Making Space for Dialogue

Dialogue has the potential to create community through purposeful talk among equals. It is distinct from debate and negotiation in that it is not intended to reach agreement, win points or look for flaws in the others argument, but to examine and challenge assumptions and reach new understanding. Creating a space for dialogue – physically, intellectually and emotionally – has a number of difficulties. In many communities of interest, voices are often left out of important public dialogue and feel silenced or ignored because they are not free to set their own agenda or to have meaningful involvement in defining a problem. There are many who feel they do not have a voice. Within the context of our “meeting” culture, driven by time constraints, rigid agendas and a desire for efficiency, dialogue may seem anachronistic. Simply put, dialogue takes time. And attending to how we plan dialogue and meaningfully include individuals who are not often involved in public deliberation also takes time.

Through my work as the Director of Dialogue Programs at Simon Fraser University I have convened many dialogues on vital public issues. These include immigration, rural urban interdependence, community drug prevention strategies in Vancouver, creative conflict management in health care, and what ‘is an educated Canadian?’ among others. Currently, I am leading a project called Imagine BC encouraging as many British Columbians as possible to deliberate together on the future of our province. I am also very committed to creating a culture of dialogue through the “Dialogue Makers” programs and dialogues we offer at SFU’s Vancouver campus. Our “Dialogue Maker’s Network” invites individuals to meet regularly in dialogue to explore the potential of dialogue in their work and other parts of their lives. Convening and facilitating these numerous dialogue experiences has taught me some important lessons about planning, dialogue.

One of the lessons involves thinking carefully about how we frame the problem. Framing the problem involves dialogue and negotiation among key participants, sponsors or partners of the dialogue. The purpose and core questions need to be arrived at, not simply pronounced by the planner. Defining the problem or issue to be examined, locating the genuine questions around which a dialogue event or process is planned call for inquiry and careful listening. By involving others early on in this process means the quality of the dialogue is enhanced and more accurately reflects the complexity and multiple perspectives held on the subject.

There is always some tension in agenda setting between not wanting to over-specify or under-specify the items on the agenda. If you arrive at the dialogue’s purpose and set it out clearly and define the core questions you want to explore, a flexible agenda helps to structure the process. However dialogue convenors and facilitators need to be responsive to emerging questions and directions. It doesn’t work to hold on too tightly to the agenda.
Participants in dialogue require a certain set of predispositions such as a commitment to candour, curiosity and a willingness to let go of certainty. These are qualities that can be enhanced by learning to listen, demonstrating empathy and being alert to hidden assumptions. Holding back, pushing a pet preoccupation or rushing to action also makes dialogue difficult.

Dialogue convenors are responsible for creating a welcoming space for dialogue. As Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue Fellow, Glenn Sigurdson suggests, “Dialogue meets one of the fundamental needs for taking control of your life and your own agenda”. To create a space for many voices in dialogue means respecting the particular traditions and ways that people prefer to interact. Creating a sense of safety and belonging in a dialogue starts with a conversation about what this means for those who would participate.

We know that successful dialogue processes, whether of short or long duration, most often create new and respectful relationships among the participants. We can also be clear about the purpose of dialogue in a particular context. But can we really be certain about the “outcomes” in terms of specific deliverables? New, surprising and worthwhile insights gained from dialogue experiences cannot be guaranteed. Rather than over-specify outcomes, we pay close attention to clarifying purpose and the process of the dialogue itself.

Creating a space for dialogue often involves spending time orienting the experts who join the dialogue to inform our thinking. Many subject-matter experts who contribute to our dialogues are asked to think about their contributions as a starting point for the dialogue and to be open to and welcoming of other perspectives and other ways of knowing. Not all experts are skilled in encouraging or facilitating dialogue.

Whenever I am asked about the value of dialogue to individuals, organizations or government, I suggest that most of the problems we face in our society are so complex that no matter how well trained or educated we consider ourselves, thinking alone is inadequate. Most often our knowledge is limited. We need the benefit of many viewpoints to fully understand the scope of complex problems. We need to involve those who have not traditionally been a part of our public deliberations to contribute in ways that are meaningful to them. As the political philosopher, Hannah Arendt said so well: “For excellence, the presence of others is required”. There is still much to be learned about how to invite the other and make them welcome.

Joanna Ashworth is the North Growth Management Director of Programs at Simon Fraser University