



Dialogue lets voices be heard. With a commitment to candour, curiosity, and release of certainty, dialogue can help solve some of the complex problems we face. **BY DR. JOANNA ASHWORTH**

## Making Space for Dialogue

DIALOGUE HAS THE POTENTIAL TO CREATE community through purposeful talk among equals. It is distinct from debate and negotiation in that it is not intended to reach agreement, win points, or look for flaws in the other's argument, but to examine and challenge assumptions and reach new understandings.

Creating a space for dialogue—physically, intellectually and emotionally—has a number of difficulties. In many communities of interest, voices are often left out of important public dialogue and feel silenced or ignored because they are not free to set their own agenda or to have meaningful involvement in defining a problem. These people feel that they do not have a voice. Within the context of our “meeting culture,” driven by time constraints, rigid agendas, and a desire for efficiency, dialogue may seem anachronistic. Simply put, dialogue takes time. And attending to how we plan dialogue and meaningfully include individuals who are not often involved in public deliberation also takes time.

Through my work as the Director of Dialogue Programs at Simon Fraser University I have convened many dialogues on a variety of pressing public issues. These include immigration, rural urban interdependence, community drug prevention strategies in Vancouver, creative conflict

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management in health care, and ‘What is an educated Canadian?’ among others. Currently, I am leading a project called Imagine BC that is encouraging as many British Columbians as possible to deliberate on the future of our province. I am also very committed to creating a culture of dialogue through the “Dialogue Makers” programs and dialogues we offer at SFU’s Vancouver campus. Our “Dialogue Maker’s Network” invites individuals to meet regularly to

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explore the potential of dialogue in their work and other parts of their lives.

One of the consistent problems in creating dialogue is *framing the problem*. Framing itself involves discussion and negotiation among key participants, sponsors, or partners of the dialogue. The purpose and core questions of the issue need to be resolved, not simply pronounced by the planner. Defining the problem or

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issue to be examined or locating the genuine questions around which a dialogue event or process is planned calls for inquiry and careful listening. Involving stakeholders early on in this process means that the quality of the dialogue is enhanced and more accurately reflects the diversity of perspectives held on the subject.

There is always some tension in *agenda setting* between not wanting to over-specify or under-specify the items on the agenda. If you arrive at the dialogue’s purpose, set it out clearly and define the core questions you want to explore, a flexible agenda helps to structure the process. However, dialogue facilitators need to be responsive to emerging questions and directions. It doesn’t work to hold on too tightly to the agenda.

Participants in dialogue require a certain *set of*

*predispositions* such as a commitment to candour, curiosity, and a willingness to relinquish certainty. These are qualities that can be enhanced by learning to listen, demonstrating empathy, and being alert to hidden assumptions. Holding back, pushing a pet preoccupation, or rushing to action also makes dialogue difficult.

Dialogue convenors are responsible for creating a welcoming space for dialogue. As Morris J.

Wosk Centre for Dialogue Fellow, Glenn Sigurdson suggests, “Dialogue meets one of the fundamental needs for taking control of your life and your own agenda.” To create a space for many voices in dialogue means respecting the particular traditions and ways

that people prefer to interact. Creating a sense of safety and belonging in a dialogue starts with a conversation about what this means for those who would participate.

We know that successful dialogue processes, whether long or short, most often create new and respectful relationships among the participants. We can also be clear about the purpose of dialogue in a particular context. But can we really be certain about the “outcomes” in terms of specific deliverables? New, surprising, and worthwhile insights gained from dialogue experiences cannot be guaranteed. Rather than over-specify outcomes, we pay close attention to clarifying the purpose and process of the dialogue itself.

Creating a space for dialogue often involves spending adequate time orienting the experts

who join the dialogue to inform our thinking. We ask many subject matter experts who contribute to our dialogues to think about their contributions as a starting point for the dialogue, and to be open to other perspectives and other ways of knowing. Not all experts are skilled in encouraging or facilitating dialogue.

Whenever I am asked about the value of dialogue to individuals, organizations, or government, I suggest that most of the problems we face in our society are so complex that no matter how well-trained or educated we are, thinking alone is inadequate. Most often our knowledge is limited. We need the benefit of many viewpoints to fully understand the scope of complex prob-

lems. We need to involve those who have not traditionally been a part of our public deliberations to contribute in ways that are meaningful to them. As the political philosopher Hannah Arendt said so well: "For excellence, the presence of others is required." Much remains to be learned about how to invite the other and make them welcome. ■

#### **DIALOGUE ON ACCESSIBILITY**

SPARC BC, in collaboration with the SFU Centre for Dialogue, BCACL, and VanCity, will be holding a **Dialogue on Accessibility** on **April 27, 2005**.

For information about the dialogue and how you can participate, contact Emese Szücs at [emeses@sparc.bc.ca](mailto:emeses@sparc.bc.ca).

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