

Civil Dialogue: Diffusing Polarization and Seeking Insights © 2010,2011

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“We live in a country in which many people live in information cocoons in which they only talk to members of their own party and read blogs of their own sect.”
- David Brooks, New York Times

“We’ve got to learn to disagree without demonizing each other and we need to restore civility in our civil discourse...”
– Rick Warren, Saddleback Church

We can disagree without becoming disagreeable.”
-President Barack Obama

Ideological polarization in political, community and educational settings impedes productive citizen communication. Civil Dialogue, a ritualized format for public discourse, provides a tool to build bridges across the chasm of viewpoints.

Inspired by Augusto Boal’s (1995) interactive Theatre of the Oppressed and Legislative Theatre, Walter Ong’s (2000) notion that “thought is nested in speech,” and Denzin’s (2003) call for nurturing “critical democratic imagination,” Civil Dialogue (CD) was developed in 2004 at Arizona State University to explore citizen reaction to political rhetoric. It has since been staged in numerous settings to explore such controversial issues as taxation, abortion, gay marriage, the war on terror, free speech, and immigration. The format can be used to build bridges of understanding across other divides as well, such as evolution versus creationism, climate change believers versus skeptics, separation of church and state, and development versus conservation in addition to other localized or regional conflicts.

CD (a.k.a. “Hot Topics, Cool Heads”) features spontaneous, face-to-face interaction among a group of students/citizens (not a panel of experts) in an “unplugged” atmosphere that promotes respect and equanimity. Audience members consider a provocative statement, and volunteers are called upon to embody their positions in a semi-circle of five chairs on stage — “Strongly Agree,” “Somewhat Agree,” “Neutral/Undecided,” “Somewhat Disagree,” and “Strongly Disagree.” CD is not a contest; the goal is not to win a debate but to reacquaint the public with the notion that citizens can have differing viewpoints or disagree without demonizing the opposition.

Civil Dialogue is Grounded in Performance Theory and Rhetorical Criticism

The driving force behind the development of CD was a desire to create a forum in which citizens could examine the persuasive impact of political speeches. Crowley (1992) suggests that rhetoricians are well suited to lead such an exercise and to show people “how rhetoric is practiced, how language is deployed as a means of coercion, and how they can resist that coercion” (p. 464).

The staging of CD is inspired in part by Augusto Boal (1995), creator of the Theatre of the Oppressed, Forum Theatre, and Legislative Theatre. Carlson (1999) explains that, for Boal, “art merged with daily activity” as “a means of exploring social situations and of developing leadership and coping skills in the participant/audience” (p. 120). Jackson (2004) explains that Boal developed The Legislative Theatre as “a way of using theatre within a political system to produce a truer form of democracy” (p. xviii). Paterson (2002) provides deeper background:

“The Theatre of the Oppressed was developed by Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal during the 1950s and 1960s. ... His explorations were based on the assumption that dialogue is the common healthy dynamic between all humans,

that all human beings desire and are capable of dialogue. ... Boal evolved various sorts of theatre workshops and performances which aimed to meet the needs of people for interaction, dialogue, critical thinking, action and fun” (p. 2).

One of Boal’s (1995) most important concepts is the notion of balance, or protecting the forum itself from being overrun by one polarized view, and this tenet is foundational for CD. Jackson (2004) reminds us that Boal's Forum Theatre “was never about a simplification into right and wrong, never in absolute terms of black and white -- one person's black might be another person’s white, or grey, or red, or blue or yellow, or whatever. Forum is always about what a roomful of people believe at a particular moment in time, and what one roomful of people believe is not necessarily the same as what the next roomful will believe. Forum never seeks to impose any kind of doctrine of political correctness, nor to make things easy; easier to understand, maybe” (p. xix).

Boal's effort to achieve balance is similar to the problem-solving model articulated by Watzlawick, Weakland and Fisch (1974). As a metaphor for the manner in which people attempt to solve interpersonal communication problems, they imagine two sailors “hanging out of either side of a sail boat in order to steady it,” noting that the more one of the sailors leans overboard, the more the other “has to hang out to compensate for the instability created by the other’s attempt to stabilize the boat, while the boat itself would be quite steady if not for their acrobatic efforts at steadying it” (p. 36). Steadying the boat of dialogue in CD is the job of the facilitator, the role that Boal describes as the “joker”: master of ceremonies, conductor, improvisational coach, teacher and entertainer rolled into one essential player. If the dialogue is dominated by one extreme position or the other, the event could disintegrate into a partisan screed and alienate not only the

opposition but also the undecided. CD events should not lean too much to one side or the other. Rather, the facilitator should keep the boat steady by inviting counterweight to extreme views. Only by insisting on balance can CD ever be useful.

Jackson (2004) explains that the joker's function is not that of facilitator, but rather, "(in Boal-speak) a 'difficultator', undermining easy judgments, reinforcing our grasp of the complexity of a situation, but not letting that complexity get in the way of action or frighten us into submission or inactivity" (p. xix). The joker's probing, challenging nature is important to Boal because he believes that "looking at the problem is at least as important as finding solutions. Looking at the problem is in itself therapeutic, it is a step toward doing something about it" (p. xx). For Boal (1995), "the debate does not come at the end -- the forum is the show," thus this kind of theatre is "not didactic, in the old sense of the word and style, but pedagogic, in the sense of a collective learning" (p. 7). This pedagogic framework is a basic tenet of CD. If, indeed, participants feel better for having looked at problems, and for having developed greater sensitivity to coercive rhetoric, then CD is providing a valuable public service.

Boal (1995) builds a bridge between performance and rhetorical criticism when he explains that theatre is built on symbolic language. "Theatre," according to Boal, "is the first human discovery and also the invention which paves the way for all other inventions and discoveries. Theatre is born when the human being discovers that it can observe itself; when it discovers that, in this act of seeing, it can see itself — see itself *in situ*; see itself seeing." When this occurs, "A triad comes into being. The observing-I, the I-*in-situ*, and the not-I, that is, the other" (p. 13). Boal claims that this tri-dimensional capacity is unique to human beings. Because the human "places itself inside and outside

its situation, actually there, potentially here, it needs to symbolise that distance which separates space and divides time, the distance from ‘I am’ to ‘I can be,’ and from present to future; it needs to symbolise this potential, to create symbols which occupy the space of *what is, but does not exist* concretely, of what is possible and could one day exist. So it creates symbolic language: painting, music, words.” Thus “the being becomes human when it invents theatre” (p. 14).

As an actual practice, Boal (1995) also reminds us that theatre “has nothing to do with buildings or other physical constructions. Theatre -- or theatricality -- is this capacity, this human property which allows man to observe himself in action, in activity” (p. 14). This capacity is characteristic of CD, which is not tied to a specific setting.

One similar practice, the Socrates Café, perhaps demonstrates that there is both a need and audience for programs like CD. Socrates Café is a concept developed by Christopher Phillips. LaFave (2004) notes that Phillips “cultivates philosophical discussion groups called ‘Socrates Cafés’ around the globe. Their purpose is to bring together varied viewpoints in dialogue; to address what sometimes seem like insurmountable differences through reasoning” (p. 1). Socrates Café is an event, not a place. It may occur in a coffeehouse or library but it is not *tied* to that space. Socrates Café is an organized, particular frame for philosophical dialogue. In the guidelines he provides for aspiring Socrates Cafés leaders, Phillips indicates that the events are to be “held in public places, anybody is welcome to participate” (LaFave, 2004, p. 1). Socrates’ Café’s call for extemporaneous speech and citizen participation in a variety of spaces is keenly in line with the goals we articulate for CD.

Civil Dialogue is designed to encourage speech

Given the popularity of the Internet, one might be tempted to develop CD as an electronic dialogue. However, in order for the public to participate in dialogue in an articulate manner, Ong (2000) reminds us that verbalizing is necessary because “thought is nested in speech” (p. 138). “In all human cultures,” Ong explains, “the spoken word appears as the closest sensory equivalent of fully developed interior thought” (2000, p. 138). Further, Ong argues that true communication requires the “public presence” of one person with another. When we contact one another via electronic means, Ong posits, we are not communicating in the purest sense because electronic mediums create an “artificial oral-aural public presence” (2000, p. 15). In short, the format of CD supports the idea that face-to-face is better than Facebook or other forms of computer mediated communication.

Portelli (1994) argues that orality is “the primary phenomenon of human life” but has been displaced by the act of writing. In his view, however, writing doesn’t have to replace or abolish orality: “The advantage of our literate (and electronic) cultures over exclusively oral ones does not lie in the fact that we possess better tools of communication but that we possess more of them, alongside one another” (p. 5). The human voice, Portelli (1994) argues, is “materially accessible to all,” while an individual’s use of other technologies can be restricted. “With the advent of writing, we no longer relate to others in terms of concrete, direct, mutual understanding but increasingly depend on mediated, written reconstructions” (p. 6).

The next phase of mediation came in the form of radio broadcasting, transforming the masses from active oral creatures to passive listeners, and poor ones at that. Radio, he observes, is primarily used as background (Portelli, 1994, p. 4). This

passivity closely parallels the way citizens have become spectators in the democratic process. Chanan (1995) acknowledges that there has been progress in terms of true democracy, such as the gain of broader voting rights, but he points out that there has been little progress in terms of deliberation. In fact, he describes what we understand to be political deliberation as nothing more than “*virtual* deliberation,” meaning that it isn’t the real thing (emphasis added, p. 120). Hague and Loader (1999) agree, claiming that “citizens watch and listen to the elite thinking aloud on behalf of the public” (p. 196).

If Ong is correct, that clarity of thought is linked to speaking words, and if Hague and Loader are correct, that we are no longer thinking aloud for ourselves, then we need to find ways to reverse the trend and restore a balance between speaking and listening. We listen to speech blasting from our car radios, we listen to speech in movie theatres and on television, but as a society we are not engaged in meaningful response to what we hear, thus we are not gaining the maximum benefit of our oral nature. In the midst of elections and hot topics, as we are inundated with highly coercive oratory, we would be wise to take time to reflect upon this rhetoric in the manner that Ong suggests gets us closest to clarity of thought: by speaking our minds.

Who better to lead an oral revival than the rhetoricians who already revere the spoken word and the practice of speaking? Perhaps it is indeed time, as Crowley (1992) says, to “accept our professional responsibility to the communities in which we live” (p. 464). If we do not help our communities engage in the issues of our time, we may render rhetorical practice moot. Indeed, the call to “facilitate civil and secure communities” is a specific goal of the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University (2010, p.1).

Knowing that speech is beneficial, and knowing that civilians are speech-deprived when it comes to the current nature of public political discourse, and given the call to serve the public, how can we *not* reach out?

The need for Civil Dialogue

Much of what passes for dialogue today is inflammatory, sensationalized, and at the very least counterproductive, if not dangerous, witness South Carolina Representative Joe Wilson's 2010 attack on Barack Obama, "You lie," during a Presidential address to congress. Television programs like the "The McLaughlin Group" and "Hardball" are staged like the Shootout at the OK Corral, with pundits and politicians taking verbal shots at each other, interrupting each other and behaving rudely to one another. The wordslinging is apparently good for ratings and revenue, but it has created an atmosphere in which reasoned dialogue with respect for all views is practically nonexistent. The *Christian Science Monitor* in their series "Talking With the Enemy" (2004) emphasized not only the depth of the divide over the 2004 election, but the need to keep talking. As Tannen (2004) noted, people are reluctant to talk because they do not want to have "unseemly arguments." The real problem, she comments, is not knowing how to dialogue across difference. Instead of dialogue, a ritualized opposition or knee-jerk reaction mirrors warlike formats. An issue is defined by featuring two extreme spokespeople, highlighting opposition, leaving out the middle ground and creating "the illusion of equivalence where there is none. Such extremism quashes legitimate dissent, creating an inherent sense of imbalance.

Perhaps this polarization was most keenly seen in the recent Tragedy in Tucson: the assassination attempt of Representative Gabrielle Giffords on January 12, 2011.

Before new reports could even confirm the conditions of the wounded, blogs and networks bantered accusations at one party or the other. Such blame games caused President Barack Obama (2011) to remark at the memorial, “[O]nly. . . a more civil and honest public discourse can help us face up to our challenges as a nation, in a way that would make them [the Tucson victims] proud.”

Fortunately, we still have a few models of decency. On the May 7, 2004 broadcast of “NOW” on PBS, Bill Moyers interviewed Paul Gigot of the Wall Street Journal. It was clear that the two men were polar opposites in their political views, but they treated each other civilly. They expressed opposing views (with Moyers’ view coming in the form of questions), yet not raising their voices, not getting emotional or seeking to “win” the argument at the cost of advancing the discussion. These two seasoned commentators, however, have the advantage of many years of practice at this sort of dialogue. Many people outside of broadcast journalism have the *potential* to participate in this type of meaningful and constructive dialogue, but they haven’t had an opportunity to practice. Thus, while Moyers and Gigot may not need a facilitator’s help to engage in civil dialogue, many of us do. The facilitator invites participation and builds an atmosphere of trust but not acquiescence. The facilitator compels us to make observations using our tri-dimensional capacity as the observing-I, the I-in-situ and the not-I, or the other. These qualities pave the way for the kind of vocational (as in “calling,” not “occupation”) participation that Boal (1995) reminds us belongs to the public, as both separate from and not to be suffocated by the smaller if more visible tribe of professional commentators. CD is designed to fill this need for vocational dialogue.

Much like the Theatre of the Oppressed, CD is not just a pastime, it is useful and, some would argue, essential to human progress. Paterson (2002) goes so far as to say that “dialogue with sounds, gestures and words was the central activity whereby pre-humans became humans,” and he reminds us of Boal’s view that when the dialogue becomes a monologue that is oppression in itself (p. 2). Yet, that form of oppression is the situation we find ourselves in, as we are assaulted on a daily basis with monologue. Rush Limbaugh, for example, a popular and influential radio talk show host with millions of followers, rarely engages in dialogue with others who disagree with his opinions. It is unlikely that any guest with an opposing view will ever appear on Limbaugh’s show, since early in his career he vilified such guests while they were speaking by playing satirical sound effects in the background. CD intends to counter the effects of monologue while renewing an interest in and resuscitating the practice of even-tempered dialogue.

Civil Dialogue and Community

Given the statewide, and even national, controversy over Arizona’s SB1070 regarding immigration, this topic became divisive for many Arizonans. On October 1, 2010, a Civil Dialogue event was hosted by Paradise Valley Community Church (PVCC) in Phoenix, Arizona. Pastor Frank Switzer was concerned about polarization in the congregation regarding illegal immigration and felt that CD would be a good way to explore the controversy. PVCC reached out to the public through its website and local media.

John Genette facilitated two rounds of CD focused on the following statements:

1. “I believe that illegal immigrants are hurting the Arizona economy.”

2. “Assume that the border has been sealed. A legal remedy should be put in place so that everyone here illegally is allowed to stay.”

As PVCC reported to its constituents, the dialogues were “passionate, thoughtful and respectful....People were not only able to share their thoughts and opinions on the topic of immigration from all sides, but they listened to one another effectively and were exposed to the breadth of responses to the issue.” PVCC received very positive feedback from the audience. 56 of the 130+ attendees completed a short survey, which asked them to evaluate the event. 77% of respondents gave the event a rating of helpful or very helpful. Many added anecdotal comments such as: “Good forum for discussion. Civil and productive.”

Because this was the largest audience ever to attend a CD event, the organizing team considered splitting the group so that more people would have a chance to participate. However, the offer to split up was not made until after the first round, and by that time the audience preferred to stay together. The decision to split a large group should be made at the start of the event, if at all. If the PVCC event is a guide, it may not be necessary. This audience was fully engaged as one group throughout the evening.

CD as a tool for critical pedagogy

Denzin (2003) calls for a “critical democratic imagination” and a path to hope that advocates “an ethical self-consciousness that is critical and reflexive.” (p. 264) The discipline of Communication offers student/citizens and public audiences an opportunity to work toward Denzin’s goal for this democratic imagination by offering research and pedagogy that enables us to engage in critical self-reflection. Those who teach, research and produce performance are in a unique position to explore this path and develop

avenues of hope for our students and those who audience our work. We are positioned to offer forms of performance that allow for critical discussion between performers, texts and audiences on a multitude of topics. If critical discussion leads to hope, the challenge becomes finding a way to engage productive and authentic critical discussion that bridges the (often large) gap between theory and praxis. How can we know what we think, do, and are if we do not engage in challenging dialogue with others?

Critical pedagogy has a long history of calling for dialogue and asking educators to address complex notions of critical consciousness, social transformation, and agency (Friere (2006), Giroux (2004), Boal (1995)). Additionally, notions of institutional power, materiality, and oppressive systems complicate the topic and call for practitioners to be mindful and cognizant of the work they put forth as “critical” and “pedagogical.”

Alexander (2006) reminds us that critical performative pedagogy provides the opportunity to view ourselves and others as a “barometer of truth or reality” (p. 256). This reminder that pedagogy and performance are inclusive of dialogue and generative reflections of truth serves as a call to all performance educators and practitioners to create productive sites of critical performative pedagogy.

Diamond (1996) writes about the intersection of performance and performativity and describes this as a place where we are given access to cultural meaning and critique. She names this a “dangerous negotiation” between notions of doing and interpreting and suggests that our understanding and use of ideas of performativity are best if grounded in the “materiality and historical density of performance” (p. 5). She argues that performance provides us access to inspiration (for love, hate, etc.) and that performativity in relationship with performance forces us to examine the ways that bodies are

represented and social relations are articulated. Diamond's ideas exist as a bordering of performance and performative and a site for productive discussion of practical performance work in conjunction with theories of performativity. It is through these lenses of critical performative pedagogy and the performance/performativity border that we articulate the use of CD as a useful tool of critical pedagogy and a way to enact a critical democratic imagination.

For three semesters (Fall 2007, Fall 2008, Fall 2009), CD was taught in a class called *Performance in Social Context* at Arizona State University. This course is part of the performance studies curriculum in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication and is presented to students as the "study of interactive performance for and with the community outside the university". In 2007, CD was taught as a form of public performance that had as its goal: "to promote understanding of political rhetoric, to ensure that questions are being asked, answers are being considered, and all views are respected reciprocally" (Linde qtd Genette, 2007). Having facilitated dialogues for public audiences in 2004, the goal was to re-frame and re-name the form as a performance method in a classroom context geared at accessing public discussion and bringing together community voices on challenging topics. In his discussion with students, facilitator John Genette called them "early practitioners" of the method who would/could participate in its eventual shape. Our hope was that students would be engaged in the method and see its potential as an interactive, performative technique that could be moved in to community spaces and used to formulate civility and conversation.

Students were asked to post a "provocative" statement to the course website that would evoke audience members (the class and invited guests) to "strongly agree" or

“strongly disagree”. Students were instructed to craft original statements or offer quotations from politicians, news media, or community sources. Having students generate the statements rather than providing them with statements was driven by a desire to engage them in topics that were of personal value to them. The intention was to de-center the authoritative voices of researcher and teacher and allow the class community to bring their anger, joy, hope and frustration to the dialogue. The call to “provoke” others to strongly agree or disagree utilized the language of the method and previewed an expectation that the class would be able to engage in dialogue, even if they did not agree with one another. Madison (2005) suggests that to be provocative allows for an unsettling of the taken-for-granted and can lead us to critical awareness. (p. 82) She articulates provocation as a way to generate memories that we may not otherwise recall. We wanted students to be open to the possibility of disagreement and to trigger their classmates to become invested in public conversation. Examples of topics posted to the site included racial profiling, prison reform, gay marriage, the death penalty, torture, animal testing, retirement funds, abortion, U.S. border policies, capitalism, and the Iraq war. Students mostly posted quotes taken from local, state, and national politicians. The statements that received the most votes were selected for the in-class dialogue.

The use of statements that were selected by majority vote by the class had an interesting effect on the dialogue. We noted a sense of excitement and commitment from the students as the chosen statements were revealed. As facilitators, our work was mostly to allow dialogue and audience participants ample time to voice their ideas and opinions. Students seemed comfortable challenging others’ ideas while asserting their own. The added influence of class cohesiveness allowed for productive civility. Students who

engaged in heated discussion in front of the class were able to return to the audience laughing and complimenting one another. One student remarked that her dialogue with another student continued into the hallway during break as they “spoke about the Bible because of the religious aspect dealing with gay marriage” (De Lugt, 2008).

Other examples of the use of CD as a pedagogical tool include a dialogue about patriotism in a political science class at Arizona State University. The dialogue was used as a tool to discuss course concepts pertaining to democratic theory and citizen participation. Additionally, civil dialogues have been used at Arizona State University in argumentation classes as well as at the University of Wisconsin and a graduate research module was taught during Fall 2010 at Arizona State University.

Civil Dialogue from the University to the Community

A good example of the way that CD reaches out to communities and offers a forum for balanced between speaking and listening is from 2004 when we were invited to facilitate a dialogue about definitions of the term “sacred” and its use in personal and academic settings. The dialogue was part of an ongoing debate at Arizona State University about the postponement of a controversial performance about one man’s experiences growing up Jewish, converting to Mormonism, and coming to terms with his identity as a gay man. An invited audience first watched, “X-Communication,” a twenty minute performance written and performed by the author/performer of the originally postponed performance. Immediately following this performance, a dialogue was conducted by John Genette. The audience was comprised of faculty, administrators, and students who had all taken sides on the controversial postponement. Since the majority of the conversations about the postponement had taken place through letters, media

channels, and private university meetings, this was the first time that a public discussion of the topic was presented. The dialogue brought together a collection of people who had a desire to *speak* and *listen* to one another. For those in attendance, the Civil Dialogue offered a formal setting to air differences of opinion, present differing worldviews, and listen to the perceptions and experiences of everyone affected by the issue. This understanding exemplifies the purpose of CD.

Conclusion

Talk show hosts and other public pundits have apprehended dialogue, and the time has come to awaken this dormant practice among the citizenry in an effort to promote clarity of thought, the ability to articulate those ideas, and the mutual understanding that results from such dialogue. Rather than participate as passive listeners to contrived “debates” by politicians, citizens should be engaged in true dialogue with each other. Using Ong, Boal and Watzlawick et al as guides, rhetoricians can facilitate this process by staging Civil Dialogues as an outlet for citizens and students to speak their minds (and thereby clarify what is *on* their minds). In addition to acknowledging polarizing viewpoints, where there are strong advocates for “strongly agree” and “strongly disagree,” we recognize that many of the citizenry are often in some middle ground, still formulating their own opinions and able to benefit from productive discussion on a polarizing issue. Recognizing that much of popular opinion on “hot topic” issues still takes a “middle” or independent turn, we acknowledge the importance of the middle stance; people who can see benefits and problems with both sides of an issue, and who often mirror the “undecided” voter in elections. Through such Civil Dialogues participants are not expected to arrive at definitive answers rather, we seek

insight by exploring the questions and creating a welcoming and safe atmosphere where people who disagree can safely share their opinions without fear of demonization.

Civil Dialogue has its foundation firmly built in both theories of performance and rhetorical criticism. It is distinct in that it calls for oral participation and active listening skills on the part of non-experts and engages audiences as participants in dialogue. Civil Dialogue encourages speech to foster a well informed community and to counteract the divisive stances often captured by the media that result in polarizing rhetoric. Through such dialogues, our attempt is to help all citizens better define and understand the wide spectrum of positions on civic issues which confront us on a daily basis.

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