

Dialogue for Social Justice

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Social Justice is generally used to describe the goal of full and equal participation—particularly political and economic participation—of all individuals and groups in a society. It is, therefore, about inclusive communities of difference, which is what public schools aspire to be, and what the uniquely Canadian ideal of multiculturalism intends.

Most educators would, I believe, consider social justice to be a worthy goal, although some might also consider it to be impossibly utopian, and everyone is challenged to know how to achieve it—whether on the playground, in the staffroom or in the community. Unfortunately, I don't have the answer to that problem, but I would more modestly suggest that if we were able to increase the frequency and quality of dialogue in schools and communities that social justice would be significantly enhanced.

Dialogue, as originally conceived by David Bohm, is not just a better form of conversation. He intended it to be a qualitatively different form of relationship and an antidote to the tendency of Western thought processes to perceive our holistic world in a fragmented way through the reductionist analytic logic of modern science.

Dialogue comes from the Greek word *dialogos*. Logos means “the word,” or in our case we think of the “meaning of the word.” And dia means “through” - it doesn't mean two ... The picture or image that this derivation suggests is of a *stream of meaning* flowing among and through us and between us. This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which will emerge some new understanding. (Bohm, 1996, 6)

Bohm's aim was not to eliminate differences but to bring them into constructive engagement and thus to create new meanings that bridge the original differences without denying or eliminating them. William Isaacs (1999) describes dialogue similarly.

Dialogue, as I define it, is *a conversation with a center, not sides*. It is a way of taking the energy of our differences and channeling it toward something that has never been created before. It lifts us out of polarization and into a greater common sense, and is thereby a means for accessing the intelligence and coordinated power of people and groups ... The aim of negotiation is to reach agreement among parties who differ. The intention of dialogue is to reach new understanding and, in doing so, to form a totally new basis from which to think and act. In dialogue, one not only solves problems, one dissolves them. (p. 19)

Viewed in this way, dialogue is a means towards creating common ground that builds inclusive communities without homogenizing the diversity that is the source of their creative adaptability. Individuals need not deny their uniqueness to belong to a pluralistic community based on dialogue, and a pluralistic democracy does not require uniform agreement in order to achieve “peace, order and good government.”

So, how might we work towards such an ideal in our schools and in our personal lives? In *The magic of dialogue*, Daniel Yankelovich (1999) begins by considering the distinction between dialogue and its more commonly practiced cousin—debate.

Debate	Dialogue
adapted from <i>The Magic of Dialogue</i> by Daniel Yankelovich	
Assuming that there is one “true” and complete way of looking at things that must be discovered through the rational contest of ideas	Assuming that there are many valid, if partial, views and that together a group can develop a better, although still imperfect, view than any one alone
Combative: Participants attempt to find “the truth” by searching for flaws in the arguments of others	Collaborative: Participants work together toward a common understanding by trying to appreciate new perspectives
About winning your point	About exploring common ground
Listening to find flaws and develop counter arguments	Listening to understand, find meaning and agreement
Defending assumptions as truth	Revealing assumptions for reevaluation
Critiquing others’ positions	Reexamining all positions
Defending one’s own views against those of others	Admitting that others’ thinking can improve one’s own
Making decisions by bringing debate to an end through voting	Making decisions by consensus while keeping questions open for further consideration in the future

Now debate has its place, such as a court of law or an academic journal, but because it is based on conflict and the assumption that truth is revealed through rigorous examination of competing views debate has little potential for creating new insights. It also tends to induce strain in the relationship between the participants unless they are able to steadfastly distinguish between the ideas, which are in dispute, and their proponents, who are not—which it is unfortunately easy to forget. Dialogue, on the other hand, is a more accepting process that values synthesis over analysis and presumes that ‘many heads are better than one.’ Alexander Sidorkin (1999) states this belief as follows.

Truth fundamentally cannot be contained within a single consciousness ... Truth reveals when one can hear and comprehend both or all voices simultaneously, and more than that, when one’s own voice joins in and creates something similar to a musical chord. (p. 29)

Yankelovich suggests that such a human synergy of truths requires at least three actions.

- Eliminate coercive influences
- Listen with empathy
- Bring assumptions into the open

This, of course, is much easier said than done. The proverbial ‘level playing field’ is surprisingly hard to create, especially if we insist that it exist in the perception of all participants, empathic listening is a rare skill and our assumptions are often held subconsciously, in many cases masquerading as self-evident truths or ‘common sense.’ Isaacs goes so far as to suggest four common “pathologies” that tend to constrain our discourse and incline it towards debate.

- Abstraction: As we try to understand the world we identify patterns, which give rise to terms and concepts that we use to unravel our experience. These labels then become reified and fragment the holistic reality they were intended to describe.
- Idolatry: The reified labels we create become an intellectual prison that conditions and limits our perception to that which we already expect.
- Certainty: Once we get used to things happening in a certain way the patterns become part of our experiential intelligence, our expertise. We then cease to question and become invested in that which we have already mastered.
- Violence: We actively try to impose our viewpoint and our expectations on others and on our own experience, not physically perhaps but none the less forcefully.

Thus, dialogue requires not only an hospitable environment—the proverbial round table—but also significant personal skills in the participants. That is why it is so rare. If we were bent on creating an ideal state of enlightened dialogue at all times this realization would be quite discouraging, but that is just as unnecessary as it is unrealistic. Dialogue is not the best form of discourse for all things. A good debate now and then can be very enlightening and is generally a better method of decision-making than dialogue. However, both debate and decision-making—not to mention human relationships—are enhanced when set against a background that more often includes the gentle but powerful art of dialogue, and as our mutual understanding and regard grow through our emergent attempts at dialogue our community becomes more inclusive and social justice improves as a natural consequence.

Let us, therefore, resolve to more often and more intentionally level the conversational playing field, listen empathically to others and look inside ourselves to better understand the assumptions that circumscribe our imperfect personal perspective on things. Who knows what we will learn or where it will lead us?

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Sidorkin, A. (1999). *Beyond discourse: education, the self and dialogue*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

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