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Dialogue in the graduate management classroom: Learning from diversity



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is (1) to introduce dialogue as a practice for learning across cultural, religious, and other differences, (2) to present the process and structure of dialogue as it is being used in graduate management seminars, and (3) to reflect on the challenges inherent in altering traditional student–faculty relationships and modes of teaching. Dialogue is a practice grounded in a pluralist framework that acknowledges the differing and sometimes conflicting opinions that arise among people with diverse backgrounds and experiences and provides tools to develop an awareness and understanding of these differences. It differs from other classroom practices such as discussion or debate because, unlike those practices, the purpose of dialogue is not to convince or win but to gain deeper understandings of each other. We describe the practice of dialogue as it occurs within a particular context that is created by both structure (for example, how chairs are arranged) and process (for example, how the interactions among seminar participants are conducted). Teaching a course using dialogue goes beyond simple technique to questioning the assumptions that underlie many student–faculty relationships. We reflect on the challenges inherent in introducing a new way of engaging among faculty and students.

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Management classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse as they attract students from around the world: according to the 2013 Graduate Management Admissions Council (GMAC) survey, international applicants to Master in Management and Master in Business Administration Programs comprised over 50% of the applicant pool. Although women still account for less than half of the students in these programs, the percentage of women in the applicant pool has increased over the years (GMAC, 2013). Students also differ in economic wealth, age, family background, ethnicity, work experience, cultural traditions, educational backgrounds, and religious faith as well as in what they view as socially acceptable behavior by students in the classroom and in their expectations of the instructor. This diversity has the potential to enrich classrooms but also has the potential to create conflict as people come together with different life experiences and with differing assumptions about ethical issues, interpersonal interactions, organizational processes, and the role of organizations in society. Management schools as well as individual instructors need to look for ways to realize the potential and address the conflict (Woods, Barker, & Hibbins, 2011) because simply being aware of or acknowledging diversity begs the question of how to address it.

Diversity can be addressed from four distinct perspectives. From an exclusivist perspective, one's own way of seeing things is “the one and only truth, excluding all others” (Eck, 2003:168). Within this view, differences provide an opportunity to convert others through debate or discussion (Huang, 1995), often creating an appearance of winners and losers.

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An inclusivist also recognizes one truth that is superior to others, but believes it is “wide enough to include the others under our universal canopy and in our own terms” (Eck, 2003: 168). The universalist or relativist does not lay claim to one truth but tries to find common ground, essentially ignoring difference. While this approach encourages tolerance, it does not lead to an understanding of difference. Finally, for pluralists “the heart of the issue ... is the difficult, potentially explosive ... encounter of people with strong and very different commitments” (Eck, 2003: 195). The pluralist seeks “to understand what presents itself as other and alien without violently imposing [one’s] own blind prejudices and ideologies”. A pluralist approach, by not claiming possession of any one truth and by seeking to understand multiple “truths,” sets the stage for an exchange that creates mutual reflection, broadening of views, and respectful learning on the part of both students and instructors.

The Ford Foundation adopted this pluralist approach when it put forth The Difficult Dialogue Initiative in 2005. The goal of the Initiative was to support “programs and projects that promote greater dialogue around the sensitive and sometimes controversial questions that arise due to increasing religious and cultural diversity on campus” (Ncdd.org/275, 2005). Recognizing that many conversations on college campuses reflect those of the society at large, the Ford Foundation sought applications from colleges and universities that would address these questions “in a spirit of scholarly inquiry and with a respect for different viewpoints” (Ncdd.org/275, 2005).

The purpose of this paper is to present the use of dialogue in graduate management classes at one of the universities that received a Ford Foundation grant.¹ The paper is organized into four sections. The first two sections provide the definition and conceptual grounding of the practice of dialogue within a pluralist framework. The third section describes how dialogue is practiced in two graduate seminars: Global Business Seminar and Women in Management Seminar. The final two sections reflect on the challenges faced and lessons learned through using dialogue as a practice intended to realize the potential of diversity to discover new insights and expand our understandings.

1. The meaning of dialogue

The term dialogue has been used to represent many different forms of interactions, from the Socratic Method to uncover the one truth to the Bohmian approach to create understanding in the face of multiple truths (Romney, 2005) and from embracing all forms of discourse to prescriptive traditions that idealize one type of discourse (Burbules & Bruce, 2001). Within the management education literature, the term has also been understood in different ways. For example, for MacIntosh, Beech, Antonacopoulou, and Sims (2012) a dialogue “occurs where there is a negotiation of ‘my interests’ and ‘your interests’” (p. 376) while Neville’s (2008) dialogical learning combines anticipating change, co-constructing meaning, and hands-on, direct experience, building on Freire’s (2000) concept of dialogue as an encounter among those who wish to “name the world” (p. 88). These and other perspectives on dialogue provide us with a generalized understanding that is captured by Romney (2005) as “increasing understanding, addressing problems, and questioning thoughts and actions” (p. 1).

Burbules and Bruce (2001) place dialogue in the broad context of discourse theory, capturing not only the spoken word but also the context of an interaction, the position of participants in relation to each other, and characteristics of participants, e.g., age, gender, race, culture, class, or physical conditions, as components of an interaction. This way, dialogue is not just an act of speaking, but becomes a relationship “within the web of other relations that exist between and among participants” (p. 1116). In such a context, difference is viewed as “a condition of all learning” (p. 1115), creating possibilities for greater understanding. This approach echoes Eck (2003) when she writes that plurality “is not an obstacle for us to overcome but an opportunity for our energetic engagement and dialogue with one another” (p. 168).

Although the term “dialogue” is often understood in common usage as a conversation between two people (for example, conversations between Presidents Obama and Putin are often referred to as dialogues), its meaning is quite different:

“Dialogue” comes from the Greek work *dialogos*. *Logos* means “the word,” or in our case we would think of the “meaning of the word.” And *dia* means “through” – it doesn’t mean “two.” ... The picture or image that this derivation suggests is of a *stream of meaning* flowing among and through us and between us. This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which may emerge some new understanding (Bohm, 1996: 6).

In dialogue, “people become observers of their own thought” (Senge, 1990: 242) and gain understanding, both individually and collectively, of how one’s opinions “tend to be experienced as “truths,” even though they may only be your own assumptions and your own background” (Bohm, 1996: 9). Senge (1990), referencing a series of dialogues in which he and Bohm participated, quotes Bohm as saying that in dialogue “people are no longer in opposition” but are “participating in [a] pool of common meaning, which is capable of development and change” (pp. 240–241). Building on these definitions, Isaacs (1999) defines dialogue as “a conversation in which people think together in relationship, [which] implies that you no longer take your own position as final” (p. 19).

Dialogue is different than discussion. Given its shared heritage with words such as “percussion” or “concussion,” discussion connotes a fragmentation or shattering (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998). In contrast to dialogue, which finds understanding through shared meaning, discussion is concerned with dissecting or examining points (Bohm, 1996; Kabat-Zinn, 2005), with “breaking the whole down into many parts” (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998), or with batting ideas back and forth (Yankelovich, 1999).

¹ The university was one of 27 colleges and universities out of 700 applicants to receive a grant.

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