

**Critical Organizational Dialogue:
Open Formation and the Demand of “Otherness”**

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To be published in R. Anderson, L. Baxter, and K. Cissna (eds), *Dialogic Approaches to Communication*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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The call for dialogue became a core part of our sociality in the later part of the twentieth century, and it clearly continues as a social hope as we confront the problems of a new era. International conflicts that bear on local interests, increasing interdependence and renewed isolationism, calls for diversity and pluralism coupled with new forms of destruction and annihilation, are all situations in a complex world context for dialogue. Although many still tout the promise of the information age, with the mass reproduction of meaning that new information technologies make possible, the need for discussion and negotiation persists. The struggle of our time is to build the practices of working together. This is the hope of a dialogic theory of communication.

Using the word “dialogue,” rather than simply “communication,” foregrounds specific normative hopes. “Dialogue” has been useful in drawing together alternative and often more hopeful understandings and practices of communication. The hopes of different conceptions and practices of dialogue are not all the same, however. In the twentieth century, three dominant positions on dialogue evolved. The first, a liberal humanist perspective, is rooted in notions of internally located meaning and grounded in the works of Maslow (1970, 1973) and Rogers (1965, 1969, 1980). These scholars advocate an interactional orientation founded on principles of understanding, empathy, and active listening. The thrust of communication from this perspective is to find common ground so that a community can comfortably co-exist. The second position, a critical hermeneutic orientation, is reflected in the writing of Gadamer (1975,

1980) and Habermas (1975, 1980, 1984, 1987). This position shifts away from an emphasis on private internal meanings, and posits interaction rather than psychological individuals as the locus of meaning production and negotiation. This perspective gives useful insights and adds a decision-component to dialogue, but it has also been critiqued for its over-reliance on a rational model of civic engagement and deliberation (cf. Young, 1990). Finally, the third model of dialogue, often called postmodern, emerged out of the post-structuralist thinking of scholars such as Bakhtin (1981), Derrida (1973), Foucault (1970), and Levinas (1969, 1985, 1987). This position emphasizes the role of indeterminacy and “otherness” in reclaiming conflicts, resisting closure, and opening new opportunities for people to be mutually involved in shaping new understandings of the world in which they live and work.

The humanist position has largely become the everyday life, “native,” conception of dialogue found in basic communication textbooks, personal improvement books, and corporate, religious, and community programs. While many scholars associated with this tradition have developed nuanced theories of dialogue, these nuances are often lost when taken up in native practice. We argue here that the latter two positions held in a complementary tension-filled relation can provide more productive guidance to reforming human interaction and enhancing mutual free and open decision making. In our studies and change efforts in organizations, however, the liberal humanist conception of dialogue often stands alongside authority and power relations to thwart this more vibrant form of dialogue. Dialogue requires both *forums*—places for occurrence—and *voice*—the capacity to freely develop and express one’s own interests. *Forums* for dialogue have been developed both in and out of organizational contexts. When the communication practices within them, however, follow from simplistically appropriated liberal

humanist conceptions some expression and sharing of understanding may occur but *voice* does not.

The everyday conception of dialogue focuses attention on the act of self-expression and the processes by which what one “means” is transferred to others. This orientation presumes that our differences are superficial in contrast to a more essential pre-communicative humanness. With such a view, the self is held as fixed and knowable, and socially produced language and social systems are rendered invisible as mere carriers of meaning. The experiences of the moment are treated as “natural” and the constitutive conditions of self-production cannot be seen as politically charged. In practice this gives a false sense of the individual as the originator of meaning and leads to self-expressionism and strategic control of others through expressive acts. The stage is set for control of self and control of others.

In contrast to the common sense view, we develop a concept of dialogic communication that is aimed less at self-expression and more at self-destruction. In order for growth, differentiation, and progressive individualization of the self to be realized, one must abandon the quest for a unitary self and its control. The point of communication as a social act is to overcome one's fixed subjectivity, one's conceptions, one's strategies, to be opened to the indeterminacy of people and the external environment to form an open redetermination. This we believe is the basis for “voice.” Communication in its dialogic form is productive rather than reproductive. It produces what self and other can experience, rather than reproducing what either has. Self-expression is misleading not because people do not or should not try to express their experiences but because such expressions in a dialogic view are the raw material for the production of something new rather than the product of self interests. Process subjectivity becomes possible in the responsiveness to a pull from the outside.

Recognizing “the otherness of the other” breaks a discursive blockage by posing questions to any fixed conception or meaning. In postmodern terminology, “otherness” deconstructs. The fundamental notion of “otherness” suggests that any possible label or conception of self, “other,” and world is capable of being questioned. Perception, as well as conception, is the end product of a conflict, a conflict that can be recovered. This conflict represents a struggle between one's fixed identity and conceptual schemes, and the excess of the “other” over that. The recollection of this struggle leaves each and every attempt to form an object potentially open to question. Every interaction, thus, holds both the possibility of closure or new meaning, either a reproduction of the dominant socially produced subjectivity or responsiveness to the excess of external events over these conceptions. Developing an appreciation of “otherness” as a part of dialogic interaction is central to developing a responsibility appropriate to the contemporary age.

Here we wish to focus on communication concepts and practices that facilitate voice. Given the limits of space in this chapter, we sketch more than develop an understanding of dialogue based in a recovery of conflict and a specific understanding of free and open communication. We call the model that we develop here a *politically responsive constructionist theory of communication* because of its grounding in the political realities of a socio-historical context and its commitment to reformation through mutual constitution. We draw from Gadamer's conception of the “genuine conversation” (1975, 1980) to show why dialogue is based less in attitudes and activities of the self, than in responsiveness to the demands of “otherness.” We then suggest that Habermas's “ideal speech situation” (1984, 1987; see Deetz 1990, 1992) can provide a heuristic for a process to overcome power relations that leads people to take as their own asymmetrically developed thoughts, feelings and interests. Based on the

work of Gadamer and Habermas, we suggest that various forms of invisible discursive closure exist and that these can be overcome. In the context opened by critical communicative practices, “otherness” can be encountered, indeterminacy recovered, and one’s own thoughts, feelings, and interests constructed responsively to the outside. Finally, this essay provides a discussion of a specific case where an organization attempted to implement dialogue in the face of conflict. In this discussion, we show how at specific moments, encountering “otherness” occurred and productive new understandings were able to emerge, and where the dominant views of good communication and dialogue remained a block to community self-determination.

“Otherness” and the Formation of Experience

Our politically responsive constructionist theory of communication begins with the premise that the more interesting processes of communication occur in the production, rather than the reproduction, of specific meanings and experiences. This orientation recognizes that meanings and experiences initially form in the relation between a goal directed activity and the not-yet-determined stuff of the world including people and events. In these encounters with objects, people, or situations that are “other,” both they and we become determined as specific objects, or conceptualized people (Levinas, 1969, 1985, 1987). Yet, the “others” we perceive are always outcomes of communicative practices situated in specific social/historical circumstances.

Most of our “personal” meanings and experiences are reproductions of earlier formations. These inherited meanings are produced by someone else to serve their purposes in their time and are uncritically taken on as our own. Usually these meanings are those of more dominant groups where even opposition and conflict are produced in relation to dominant preferences. We are able to understand the distinctions of this versus that, but distinctions that would organize the world differently are hidden and suppressed. Although the reproduced experiences are clearly

“ours,” they are not formed by us but are borrowed from earlier formative processes that are politically partial.

Most acts of everyday interaction are reproductive in the sense that we trade or share routinized information about what we already “know.” Occasionally, though, the routine is radically disrupted and the excess of the “other” over our determination of it calls out for reconceptualization and redetermination. “Otherness” is encountered and our experience is transformed from routine to extraordinary and meanings become “ours” in a more radical sense. We reserve the concept “dialogue” to designate the productive (rather than reproductive) communication processes enabling these radical transformations. We believe that this process is what pulls together the great communication theories of dialogue. This is Buber’s (1958) encounter with “Thouness” that overcomes calcified understandings of “it”, and Gadamer’s (1975) “conception formation” in the great piece of literature or art, for example. *Voice* is grounded in this dialogic open formation.

Embracing this position highlights the dilemma of a dialogic theory rooted in notions of “common ground.” Dialogic models that favor a quest for “common ground” inherently favor the already-dominant position of institutional privilege. As feminist standpoint theorists have aptly demonstrated, marginalized members of society must be bi- or multi-cultural. People at the margins must learn not only to navigate their own cultural terrain, but must also be fluent in the workings of the dominant culture. Those in positions of relative privilege, however, can afford to take these workings for granted (see Harding, 1991, 1992; Hartstock, 1998). Calls for “coming together” and “finding common ground” *de facto* reproduce the status quo because the ground that is common between participants is that of the dominant culture. This inhibits, rather than supports, the radical disruption of self that is central to our productive understanding of dialogue.

Only through our encounter with radical difference does transformation becomes possible, as the taken-for-granted assumptions of dominant ideologies are made visible through juxtaposition with alternative understandings. When we encounter the “other” in this way, we not only challenge the status quo of existing systems, but also open the door to deeper self-awareness. “Otherness” may be present either in the concrete person standing there or in the way their understanding reopens the things of our world to redetermination. This is the productive potential of dialogue.

A shift in orientation from an understanding of communication as a vehicle for overcoming difference to a process of exploring and negotiating difference fundamentally alters our understanding of the form and function of dialogue and reclaims its transformative potential (see Peters, 1999, for a detailed history of this difference). Gadamer and Habermas both contribute to our understanding of this process.

Dialogue as a Free and Open Interaction Guided by the “Subject Matter”

Conceptualizing dialogue as a politically responsive constructionist theory of communication shifts our focus to the production of meaning through interaction and away from the strategic reproduction of meaning. Even within the strategy-loaded context of the workplace, communication to express one’s “own” (as constructed by others) thoughts and feelings or to strategically influence others can be replaced with communicative attempts to reach greater understanding. In doing this we foster decisions that enhance creativity, commitment, and create opportunity for interlocutors to make specific contributions to mutually determined problems.

Such a conception is grounded in the works of Gadamer and Habermas. Although their positions differ regarding the nature of the dialogic process, they both emphasize continual social

formation of consensus in interaction beyond the intentions and opinions of the participants. As developed in many places, this notion of interactionally produced understanding focuses attention on reaching openly formed agreement regarding the subject matter under discussion, rather than on seeking agreement between participants' perspectives (see Deetz, 1978, 1990, 1992).

From this perspective, communication difficulties arise from practices that preclude value debate and conflict, limit access arbitrarily to communication channels and forums, and involve decisions based on arbitrary authority relations. This perspective suggests a process of preparation and activity to reduce continually all socially determined asymmetries for the interaction as critical to the dialogic process. In the absence of dialogue, communication processes are advanced by power-laden interests that obscure and preclude the demands of "otherness." Hence, that which might be contested in interaction is left uncontestable.

The normative preference for this specific form of dialogue is grounded in two ways. First, Gadamer (1975), in developing an ontology of understanding, demonstrated the social character of the formation of experience that precedes each and every expression of it—the hermeneutic situation. Second, Habermas (1979, 1984) and Apel (1979) have shown that the illocutionary structure of discourse demonstrates the types of claims presumed possible in a society and, thus, anticipates the forms of support and dispute when claims are contested. In both cases, the "hermeneutic" and "ideal speech" situation are counterfactual—that is, rarely fully realized—but each is a necessary anticipation even when not achieved. This enables a shift in locus of concern from the individual's point of view and how it is presented, to determining whether the interaction includes all relevant positions and interests.

Although many communication studies and native theories of dialogue emphasize what each person has to say about the subject matter, Gadamer focuses on what the subject matter “says” to each. In other words, the imaginary self and world produced in discourse is challenged by the excess of that which the discourse is about over the description of it. The communication question concerns how interaction is to proceed so that this excess is “remembered” or can make its claim.

Gadamer (1975) argued that the ideal is not "self expression and the successful assertion of one's point of view, but a transformation into communion, in which we do not remain what we were" (p. 341). It is not the insides of the other or the self that is to be understood, for either would be covering up the objective demand of the subject matter with one's subjective reaction. Gadamer's claim thus clarifies why a “successful” presentation of one's own meaning can limit rather than aid productive communication. To the extent that the object or “other” is silenced by successful expression, the capacity to engage in reclaiming difference is limited and the conceptual expansion toward a more open consensus on the subject matter is precluded. The “otherness” before us makes visible the one-sidedness and suppressed conflict in current perceptions, and forces us to surrender those perceptions to the development of consensual thought as a new momentary resting place. Levinas (1969) presented the understanding poetically: “The presence of the Other is equivalent to calling into question my joyous possession of the world” (p. 75). Both the loss and the growth are critical to human social conduct.

Although it is possible to participate in dialogues along the “genuine conversation” mode, such opportunities are relatively rare because of the limitations daily life imposes both on ourselves and others. Rarely is an experience so powerful that the disciplines, routines of life,

and ordinary ways of seeing are spontaneously overcome. There are real power relationships, manifested as institutional arrangements and structures of permissible discourse, that routinely preclude “otherness” and block conversation. Although Gadamer recovers dialectics and understanding from modern epistemological domination, he has no politics. Such a politics requires a more complete analysis of actual communication processes.

Systems of domination usually preclude the genuine conversation. Below, we turn to Habermas to explore what the nature of interaction might be where a new consensus does not arise organically out of the interaction. Further, Habermas opens us to the questions of how one can engage the “other” in such a way that competing claims can be resolved, and illuminates that which allows us to distinguish consensus reached regarding the subject matter from that knowingly or unknowingly produced by authority or relations of power. Because Habermas and others have developed his position in many places, we will be brief.

Essentially, Habermas (1987) argued that every speech act can function in communication by virtue of common presumptions made by speaker and listener. Even when these presumptions are not fulfilled in an actual situation, the common presumptions serve as a base of appeal as the failed conversation itself turns to a special dialogic argumentation to resolve disputed validity claims. Every interaction depends on presumptions made about the identity of participants, the normative rules guiding behavior, knowledge of the external world, and values guiding the interior world. In everyday interaction we express these presumptions to others, but the social, often asymmetrical, conditions of their constitution generally remains invisible. These are the unassessed, unchosen prejudices that stand between us and the specific subject matter at hand. Dialogue, however, provides renewed opportunity for contestation.

Any claim that cannot be brought to open dispute serves as the basis for systematically distorted communication (see Deetz, 1992). Creating situations that come closer to the ideal speech situation helps avoid or overcome such distortions. This conception not only applies to the everyday and ordinary acts of communication but also models the ideal processes by which collective decisions can be made. In this sense, the ideal speech situation acts as a guide to defining institutions and practices that advance participation and democracy (Denhardt, 1981; Mingers, 1980; Ulrich, 1983). Dialogue modeled in this way is central to our moral responsibility to decide what our society will be and what kind of people we will become, and lies at the heart of a productive dialogic process.

The “ideal speech situation” gives us four basic guiding conditions necessary for free and open participation in negotiating differences (Habermas, 1987). First, the attempt to reach understanding presupposes a symmetrical distribution of the chances to choose and apply speech acts. This specifies the minimal conditions of skills and opportunities for expression, including access to meaningful forums and channels of communication. Such a principle argues against privileged expression forms, routines, and rules that advantage certain experiences, identities, and expressions.

Second, the understanding and representation of the external world needs to be freed from privileged preconceptions in the social development of “truth.” Ideally, participants have the opportunity to express interpretations and explanations and to have conflicts resolved in reciprocal claims and counter-claims without privileging particular epistemologies or forms of data. This opens up the possibility for transformation.

Third, participants need to have the opportunity to establish legitimate social relations and norms for conduct and interaction. The rights and responsibilities of people are given in advance

neither by nature nor by a privileged, universal value structure, but are negotiated through interaction. The reification of organizational structures and their maintenance without possible dispute and the presence of managerial prerogatives are examples of potential violence in corporate discourse. Acceptance of views because of an individual's privilege or authority or because of the nature of the medium would constitute a possible illegitimate relation. Authority itself is legitimate only if redeemable by appeal to an open interactional formation of relations freed from the appeal to other authorities.

Finally, interactants need to be able to express their own authentic interests, needs, and feelings. This requires freedom from various coercive and hegemonic processes by which the individual is unable to form experience openly, to develop and sustain competing identities, and to form expressions presenting them. Limiting the "other's" right to autonomous definition of self both does violence to the "other" and limits our own capacity for growth.

Gadamer and Habermas each offer much to develop a dialogic conception of communication describing the possibility and conditions for the production of meaning in interaction, and also provide a description of communication problems and inadequacies. In general, most strategic or instrumental communicative acts have the potential to assert the speaker's opinion and to inhibit the quest for understanding regarding the subject matter. In such a case, an apparent agreement precludes the conflict that could lead to a new position of open mutual assent. In cases where the one-sidedness is apparent, usually the processes of assertion/counter-assertion and questions/answers are able to reclaim a situation approximating participation.

Humanist conceptions of dialogue offer more complex problems. In many cases, the asymmetries of concern are part of the culture and or deeply embedded in socially formed

experiences. In these cases, they remain invisible and often naturalized. Superficial equality further supported by warm, caring attitudes and open acceptance many make discovery and constestation of these almost impossible. Attempts to surface these closures and to achieve voice might well be seen as disruptive and violating norms of cooperation and pursuit of commonality. The native dialogic communication model can be used harmfully to silence difference, preclude open dialogue, and support a type of middle class civility in its place. Many workplace participation programs, for example, reduce the very conception of “voice” to merely having a say rather than looking to the social construction of what is to be said or the process of reclaiming a fundamental relation to “otherness” in order openly to form a position. Difference, representation, and creativity can all be lost when this happens.

The Organizational Context

Communication processes in large organizations provide an interesting site to consider alternative concepts and practices of dialogue. First, globalization of business and the rapid increases of women and various ethnic minorities in the workforce make the active presence of diversity and the need to work with it greater in the workplace than in virtually any other institution in U.S. society. Second, power differences and hierarchical relations are a central and visible part of most large organizations. In this context, much communication is also openly strategic. Yet, here too, we see widespread direct decision-making distributed across large groups of people more clearly than in any public political process. Further, the forms of interaction in organizations have a bias toward making decisions. Finally, dialogue theories based in liberal humanist principles, following the work of Senge (1990), Bohm (1996), and others have been actively advanced in many organizations. Our experience in organizations indicates that these perspectives are often appropriated in ways that over-emphasizes the

importance of shared meaning and finding common ground at the expense of encountering difference and mutually constructing understanding. Each of these organizational insights shapes and refines our understanding of dialogic transformation.

Workplace Diversity

Despite gains in the latter half of the twentieth century in desegregating public institutions in the United States, the country in many ways remains socially and culturally divided. Native notions of dialogue rooted in understandings of self as fundamentally separate from “others” has set up an understanding of communication that necessitates a “common ground” from which to build understanding. Although finding “common ground” may be marginally possible among and between individuals of like mind or like experience, the increasing diversity found in today’s organizations points to real problems with this communicative demand in practice. And because segregation and separation are less often present in organizations and more often legally prohibited, organizational members must actively engage and deal with diversity.

Beyond being difficult to *do*, however, organizational dynamics suggest that “coming together” and “finding common ground” may be far less desirable activities than learning to recognize, value, and even celebrate difference. Creativity, member commitment, and customization of products add needed value to organization practices and outcomes. Difference, rather than being a problem, is core to achieving these things. By attending to the centrality of difference in organizations, we can see more clearly that transformation requires not simply a rapprochement of perspective, but a more careful examining of a wider range of voices.

Power and Participation

Although interactions that occur in the private domain are also replete with inequitable distributions of wealth and influence, in organizations these relationships are codified and institutionalized in ways that allow us to focus attention more readily on the dynamic of power. Power distribution differences in organizations draw attention to the dilemma created by a dialogic orientation centered on finding “common ground.” Because power is never distributed equally and most organizations have massive cultural management programs, what is “common” between stakeholders almost always favors the already privileged position. In emphasizing dialogic processes that encourage “coming together,” we lose sight of the uneven ground upon which such a meeting would necessarily take place.

With the increased use of and talk about team decisions, dialogue, and forms of participation generally, alternative ways of communicating have been advanced. Often these alternatives have not been theoretically or empirically investigated, however, and have been presented in a vague unproblematic way as simply “democratic” or participatory communication. Furthermore, these communication practices have often been seen as requiring little training or development. If we build a trusting team, members will communicate well; if we develop participatory attitudes, appropriate skills will spontaneously arise. But all democracies are not alike, and native intuitions and skills can be counterproductive. Anyone hanging around most corporations will hear a lot more complaint about the endlessness and frustrations of meetings than about the lack of opportunity to participate. This results not only from the limited nature of participation tasks but also from the inability to participate *well*. Our biggest task may not be overcoming the autocratic tendencies of many managers and the communication structures,

principles, and practices fostered by this, but rather providing new ways to think about and do communication in places where participation is genuinely favored.

Native views of dialogue and communication were never intended to accomplish truly mutual and creative decision making. Common native understandings are largely based in an 18th century conception of liberal democracy as institutionalized and advanced by Western state institutions. The root conceptions advanced in organizations are the same as the humanists' conception of dialogue. Liberal democracy is central to the justification of contemporary forms and institutions of communication. The thin conceptions of communication inherent in this model may account partly for the poor regard people have of political processes and general cynicism in many societies.

Organizations, unlike many other institutions, tend to be less mired in the pretense of naturally occurring discourse because many organizational interactions occur within both sanctioned and unsanctioned strategic space. Although clearly they are filled with forums that do not facilitate voice, including town halls, suggestion boxes, and committees, to name but a few, they are unlike many other social contexts in that they are driven to make decisions rather than simply to vent or recommend. Whether decisions get made by boards, committees, task forces, advisory groups, chairs, managers, executives, or chancellors, the organization has routine and well-defined channels for sanctioning and authorizing those decisions (even if they were initially negotiated around the water cooler, in the rec center, over a power lunch, or on the back nine). The ability to make mutually satisfactory decisions together may well be a stronger basis for community than mutual understanding, shared values, or open discussions. Organizations provide a rich context to observe this process.

Native Theories of Dialogue

“Dialoguing” about issues is a common catch-phrase for many forms of discourse involving interaction or “coming together.” Nevertheless, because of the transformative potential the word invokes, its use often raises expectations of fairness, justice, and equity that may not be readily accomplished by “getting people in a room together.” In fact, we find that, for some organizational members, the very invocation of the word “dialogue” is a strong portent of change (Simpson, 2001). The coupling of high expectations with an ill-defined and murky concept, however, increases the likelihood of disappointments, stagnation, and an entrenchment of polarized positions that do not bear out the dialogic promise. Organizations seem to experience this routinely with the use of various humanist-based programs. It may well be that other communities do too, but we lack the systematic assessment in those contexts that is common to organizational interventions.

Individual organizational actors often subscribe to implicit theories of self and meaning that are rooted in a liberal humanist tradition. This should come as no surprise. Organizational emphasis on individual responsibility and clear, concise presentation of material reinforces notions of autonomous selves with individually formed and internally located meanings. Often, professed “autonomy” is a central feature of advanced control systems in organizations and evidences the absence of voice (see Barker, 1993; Deetz, 1998). The humanist model of communication and identity provides little space for delighting in the difference that makes our encounter with the “other” rich with possibility. Native theories of dialogue may be one of the greatest threats to productive dialogic encounters.

An Unexpected Organizational Encounter with the “Other”

A recent study of a large, Western, public university (Simpson, 2001) provides a rich example of how dialogue can be constrained by native theories and how the unexpected intrusion of “otherness” may establish the conditions for voice. During the course of this study, the institution in question organized a Campus Retreat on Community. We explore how this event, part of a broader initiative to “Build Community” on campus, demonstrates how encounters with dialogic potential that provide space for meeting with and delighting in difference may be manifest in organizational spaces. As Pearce and Pearce (2001) have discovered through their Public Dialogue Consortium, “public dialogue and participatory democracy are deeply interrelated. The challenge confronting any democratic organization is to balance the needs for efficiency with the structure that not only allows but respects disagreement” (p.120).

In the two and a half years leading up to the event described below, the campus in question developed many programs and initiatives aimed at fostering a more open, welcoming, and supportive community (Simpson, 2001). Many of the projects of the “Building Community Campaign” (BCC) offered pronounced examples of the dilemmas and tensions present when sincere efforts to bridge and honor difference collided with socially prescribed understandings of communication and dialogue rooted in expectations of “coming together” and “finding common ground.” Although this dilemma was not lost on some members of the group, awareness of it was often eclipsed by a pull, both from institutional forces, and from campaign members, to reach closure, make decisions, and “get things done.” In this way, the powerful potential of “otherness” was at times overshadowed by commonplace understandings of “diversity” and transformative potential was closed off in favor of more expedient action. At times, such as the instance described below, however, the campaign has helped to open spaces ripe with that potential. The following example illustrates how providing a space that allows and

encourages expression of difference may also create space for empowering encounters with disagreement that have the potential to allow participants not only to “survive the disgraceful fact of our mutual difference” (Peters, 1999, p.31) but also to delight in the insights afforded by that diversity of perspective. As we will see, however, the momentary opening of possibility that occurs here is ephemeral and becomes difficult to sustain as soon as participants return to organizational structures with taken-for-granted norms for interaction.

The Gallery

In January of 2001, the BCC developed a “gallery” exercise for their second Campus Retreat on Community. During this retreat, approximately 100 students, faculty, staff, and administrators had an opportunity to view and react to thirty posters compiled from words and images taken from newspaper clippings and interviews with campus members by posting notes and responding both to the display and to one another. Sadly, the linear narrative form of this chapter is poorly suited to capturing the dynamic richness of this activity as it unfolded, and part of the uniqueness of this experience was, precisely, the fluid and tactile nature of the exercise. In an interview that preceded the Gallery event, Jackson, an undergraduate student of color on this campus succinctly captured the common-sense notion that organizational members often have of the dialogic process, saying:

That’s how we deal with things is by sitting down and having meetings, and I’m in my suit and my tie and you’re in your suit and your tie and we sit down and, you know, go over a couple of pamphlets and spell out a few point plan and discuss and dialogue.

The Gallery was not that experience of dialogue. The words on the wall as well as the “posted note” responses to them became polysemic texts separated from authors and personal authority. The texts’ subject matter remained other and evoked responsiveness. As notes were added, no

single interpretation remained stable. As individuals returned, their very own statements had shifted in meaning and implored their own rethinking. Simpson (2001) tries to direct our attention to this sense of carnival:

The room is warm with people. I notice that the poster near the air conditioning is drawing a crowd. As I walk around, I am taken with the many different ways that people are engaging what they see. Their task is to read the quotes, and to respond as they see fit. There is no order to what they see, they simply move from one poster to another as it catches their eye or fancy, or because it has a smaller crowd around it. They will have time later, at dinner, to discuss what they have seen, and what they have felt. . . .

Some participants are very task oriented. They wander the room with their colorful pads of Post-It notes, jotting comments as they go along. Others engage everyone around them. They strike up conversations, share perceptions and stories, and soon the room is a-buzz with conversation. There is another group, though, that seems equally engaged, but much more subdued. They walk quietly, often standing still for long stretches of time, expressions of concern, or deep reflection on their faces. I think about everything I have written about difference in the last few years, and watch attentively as people from all backgrounds, across levels of the organization each engage the writing on the wall in their own way. I will be curious to see what they write. (p. 144)

Later, a senior white male faculty member who participated in the event remarked that the experience was “like being popcorn in a popper”: a still silence of hesitation and waiting permeating the air until someone jumped into the fray and others were compelled to follow until, by the end, people were running around trying to find more Post-It notes, so that they could engage yet another idea that had caught their attention. What follows is a condensed and diluted,

but nevertheless illustrative, depiction of the event and a reflection on what the experience can teach us about dialogue and its power to transform. Capturing this sense of dialogue can be difficult:

Afterward, I struggled with how to do justice to this event in my representation. The non-linearity of the event seemed to defy transcription. Comments sometimes referred to both a quotation and a picture on a given poster. Sometimes the comments spoke more to one another as the voices in the room merged with those on the wall and became both a part of and apart from the display. I had no way of knowing in what order some posters might have been viewed or how that might have influenced interpretations. (Simpson, 2001, p. 145)

The example below greatly abbreviates the experience of that evening but provides insight into the dialogic potential of encounters in which difference is not only allowed, but also respected and invited. There are many examples that might have been used for this illustration: 30 posters in all, some with multiple quotations and/or images, and each with multiple posted responses. Due to the space constraints of this chapter, we have selected excerpts from four posters and their responses that, we feel, best capture the cumulative and collective nature of the sense-making process that unfolded throughout this event. Each poster is separated by ***** from the next. **Boldface** text indicates material that was presented to participants, and *italics* indicate participant responses. Because the experience of this material was not linear or static, we invite you to move around, among and between the posters, as the participants did, and notice how the introduction of new voices shifts earlier interpretations.

Everybody is not welcome in this community. Let's get that out on the table, but we know that and we're trying to do something about it and everybody has a part to play in it pretty much. Female Staff of Color

I appreciate this statement because it is provocative and realistic. I read and hear strategies!

This addresses the issue that we all, each and every one of us, needs to make a commitment to valuing others.

I still hear from a lot of people about the insecurity, about the feeling like, you know, from faculty, from young faculty, that they don't know if they are respected here. They don't know if they are safe here. They don't know if they're going to have a job here. They don't know if they're going to get tenure and I think that's like part of it, like the whole process that somebody goes through to be a faculty person just sounds like it's about everything else but building community. White Female Staff

We all need to feel safe and respected

What's valued for tenure, eh? It's not about being a community member or even a good teacher. Publish or perish!

Must the pressure to be academically/intellectually "acceptable" necessarily disallow caring, passion, acceptance—community?

Do we then lament the fact that we haven't been able to have a lot of senior faculty of color? Well, I can tell you why. It's because nobody cares about them enough, you know, and then after awhile, when nobody pays attention to your work, when they're not interested in your work, when they don't value it, when evaluation time comes, what do you think happens? We get discouraged. Female Faculty of Color

The way to being comfortable begins with being uncomfortable.

Unfortunately this attitude then trickles down to the students.

When people who care give up—what have we left to build on?

What will it take to value diverse ways of thinking, approaching research and writing?

We marginalize & devalue topics dealing with multicultural issues—in fact we segregate them. How about integrating diversity into every course in this university?

This is why faculty of color don't stay

When an entire field of study (i.e. Ethnic Studies or Women Studies) is called into question as a legitimate field for scholarly pursuit—what type of message does this send?

What's really missing is caring and generosity. When a faculty, a typical faculty member is approached by a student group or even by an individual student, there's already a kind of tension of an adversarial relationship. White Male Faculty

This is sad. What a way to start a collegial relationship!

But it is inherently rewarding damn it!

On which side?

Many faculty are generous and caring but reticent to act on these instincts due to the incentive system in place for them.

The stressful academic culture—pressures for achievement for everyone—makes it difficult to find space and time for generosity.

I have found caring and generosity. What is missing is public support for those who are caring and generous.

If faculty were appropriately rewarded for participating in student activities, there might be more willingness (on the part of faculty)

I AGREE. Perhaps 'community-building' types of things should be given a little more weight as we make tenure decisions

These brief examples, although oversimplifying a more complex and textured process, provide a glimpse into how the possibility of dialogue may open when we create respectful and delightful opportunities to encounter and engage difference. We suggest that not only is this an important communicative task, but that it is fundamental to a dialogic process rooted in an understanding of historicity and situated, mutually constructed meaning.

Although the nature of the gallery event challenged and defied neat transcription, its power lay precisely in its capacity to engage a wide range of organizational actors with

“otherness.” As individuals moved through the room and encountered thoughts, ideas, and perspectives that both fit neatly with and deeply challenged previously held conceptions, new meanings and new understandings seemed to emerge, literally, in the writing on the wall. When people responded to the quotations and images that were placed initially the picture of the “community” that was represented on the walls gained depth and texture. As people’s voices intermingled, feelings emerged, ranging from hope and excitement to anger and despair. Along with those feelings, critical organizational issues were named.

The challenge that remained at the end of the night, however, was that, given previously held understandings of communication, dialogue, and action, what had transpired was largely perceived as “just talk” and much of the dinner conversation focused on what “the university” would *do*. As soon as the forum returned to one with clear organizational norms for interaction, many of the items that had been open to contestation in “The Gallery” were once again outside of the ground that was common to participants. Although dinner conversations focused on concerns over minority student and faculty representation on campus and impediments to their recruitment and retention, the solutions offered did not emphasize dialogic models or forums that would permit, encourage, or celebrate continued or deepening encounters with the “otherness” that had been made visible during the Gallery exercise.

Wrapping Up

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges and most exciting potential contributions before the field of communication today is to recognize the role that we can play in challenging, questioning, and opening to critique those native, common-sense assumptions about communication and dialogue that privilege the self at the expense of the “other.” Failure to attend carefully to the “otherness” around us limits our own perspective, produces incomplete

and inadequate decision-relevant information, and does violence to those “others” whose positions are often already institutionally and culturally marginalized. Encounters with the “other” must go beyond notions of exchange, move past understandings of communication as the transmission of internally located meaning, and revitalize conceptualizations of dialogue that recognize the central importance of radical difference to our own capacity for growth in understanding.

Native actors in organizational contexts already believe in dialogue as a powerful tool rich with promise. Yet the commonly-held assumptions about what dialogue is and how it happens tend to privilege a “coming together on common ground” perspective that inherently privileges the already dominant set of understandings. From this communicative orientation, those organizational “others” who must set their perspectives, insights, and understandings aside to “dialogue” on common ground are likely to continue to feel an absence of voice because “their issues” will always be beyond the scope of the “dialogue.”

In such a dialogic view, agency is not dependent on a new-found internal will but on a recovery of the demand of “otherness” or “subject matter,” in Gadamer's (1975) sense. Dialogic communicative processes perpetually recover a space for exceeding personal and systemic restraints and distortions. Responsiveness is greatest in chance and transformative events that defy routines and standard recipes. Such chance events make possible reclaimed conflicts and transformations. But openings can also be encouraged, especially in periods of conflict, turmoil, and transition. The production of alternative social memories and counter-narratives demonstrates the possibility of new articulations of experience and opens them to a new political understanding. Contemporary everyday conceptions of interacting with others through effective communication are conceptually flawed as a basis for responsibility and responsiveness. Rarely

are adequate forums provided and voice is greatly limited. Reclaiming and taking seriously the demand of “otherness” on dialogic encounters foregrounds an understanding of communication as a productive process grounded in response to particular political circumstances. This, we suggest, holds the greatest potential for recovering voice and the dialogic transformation it invites.

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