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# Externalising inner conversation in supervision and in therapy through 'I' and 'YOU' dialogical writing

Karen Partridge, Nicola McCarry, Ann Kelly, Erica Ruse and Jane Holmes

“ We are never more than the co-authors of the identities we construct narratively....We are always as many potential selves as are embedded in the conversation ”

Goolishian and Anderson 2002, pp. 221-222.

Karen and Nicola work together as systemic trainers and supervisors at The KCC Foundation and in CNWL Mental Health Foundation Trust. Ann, Jane and Erica have engaged in supervisory conversations with us at CNWL, where Ann works as a family therapist with older adults, at KCC where Jane is a fourth year student and on a private basis with Erica who works as a teacher and a counsellor in schools. This article represents an experiment in progress which is generating excitement and enthusiasm, so we felt it worth sharing here. We describe a simple and accessible process in which inner dialogue is externalised using 'I' and 'you' positions to create a difference through the process of red and green writing.

## Dialogical understanding

Tom Andersen's contribution to systemic therapy has brought a focus on dialogue and reflecting processes right into the centre of current developments (Rober, 2005; Bertrando, 2007). Back in the 1960s, Buber (1965) made the important shift from an I-It relationship to an I-Thou relationship, describing growth and change as coming from the dialogical relationship between the I and the other, shifting the focus from a unitary notion of self to a dialogical sense of self. Harlene Anderson (2005) describes "dialogue as an interactive process of interpretations of interpretations, in which one interpretation invites another and in the process of understanding new meanings are produced". According to Shotter (1993), the process of understanding is a process of negotiation between people where what is understood is active, responsive and unfinalisable. Rober (2002) introduces Bakhtin's (1981) term "creative understanding" to explain this active process. Like Bateson (2000), Bahktin stresses the importance of the "outsideness" of the therapist in creating difference through questioning, to enable the "not yet said" to emerge. It is this other, outsider position that we have been playing with in what we shall describe as "red and green writing."

## Inner and outer conversation

Anderson states that, "to initiate and partake in a participatory conversation requires being in an internal dialogue with oneself as an other or multiple others" (Anderson, 1997). A number of authors have experimented with different approaches to exploring inner talk. For example, in his paper *Chitter Chatter: The language of our lives*, Steve Madigan uses narrative questions to challenge the power of negative internal dialogues. He argues that "to expose and discuss these negative conversations is to poke holes in their legitimacy" (Madigan, 2008). Penelope Cash presents the story of a nurse's conversation

with herself following a complaint from a patient. She presents this conversation in three voices, which she calls a "Polyphonic soliloquy," which, she argues, unpacks, "ideological, philosophic, epistemic, ontological and ethical dimensions in practice" (Cash 2007, p. 274).

Peter Rober (2008) makes a distinction between the therapist's inner dialogue and outer conversation, and has proposed a process of questioning where inner conversation is externalised by the help of an outsider through questioning. Like Cash, Rober is inspired by Bakhtin's (1981) concept of the dialogical self as a polyphony of inner voices. He refers to the therapist's inner conversation as a series of inner voices, speaking from different "I" positions, which question each other and agree and disagree with each other. He quotes Hermans (2004), who writes that dialogue can only happen when there is a difference, when the answering part is qualitatively different from the asking part.

## Constructing an internal guide

From a psychodynamic tradition, Patrick Casement (1990) coined the term Internal Supervisor to describe some of the inner conversations we have with ourselves about our work. From a systemic perspective this fits with Karl Tomm's internalised-other interviewing techniques (Burnham, 2000), in which he invites clients to take part in an exercise where he interviews their construction of the other inside them as though the client was the other. Internalised-other interviewing is a little like a role-play although the focus is on interviewing the client in the other's position to create difference, placing the client in an observer position to themselves and their construction of the other. In a similar way "I" and "YOU" writing uses the idea of different subject positions in a dialogue to enable trainees and supervisees to construct dialogical space around a current dilemma. Nicola has coined the phrase a "systemic breath or pause" to describe the moment of reflection before action which we, as systemic therapists aspire to, but which can collapse into a monological position

when we are stressed or get too attached to our favourite stories. In this way dialogical writing could be thought of as a way to slow down inner talk and to enable the construction of an internal supervisor or guide. Further reflections on the dialogue from other positions can help to shift to a multiverse of different perspectives.

### Private and public discourse

The challenging of inner dialogue is also the province of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) which is increasingly influential in the NHS through government initiatives (Mental Health Policy Group 2006). It could be argued that the popularity of CBT is due, at least in part, to the process being transparent and easily accessible, allowing easy documentation of the process, teaching and research. In one of the examples below, Erica makes the connection between red writing and "hot thoughts" in CBT. In a similar way to CBT, externalising inner discourse makes the process of supervision or therapy transparent and explicit, opening private discourse up to public scrutiny. This fits with Neden and Burnham's (2007) intention to make supervision coherent and transparent, so challenging the hierarchy of the supervision process and making it more egalitarian. Simon (2007) takes this further to open up supervisory conversations in order to challenge dominant societal discourses. In example 1 the supervisor's inner talk is made explicit for the supervisee to comment on, such that the supervisor and trainee can shift positions.

### "I" and "YOU" or red and green writing

The idea for "red and green writing" came from an exercise which KP was introduced to in a workshop where she was invited to write to herself with her dominant hand and respond with the non-dominant hand (Adams, 1999). This proved useful but cumbersome and evolved into writing in two different colours, i.e. we used green and red, although any colours could be chosen. Writing with a non-dominant hand has been shown to trigger brain activity in both hemispheres and we thought that the use of visualisation using colour might have the same effect (Hoshivama & Kakigi, 1999). It

seemed to KP that the important aspect of this writing was that it was a dialogue between two different aspects of self, so that the author is taking two different person positions, the "I" and the "You" positions. KP found that constructing a "You" position in the dialogue enabled her to begin to construct a preferred version of self which was distinct from the "I" version. The process of externalising by writing shifts a monological inner discourse into a dialogical outer discourse, which can then be shared with others. Red and Green writing as a description of this process evolved through use and it was later that it struck KP that she had used green writing to externalise the rapid train of monologue that was overtaking her (the "go" colour) and red to create the dialogical "you" position, which puts the brakes on (the "stop" or "slow down" colour) and enables the systemic breath for reflexivity. Erica reversed this to use red to depict "hot thoughts" and green as an alternative position. The three examples, which we will describe, show different uses of this technique, in an e-mail post-session conversation, in a supervision session and with a client, Harry, aged 8. We will describe each example and add in Jane, Ann and Erica's reflections as co-creators of the process. Nicola created dialogical space through discussion of the writing of this article and in creating theory/practice links.

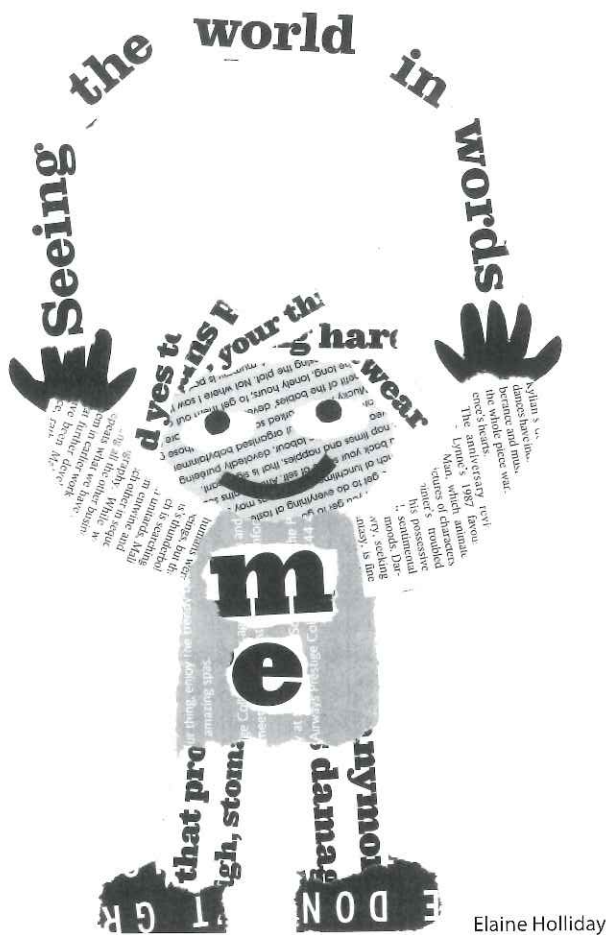
Due to the limits of the printing process, here **Bold type** denotes the red writing, *Italics* the green, CAPITALS the blue and regular text the black.

### Example 1: Red and green writing as a post-session email conversation

#### Background

In the first example, below, KP was supervising a live session with a fourth-year trainee systemic therapist at The KCC Foundation and went home feeling that she had not done a good job. Reflecting in the red and green writing about what she could have done differently opened up a discourse about preferred versions of self: firstly about what preferred versions of self, KP would have liked to have performed

| Person position | Karen's dialogical writing   | Jane's response   | Ideas for action                                  |
|-----------------|--|---|---|
| "I"             | <i>Looking back I don't like the way I was left feeling about the last session. I was having trouble identifying with the client's position. I felt I needed to shift my perspective as I wanted to avoid being judgemental, but even though we tried to talk about it and shift positions I felt stuck.</i> |   |   |
| "YOU"           | <b>Do you have an idea of what was getting triggered for you?</b>  |   |   |
| "I"             | <i>The client reminded me a bit of my younger self when I was trying to leave the relationship with my long term partner, I was unhappy but I just couldn't get out of it and it couldn't go on. I don't like that aspect of myself, it seemed weak and selfish.</i>   | INTERESTINGLY WHEN I FIRST SPOKE TO HER ON THE PHONE SHE TALKED ABOUT NOT LIKING WHAT SHE DID AND WANTING TO UNDERSTAND WHY SHE DID IT. I DON'T FEEL WE HAVE REALLY EXPLORED THIS IN THE SESSIONS | <b>What would you like to ask her about this?</b> |
| "YOU"           | <b>Do you think she might feel like that too? It makes me think about what aspect of self she is performing and what her preferred stories of self might be?</b>   |   |   |



Elaine Holliday

as supervisor and then about what preferred versions of self the clients we had just seen might have liked to perform to each other and in the session. KP e-mailed her red and green writing and reflections to Jane the trainee therapist for her to add her perspective. As shown in the extract from the grid, KP starts with a self reflexive shift making a connection to a personal story. By the fourth statement from the "You" position, she shifts to relational reflexivity opening curiosity about the client's experience. At this point, JH feels invited into the dialogue and adds her own reflection. This process as it unfolded in further dialogue and later discussion opened up curiosity which enabled new questions and hypotheses to emerge for the next session. In our e-mail experiment, we discovered that interjecting a third voice (Jane's blue writing) into the dialogical writing broke up the flow of the original red and green discourse, so we tried writing in a grid (see extract on previous page), which respected the coherence of the original discourse and showed subsequent reflections in separate columns so that each additional contribution is entered in the next column to the right. This keeps each person's comments distinct and shows the development of the multiple perspectives written as a conversation from left to right.

### Reflections from Jane

*I felt invited into the dialogue by KP's questions from the YOU position; KP's red writing could have been asking me the questions she was asking herself. It felt as if KP's red writing had a flexibility to be able to move between herself and me. What was most useful was to have the dialogue concretised by having it written down and in this particular form. It was there to revisit, and in that way understood differently with the passage of time. Although the starting point was Karen's idea about self (her own and the client's) the separation of dialogue (the green and red and then the blue and red) helped to see the way different dialogues developed.*

*As an educational psychologist I am interested in how different and helpful it has been having the dialogue represented visually in this way. I think, for me, that having it written down like that and being able to return to it, has been really interesting - and useful. It is very different from the conversation that takes place in live supervision. I could imagine as part of the supervision process it may be more useful than telephone supervision. The downside is the problem with anything written is that it is open to misinterpretation because of the absence of the non verbal cues that are part of any direct communication.*

### Example 2: Externalising inner conversation in supervision

#### Background

In the second example, illustrated in the grid opposite, KP was engaged in supervision with Ann, a qualified systemic therapist working in the Older Adults Service at CNWL. Ann wanted to talk about feeling stuck about a proposed home visit with an older adult couple. AK and KP decided to try the technique as a framework for face-to-face supervision. We did not share any prior information about the case and the grid shows the conversation in its entirety. Karen drew a grid on the board and prompted Ann to externalise her inner talk by asking questions such as:

- So what did you say to yourself?
- And then what?
- Is that the green or the red voice talking?
- What comes next?

Karen wrote each statement in the first column so that the green and red writing reads down the first column. KP then added her own reflective comments in the second column and suggested ideas and questions for further exploration in the action column. AK then added her final reflections on the process in the last column. This process could be described as supervision of supervision, scaffolding Ann's own reflexivity or internal supervisor.

#### Ann's reflections on the process

*When we started I wasn't quite sure how it would work out. It felt like we were moving quickly with the short question and answer structure (I think this was both disconcerting - possibly due to the speed with which it got to my beliefs, and exciting), yet at the same time it gave space for creative ideas to emerge, and I left our meeting feeling energised.*

*I think what was so useful about this was that it helped me think about how I positioned myself before this session with the couple, but also rapidly got into some of the issues which I struggle with in my work context. Being able to share the dialogue changed it and gave it space to develop. I carried on thinking about this conversation afterwards, particularly around KP's reflection about personal and professional stories about change, hope and endurance and death. I think this helped me approach my session differently, from a posture of tranquillity (Fredman 2007), and also using some of the resources of a home visit - particularly looking at photographs.*

*When I looked at the grid afterwards, I was interested in the 'red' comments which the conversation had brought forth and I noticed how dominating that green 'I' voice could be, to the extent that the green conversation seemed much more familiar (I printed the grid off, but as I have a black and white printer it lost its impact, and what was so helpful about the coloured version was the way the red voice stood out). It made me think about when I might be likely to pay attention to the unhelpful monologue and how I could manage this. I noticed my reflections brought out my struggle with some of the dominant discourses around*

| AK's inner conversation   | KP's reflections   | KP's ideas for action   | AK's reflections  |
|---|--|---|---|
| <i>It's been going on for so long, nobody's made any difference</i>   |  | MAYBE YOU COULD ASK WHAT IF ANYTHING HAS MADE A DIFFERENCE, FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE   |   |
| <b>How does that stop you from being curious?</b>   | THAT'S INTERESTING HOW DOES IT DO THAT? WHAT DOES CURIOSITY MEAN TO YOU?   |   | How to keep curiosity in a rational positivist system? This connects with professional stories about ageing and longevity of problems – "gloomy professional stories"   |
| <i>I'm being pulled into the story and I've only got one idea about change</i>  | WHAT OTHER IDEAS MIGHT THERE BE?   |   | The important thing is not to get pushed into stuckness – but perhaps its not even stuck? Who say it is stuck? What is this about?  |
| <b>So what stops you thinking about other possibilities for change?</b>   |  | MAYBE YOU COULD ASK WHAT CONVERSATION TODAY WOULD MOST LIKELY LEAD TO THEIR PREFERRED OUTCOME? WHAT ARE THEIR IDEAS ABOUT CHANGE? | I'm going into someone's home, do I have to take it so seriously, and/or can I engage in a different sort of conversation. It all keys into the need for "measurable change" but I could have an interesting conversation which something may come out of or not...perhaps it doesn't matter. |
| <i>That's because I'm being informed by an idea that families are more likely to change if they bring certain things to therapy</i> |  |   |   |
| <b>That's stopping you thinking about what might make a difference</b>  |  |   |   |
| <i>I'm thinking about my resilience as a therapist, can I stand this?</i>   | THAT'S REALLY INTERESTING. HOW DOES IT FIT WITH YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL STORIES ABOUT CHANGE, ABOUT HOPE AND ENDURANCE AND ABOUT DEATH? | ASK THEM ABOUT THEIR RESILIENCE? WHAT ARE THEIR CHERISHED VALUES?   |   |
| <b>Where does that idea come from?</b>  |  |   |   |

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*aging and mental health and our outcome-obsessed service, and I think externalising them in this way helped me to be more open to listening for alternative stories. I liked having the conversation recorded in this way, as it was clearer to see the different perspectives and voices. Writing this now has made me think I could try this on my own with another dilemma and see how this works.*

### Example 3: Red and green writing with Harry, aged 8

#### Background

Karen introduced Erica to red and green writing in a supervisory conversation and ER thought it might be helpful in her work as a Counsellor in primary schools. Harry, 8 years old, has severe anxiety

about going into the playground at break times as he feels he will be attacked by an older boy who once chased him. He engages well in sessions, but the anxiety has not diminished as a result of CBT. Harry uses some strong vocabulary, "he might attack me," "bullies do that," which place him in a subjugated position and ER felt that it might be helpful to try "red and green writing" to encourage his inner voice to develop a more supportive tone and to increase his personal agency.

### Introduction to the writing

ER has previously found that children seem to relate well to the ego states of transactional analysis, and so decided to explain to Harry that we all have different voices within us, using the adult, parent and child as an example. In order to enable Harry to construct an alternative voice, ER asked him to think of some people or characters that he could think of that were quite wise and calm and gave him sensible advice. He listed the headteacher, ER, and his Mum and Dad "on a good day." ER then suggested that the red voice started by saying something that he thinks when he is worried. ER chose to use red for this voice as the colour links to "hot thoughts" in cognitive behavioural therapy, reminding her of which colour was which.

### Erica's account and reflections

Harry thought of a red thought and I scribed in red writing:  
**"He's going to wait outside for me with his friends"**

I asked how the wise person might reply to this, and he thought of what the learning mentor might say to him, which seemed to enable him to get in touch with the "green voice".

*"Has he hurt you? Has he touched you? Are you alright? If he hasn't done anything in the past, why would he do it now?"*

I asked him what the red voice might go on to say, he continued;

**"Yes, but what if he does in the future?"**

*"If he does come near you, come and tell a teacher and they will sort it out"*

From this point, Harry continued without support in constructing the dialogue, apart from the occasional:

**ER:** *"And what might the red/green voice say?"*

I was surprised how easily this conversation began to flow. After the first reference to what "the learning mentor might say", he no longer seemed to have to tune into the green voice, the two voices were distinct and flowing very naturally. I was also struck by the detailed and practical solutions of the green voice.

**"Can I join clubs outside so I can still play with my friends?"**

*"That's fine, but if you get a bit panicky stay in the adults' sight, so you're not completely with them, but you're not on your own."*

**"If I do get a bit panicky and there's no one around can I find someone?"**

*"Go and find a group that you really like and play with them so it goes right out of your head."*

This seemed a crucial interaction, as previously Harry had been either unable to go outside or was likely to come in again within minutes in search of reassurance from an adult, often going straight to the Headteacher, so it seemed very helpful that his green voice was able to suggest such a sound alternative to this.

**"What if I still feel a bit panicky?"**

*"Just speak to one of your friends about it, and see what they say."*

**"What if they don't understand?"**

*"Then ask another friend until you find the right person who really understands."*

I felt that Harry's green voice had been surprisingly strong and rich in creative problem-solving, but was fascinated by the way Harry went on to make sense of the activity. I reminded him, although he had thought of people who might give him "wise" advice, he had actually created the green voice himself. The reassurance and wise strategies were within him.

**ER:** *"The great thing is that it wasn't their voice, it was you."*

He seemed to confirm his realisation of this by saying,

**H:** *"If I can listen to the green voice all the time, then I can say it to myself."*

I asked him how creating the green voice had made him feel, and he said:

**H:** *"It makes me feel adulty."*

He went on to make another interesting connection of his own; he had been told about parts of the brain before, in relation to his anxiety.

**H:** *"It's like the amygdala part of your brain says run, run! But the front part of your brain helps you think about it."*

Both of these connections seemed to highlight a deep understanding of what he experienced in the writing activity.

Harry's final comment also showed great reflection and insight,  
**H:** *"Normally I would just keep thinking the red voice, the red voice, the red voice..... and never think of the green voice."*

His repetition of "the red voice" seemed to embody the persistence and dominance of the red voice, or "hot thoughts" and I hoped that this understanding would create a new window through which the "green voice" could grow stronger.

I found this technique to be very simple to introduce and to execute. I was very excited by the way that Harry was able to both engage with the technique and then to take control of it almost immediately, especially as this particular client had shown limited progress with other work. From my point of view, once I had introduced the technique, it felt as though Harry was able to run with it, with no further support, as if the technique had a power of its own, or more importantly was able to harness the strengths of the client. I felt the technique had been very effective in helping Harry discover a surprisingly confident "green voice" and in enabling him to find a new strategy in dealing with his difficulties.

I felt that the technique was very successful and I am very keen to try this with other clients. I am also fascinated to learn whether Harry's "green voice" was able to help him between sessions, and how this voice might continue to develop in the future. Following this work, I asked Harry how he had found using the technique, and what his reflections were. He commented:

**H:** *"It was really helpful. With the adult side you can do whatever you want. It's so calming. I found out that the red side can be so wrong sometimes."*

### From reflexivity to action

We have enjoyed these experiments in playing with inner and outer discourse through red and green writing and found them stimulating and invigorating. Dialogical writing from an "I" and "You" position seems to be a simple and versatile additional technique for exploring reflexivity and constructing an internal guide. Like other forms of therapeutic writing, the technique seemed to instil hope in the participants. Since these initial experiments, trainees and supervisees have gone on to use the technique for post-session reflections and in therapy and executive

coaching. Of course, reflexivity in itself is not an end point. As Taylor (2006) points out, it is just another performance and what is important is the action that results from dialogical thinking: It is how we go on together to create preferred futures with our clients which is important. However, occasional use of "I" and "YOU" writing might enable a transparency which increases our accountability to each other and to our clients.

### Trainee 1:

Well for me it allowed me space to reflect on an area of work that was particularly challenging. It was useful to also write it down, in my case in "black and black" writing. It has been a space to look at the issue or prejudice you may have and to challenge your own thinking about what you were feeling or why you were feeling that way. In terms of reflecting on practice I am probably more familiar with looking at the overall management of the client but this method is useful in looking at the finer detail of what is challenging about the particular details of certain contacts. Doing this exercise has helped me move on as there was a particular sensitive detail about a client's presentation that has been challenging me for some time and it has assisted me in approaching the matter with a different way of thinking. This approach is something I would use in future if another challenging matter arises. It has highlighted the importance of sensitivity and having time to reflect on challenging areas presented by clients so it does not compromise engagement and the therapeutic relationship.

### Trainee 2:

Overall, I found it a really helpful process for providing a more structured reflective space after a client session. In particular I enjoyed the liberating opportunity to unpick my emotional responses to clients and topics in the session without any concern for how that might be perceived by the "other", as in this process the "other" was myself! It also allowed me to develop a sense of an internal supervisor and I was surprised by the ideas I could generate just by making the mental shift from subjective to more objective comment. I think it could therefore help to generate a sense of one's own resourcefulness in the absence of an always-available supervisor. I also wondered if it would help develop therapeutic skills as the questions/comments I was asking myself were not dissimilar to those that I might try asking families. I have not yet seen the family again and so can't comment on how it affected what I did next. All in all – a simple and portable technique that I will use again.

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"What can I do about the voices in my head?"

"Hang on. Let me listen to what my inner dialogue is telling me."



Brian Cade

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