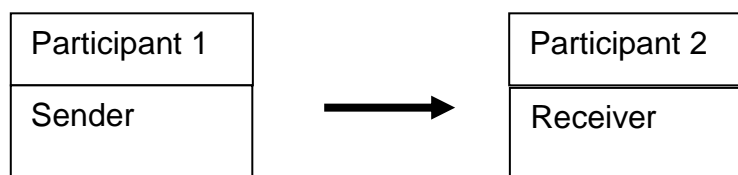


Figure 2 The basic roles in the conduct of communication

Even though the roles of sender and receiver co-exist in this understanding of dialogic communication, it will be necessary to consider and present them separately within the definition, so that it is possible for different influences on each of these contributions to the dialogic form to be identified. Thus, the initial version of the emerging definition is sustained:

Dialogic communication is the sending and receiving of ideas between two participants.

However, one of the first amendments made to this simple model of dialogic communication must be the incorporation of the response to the message by the receiver (the responder in Bakhtin’s terminology). Thomlison (2000) labels this response by receivers “feedback”. This term is not itself used in the definition of dialogic communication being developed for use in modelling the process, as it implies that the communication response generated from a received communication is always directed to the original sender, and this might not be the case; therefore, the label and concept of “feedback” might be unnecessarily limiting. However, the concept of some response to a received communication is important, and this is the next element incorporated into the developing definition of dialogic communication.

Dialogic communication is the sending and receiving of ideas between two participants, resulting in a response by the receiver.

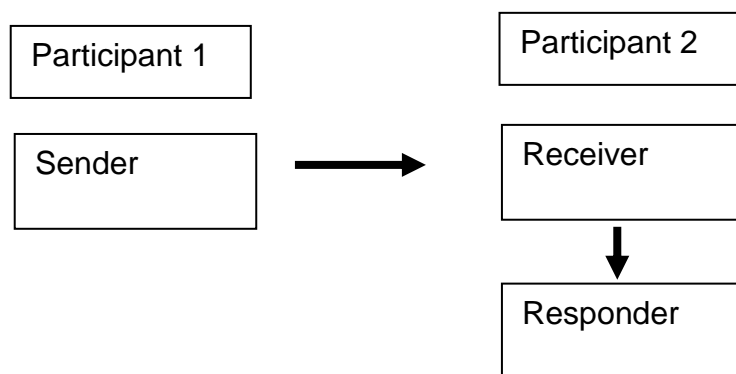


Figure 3 The roles of sender, receiver and responder (devised for this paper)

The receiver’s response to the information received results in the transmission of information, either by their words or by their behaviour. This important aspect of dialogic communication reflects the conclusion drawn by Thomlison (2000) that, when a communication event is seen as a whole, the roles of sender and receiver are not fixed, nor permanently allocated to either participant. Thomlison (2000) illustrates it thus:

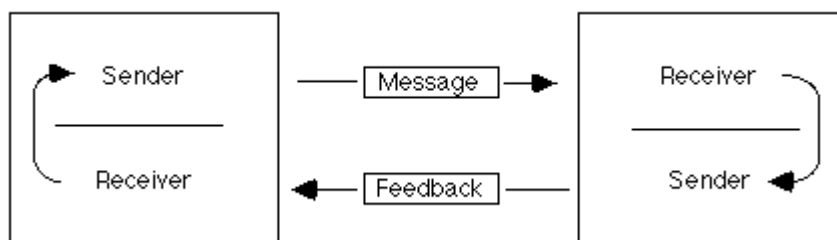


Figure 4 Feedback model of communication (Thomlison, 2000, p. 179)

This demonstrates the interchangeability of the roles of sender and receiver in any given dialogic communication. This conclusion is widely supported in the specialist literature on dialogue. Zauderer (2000-2001) asserts that the Greek roots of “dialogue” more appropriately translate as “flowing through” and cites Bohm et al.’s (1991) suggestion that this evokes images of “a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us” (p. 27). This indicates that not only is dialogue pervasive in society, but also that there is fluidity or interchangeability of the sender/receiver roles within dialogue itself. This bi-directional aspect is important to incorporate in the developing definition of dialogic communication being constructed in this paper.

As noted previously, the preferred term for this stage in the process of dialogic communication is “response” rather than feedback, since it may be directed to the original sender of the information, or to a third party.

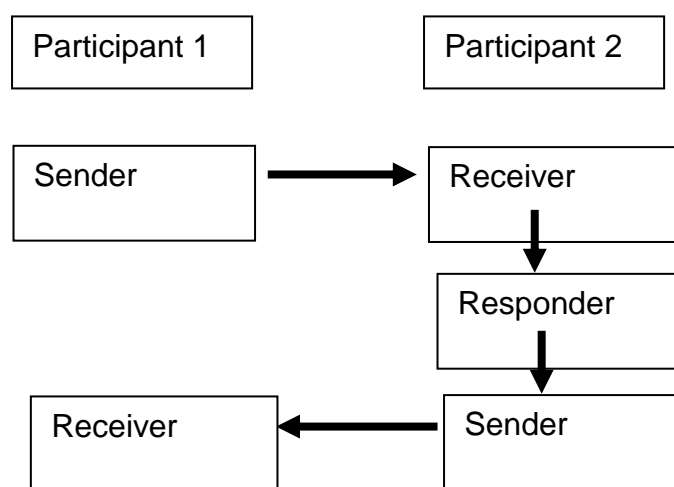


Figure 5 The interchangeable nature of the roles of sender and receiver (devised for this paper)

In this illustration, the response is made to the original sender of the message. This demonstrates clearly the earlier point that the roles of sender and receiver are not fixed. Participant 1 was originally the sender and Participant 2 the receiver, but the communication of a response transforms Participant 2 into the sender, and Participant 1 into the receiver. This results in a diagrammatic representation resembling Thomlison’s (2000) conceptualisation of the interpersonal communication process, which incorporates a feedback loop. Participant 1 in the above diagram would then—as a receiver—also respond to the information received, thus suggesting that dialogic communication can have a closed and exclusive looped structure.

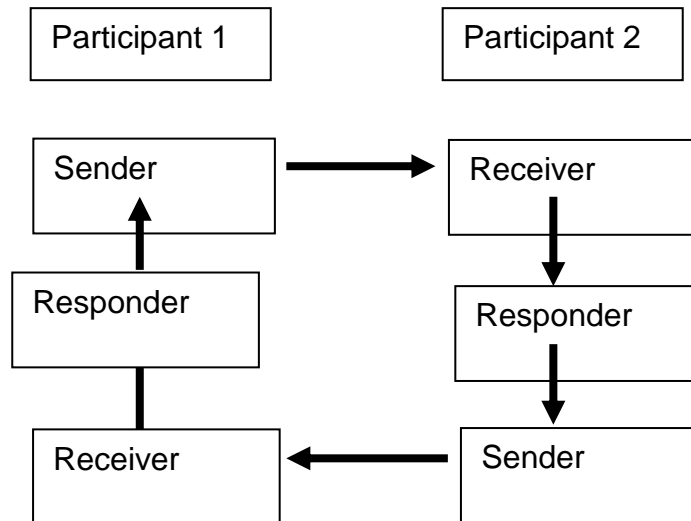


Figure 6 Dialogic communication as a closed loop (devised for this paper)

However, this need not be the case. The definition of dialogic communication synthesised so far from the extant literature does not preclude the possibility that the receiver's response might result in the sending of information to a third participant, thus:

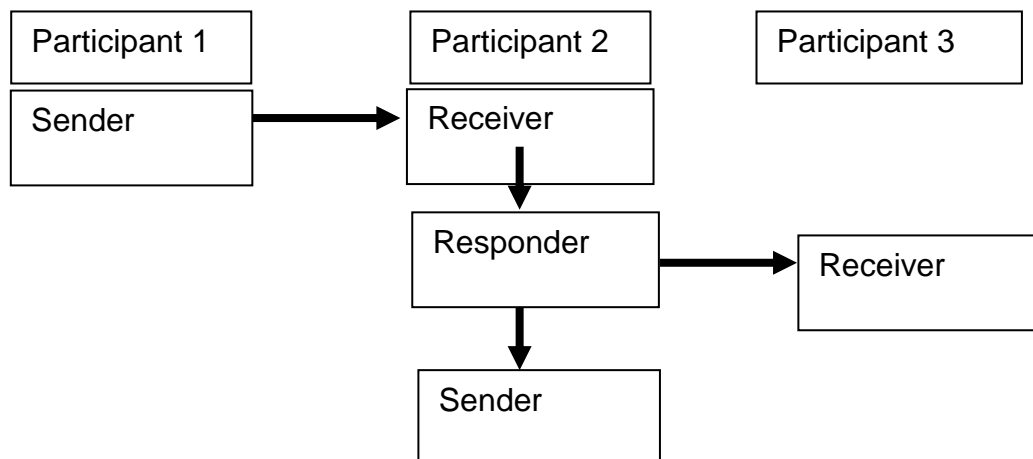


Figure 7 Dialogic communication as an open process (Devised for this paper)

In the illustration above, Participant 2's response results in the communication of ideas to a third party.

This conceptualisation of the changing nature of roles adopted by a single participant in a dialogic communication is crucial in distinguishing dialogic communication from broader discussions on the role of dialogue *within* public relations. Although feedback loops have been incorporated into existing models of communication, such communication has previously been used in linear process models which represent communication occurring between participants in defined and fixed roles. The definition of dialogic communication being developed for this paper presents instead an alternative view of dialogic communication as occurring because of a shift between roles within the contribution of each participant.

A review of a range of literature on dialogue and communication from a number of disciplinary fields has resulted in the identification of three roles in the conduct of the process of dialogic communication: the sender; the receiver; and the subsidiary role of the responder. These have been incorporated into a working definition of dialogic communication as the sending and receiving of ideas between 2 participants, resulting in a response by the receiver. This preliminary conceptualisation of dialogic communication is a useful starting point in mapping out the major components of the process of dialogic communication. However, it is still insufficiently nuanced to fully represent some of the points of variation highlighted previously in this paper. It may be used to identify the roles in the process of dialogic communication, but it is not yet sufficiently developed to acknowledge the different ways in which these roles may be conducted, and the possible links between these variations and the different type of outcome possible. These variations need to be incorporated in the definition of dialogic communication. It is, therefore, now necessary to return to the literature to search for refinements to the roles identified within the working definition so that it better encapsulates the practice of dialogic communication in public relations.

As previously concluded, dialogic communication derives from the interaction of participants adopting different roles. Variations in the way they conduct themselves in these roles can ultimately be seen as differences in their behaviour while enacting each role. Adopting such a behavioural perspective, rather than seeing variations as the result of differences in attitude to the roles, is crucial, and will be of particular importance when the model is tested in the field. It will avoid the possibility of participants disguising their true approach to their roles in dialogic communication by obfuscation and dissembling. Variations in approach to the roles of sender and receiver can, therefore, be identified through the behaviour of participants in dialogic communication. If enacted behaviour is taken as the variable, it should be relatively simple to observe variations objectively. After all, it is the final behavioural outcome—i.e. what the other participant does—that is of greatest significance to the senders and receivers in dialogic communication, not what they might *say*.

A review of literature reveals that the idea that different approaches can be taken to the sending and receiving of information is not a new one. The concepts of passive and active approaches to conducting communication are frequently mentioned in the public relations literature, most often in relation to the behaviour of publics in their relationships with organisations (Grunig, 1992; Hallahan, 2000; Houston, 2003; Karlberg, 1996), or a public's involvement with an organisation (Hallahan, 2001). A distinction between active and passive approaches has also been drawn in the information-use behaviours of audiences in public relations campaigns (Slater et al., 1992). J. Grunig (1993) further noted that publics can be passive (and by implication, active) in their behaviour when consuming media when he commented that "Passive publics are exposed to news haphazardly and seldom develop broad or deep cognitions from the exposure" (p. 159). This concept of a passive approach to new ideas and information readily lends itself to application to communication participants' behaviour in dialogic communication. A message sender may transmit their information in an active way, consciously framing and spreading their desired output. This is a form of communication with which public relations practitioners are very familiar, encompassing as it does much of the day-to-day functions within their role (e.g. sending out a media release). Equally, however, it is possible that such sending may be

conducted in a passive way, where information is communicated almost by default and without clear commitment to an ongoing dialogic process. In the case of the media release, a journalist will be the most likely receiver of the information. Their subsequent actions then render them a sender in this dialogic communication, which confirms the earlier notion of a bi-directional interchangeable role for communicators. If the journalist uses the media release, they are passively sending a message that its form and content are acceptable and appropriate to them. However, if the journalist chooses not to use the information supplied and instead throws the media release into a bin, this is clearly communicating their feelings about the content and/or timing of the message without making an active statement to the original sender. This not only clarifies the notion that dialogic interaction involves communication between two parties, it also avoids the presumption that that communication must be verbal. Thus, a sender in a dialogic interaction can communicate just as clearly by saying or doing nothing as they can by making a verbal contribution.

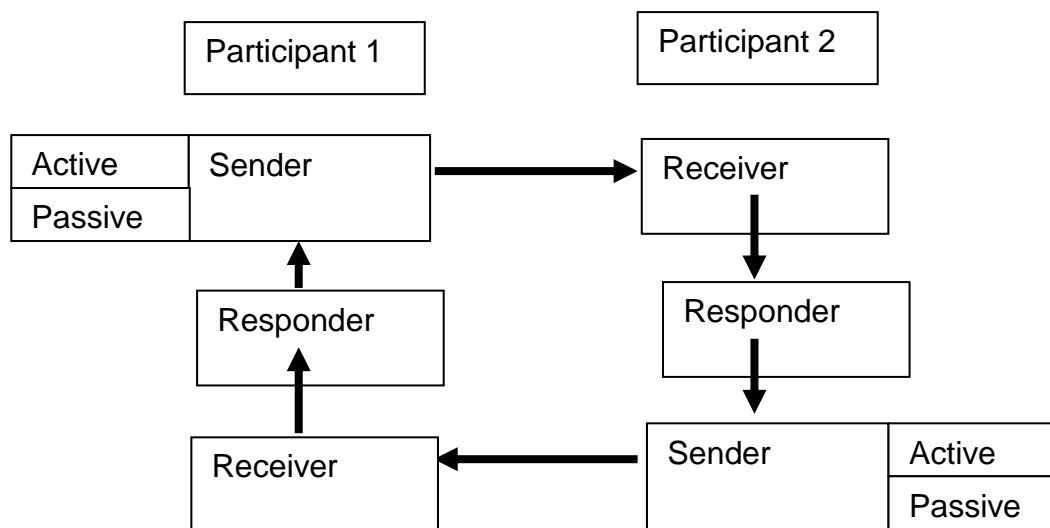


Figure 8 Active and passive approaches to the role of sender in dialogic communication (devised for this paper)

Clearly this active/passive binary can and does apply to the sender role in dialogic communication, but could it apply equally to the receiver? Linder (2002) refers to this distinction within this role as that of "hearer" rather than "listener". Luhmann (2000) also makes this distinction when he refers to communicators "watching" rather than seeing, and "listening" rather than hearing. Varey and Ballantyne (2005) also note the propensity of potential communication targets to not seek information. This is an important distinction, as it acknowledges that the receiver function may, in fact, also be passive and/or reactive rather than (pro)active.

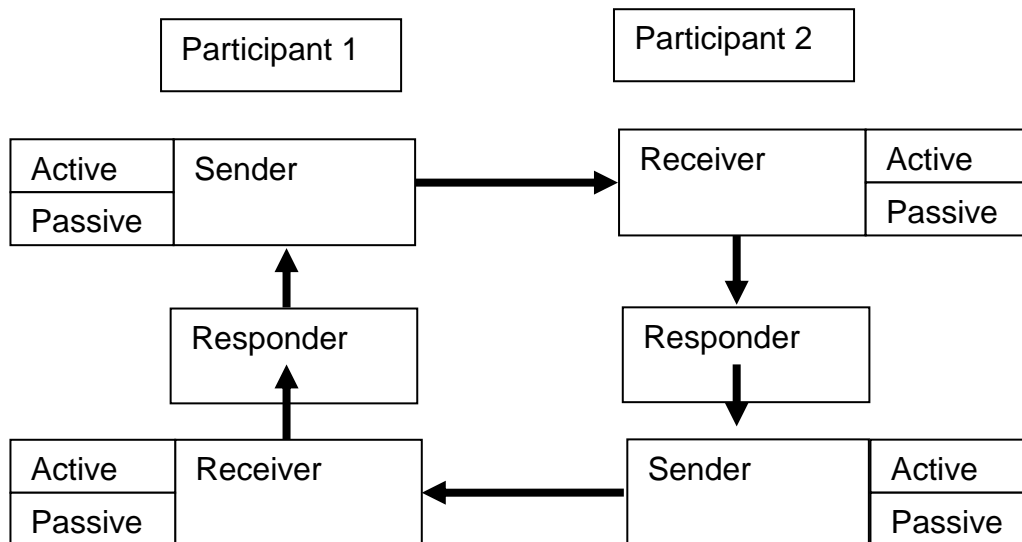


Figure 9 Active and passive approaches to sender and receiver roles in dialogic communication (devised for this paper)

The next iteration of the developing definition of dialogic communication must, therefore, accommodate these points of potential variation in the sender and receiver roles, thus:

dialogic communication is the sending and receiving of ideas between two participants, which may be approached in an active or passive way, resulting in a response by the receiver.

Finally, this consideration of potential variables in dialogic communication needs to be extended to the response element previously identified. The previously-proposed definition of dialogic communication clearly encompasses the linear models outlined earlier—such as Buber’s *I-Thou*—but does not make sufficient distinctions to enable the recognition of the more sophisticated “shared understanding” concepts as a distinct form. In order to achieve this, consideration of an additional variable is required—that of differences in the responsiveness of the receiver to the information received in a dialogic communication, or what Linder (2002) describes as “uptake” (p. 53). Gummesson (1999) also notes that being involved in a dialogic communication means that one avails oneself of existing knowledge, and also has the opportunity (but not a requirement) to create new knowledge. This clearly implies an element of potential variation in the receiver’s internal responsiveness to dialogic input. Information received may result in receptiveness or resistance on the part of the receiver to the ideas contained within the communication.

The next evolution of the definition of dialogic communication should then encompass the full variety of permutations within dialogic communication (including Dialogue as described previously). It should, therefore, acknowledge the existence of a communication boundary between dialogic participants, behind which understandings are arrived at and decisions are made in response to ideas received, a concept familiar in public relations (e.g. see Kuhn, 2002; White & Dozier, 1992). Indeed, public relations is often described as the function that spans such boundaries (White & Dozier, 1992). This, therefore, introduces the final variable in the developing definition of dialogic

communication: what happens to the receiver (whether as active watcher/listener or passive seer/hearer) when they receive the idea being communicated?

Gao and Zhang (2006) state that dialogue must incorporate some level of response. They maintain that dialogue should be a two-way process where stakeholders are not merely consulted or listened to, but are also responded to—i.e. the dialogic loop must be closed. However, this could occur if the communication receiver is resistant to the ideas received, or even if they reject them totally; communication of non-acceptance (whether transmitted in an active or a passive way) would support the inclusion of the variable of responsiveness in the proposed definition of dialogic communication. This concept is supported by Bishop and Davis's (2002) assertion that "[c]onsultation collects voices and ensures they are heard when choices are made, but does not assume any fundamental shift in the ultimate responsibility for the decision" (p. 22). This clearly indicates the possibility that dialogic communication situations will occur where the receiver is keen to gather input, but remains resistant to the suggestions made by external information sources (similar views are expressed by Brackertz, Zwart, Meredyth & Ralston (2005)).

The need to incorporate notions of receiver responsiveness in any definition of dialogic communication is also highlighted by Guilfoyle (2003), who states that dialogue "invites participants to both influence and be influenced, to shape and be shaped by the interaction" (p. 332). His use of the word "invites" is of particular significance, as it clearly indicates that the conduct of dialogic communication in no way predicates a positive or receptive response, and signals that resistance to the influence of received information is also a possible outcome. Consideration of this variable would also provide context for the current interest in the function of public relations as a platform for the (co)creation of shared meaning between organisations and their stakeholders (e.g. see the section on this topic in Heath, Toth & Waymer (2009)). The co-creation of meaning must involve—to a certain extent—the acknowledgement and perhaps resolution of resistance by either party to received messages.

Therefore, a final variable element for inclusion in the definition of dialogic communication must be that of responsiveness, with the possibilities being that a receiver may be receptive or resistant to the ideas received. A response can be categorised according to whether the receiver is positively receptive to the information, or resistant to it—as displayed by their behaviour in response to the information. Therefore,

dialogic communication is the sending and receiving of ideas between two participants, which may be approached in an active or passive way, resulting in a response by the receiver, who may be receptive or resistant to the ideas received.

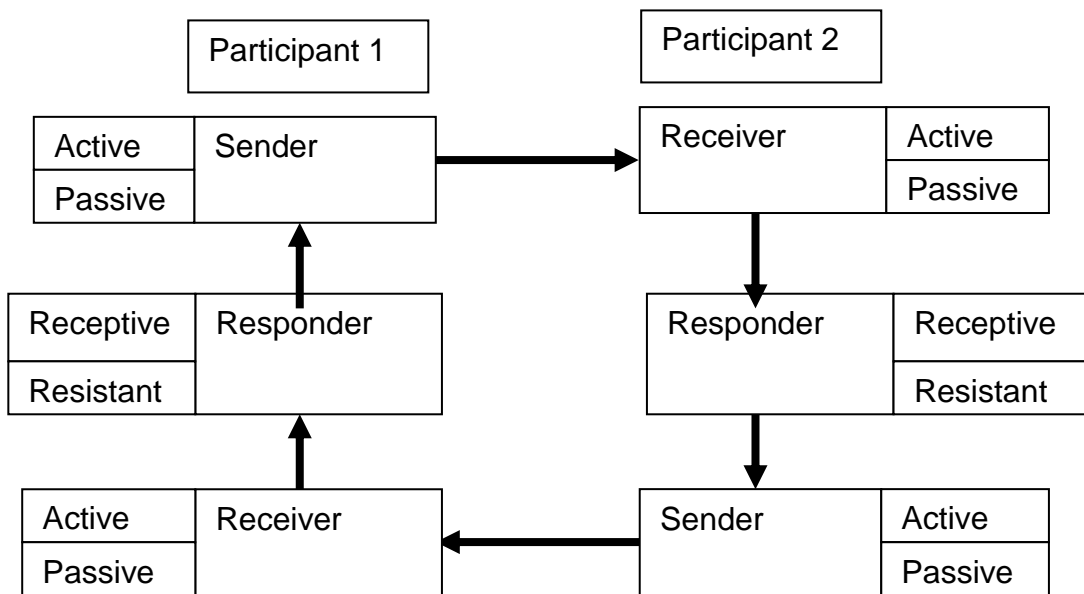


Figure 10 Variations in the three roles within dialogic communication (devised for this paper)

This final draft of the definition of dialogic communication—derived from extant literature—and its model represented above must now be tested in the field for validity and accuracy, as well as its relevance to the lived experience of practitioners.

In conclusion, this paper has presented a case for devising a model of the process of dialogic communication in public relations. The framework for this model was derived from an evolving definition of the dialogic communication, which was synthesised from literature on the concept of dialogue. From this emerged a definition that identified the importance of the interaction of participants in three different but linked roles—those of sender, receiver, and responder. Potential variations in participant behaviour within those roles were also identified and incorporated into the definition and model of dialogic communication. The model is now ready to be tested in the field by comparing it with, and contrasting it to, real-life instances of dialogic communication between organisations and their stakeholders. This will help to determine whether this role-based approach is viable, and whether the proposed variations in the conduct of the roles in dialogic communication can be linked to the different types of dialogic outcome identified in the literature review. The outcome of this research will ultimately provide a model of dialogic communication that will make a significant contribution to the continuing conversation around the development of a dialogic theory of public relations.

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