

**A new translation,
the next ten years, and
*you are already a communication skills trainer***

by Dennis Rivers, MA

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A new translation

Dear friends around the world,

I am happy to report this month that The Seven Challenges Workbook has been translated into Portuguese, as Os sete desafios, and is now available free of charge in PDF format on the new sister web site of www.newconversations.net:

www.comunicarmelhor.org. Wherever the Workbook is listed on the New Conversations site, you will now find links to both the Portuguese and the Spanish editions. Please pass this news on to any of your Portuguese-speaking friends whom you feel might be interested in the workbook.

I am deeply grateful to Irene Schardijn for the months of work she gave to the Portuguese translation. She was responding to our homepage request for volunteer translators. Receiving her work caused me to think hard about that invitation, and I rewrote it as follows, to give the translators more credit for their labors of love:

"Volunteer translators wanted: The Seven Challenges Workbook is now available in Spanish and Portuguese (in both printed book and free PDF file formats) thanks to the wonderful generosity of our volunteer translators, Ilija Morales Figueroa, Annette de Paz and Irene Schardijn. We invite translation of our books, articles and teaching materials into all languages. (No language community is "too small.") We will be delighted to make your translation available free of charge as a PDF file and/or web page on this site, and to arrange for it to be printed on demand. If you are studying for an MA in translation, please consider

translating one or more of our documents as part of your MA program."

I have found a new printer/publisher for all our books and workbooks: Lulu.com. I also developed a new marketing strategy that allowed me to lower the price on the printed version of The Seven Challenges Workbook from \$16 to \$10.

The price of the printed version of The Geometry of Dialogue has also fallen, from \$30 to \$15. Both the Spanish and Portuguese editions are also now available in printed format for \$10. Lulu.com has an interesting shipping policy: orders between \$25 and \$100 will be shipped free of any shipping charges to anywhere in the world. This certainly levels the playing field for teachers in Australia, New Zealand, India and the UK who may be using the Workbook in their classes.

Because I insist on giving these documents away free of charge in PDF format, I have had to start my own publishing company, since no existing publishing company will talk to me. For my part, it seems like the dire state of the world and the pressing need all around for new communication skills should inspire us all to be more creative and experimental, so that is just the direction in which I'm heading. You can see more of what I'm doing in this area at www.karunabooks.net.

the next ten years

As I look back over the first 10 years of this project, it seems to me that I have done really well at writing and distributing books, workbooks and essays; good at teaching classes; but not well at all

and organizing mutual support groups. So I am envisioning that the focus of the next 10 years will be more on mutual support groups and less on printed materials. (Although I am sure we will continue to publish new items, and I certainly hope that we will find new volunteer translators.)

Organizing mutual support groups is so different from producing documents that I imagine I will have to learn a lot of new skills along the way. I have been thinking for quite awhile that our standard way of distributing knowledge, "the expert teaching the student" model, does not work very well when applied to learning new communication skills. I am hoping to develop over the coming years some "co-explorer" and "co-learner" models and try them out in the courses that I give.

I am especially interested in poker games and 12-step meetings as examples of self-regulating groups of people who are pretty much on an equal footing and can meet together for months or years at a time. There will always be a place for teachers and coaches. But so much of the development of communication skills has to come from inside the learner. From what I have seen, the traditional idea that the teacher knows what the student has yet to learn may not actually help the student focus on the inner work. On the one hand, if the teacher has a particular skill or knowledge, that proves that a human being can achieve that skill or knowledge, so that is encouraging. On the other hand, if the teacher has it I may be tempted to try to get simply by identification or association with the teacher, in the same way that one might, as a young child, be carried over rough ground by a helpful parent. I invite you to send me your thoughts on this challenging topic (much discussed in developmental psychology in relation to the work of Lev Vygotski (1896-1934)) at rivers@newconversations.net.

What follows is a kind thesis to be nailed to the door of the psychotherapy office, which I shared with the participants in my most recent class at the Santa Barbara Community Counseling and Education Center. Please comment.

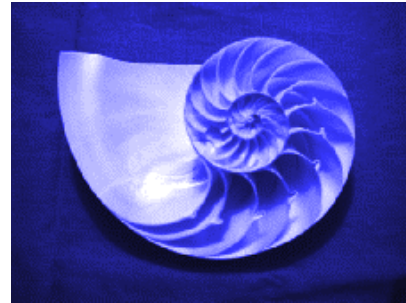
I wish you many blessings in this new year of 2006,

Dennis Rivers

You are already a communication skills trainer!

(from a talk given at the SBCCEC in fall of 2005)

Communication training for a transformed world using a chambered Nautilus model of skill development, emphasizing self-help and peer support.



The chambered Nautilus model is a radical alternative to the normal way people think about learning new skills and teaching new skills to others. Please allow me to explain some of the ways in which the self-help and peer support model of learning new skills differs from the professional training model. I'm going to call the professional training model "the normal way" because it is so widely used.

The normal way

- makes a strong distinction between teachers and learners,
- marks the path of learning as a series of clear steps,
- celebrates the completion of the steps with the awarding of certificates and licenses, and
- restricts who can teach to those who have licenses.

Someone other than the learner is in charge of the learning process. The people at the top of this pyramid earn money by providing services to the people at lower levels of the pyramid. The normal way is as much about excluding incompetent practitioners as it is about recognizing competent practitioners. These are two sides of the same licensing process. Because there is not enough room at the top of the pyramid for everyone, the normal system must necessarily fail a large

percentage, often a majority, of its participants, must declare them to be incompetent.

Unfortunately, the goal of the normal system is not to get everyone across the finish line of competence and excellence, each person receiving whatever help they need in order to make that journey. It is important to realize that the normal system is set up to reward a few people and fail a lot of people. Right now, I simply want to acknowledge that as a fact, and not go into all the arguments about whose fault it is, or about how competition creates excellence, and so on. (I accept that competition creates excellence among at least a few of the competitors. My concern is the ratio of how many become excellent versus the total number who participate.)

There are some areas of human activity in which the normal way works tolerably well. Accounting and brain surgery come to mind. So my purpose here is not to stir up a general rebellion against the normal way, although perhaps we could talk about that on another day. The point I want to emphasize now is that there are certain areas in human life where our normal way of encouraging and recognizing competence seems to serve us well, and other areas where it does not serve us well. In fact, in some areas the process of excluding people is really damaging to society.

Communication skills training is one of those areas where everybody needs to be involved. As outlandish as that might sound, please bear with me for a moment. Every person on planet Earth is already a communication trainer. From the moment we are born, we send out a complex stream of signals to the people around us. As we do this, we provide the people around us with a model for communicating. It may be a good example or a bad example, but our behavior is always a model for the people around us, whether we want it to be or not. We don't have a choice about whether or not we are going to be communication trainers; from this perspective, we only have a choice about how well or how poorly we are going to do it. Planet Earth needs each of us to embrace our communication-trainer-dom, and commit ourselves to doing our training better.

I call this the Chambered Nautilus model. Some of us might appear to be at the earlier rounds of the spiral shell, and some of us might appear to be on one of the later rounds, but we are all participants in the spiral of evolving communication modeling and competence. Everyone has room to grow, and always will. From this point of view, there is absolutely no room for excluding a single person, no justification for flunking anyone. The truth is, a lot of people flunk out of our current way of teaching communication skills. And we have developed giant, shadow institutions to try to deal with them, called jails, prisons, reform schools, foster care systems and divorce courts.

I am deeply convinced that we need an alternative model for teaching communication skills, a model organized along completely different lines than the current professional pyramid, a model that empowers lots more people. You have heard it said of old... "Someday you will pass your board exams and become a well-paid doctor." But I say unto you "We are all communication skills trainers this very moment, and will always be so! How can we work together to do it better?" You can see how different this is from the normal way of talking about skill development.

As it happens, there are already several large training programs for people who want to become professional communication skills trainers, and there are thousands of psychotherapists and social workers who include some sort of communication skills training as part of their counseling. So the path of professional training has been well explored over the past half-century. As wonderful as these activities are, I do not see that they have made much of a change in global communication culture. (Both entertainment and sports have gotten more violent, giving us lots more bad examples to follow.) I think there are three reasons why current institutional arrangements are not helping us to communicate with each other better:

First, there are a limited number of people on the planet who can pay \$50 to \$100 an hour to be trained by an expert. So the "hotel conference

room" model of training is always going to reach only a limited audience.

Second, the economics of offering classes for pay pushes teachers toward the "brief intensive" model rather than the ongoing support group model, because the brief intensive model generates more money. If the skill one is trying to teach requires ongoing support, than the brief intensive model will not provide very good learning results.

Third, paid teachers of communication skills struggle to reconcile two radically different roles they play in relation to their students (as to psychotherapists and social workers in relation to their clients). One role is the role of the peer encourager: "I'm human and your human, so if I can do this, you can do this, too. I walk beside you as a fellow learner. There is no shame about having more to learn about communication, because we all have more to learn about communication." The second role is the role of the paid expert. "I am so smart and so well trained and educated that you should pay me \$100 an hour for my help, even if you only earn \$10 an hour. I have lots more

information about the art of living than you do, and I'm not going to share it with you unless you pay me." I don't have any easy solution to offer for this role conflict. It seems to me that the second role cuts the ground out from under the first. It is very difficult to both emphasize a person's capacity to learn and ability to take the initiative, and simultaneously claim to hold a special knowledge that the learner really needs and can't get anywhere else.

As a result of these many considerations, I have reached the conclusion that the professional model doesn't fit communication skills training very well. That is why I am committed to exploring an alternative model, one that emphasizes self-help and peer support. I look forward to participating with you in the evolution of a mutual support community that would help us all get further down the road. There is a good deal of research and thought going on about the "guide by the side" model of mentoring. I hope to apply it to the development of communication skills.

Dennis Rivers is a writer, teacher and peace activist who lives in Santa Barbara, California, teaches communication skills at the Santa Barbara Community Counseling & Education Center, and edits several large peace and ecology web sites, including newconversations.net, nonukes.org, turntowardlife.org, liberationtheology.org and earthlight.org. Dennis received his MA in interpersonal communication and human development from the Vermont College Graduate Program, after studying sociology and religious studies at UC Santa Barbara, and theology at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. His books include *The Geometry of Dialogue*, *the Seven Challenges Workbook*, *Prayer Evolving*, and, most recently, *Turning Toward Life*, an exploration of reverence for life as a spiritual path. All of Dennis's books and essays are available free of charge on the web at www.karunabooks.net thanks to generous support from the Estates of Hector and Winnifred Tate.



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