

## THE CONVERSATION CONTINUES <sup>1</sup>

**Suzanne Rice**  
*University of Illinois*

Listening has received little attention in the recent literature on education, and Garrison and Kimball make an important contribution by suggesting the educational significance of this aspect of communicative interaction. In formal school contests, considering the amount of time students are expected to listen, and the belief, implicit in the expectation, that listening is one of the primary means by which we learn, this lack of attention is quite remarkable. Although I wholly support Garrison's and Kimball's efforts to draw more attention to listening as an educational activity, I do wish to voice several concerns about this particular version of their larger project.

My first concern pertains to Garrison's and Kimball's assertions regarding the moral status of listening. While the authors seem to view listening itself as inherently morally praiseworthy, I would like to suggest that claims regarding the moral status of listening need to be sensitive to such issues as the appropriate motivations for listening, the depth of attentiveness required under different circumstances, and the conditions under which one is morally obligated to listen. One may listen well in a technical sense, but do so aiming solely to gain strategic advantage over others. Even lacking this questionable motive, one may hear what in literal terms is, say, a serious logical flaw in a friend's argument, while failing to grasp the deeper significance of what she or he has said. Or, one may listen well to a slew of sexist or racist epithets, comprehending fully that doing so is personally demoralizing. In each of these cases, listening seems morally problematic, rather than praiseworthy.

No doubt, participants' ability and willingness to listen to one another has profound implications for the possibility of dialogue across differences. But these differences often include inequalities in partners' status and authority, as Garrison and Kimball acknowledge. Such inequalities suggest that a normative conception of listening also needs to recognize that the responsibility for listening may not accrue equally to all participants. The argument that certain groups and individuals are silenced implies the need not only to gain a voice, but also to be heard. If dialogue across differences is going to be equitable, then I would think that those who have been silenced may have a stronger claim to be heard, while those who have enjoyed the privilege of being heard have a greater responsibility to listen.<sup>2</sup>

My second concern pertains to what Garrison and Kimball call the "conflict model" of dialogue. Garrison's and Kimball's criticisms of this model draw on a strain of feminism in which it is often argued that "conflictual" modes of self-expression, generally distinguished by critical questioning, "silence" those whose styles of self-presentation (usually women) tend to be relatively tentative.<sup>3</sup> Barbara Houston, for one, argues that this reluctance to engage in openly conflictual dialogue appears to stem from the fact that, at least for many middle-class white women, this direct mode of self-expression violates the norms of femininity.<sup>4</sup> Because women who express disagreement and criticism directly are likely to be judged unfeminine, there is a strong incentive for adopting a less confrontational stance in conversation. In educational contexts, a popular response to this gender-related difference in dialogical comportment is to adopt pedagogical practices guided by the metaphors of "connection" and "care."<sup>5</sup>

While it is important to be sensitive to differences in gender-related styles of self-presentation, there is room to question whether recent efforts to accommodate these differences may inadvertently help

to entrench even more firmly the problem they seek to redress. If Houston is correct, it seems that the deeper educational issue may pertain more to expectations regarding women's comportment in dialogue than it does to conflict per se. Outright *expression* of conflict is not legitimate for women, but this should not be taken to mean that no conflict exists; and at a time when women students are engaging others in critical discussions about sexism and other manifestations of inequality and oppression, there is considerable irony in the advocacy of educational practices that seek explicitly to minimize the expression of conflict.<sup>6</sup>

Michelle Fine makes a similar point in regard to poor and minority high school students:

Inside public schools, particularly low-income public schools, there persists a systematic commitment to *not name* those aspects of social life or schooling that activate social anxieties.... School-based silencing precludes official conversations about controversy, inequity, and critique.... [The students whose] self-conscious critique, or even naive questions pierce the fragile veneer of equal opportunity, typically pay a price. Their critique may be banished, suppressed, or declared "wrong" on a standardized test.<sup>7</sup>

Although being on the receiving end in a confrontational dialogue can be "disturbing," as Garrison and Kimball claim, this is not necessarily undesirable. When young women, poor, and minority students *do* confront beliefs and values that help to support inegalitarian social relations, many of us, I suspect, see this as something of a triumph for these students. Further, if we take seriously the idea that our own knowledge is partial and perspectival, then we should welcome students' "oppositional talk," even when it is directed toward us, as an opportunity for personal development. After all, we often stand to learn the most from conversations in which a partner *does* challenge our deeply held, but unexamined, beliefs. The anticipated benefit of learning from others' questions and criticisms is one of the motivations for presenting papers at academic conferences such as PES.

As Garrison and Kimball argue, conflict can lead to a breakdown in dialogue; there are times when temporary and partial understanding, let alone "consensus," cannot be reached, and sometimes the best alternative is to withdraw from particular conversations. But in light of experience to the contrary, it is important not to assume this outcome.<sup>8</sup> Numerous white feminist scholars in particular have demonstrated a remarkable willingness to learn from and respond to pointed criticisms concerning racial and class biases informing their work; Elizabeth Ellsworth's description of her own classroom experiences is illustrative in this regard.<sup>9</sup>

Further, engaging in critical dialogue need not entail doing so with the aim of gaining the upper hand in an argument, as Garrison and Kimball imply. *When* one can assume that dialogue is animated by such qualities as a willingness to admit mistakes, to respect one's partner, and to learn from the perspectives he or she brings to the encounter, whether the dialogue will be critical becomes much less an issue.

My third concern relates to Garrison's and Kimball's pedagogical suggestion for actually promoting the aim of dialogue across differences. I agree that this aim is educationally worthwhile, but I find Garrison's and Kimball's emphasis on the formation of "affinity groups" as an important means of facilitating such dialogue problematic. My concern stems partly from the conception of "affinity" on which Garrison and Kimball defend their proposal for promoting dialogue across differences. What they describe is not a group formed on the basis of "affinity," but rather one formed on the basis on its members' sex; it is a women's group in which participants, according to the authors' own description, "vary widely in terms of age, religious belief, occupation, educational background, ethnicity, [and] political affiliation" (p. 10). In contrast to a women's (or men's) group, affinity groups are those into which participants self-select on the basis of "shared oppressions" — similarities in terms of racial, ethnic, class, sexual (etc.) identities. Feminist scholars have developed the idea of affinity, in part, to emphasize that differences linked to sexuality, religion, ethnicity, physical and intellectual abilities and challenges, among many others, may be more significant than commonalities often attributed to "women" as a social group.<sup>10</sup>

By using a highly unconventional conception of “affinity” to illustrate their argument, Garrison and Kimball sidestep one of the key problems they set out to address — identifying the conditions under which individuals and groups who differ in deeply felt ways are actually able to engage in dialogue, despite their differences. They describe a group in which dialogue across difference occurs; but they do not discuss the conditions that have contributed to this outcome. Instead they conclude that “it is left to each of us to accept the need to listen better, promoting democratic dialogue across difference.” Having attested to the fact that the group in which one of the authors participates is beneficial to all involved — a group marked more by difference than affinity — a helpful starting point for such a discussion might begin by identifying what motivated these women to engage in dialogue in the first place, and what enables them to continue to converse with one another in a way that is mutually satisfying.

Aside from this conceptual issue, in light of the aim — *dialogue across differences* — I would like to question Garrison’s and Kimball’s advocacy of affinity groups, as these are usually conceived. While Garrison and Kimball recommend these groups on the grounds that they provide a context where members can “validate” one another’s experiences, it is not apparent why this should promote dialogue across differences. It is one thing to acknowledge a partner’s experiences, and quite another to actually *engage* these experiences, especially when, owing to differences related to class, race, and gender, among others, they have little or no resonance with one’s own. Further, if the goal is to enable students of difference to engage in conversation with one another, such groups will be problematic to the extent that they engender the belief that dialogue is possible only among partners who are relatively similar in important regards. *If* we learn to engage in dialogue across differences, we do so by actually engaging in such dialogues, not by talking and listening to only those individuals who are most like ourselves.

---

<sup>1</sup> Garrison’s and Kimball’s essay responds primarily to an earlier essay, Nicholas C. Burbules and Suzanne Rice, “Dialogue Across Differences: Continuing the Conversation,” *Harvard Educational Review* 6 (1991): 393-416.

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller discussion of this point see Nicholas C. Burbules and Suzanne Rice, “Can We be Heard? A Reply to Leach,” *Harvard Educational Review* 62 (1992): 264-71; and Suzanne Rice and Nicholas C. Burbules, “Communicative Virtues and Educational Relations,” in *Philosophy of Education 1992*, ed. H.A. Alexander (Urbana, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 1993), 34-44.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule, *Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Houston, “Gender Freedom and the Subtleties of Sexist Education,” *Educational Theory* 35 (1985): 359-69; and Jane Roland Martin, “The Ideal of the Educated Person,” *Educational Theory* 31 (1981): 97-109.

<sup>5</sup> On this issue see, for example, Suzanne C. de Castelle and Mary Bryson, “En/Gendering Equity: Emancipatory Programs or Repressive ‘Regimes of Truth,’” in *Philosophy of Education 1992*, ed. H.A. Alexander (Urbana, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 1993), 357-71.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Hartsock, “Rethinking Modernism: Minority and Majority Theories,” *Cultural Critique* 7 (1987): 187-206.

<sup>7</sup> Michelle Fine, *Framing Dropouts: Notes on the Politics of an Urban Public High School* (Albany: SUNY, 1991), 33, 61-62.

<sup>8</sup> This point was stressed repeatedly in Burbules and Rice, “Dialogue Across Differences.”

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Ellsworth, “Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy,” *Harvard Educational Review* 59 (1989): 297-324.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Christine Di Stefano, “Dilemmas of Difference: Feminism, Modernity, and Postmodernism,” in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990), 63-82.

