

## DIALOGUING ACROSS DIFFERENCES: THREE HIDDEN BARRIERS

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Elizabeth Ellsworth has provided an important critique of critical pedagogy that problematizes such popular liberal principles as rationality, democracy, dialogue, justice, equality, and empowerment. Ellsworth's point is that these liberal principles "are repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination."<sup>1</sup> She believes that

in schools, rational deliberation, reflection, and consideration of all viewpoints has become a vehicle for regulating conflict and the power to speak.... In a racist society and its institutions, such debate has not and cannot be 'public' or 'democratic' in the sense of including the views of all affected parties and affording them equal weight and legitimacy.<sup>2</sup>

She urges us to examine the "overwhelming evidence of the extent to which the myths of the ideal rational person and the 'universality' of propositions have been oppressive."<sup>3</sup> Ellsworth characterizes herself as a follower of "feminist poststructuralism," and seems to abide by poststructuralist and postmodernist admonitions against "totalizing discourses" and "modernist metanarratives" about life, truth, or rationality, and to be for their deconstruction.

In their paper titled "Dialogue Across Difference: Continuing the Conversation," Nicholas Burbules and Suzanne Rice characterize Ellsworth's position as "antimodern" rather than "postmodern." They acknowledge that liberal principles like rationality, democracy, and dialogue "have frequently masked practices that actually undermine them," but argue, we think accurately, that "it is very difficult to see what could follow, educationally, from their wholesale rejection."<sup>4</sup> Burbules and Rice argue that Ellsworth's and other antimodernist positions are "fundamentally inconsistent" and "unsustainable practically."<sup>5</sup> Their positive argument insists that "dialogue...offers paths both to establishing intersubjectivity and consensus, and to creating a degree of understanding across (unresolved) differences.... Dialogue can also serve the purpose of creating partial understandings, if not agreement, across difference."<sup>6</sup> We agree with these statements, and thought that Burbules and Rice had effectively dismissed most of Ellsworth's claims and concerns. But in the process of exploring the idea of dialogicality further, with reference to *listening* as one of what Burbules and Rice call "the communicative virtues," we identified, much to our surprise, three additional barriers to dialoguing across difference. We are not sure if these are Ellsworth's reasons for saying that "free" and "equal" democratic "dialogue" may not secure "justice" or be "empowering," but they are compatible with her position.

Liberal principles of rationality, democracy, and dialogue are intended to secure the rights of a speaker to have his or her say. However, liberal principles alone will not liberate or relieve oppression. There is no dialogue unless the Other *listens* well; nor, for that matter, is there democracy or rationality as Dewey, for instance, understood it. In *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey wrote: "Logic in its fulfillment recurs to the primitive sense of the word: dialogue. Ideas which are not communicated, shared, and reborn in expression are but soliloqui, and soliloqui is but broken and imperfect thought."<sup>7</sup> Rather than some transcendental, supra or supernatural metanarrative of logic, Dewey understood rationality *dialogically* as concrete and contextualized face-to-face conversation. When dialogue devolves into soliloquy the situation becomes irrational,

and in all likelihood the soliloquy expresses dogma and domination. Dewey's dialogical notion of rationality leads directly into his definition of the most rational form of social relations. In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey offered: "A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience."<sup>8</sup> Without dialogue across difference we get antidemocratic soliloquy. Unfortunately, much of what passes as democratic dialogue is soliloquy in disguise.

In this paper we will discuss how the "conduit metaphor" and the "conflict model" of discourse, along with the notion of "ventriloquation" affect dialogue by minimizing or interfering with listening. We will then suggest ways in which classrooms can become safer places for participation in dialogue.

### THE CONDUIT METAPHOR, THE CONFLICT MODEL OF DISCOURSE, AND DIALOGICALITY

Our overall impression of the literature on listening is that it has remarkably little to say about the problems of interpretation in communication. Empirical research on listening has, as Michael Purdy puts it, "insisted upon, and continues to insist upon, quantifiable constructs and variables."<sup>2</sup> Purdy further notes that the emphasis in the literature on listening almost exclusively "deals with speaking and expression rather than reception."<sup>10</sup> Finally, we note that models of listening are largely drawn from information processing. Purdy's and our concerns are captured by what Michael Reddy calls the "conduit metaphor" of communication. The overall idea, as James V. Wertsch puts it, is that "human communication can be conceptualized in terms of *transmission* of information."<sup>11</sup> Reddy outlines the conduit metaphor as consisting of four components: "1) language functions like a conduit, transforming thoughts bodily from one person to another; 2) in writing and speaking, people insert their thoughts or feelings in the words; 3) words accomplish the transfer by containing the thoughts or feelings and conveying them to others; and 4) in listening or reading, people extract the thoughts and feelings once again from the words."<sup>12</sup> For us, the metaphor recalls the old mind ("thoughts and feelings") versus body ("transferring thoughts bodily," "words") dualism. Wertsch schematizes the transmission model or conduit metaphor as follows:



He then notes a number of criticisms. Wertsch begins, "One of the most common critiques of the transmission model... concerns the unidirectionality of the arrows involved. Because they are unidirectional, the receiver is viewed as passive (note the very term *receiver*)."<sup>13</sup> Reddy himself writes, "to the extent that the conduit metaphor does see communication as requiring some slight expenditure of energy, it localizes this expenditure almost totally in the speaker or writer. The function of the reader or listener is trivialized."<sup>14</sup> Among other things, we think that the conduit metaphor maps relations of power between active speaker and passive listener. "Part of the problem," Purdy remarks, "may also be a Western Civilization predilection for control. Listening has not been perceived as influential, as helpful in managing and controlling.... In that culture, generally, we often command others to 'listen up'... as if we needed some external order to *force* us to listen or attend."<sup>15</sup> Western modernity's emphasis on the "rational" self-assertion of the autonomous individual who has the right to speak and be heard, ironically enough, devalues listening and listeners. We think that this irony is felt far more by the oppressed rather than the oppressors, by those from cultural traditions that place a greater value on listening, and, we suspect, by women more than men.

The liberal forum of democratic discourse is one wherein each *individual* has an equal opportunity to *speak* and be heard. The assumption is that through the confrontation of ideas and opinions, justice will be served. The conflict model is firmly ensconced in the system of justice in the United

States wherein we find juries, judges, prosecuting and defending lawyers that confront each other with their clients' cases. It is the irresistible power of the superior argument that *forces* agreement on the listener. The conflict model of discourse is preeminent in most professional meetings, including especially PES, where a paper presenter is normally expected to be confronted by a critic. Doubting rather than believing dominates talk of critical thinking, in spite of evidence that it is gender-biased and distorts the critical enterprise.<sup>16</sup> The *locus classicus* of freedom, justice and equality accomplished through conflict is Chapter II of John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*, entitled "Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion." There we find such statements as the following:

On any other subject no one's opinions deserve the name of knowledge, except so far as he has either had *forced* upon him by others, or gone through of himself, the same mental process which would have been required of him in carrying on an active controversy with opponents.<sup>17</sup>

Truth, in the great practical concerns of life, is so much a question of the reconciling and combining of opposites, that...it has to be made by the rough process of a struggle between combatants fighting under hostile banners.<sup>18</sup>

Not the violent conflict between parts of the truth, but the quiet suppression of half of it, is the formidable evil; there is always hope when people are *forced* to listen.<sup>19</sup>

For many people, if not most, confrontational dialogues are frequently disturbing and distorting. In a conflict of ideas and opinions the powerful will likely win out, even if, to borrow a phrase from the critical theorists, the so-called conversation is not "systematically distorted." Further, even if the conversation were not confrontational and systematically distorted, as it often is, the conduit model of communication could still forbid genuine democratic discourse and equality.

Wertsch comments on his schematism of the conduit metaphor that, "from a Bakhtinian perspective the schematization of the transmission model is problematic above all due to the inherently monologic assumptions that underlie it. These assumptions [are] reflected, among other places, in the schema's unidirectional arrows...."<sup>20</sup> From the perspective of Bakhtin's notion of the dialogical multivoicedness of meaning, the conduit model is monological. Much of what claims to be democratic, equal, and empowering dialogue, the right to speak and be heard, is actually a conduit metaphor monologue. Speaking in turns may reverse the unidirectional monological arrow, but unless the other, the so-called "receiver," actively listens, there is no real dialogue — only a series of soliloquies.

By the term *dialogicality* Bakhtin is suggesting that meaning-making is a shared social endeavor based on group life. A central question for Bakhtin is always "who is speaking?" Whenever an individual is speaking, he or she is speaking to somebody and, in a typical conversation, will be responding to something said earlier. What the individual says is not *free* from what others say and do in some specific situation as, for instance, the structuralists suggest. Bakhtin stated, "the simple utterance, with all its individuality and creativity, can in no way be regarded as a *completely free combination* of forms of language, as is supposed, for example, by Saussure...who juxtaposed the utterance...as a purely individual act, to the system of language as a phenomenon that is purely social and mandatory for the individuum."<sup>21</sup> We are never completely free from our relations to other persons, culture, history, and community. Something is lost in modern Western liberalism's obsession with the autonomous (mono)-logical man. In a response to Burbules and Rice, Mary Leach suggests that to understand their communicative virtues as "properties 'acquired,' 'possessed,' and 'practiced' by individuals, rather than as properties of the relations themselves, reinscribes the individualistic ontology characteristic of liberal humanist thought."<sup>22</sup> However, even if we acknowledge dialogical relationships, there is still a danger that remains from the fact that we are never dialogically free. Wertsch observes that, in Bakhtin's view, "a speaker always invokes a social language in producing an utterance, and this social language shapes what the speaker's individual voice can say."<sup>23</sup> Bakhtin terms this sort of dialogicality "ventriloquation," a notion Wertsch defines

as “the process whereby one voice speaks *through* another voice...in a social language.”<sup>24</sup> Bakhtin himself described the situation as follows:

The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language (it is not after all, out of a dictionary that the speaker gets his words!), but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s concrete contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word and make it one’s own.<sup>25</sup>

We cannot be free, nor in a certain sense even have a “self,” until we can appropriate words with which to tell our own story populated with characters chosen according to our intentions. Our story is not autonomous and detached; *our shared* story, like all stories, will be about our relations with others.

Surely language is not neutral or impersonal. It is comforting to know that we can never actually be disconnected or free from others. At the same time, it is frightening to confront the unfreedom of being forced to tell one story, to frame our own self-identity, entirely from the words taken from others, at least when those words are dictated to us.

Thus, even if we overcame the barriers of confrontation models and conduit metaphors of communication, democratic dialogue and equal opportunity to speak and be heard may still fail to be “empowering” or enabling if victims are ventriloquated, their words appropriated by hegemonic powers. Until the oppressed have their own vocabularies and are able to appropriate and ventriloquate the words of the powerful for their own purposes, they will always be at a dialogical disadvantage.

#### TOWARD OVERCOMING BARRIERS: MAKING THE CLASSROOM SAFER

Ellsworth argues that participation in rational, democratic dialogue is substantially more threatening and less rewarding for members of subcultures than for those affiliated with the more powerful dominant groups. We agree that this is the case. In a competitive situation where the legitimate knowledge, vocabularies, and modes of expression are predetermined, those who have been excluded from the making of the “rules” are at an immediate disadvantage. However, with Burbules and Rice, we do not believe that withdrawing from the dialogue is a constructive solution for anybody. Reflecting on her attempts to apply the principles of critical pedagogy in a classroom setting, Ellsworth states that “a preferable goal seemed to be to become capable of a sustained encounter with currently oppressive formations that refuse to be theorized away or fully transcended in a utopian resolution.”<sup>26</sup> At most, it seems that such rejection of dialogue could lead to changes in *who* has power, but not changes in structures that allow domination of one group over others. As an alternative, we propose continuing the effort to make the classroom a safer place, acknowledging that this is an ongoing project which involves risk for all.

First, persons cannot be forced to dialogue. Second, and somewhat paradoxically, if they do agree to dialogue they are not committed to agree on the truth-functional content of the dialogue, but morally they should be committed to seeking understanding. Otherwise, the dialogue is inherently deceptive and insincere; its object can only be conflict and not cooperation. The conflict model of discourse dominates in conversations in which participants are committed to asserting or discovering *the* Truth upon which everybody must agree. In such a situation, a person may be forced to deny the validity of another’s experience or belief if it does not match her own, or risk abandoning her own point of view.

Further, the conduit metaphor must be exposed and challenged. One manifestation of it in the classroom is in the assumption that experiences can be transferred from one person to another via language, leading people to expect to be able to know each other and to be known by others. When

such connections fail to form, as they necessarily will, people feel misunderstood and unappreciated. On the other hand, recognizing that words are not conduits for ideas and information can help us replace the notion of individual self-discovery with that of dialogical self-creation, wherein we help *make* each other by appropriating what we need from the words of others.

Ellsworth identifies several reasons why, for many students, her classroom was not a safe place:

These included fear of being misunderstood and/or disclosing too much and becoming too vulnerable; memories of bad experiences in other contexts of speaking out; resentment that other oppressions (sexism, heterosexism, fat oppression, classism, anti-Semitism) were being marginalized in the name of addressing racism — and guilt for feeling such resentment; confusion about levels of trust and commitment surrounding those who were allies to another group's struggles; resentment by some students of color for feeling that they were expected to disclose “more” and once again take the burden of doing the pedagogic work of educating White students/professor about the consequences of White middle-class privilege; and resentment by White students for feeling that they had to prove they were not the enemy.<sup>27</sup>

From these observations, Ellsworth concludes that “dialogue in its conventional sense is impossible in the culture at large because at this historical moment, power relations between raced, classed, and gendered students and teachers are unjust.”<sup>28</sup> Even though we have tried to identify at least three things that are oppressive about “dialogue in its conventional sense,” we feel that in making such a statement Ellsworth underestimates at least one solution that developed out of her course — namely, the formation of affinity groups among her students.

Ellsworth explains that “informal, overlapping affinity groups formed and met unofficially for the purpose of articulating and refining positions based on shared oppressions, ideological analyses, or interests. They shared grievances about the dynamics of the larger group and performed reality checks for each other.”<sup>29</sup> In their article, Burbules and Rice also discuss such subgroups, which they refer to as “alliance groups,” calling attention to an empirical study that documents their “partial and provisional” success.<sup>30</sup> Wisely, though, they warn us that such subgroups “may actually impede [dialogue] by promoting greater separatism.”<sup>31</sup> Heeding their warning, and proceeding with caution, we would like to consider a number of ways in which affinity groups can serve to enhance free, democratic dialogue.

In any true dialogue, involving both listening and self-disclosure, there is an element of risk for all participants, as beliefs are challenged and alternate interpretations of self and others are asserted. Clearly, this can often be an opportunity for growth and positive change. On the other hand, it can lead to the sacrifice of difference. But since it is the experience of “sameness” with some people that leads us to perceive differences between ourselves and others, it follows that aspects of identity can be preserved through affiliation with groups.

The purpose of affinity groups, then, is to provide support by validating each others' experiences. For example, one of the authors is currently involved with a women's group which serves such a purpose. Although the participants vary widely in terms of age, religious belief, occupation, educational background, ethnicity, political affiliation, and so on, our common experience as women allows us to dialogue across our other differences. Each participant knows that her identity as a woman will not be threatened in any way within the group, and this safety makes it easier to risk other aspects of identity. The reinforcement we give and get from each other helps in confrontations in other situations where we do experience disadvantage on the basis of our gender. In addition, because each of us has experienced some degree of gender discrimination, we tend to be more sensitive to each other in terms of other differences, able to communicate, sympathize, and offer support even when our understanding is not based on mutual experience. Interestingly, participation in this affinity group, at least, has not led to separatism or withdrawal from the larger culture; in fact the opposite is true, in that for the most part each of us tends to feel more confident in dealing with other situations knowing that support is always available.



In the classroom, affinity groups can be fostered by allowing and encouraging students to get to know each other and gather informally outside of class. Since it cannot be determined beforehand which differences and “samenesses” will be important to students, such groups should not be prescribed or assigned. There are a number of practical things, though, that teachers can try. Teachers can, for instance, relate anecdotes which introduce the idea of affinity groups and their potential benefits; they can meet with small groups of students in and out of the classroom to discuss topics of special interest; they can explicitly acknowledge the non-neutrality of all discourses. And they can strive to remove the three hidden barriers to unconventional “free” democratic dialogue. Still, in the end, there is nothing a teacher or anyone else can do to assure that a classroom or any other social setting is an absolutely safe place.

We realize that all of our suggestions assume the participants’ commitment to “unconventional,” freeing, democratic dialogue in which all voices not only may speak, but are listened to. Obviously, this condition can never be guaranteed; indeed, even those of us who *are* committed may unknowingly silence others through habitual conversational styles, uninformed assumptions, and unexamined beliefs. Burbules and Rice offer a number of “communicative virtues” which can be helpful in sustaining dialogue:

These virtues include tolerance, patience, respect for differences, a willingness to listen, the inclination to admit that one may be mistaken, the ability to reinterpret or translate one’s own concerns in a way that makes them comprehensible to others, the self-imposition of restraint in order that others may “have a turn” to speak, and the disposition to express one’s self honestly and sincerely.<sup>32</sup>

While these virtues can be reinforced in schools and other situations, they obviously cannot be externally imposed. In a sense, then, it is left to each of us to accept the need to listen better, promoting democratic dialogue across difference. We feel that a dialogical approach to listening can help us see why persons cannot be made to listen, but can, perhaps, be shown why they, morally, *ought* to listen.

The theoretical insights and practical suggestions for something we call “dialogical listening” takes us into the paper we had hoped to write. Instead we would like to conclude with the two alternatives that would have concluded our as yet unwritten paper. First, you cannot *force* anyone to listen any better than you can force anyone to learn. The fear of force is a motivation, but it cannot make people learn exactly what you want them to learn or hear exactly what you want them to hear. Most often, the oppressed learn the dialectical opposite of that forced upon them by the oppressor. Second, there is a moral reason for why we should want to listen well. Carol Gilligan ends a chapter from her book *In a Different Voice* entitled “Images of Relationships” by writing: “These disparate visions in their tension reflect the paradoxical truths of human experience — that we know ourselves as separate only insofar as we live in connection with others, and that we experience relationships only insofar as we differentiate other from self.”<sup>33</sup> Gilligan is right; there is a moral reason to listen to different dialogical voices. Not only do we come to know ourselves as different in dialogical relations, but, as we said earlier, it is how we create ourselves. It is also in such dialogical relations that we learn that we create the other person. In writing this paper, our hope has been to identify barriers whose elimination would help open up a creative public space in which to continue the dialogue.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Ellsworth, “Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy,” *Harvard Educational Review* 59 (1989): 298.

<sup>2</sup> Ellsworth, 301-02.

<sup>3</sup> Ellsworth, 304.

- <sup>4</sup> Nicholas C. Burbules and Suzanne Rice, "Dialogue Across Differences: Continuing the Conversation," *Harvard Educational Review* 61 (1991): 398.
- <sup>5</sup> Burbules and Rice, 402.
- <sup>6</sup> Burbules and Rice, 409.
- <sup>7</sup> John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1954), 218.
- <sup>8</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 87.
- <sup>9</sup> Michael Purdy, "Contributions of Philosophical *Hermeneutics* to *Listening* Research" (Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International *Listening* Association, San Diego, March 13, 1986), 1.
- <sup>10</sup> Purdy, 2.
- <sup>11</sup> James V. Wertsch, *Voices of the Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 71.
- <sup>12</sup> Michael J. Reddy, "The Conduit Metaphor: A Case of Frame Conflict in Our Language about Language," in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. A. Ortony (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 290.
- <sup>13</sup> Wertsch, 72.
- <sup>14</sup> Reddy, 308.
- <sup>15</sup> Purdy, "Contributions of Philosophical *Hermeneutics* to *Listening*," 2, italics added.
- <sup>16</sup> See Peter Elbow, *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 266. See also Mary F. Belenky, Blythe M. Clinchy, Nancy R. Goldberger and Jill M. Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 113. Belenky et. al. refer explicitly to Elbow.
- <sup>17</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (1859; reprint, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1975), 44, italics added.
- <sup>18</sup> Mill, 48.
- <sup>19</sup> Mill, 50, italics added.
- <sup>20</sup> Wertsch, 73.
- <sup>21</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. V. W. McGee, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 81.
- <sup>22</sup> Mary Leach, "Can We Talk? A Response to Burbules and Rice," *Harvard Educational Review* 62 (1992): 260.
- <sup>23</sup> Wertsch, 59.
- <sup>24</sup> Wertsch, 59.
- <sup>25</sup> Bakhtin, 293-294.
- <sup>26</sup> Ellsworth, 308.
- <sup>27</sup> Ellsworth, 316.
- <sup>28</sup> Ellsworth, 316.
- <sup>29</sup> Ellsworth, 317.
- <sup>30</sup> Burbules and Rice, 406.
- <sup>31</sup> Burbules and Rice, 406.

<sup>32</sup> Burbules and Rice, 411.

<sup>33</sup> Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 63.

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