

Power, Disability, and Democracy

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Ashley Taylor's goal in "Can You Hear Me: Questioning Dialogue Across Differences of Ability" is to demonstrate the ways power structures inherent to dialogue across differences of ability serve to "challenge the goals of dialogue and the possibilities for mutual understanding that are central to the project." Arguably, she has unquestionably met her goal — and with clarity and elegance. Upon finishing her essay, a very clear sense of the problems that attend dialogue across differences of abilities is evident. Indeed, her essay is so convincing that while she refuses to consider the difficulties insurmountable, I am ready to do so — that is, at least under the terms Taylor describes.

Taylor first addresses the theoretical difficulties concerning dialogue across difference. She masterfully weaves together a number of intellectual and pedagogical strands within postmodernism and critical pedagogy to show that successful dialogues across difference are profoundly difficult if not impossible. Her assessment runs something like this:

Premise (a): The goal of dialogue is to generate mutual understanding, empower marginalized individuals, and promote equality.

Premise (b): These goals can only be achieved if the marginalized and nonmarginalized members of the dialogue can make themselves more or less equally understood.

Premise (c): Power structures inherent in dialogue make it impossible for marginalized individuals to be understood.

From these premises, Taylor draws the following conclusions:

Conclusion (1): Since power structures inherent to dialogue make it impossible for marginalized individuals to be understood, then members of a dialogue who are marginalized cannot be equally understood.

Conclusion (2): Since marginalized members in a dialogue cannot make themselves equally understood, then the goals of mutual understanding, the empowerment of marginalized individuals, and the promotion of equality cannot be met.

Taylor then applies these difficulties to dialogues between individuals with differences in abilities; adducing disturbing examples of the ways individuals with disabilities are socially and institutionally marginalized. Consequently, the preceding argument obtains in their cases as well. When engaged in dialogue with members of the dominant culture, individuals with disabilities are neither understood nor empowered, nor is equality expanded. If we assume the three premises as they stand, Taylor's conclusions inevitably follow. Fortunately, as damning as her conclusions seem, Taylor offers us a glimmer of hope.

In the last paragraph of her essay, Taylor recommends that educational theorists reexamine the *goals* of dialogue as they are currently construed. If the goals are what make effective dialogue impossible, then it is time to reevaluate them. It is to this project that I turn in the balance of this essay.

Before examining the goals, I should state my own convictions regarding dialogue across differences of ability: I believe that individuals with disabilities may have better conceptions of human flourishing than individuals without disabilities, and that it is the latter who would be the primary beneficiaries of intergroup dialogue. The persistent prejudice that persons with disabilities and other disenfranchised individuals need dialogue so that *they* can be helped only serves to reinforce their disempowerment. Moreover, it allows us, the “abled,” the “enfranchised,” and the “empowered,” to remain blind to our own culturally constructed disability — the belief that human flourishing consists in becoming like *us*.

This prejudice is based on the assumption that personal power is best understood as an individual’s acceptance by, and achievement in, the dominant culture. I find this a very dangerous conception of power. While Taylor does not explicitly affirm this assumption, it permeates her essay in a problematic way. It is common for members of the dominant group to see others who do not “fit into” the dominant culture as lacking power. Friedrich Nietzsche, Soren Kierkegaard, and others argue that the opposite is the case: those who are enfranchised are the powerless; the disenfranchised may in fact exercise a superior kind of power. Unfortunately, the dominant discourse inscribes individuals with disabilities with powerlessness, thus systematically denying the power available to them. Importantly, this includes wanting to “empower” them through dialogue. Following Ian Hacking,¹ Taylor points out that individuals adopt behaviors consistent with their classifications within the dominant culture. People become what we label them. This is true. However, what Taylor does not explicitly acknowledge is that when we seek dialogue with individuals with disabilities in order to help them, we implicitly label them, and thus inscribe them in their powerlessness. In trying to empower them our message is, whether explicitly stated or not, that they are weak and we are strong. It is my conviction that until we rectify this myopia, dialogue across differences of ability will continue to perpetuate social ills that work to undermine democracy.

This leads me finally to the question of goals. The goals of dialogue ought not to be the promotion of mutual understanding, the empowerment of marginalized individuals, and the expansion of equality. Not only are these goals impossible to meet as Taylor has elegantly shown, but they miss the more important democratic point.

The first goal of dialogue should not be mutual understanding, but mutual edification. As Megan Boler argues, the insistence on empathetic understanding is passive in that it does not require individuals to take responsibility for their role in improving social conditions; for Boler, empathetic understanding is ultimately “consumptive.”² Mutual edification is more democratic because it assumes that others have something to offer, something we are lacking. We are built up

intellectually, ethically, and spiritually. On this view, we enter dialogue to bless and be blessed, rather than to empathize and be empathized with. Edification is democratic because our incompleteness necessitates a connection with others, a connection that is not merely intellectual, as in the case of understanding, but also ethical and spiritual.

The second goal of dialogue should not be the empowerment of the marginalized, but the mutual empowerment of the marginalized and the nonmarginalized. As it stands, we are so concerned to empower persons with disabilities that we fail to recognize the profound power they may already have. Because we desire to ameliorate the struggles of individuals who seem at a disadvantage to ourselves, we want to show them respect and to listen to what they have to say. By listening to them, we hope to give them a kind of dignity that we imagine they are lacking. From my point of view, this is backwards. They may have a dignity that we are lacking. It is precisely because they are marginalized from our dominant culture that they may better be able to show us a new and better vision of humanity. This is where Lucy in Taylor's example goes wrong. Because of her assumption that Roger is weak and needs to be empowered, she accidentally patronizes him and, what is worse, fails to recognize her own weakness; she misses the opportunity for her own transformation, because she is focused on his. Expecting to benefit from dialogue with marginalized individuals does not imply using them to our advantage; the role reversal of power dynamics is also meant to serve them. As Taylor argues, when people are made "aware of how they are classified...[they] change their behavior in relation to that classification."

Finally, the third goal of dialogue should not be the promotion of equality but the promotion of democracy. Democracy flourishes when individuals who are of unequal social status desire to see greatness in each other. It is a truly democratic temperament that can revel in the erudition, self-confidence, and creativity of the "intelligent," the "well-born," and the "beautiful" in the same way that it can revel in the determination, courage, and strength of the "unintelligent," the "low-born," and the "homely." Such a temperament does not see one as powerful or the other as weak, or one as fortunate and the other unfortunate. It sees greatness in both and longs to be inspired by both.

To conclude, the general aim of dialogue across difference should be to promote excellence in others and in us. Excellence must not, however, be construed as success in, or acceptance by, the dominant culture; when excellence is defined by the dominant culture it leads individuals who are enfranchised to mistakenly assume they have power and those who are marginalized do not. I suggest that the opposite is often the case. In dialogue, the question should always be (whether asked by the marginalized or nonmarginalized): In what ways do I lack power and in what ways can the members of this dialogue inspire me to excellence? In the case of dialogue with persons with disabilities, the answer may be the answer of some members of the deaf community who refuse cochlear implants and oral language training for their families. They do not regard their "inequality" as something to be equalized, but as a source of pride, beauty, and strength.

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1. Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 32.
 2. Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 158–65.