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Creating Dialogue

Sarah Buie

a talk presented at the CHCI conference, Dialogues of Enlightenment
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Creating something akin to dialogue is certainly one of the charges of our work in humanities centers. On various of our websites, I saw descriptions of our work as "fostering intellectual collaborations", "working to create opportunities for intellectual and creative exchange which engages the campus and community in conversation on topics critical to our lives and world", "creating opportunity for lively dialogue among scholars, students, and citizens on issues pertaining to the human condition" and "enhancing intellectual and cultural life by fostering challenging exchange among faculty, students, and diverse communities of writers, artists, performers, thinkers, activists, and innovators".... etc! There's no doubt the intention to create genuine exchange is there, but do we actually understand this profound term and experience called dialogue?

So I'd like to focus in on it for a time and how — if we choose to more intentional about it — we might substantially deepen the work of our centers and of higher learning as a whole. We really are privileged spaces at a scale in which this kind of unmediated communication is possible, and in which we can consciously examine our own processes. But creating real dialogue is difficult, and we have resistances to it, in ourselves and culturally. At Clark, we've been working on this for the last four years through our Difficult Dialogues program, which began through a Ford Foundation initiative. Let me backtrack for a minute and give you some context.

Clark is a small research university, focused on undergraduate education for about 2200 students (though also we have about 700 graduate students). For a couple of decades, our center — the Higgins School of Humanities — served primarily as a well-loved funding resource for our humanities community — through grants for faculty research, support for community cultural events, an interdisciplinary seminar each year, and a small series of scholarly talks each semester. When I took the job of Director five years ago, I had a strong sense that something was missing in the work of our center. I wanted to see us begin to address contemporary issues of concern, and to build campus conversations around them — I began by initiating public programs and discussions around the state of our democracy.

The real transformation of the work of our center really began with one email — a call from the Ford Foundation in April 2005, requesting proposals for their new Difficult Dialogues initiative. Some of you may be familiar with the reasons for the initiative, and with the project itself... a group of twelve college presidents were particularly concerned about the increasing threats to academic freedom going on at that time; they sought Ford's help to support academic freedom and discourse across difference in American colleges and universities — which had been seen as "dedicated to full and unflinching examination of fundamental issues."

Please recall the climate into which Ford made this call. Bush had just been re-elected. We were deep into the quagmire of Iraq, and information about the abuses at Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib were beginning to surface. Our civil liberties were increasingly under assault through the Patriot Act and more.

At Clark, where our cultural mythology is one of engagement (with the motto "challenge convention, change our world"), there was little discussion at the time among members of the community about any of the difficult issues we were facing as a nation. As we wrote in our DD proposal to Ford:

Despite Clark's commitment to and framework around these goals, conversations with faculty and students reveal a reality quite different from our stated intentions. Too often, important dialogues simply are not taking place. ...our initial research suggests that many Clark faculty and students shun controversial topics altogether ("everyone I know avoids confrontation," one senior reported...) Whether arising from fear, avoidance, denial, lack of critical thinking or from reluctance to engage in difficult issues — silences such as these undermine the basic premises and values of a liberal education...

So the call from Ford was compelling to us on a number of counts. The silences called out to be opened, to be addressed at the level of root causes and sustainable transformations. Our experiments in building dialogue could serve as a microcosm of the whole in facing these pervasive challenges. And a more intentional focus on dialogue seemed a natural evolution for the Higgins School in becoming a more vital center.

In partnership with our international development program, we brought together a faculty team which developed our proposal, and led to our receiving full funding in the DD initiative from Ford, one of 27 institutions out of over 700 who applied. Our proposal baldly stated that we would build a "culture of dialogue" on campus, through building skills of dialogue among a sizeable number of faculty, staff and students; creating opportunities for the community to engage in dialogues around significant and controversial issues common to us all; and integrating dialogue into a number of academic courses across the curriculum, thus ensuring its continued practice... so that's what we've been working to do ever since.

While most of the other DD projects focused their work around a particular challenging issue (many of them related to religion or race), the focus of our proposal was the question of discourse and dialogue itself — its process, what it makes possible, its necessity for higher education and for our culture. We began by situating dialogue within a continuum of methods of discourse, and seeing how our most common practices (discussion, debate) actually show up in relationship to dialogue, and what distinguishes it.

So how do we define it? A hot word these days! Both Obamas use it regularly (as he did with Turkish students in April, as she did about the poetry and jazz event at the White House in May, or as a larger approach to government as we are seeing in the work of the administration's Office of Public Liaison and Intergovernmental Affairs, in their efforts to build transparency and collaboration into practices of government). His Holiness the Dalai Lama often calls it out as the central work of our time.

But often our use of the dialogue word is imprecise, and even an easy feel-good catchall.

I have found the words of the physicist David Bohm, a seminal thinker about dialogue practice, to be helpful:

"Dialogue" comes from the Greek word dialogos. Logos means 'the word', or in our case we would think of 'the meaning of the word'. And dia means through'.... The picture or image that this derivation suggests is of a stream of meaning flowing among and through and between us. This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which may emerge some new understanding. It's something new...It's something creative. And this shared meaning is the 'glue'

or 'cement' that holds people and societies together.

The object of a dialogue is not to analyze things, or to win an argument, or to exchange opinions. Rather, it is to suspend your opinions and to look at them.... We can just simply share the appreciation of the meanings, and out of this ... truth emerges unannounced — not that we have chosen it.

In defining it, Bohm focuses on the collective and creative aspects of dialogue, and the perspective it provides on thought itself. My way of "defining" is to look at what I believe are its essential characteristics:

dialogue as presence

As conscious practice, dialogue usually includes agreements between participants at its outset (these are like the "pre-conditions for trust" that Akeel described yesterday). Premised on speaking honestly, listening with respect, releasing judgment, seeking to understand, dialogue aims, as Onora O'Neill described it, at "intelligibility to the other". These are choices to be mindful and present, individually and collectively.

dialogue as engagement

As a practice, dialogue engages and empowers its participants — it creates a non-hierarchical space (a circle) in which all voices can be heard and valued. Though exploratory (not goal-driven) in its essence, it is a natural process for addressing issues and catalyzing action. Ancient versions include the use of council by native peoples to make community decisions.

dialogue as "the space between"

It is a container in which difference and paradox can be held respectfully. In so doing, the "space between" often allows common values or new insights to arise.

dialogue as reflective thought

By encouraging critical thinking and the examination of assumptions, dialogue illuminates the "unnoticed structures of our society" and power dynamics. It enhances consciousness around discourse itself and the topics considered, allowing us to examine and make choices about them.

dialogue as a creative matrix

Dialogue is iterative, playful, exploratory in ways that involve "listening", willing to enter the unknown, free of preconceptions, responsive to the flow of ideas and information.

The development and deepening of all of these dimensions of exchange is what genuine dialogue offers us in our work (and to the "work of the world", as Diana Chapman Walsh put it in the keynote address which launched our project.)

This a quick review of the places we have been doing this work; I hope you'll consult our website for details, especially for resources on specific dialogue practices, and on the programming we've done.

We approach the entire process of the project as in the nature of dialogue. That means collaboration, reflection, synchronicity, transparency, analysis, inclusivity, and a lot of trial and error. We listen to our community and to the emergent nature of the project itself.

In public symposia we focus on a different theme each term (race in the era of Obama, reclaiming the commonwealth, climate change, religion and tolerance). We emphasize engagement around the issues and a dialogic approach to the discourse around them. Academic conventions around lectures, panel discussions, etc. challenge us to bring a more dialogic approach to these experiences, and we don't always succeed. We experiment with different models for Q & A, use conversation cafes (a very simple dialogue structures) after talks or films, and invite speakers who are working to integrate dialogic approaches into their presentation style.

We began our project with a semester-long faculty development process for seventeen faculty, working with leading dialogue practitioners. Monthly conversations about dialogue and pedagogy take place among faculty teaching DD-related courses, and we hold at least one new faculty workshop each semester.

We've worked to integrate dialogue into new and revised courses. Faculty (many who did the faculty development) have integrated dialogue practice and content into their own pedagogy in whatever ways they choose. Between 14 and 18 DD-related courses across the disciplines are offered each semester.

In addition, we run dialogue seminars to accompany the symposium for the semester. They are jointly facilitated by a faculty member and student DD fellows. The seminars engage the symposium topic and allow deep and sustained dialogue experiences to develop over the course of a semester; the entire group takes increased responsibility for the experience of the class.

Finally, we work with other members of the Clark community — the Office of Intercultural Affairs, our Hillel organization, Residential Life, Student Council and student groups as well — to create programming, hold workshops, counsel them on developing a dialogic process for their project or group. And have also partnered with The City of Worcester to create citywide dialogues.

I think it would be fair to say that our project has succeeded in creating a culture shift on our campus, despite the many ways in which we experience setbacks and constraints of institutional norms.

I'd like to end with a quote from David Bohm, which goes to the heart of why dialogue matters:

Because the nature of dialogue is exploratory, its meaning and its methods continue to unfold... its essence is learning... as a part of an unfolding process of creative participation between peers. The process of Dialogue is a powerful means of understanding how thought functions... without a willingness to explore this situation and to gain a deep insight into it, the real crises of our time cannot be confronted, nor can we find anything more than temporary solutions to the vast

array of human problems that now confront us.