A Dialogue About Dialogue

Nicholas C. Burbules
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

I am a big fan of Rachel Wahl's work on dialogue, especially her method of grounding her analyses in studies of actually occurring dialogues, including difficult dialogues in contexts of conflict and mistrust. This grounding is frequently lacking in other theoretical studies of dialogue (including my own). I want to engage Wahl's discussion of dialogue in a dialogue, I want to question some of the distinctions and dichotomies in the discussion, and I want to try to complicate the picture a bit.

Many theories of dialogue, and related communicative ideas, rest upon a dyadic distinction. Plato distinguished friendly from disputatious dialogue.[1] Jürgen Habermas distinguished communication aimed toward understanding and consensus from what he called strategic communication.[2] Iris Young distinguished deliberative dialogue from activist speech.[3] And, in Wahl's essay, we encounter Chantal Mouffe's distinction of democratic and agonistic communication. While these are not all the same distinction, they share the similarity that the first in each case is more engaged and consensual and the latter more adversarial and instrumental. Wahl's essay explores the choices groups make in deciding which approach is to be preferred in "contact" spaces.

I prefer a less either/or approach. I have argued that there are at least four different types of dialogue: (1) instruction: dialogue concerned with teaching and learning (think *Meno*); (2) conversation: dialogue concerned with interpersonal understanding and making a connection (think *My Dinner With Andre*); (3) inquiry: dialogue concerned with problem-solving, deliberation, and working together toward some shared answer (a wonderful example is Imre Lakatos's *Proofs and Refutations*, in which a group works through a mathematical problem);[4] and (4) debate: dialogue that is about competing positions contesting with one another (think of the climactic courtroom scene in *A Few Good Men*).[5] I recount this model because, first, it supports a broader array of communicative options, not just two; but even more importantly because any

ongoing dialogue, I argue, often goes through different phases over time — it need not be all one thing or another. Sometimes problem solving gets derailed over personal conflicts, and there needs to be a conversation; sometimes an instructional dialogue becomes a debate, and then becomes a process of joint problem-solving. And so on.

My point here is that the choice between more adversarial and politically strategic communicative engagements, and more respectful and deliberative ones, is not totalistic or either/or; depending on context and situation, the first can be a necessary step for getting to the latter. Moreover, sometimes that journey goes through what might seem to be ancillary communicative channels — there aren't only two options.

Especially when we are dealing with situations framed by an atmosphere of conflict, mutual misunderstanding, and mistrust, the process of communication has to be, in part, a process of fostering the conditions of possibility under which other kinds of communication become possible. Wahl is absolutely right, I think, that this is not *only* a process of communication: real actions outside the communicative sphere are often needed in order to help foster these conditions. Dialogue is not always self-correcting, and the path toward learning from, with, and about one another depends on things, like trust, that cannot always be achieved only through communication.

Wahl's discussion of learning and trust is subtle and nuanced. Let me add a little more if I can. Learning in the context of dialogue can be both a means and an end. It can be a means when learning more about your interlocutor helps create the conditions in which other kinds of dialogue, such as deliberation or inquiry, become more possible. It can also be an end in the sense that learning about and better understanding others is itself a worthy outcome of a dialogue. It can entail greater empathy, tolerance, and respect.

But I want to emphasize how reciprocal the process of learning often is. I agree that in situations of unequal power, the obligation to try to learn about the other is not entirely symmetrical. As many have pointed out, disadvantaged groups are often much better informed and more insightful about those who

DOI: 10.47925/78.3.048

have advantage over them (they have to be; it is a survival mechanism). Without question, one of the things that those with more power need to do in these encounters is to shut up and listen. Learning requires a recognition of what you do not know, and a desire to remedy that. Having said that, I think that in actual situations of talking and learning, *over time*, my learning more about you entails your learning more about me. Learning isn't only listening: it is asking questions, it is drawing comparisons and parallels, it is exploring keywords and vocabularies that create the shared conditions in which understanding is possible.

Similarly, trust in dialogues is both a means and an end. It is a condition that allows certain kinds of openness and honesty to take place; and it is also worthwhile as an outcome in itself — especially in the kinds of fraught situations Wahl describes. And here too there are asymmetries shaped by power and history and context. There are risks entailed by trust, and those risks cannot (and should not) be borne by all parties equally. Yet for all that, here too I would want to emphasize the degree to which the actual process of building trust in a dialogue requires some element of reciprocity. Giving trust and receiving trust have a complex interdependence. It is appropriate to ask questions about who needs to make the first move — and who can afford to. And it is absolutely true, as Wahl says, that sometimes building trust depends on extra-communicative actions that may involve concrete concessions by those in power or other changes that demonstrate some degree of good will. Wahl, drawing on Danielle Allen, calls these "sacrifices."

I do wonder about that word. Are these sacrifices? Or gifts? Or peace offerings? Or the first move in some kind of transactional exchange? What we call them influences how they are perceived. The idea, it seems, is the importance of *giving something up* — something which may in fact be very difficult or unpleasant to given up. The fact that it might be hard to do is part of what makes the gesture the basis of building trust. At the same time, thinking of it as a *sacrifice* frames the choice to do it in a very particular way — which might make it unnecessarily harder for others to do it. I would not want to overcorrect for asymmetries in one direction by creating new ones in the other direction.

Finally, I would want to emphasize the ways in which these two processes — learning about others in a particular way and building trust — are themselves subtly interrelated, in ways that reinforce the dynamic in which these processes need to involve some degree of reciprocity. The more you learn about me, the more I trust you. The more you trust me, the more you share with me so that I can learn about you. The more I learn about you, the more I am able to trust you. And so on.

Part of why this is so is that trust is not just an affective state or feeling; it is also an epistemic attitude, one in which I have some degree of confidence that what you tell me is true. And when I trust you, I am also more willing to tell you what is true. As a result, learning from, with, and about one another depends on trust in both directions in order that things can be said, and heard, and believed, that make meaningful learning possible. This also helps us understand why more conflictive speech, even argument or debate, is not necessarily corrosive of trust — as it might initially seem to be. Worked through, these more agonistic encounters can even strengthen trust, because they do often entail expressing (and hearing) difficult truths.

In closing, let me return to the point that provisionally setting aside certain kinds of power and privilege is one of those extra-communicative actions that make all of this more likely to happen; and that, of course, this is something that only people in positions of power and privilege have the luxury of doing. Wahl's perceptive analysis of who *can*, who *should*, and who is *willing* to learn goes to the heart of this. In all sorts of real, conflicted situations, somebody has to make the first move — whether we call that a "sacrifice" or something else. But one of the points I am trying to emphasize here is that the potential benefits of doing so run in both directions; it isn't just a sacrifice or concession. It is, from a different standpoint, an opportunity.

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1 Plato, *Meno* 75d, retrieved from http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0178%3Atext%3DMeno%3Asection%3D75d.

DOI: 10.47925/78.3.048

2 Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume I: Reason and the Rationalization of Society* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1984), 86.

3 Iris Marion Young, "Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy," *Political Theory* 29, no. 5 (2001): 670-690.

4 Imre Lakatos, *Proofs and Refutations* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

5 Nicholas C. Burbules, *Dialogue in Teaching: Theory and Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), Chapter 6: Four Types of Dialogue.