Drawing Conversations: drawing as a dialogic activity

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The paper presents drawings and commentary from the research study 'Drawing Conversations', an investigation into drawing as a social activity. Referring to Martin Buber’s notion of the ‘inbetween’ and David Bohm’s model of group dialogue, the paper suggests that drawing can bring people into an especially open, spontaneous and playful relationship and simultaneously produce an artefact that materialises the exchange between them.
Drawing Conversations: drawing as a dialogic activity

‘It felt like a sort of sparring – not in a bad way or aggressive way at all – polite sparring.’  Seana

Saturday 30th September 2006 I was setting up a table, drawing materials and voice recorder in front of a large plate glass window with a display of earlier Drawing Conversations behind me. I was about to carry out Drawing Conversations with visitors to the ‘Drawing Room’ exhibition at the Phoenix Gallery in Brighton. It was not an auspicious start, there had been no one to let me into the gallery when I arrived, no one to give me a parking permit there was a risk my car might be clamped, no where to hide my lap top and I had forgotten to bring any coffee and no potential drawers - yet.

I am investigating the way in which drawing activity can facilitate social encounter either as an initial meeting with strangers as in the examples described here, or as a way of colleagues connecting with each other differently. I ask people if they will draw with me as if in conversation, i.e. a one-to-one, face-to-face, turn-taking encounter. This is not to make a direct analogy between drawing and spoken conversation but for ease of procedure, to give participants a familiar recognisable social structure for the activity. At this stage of the research I was using single sheets from an A4 sketch book and Japanese pen brushes with refillable ink barrels; there was no theme for the drawing content and I invited participants to start and finish the drawings.

I will discuss selected drawings and commentary from Drawing Conversations carried out at the Phoenix Gallery during Autumn 2006. These drawings are not presented as examples of successful or resolved work, it is up to the reader to draw their own conclusions on those matters, but offered as materialised encounters; in the words of Martin Buber as ‘images of the ‘inbetween’ and examples of dialogue based on David Bohm’s model of non-contingent dialogue. I will draw on the work of Buber and Bohm in an attempt to demonstrate one view of what might be happening during a Drawing Conversation.

Buber (1878-1965) places enormous emphasis on one to one human encounter and is best known for his ‘I-You’ and ‘I-It’ explanation of essentially two different modes of being. Put simply, ‘I-You’ can be understood as a connection between people or people and things that is mutually and respectfully co-existent and ‘I-It’ seen as a non-connection where the I treats people or things as objects to serve their own ends; these can be thought of respectively in terms of dialogue and
monologue. He spoke about the significance of what happens in the ‘inbetween’, the space between people which he thought was the only place where anything new can be created in the world; art, he said, is the image of the ‘inbetween’. This inquiry explores whether drawing is able to facilitate an ‘I-You’ dialogue and create an artefact that is both a record and product i.e. materialise the encounter.

Bohm (1917-1992) was a quantum physicist recognised for his contribution to the Manhattan Project. In later life he produced a model of collective dialogue that he thought would contribute to greater shared understanding and meaning. As a concrete experiential process he believed that the practice of this model of dialogue would begin to address humanity’s current problems of fragmentation and lack of shared meaning. It was an ‘invitation to test the viability of traditional views of what it means to be human, collectively explore the prospect of an enhanced humanity.’ The significant point about Bohm’s model of group dialogue is that it has no purpose other than dialogue; it is without goals or agendas apart for a commitment from participants to examine assumptions and their effects on our thinking with the aim of arriving not at agreement but some kind of shared understanding.
Three Drawing Conversations

Over the two days at the Phoenix Gallery the visitors who drew with me raised several issues about the collaborative activities that were manifest in a Drawing Conversation. These included the openness and adaptability in the development of a drawing, the benefits and difficulties of shared responsibility for a completed drawing and the way drawing together was an analogy for negotiating the balance between intimacy and distance when meeting new people.

I will focus on four drawing conversations which highlight the dialogic nature of collaborative drawing:

- as a task
- as a first encounter
- as aesthetic conflict

The first example raises points about joint activity, specifically trying to create an observed scene without planning a strategy or allocation of individual tasks. The second example highlights the tension between intimacy and distance and the balance of power when meeting someone for the first time. The third raises strong feelings about accommodating difference and shared authorship. These three examples in one way or another comment on an intractable human condition; the tension between wanting to be connected and belong and wanting to be separate and individual.
The drawing conversation with Dave was the only drawing out of 70 plus that was based from beginning to end on observation of a scene and therefore an overt shared drawing task. This isn’t as surprising as it might seem as out of all 72 Drawing Conversations in the inquiry it was only during the nine drawings at the Phoenix Gallery that I was sitting with people looking through a large plate glass window onto the street outside. At the start he told me he tended to draw figuratively and suggested we plunge in. I felt some concern that this might become a competition and test of drawing skill but in fact it was very comfortable.

Talking about the experience he described it as both collaborative and non-collaborative, sometimes wanting to develop what I (AR) had drawn and at other times ‘… more interested in something over here, especially that red light. I didn’t want to miss my turn, didn’t want to forget that, so I put the red in there.’ I had felt the same anxiety about not missing something on my turn when I had been concerned that the participant would complete the space I wanted to draw in. Dave described consciously working in a different space on the paper from me,
opening up new areas, as in a game of Scrabble, so we both had more opportunities of ‘scoring’. I felt the same tension when it was my turn. Do I want to build on what he’s drawn or is there anything else out there or in the drawing that catches my attention? We were continually looking at the scene and the drawing from our own and each other’s point of view, choosing whether to respond to what we saw outside and or to what the other person had drawn, both in terms of content and gesture. Reflecting on when I drew the tree upper left, he said, ‘… made me think, how did I miss out on that? It was case of I hadn’t thought of doing that (a more gestural response) so I followed your lead …’ which was when he’d drawn the red flag in the foreground. What I failed to tell him at the time was that it had not occurred to me draw what was out of the window and I had followed his lead and been given one of the most satisfying drawing experiences of the whole project.

‘The interface needs to be playful because otherwise we’re both going to go and make guns.’ Anne

Whilst I was drawing with Anne two musicians were playing in the next gallery which may well have contributed to the particularly affective connection between us. She finished the drawing saying ‘I feel complete. I feel sad’. I myself had felt tearful during the drawing and her daughter sitting nearby said she had been crying watching her mother connect with me. I will quote her at length because at the time I felt she absolutely expressed the concerns of the research.

‘To begin with it was shy, - playground – do you want to play? Well I will if you will. Then became bolder kind of … I didn’t feel it was a competitive power struggle. It felt like an uneasy balance somehow – co-operation and taking over. It felt co-operative. More to do with space that we chose to go into and whether or not we invaded each other’s space or whether we made a new motif somewhere else, went off and played on our own for a bit. How much we echoed and how much we led. All that (incoherent) happens in connection with people – that’s the sort of thing you’re doing all the time. It’s like a balancing act if you meet somebody. It feels like wanting to remain an individual and separate at the same time as wanting to be co-operative and to meet, not be stand-offish. It’s intimacy and - what’s the opposite of intimacy? (AR ‘Distance?’) - distance I suppose, which is always in relationships. How close can you get? How safe is this? It always feels to me like a dance somehow. I just think it’s a physical
manifestation of that, and because it’s so tangible and it hasn’t got another agenda … it just felt like it was on straightway, although I don’t know you, onto a much deeper level, deeper than the polite words that we normally use in greeting each other. … That was my experience.’ Anne

These comments are very close to de Mare’s notion of ‘impersonal fellowship’ (de Mare, 1991, cited in Bohm, 1995) i.e. a sense of warmth and connection that has not been fuelled by the revelation of life personal history nor the sharing of intimate personal details. It is this impersonal fellowship that Bohm says can be achieved through dialogue. A participant from another study observed there has to be a level of trust developed to be able to continue through the process. Although there is nothing seriously at stake one is going into the unknown with someone and if ‘…you don’t trust and commit to the process there’s no point in doing it’ (Petra). Bohm emphasises the need for participants to make a commitment to the process for dialogue to be worthwhile and this may well involve some frustration or anger as demonstrated by the next example.

‘I was quite upset. I wasn’t able to draw what I wanted to draw, I couldn’t hem you in.’ Seana
At the start of our drawing Seana commented on how much she needed things to be controlled. ‘I think that’s the space I’m in – needing things to be more controlled.’ This came out more forcefully when I made a loose mark across the drawing (the red line that reads as a stem above) which I anticipated would be unwelcome for her, so I apologised in advance. ‘Oh! I knew you were going ...I knew... I can’t bear that ... that you’ve done that ... you’ve ruined it.’ But by the end of the drawing she said, ‘I love it, I love it, it’s great!’ Later on she described how she felt about the mark I had made at the time, ‘How dare she do that, can’t she see I’m working in a very fluid manner with my black,’ it was as if you (AR) were ‘... some child who had just come and ruined it for me... Actually it’s one of my favourite bits’. Reflecting on our encounter Seana said,
‘I started off quite tentatively and I found it a challenge to share the paper ... It would be interesting but obviously I needed to be in control today ... Get off my paper. Stop drawing those straight lines...but something great has come out of it ... and when the poppy arrived ... of course first of all you just ruined the whole thing for me by doing this line of red which actually is the most beautiful part.’ Seana

It could be said that this drawing session went through several stages of Bohm’s model of dialogue - the tentative start, frustration and agitation, recognition of assumptions and defensiveness, revelation of consciousness, the emergence of new content taking shape through mutual discussions and an attempt to make something new in common rather than make things common. It is also an example of Buber’s notion of ‘inbetween’ and the dynamic of relationship where the spontaneous quality of an encounter has created something new.

To return to the original question ‘What is drawing for?’ I hope to have demonstrated, to a modest extent, that drawing can be for bringing people together in an especially open, spontaneous and playful relationship, at the same time producing an artefact that materialises the exchange between them. Post drawing interviews with participants indicate that it is the indeterminacy of drawing over time that allows this freedom of interaction. Images and meaning can easily mutate, and rather than this undermining the interaction, though some participants did feel that in the moment, it is liberating. Dave had said he felt attuned to me during the session, he did not want to say anything that would break the concentration or influence what I did and he felt that I did not want to influence what he did, he wanted to ‘...just see where it went, ‘cos that’s the most interesting thing really’.

I suggest that drawing’s potential as a social activity is unrealised; that drawing can offer the quality of an ‘I–Thou’ encounter that Buber recognises as seldom occurring in everyday life and an opportunity for dialogue that explores a particular kind of relationship an impersonal fellowship. As another participant put it, ‘Buber’s quote is a compelling idea, drawing as a medium for connection, a unique kind of intimacy completely plausible even though we don’t know each other.’ (Ken).

Bibliography

All participant quotes are from drawing sessions in September, October or November 2006. I drew with Anne, Dave, and Seana at the Phoenix Gallery in Brighton, with Petra in Lewes and with Ken at Wimbledon College of Art. Participant names are pseudonyms.