Perspectives

REFLECTIONS ON THE DIFFICULTY OF CREATING AND SUSTAINING EQUITABLE COMMUNICATIVE FORUMS

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Abstract

The last two decades have brought renewed interest in the study of communication. One segment of this renewed interest focuses on the communicative patterns in people's everyday lives. This facet of communication is particularly relevant to the dialogues that comprise much of the adult educational processes. In this paper I reflect upon the process of communication and, particularly, explore the possibility of achieving equity among diologists. I begin by expressing my own frustrated personal and professional efforts, while a graduate student in an adult education program, to effect equitable communication with colleagues. I explore the definition of communication and the challenges involved in the efforts to enhance transformational, emancipatory learning by facilitating equitable communication. Finally, I reflect upon what I have discovered in my own subsequent practice, particularly while teaching in China, where I found a venue receptive to efforts toward equitable communication.

Résumé

On a pu noter, au cours des vingt dernières années, une recrudescence de l'intérêt envers l'étude de la communication, particulièrement dans le domaine des formes communicatives du quotidien. Cet aspect de la communication revêt un intérêt particulier pour l'étude des dialogues qui sont au centre du processus éducatif de l'adulte. Dans cet article, j'offre une réflexion sur le processus de la communication, en particulier sur la question de l'équité entre les participants au dialogue. J'exprime d'abord ma frustration à cet égard en tant qu'étudiante de deuxième cycle. À partir d'éléments de définition de la communication,

j'explore les défis que comporte l'atteinte d'une communication véritablement équitable dans le cadre d'un apprentissage axé sur l'émancipation et la transformation sociale. Je décris enfin ma propre expérience en Chine, où j'ai découvert une tribune favorable à la communication équitable.

Like many adult educators, I am vocal about the importance of dialogue. I infrequently (and inadequately) deconstruct how my participation perpetuates the pattern of hierarchical, status-quo conversations that we collectively malign. Yet, the practice of adult education, particularly if one's philosophical approach to pedagogy is emancipatory, is integrally connected with an examination of the manner in which the text of our lives reciprocates with the creation of our identity. With that in mind, it seems to me that adult educators should not only reflect upon their practice in an introverted manner but also seek ways in which to bring to life, in an extroverted sense, the exercise of praxis—the continuous critique and improvement of practice while practicing. I believe that awareness of one's own manner of interaction needs the input of others' perspectives during the process of dialogue. Embracing difference, with the accompanying interruption and confrontation of one's cognitive and behavioral habit patterns, is worthwhile in that it allows for a turning back—as it were, a seeing of oneself while being separated from oneself within the interweaving tapestry created during dialogue. Such a process of dialogical critique is continuous, ubiquitous, and, often, excruciatingly difficult.

Struggling To Put Myself Into Practice

Several years ago I was a graduate student in an adult education Masters' program. The faculty with whom I studied took the Freirian approach seriously. Professors spoke passionately of emancipatory education. Yet I was puzzled. On more than one occasion my former professor, Michael Collins, emphatically stated that equity would never exist within a capitalist *system* because the system itself is based on hierarchical inequities. Were we then— was he—only engaging in an elaborate and grossly unkind game of charades when promoting communicative action "where all participants are engaged in rational discourse that emerges from a genuinely democratic situation" (Collins, 1991, p. 12)? Were we destined forever to fall short? And, if so, would that realization lead us eventually to pay only lip service to our "aspirations to genuine participatory democratic action" (p. 30), while we, in

our practice, continued to engage in ineffective and undemocratic styles of communication?

Experience within various adult education classes during my graduate study tended to confirm my suspicions. Most communication within these classes, peopled entirely by adult educators and those who aspired to be so, was neither democratic, honest, nor open. Although it was laudable that many of the professors relinquished their monopoly on speech within these classes, it was regrettable that they also often abdicated responsibility for an equitable *process* of communication—a classic case of throwing out the baby with the bathwater. The result was oligarchic control in many cases, but sometimes a single person commanded the forum, a "wheel" who controlled his or her colleagues' active participation time and the subject matter of their comments, creating a prison within a prison. There were some people who seldom contributed to class dialogue. The reasons for their silence may have been as numerous as the non-contributors. There were some who monopolized the conversation, often diverting class attention to focus at length on their private interests. As a regular contributor, I found that the expression of my ideas often went unquestioned, both with reference to the frequency and to the content of that expression. I was frustrated, as I had come from years in a rural business where most of the customers were assertive and vocal male farmers. I had been well apprenticed in the art of conversational fencing by folks who relieved the frustration of their career with enlivened debate and good-natured banter. I gloried in the reciprocal aggravation. I learned how to guard, lunge, and parry with skill and exuberance. But all our tips were protected in those skirmishes, for no one wanted to win in any final sense for fear that the game would end. When no one picked up a foil and challenged me or accepted my challenge to dual, I was stymied. I responded by often acting (if I may change metaphors again) as the "wheel" during classes in an attempt to force the language game. A professor turned to me one time, upon entering the room, and asked, only half in jest, "Well, Helen, what are we going to do today?"

This confession serves as an indication that I was as guilty of perpetuating ineffective communicative patterns as anyone. I did not know how to dialogue with others, only how to debate. Conversation, if left without structure and without purpose to the process, often wandered aimlessly, and I (a single parent with a teenage son at home) bristled at what I called "these 3 hour coffee breaks." I often left classes frustrated with the way the time had unfolded. Obviously, at times, I responded by attempting to control the

communicative process myself, albeit (I still like to tell myself) in a equitable, democratic fashion. The proverbial enlightened despot! Occasionally, I shared my frustrations with a class colleague or a professor, but I neglected to express such thoughts in class and have them addressed, for fear that I would be considered impolite—or even worse, be rewarded with a low final grade for my expressed dissatisfaction. On one occasion, a professor shared with me similar frustrations. It seems that Argyris (1993) is correct: for fear that we may offend, our dissatisfaction remained unshared. Certain issues were undiscussable. And the undiscussability was, itself, undiscussable. We deliberately (having rationalized our actions, of course) or unconsciously avoided putting ourselves into a practice that might openly confront and address venues that discourage communicative equity.

By being a party to the failure to find ways to effectively involve everyone, I became a facilitator of the perpetuation of the problem. Looking at the situation from an ethical standpoint, I reflected that encouraging others to voice their thoughts can be construed as an invasion of privacy, a violation of the mystery of communication. I felt this particularly with my aboriginal colleagues, whose various cultures often devalue speech that has not been well planned, resulting in fewer verbal responses to issues raised within the class venue. One professor's voiced opinion that silent people can be active participants in class dialogue without being verbally involved is possible, perhaps, but remote in my opinion. Although the silent person is always silent for a reason, by its nature silence does not allow for reciprocal verbal conversation to explore the reasons for its presence. This professor's belief in his ability to effectively evaluate such students on their eye contact and body language input I found foreign to my pattern of comprehension. That aside, the fact that evaluation depends upon one's ability and willingness to communicate, usually in a declarative manner—thus weighing the entire educational system in the favor of those privileged enough to be fluent in the means of such communication—is also a relevant issue, albeit not *within the* realm of this paper.

Never in our classes, to my recollection, did we explore what equitable communication would look like in practice by purposefully attempting to exercise it ourselves. We perhaps assumed an intuitive skill at its practice, given our dedication to the concept. Oh yes, we read Freire, Habermas, Mezirow, Alinsky, Gramsci, Giroux, all those men (no women), and we *learned* about how important it was to be "transformed," to be emancipated

from the bonds of oppression, but it seemed that we never got much beyond the rhetoric. Soapbox orators, preaching what we did not know how to practice, that's what we were! Perhaps now, after I have been taught by students a little more both about my own practice and, through it, about myself, it is time for me to examine what hitherto I have left unaddressed, either because of my ignorance of, or my unwillingness to admit, my own complicity.

Exploring the Meaning of Equitable Communication

What does equitable communication mean? The *New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1993) refers to communication as "the science and practice of transmitting information" as well as "shared possession, common participation" (p. 455). These ambiguous definitions of the word indicate the complexity inherent in the activity itself. Can the transmitting of information, with no assumption of response, be called communication? Does the term, having originated from the root word *commune*, not inherently imply a joint activity, which goes beyond even the exchanging of ideas to the creation of new ideas through the interrelationship of ideas? The root of the word suggests that unified activity can result in the fluid *commonality* of ideas; common is also linked in origin to commune and, thus, communication (Partridge, 1958, p. 112). But even there I find difficulty, because joint activity cannot presume the existence of an atmosphere of fairness which will result in new ideas that are an equitable conception of the speakers. If equitable participation is not established, the notion of *common* must be understood as holding in common rather than having been created with common influence. Perhaps the former, held-in-common condition is true; otherwise (if the latter were true), the addition of the adjective equitable would only create a redundancy.

I wonder if I have complicated the discussion beyond recovery by including the notion of *equity*. Definitions, synonyms, and etymological origins of equity all focus on two words—justice and fairness (Cayne, 1988; Partridge, 1958; Rodale, 1986). "Whose justice and whose fairness?" one might ask, echoing MacIntyre's (1988) sentiments. Each term points to yet others, to spaces between the others, with meaning—the answer to equitable communication—elusive, fluid, centrifugal. When attempts at clearly definable equitable communicative venues result in such easy and such repetitious humiliation, it is no wonder that so many adult educators genuinely experience (or choose to feign) ignorance, complacency, or impotence rather than resist status-quo hierarchical patterns of communication.

There exists no greater challenge to the achievement of an emancipatory life than the inability, or unwillingness, of all humans to understand, let alone master, the enigmatic activity of equitable communication. Communication involves much more than speech: speech is merely its verbal component. Communication involves an *acting out* and a *holding within*. The absence of speech is, in itself, an often passive form of communication. Speech can be the result of intense thought and reflection, but it need not be. It can be informed or ignorant. It is subject to idiosyncratic yet collective interpretation, because speech is sent forth to others and has its meaning created for the speaker on the rebound. Listeners may interweave interpretation with the speaker by voice or by gesture, thereby influencing the nature and the content of further speech. The ricochet is unpredictable in its direction and its definition. As such, speech, the verbal utterance of communication, is at once the most fascinating and unsettling of creations as it encompasses the mysterious interaction of the human with all others—the text of people's lives. (Some indigenous people note the importance of the contribution of all other forms of animation and inanimation in the communicative process, as eloquently elaborated by Abram, 1997; such other-than-human contributions is beyond the scope of this paper.)

Communication, if it involves interaction leading to a changed perception, not only reflects people's thoughts and activities; it also creates them. As we write, we are written. If that is true, then the manner in which we create through communication should always be deconstructed, examined for how we consciously and subconsciously keep ourselves and others within the constraints created by an accepted manner of communicative play. Communication is, thus, a most complex human activity because it is both uniquely intrapersonal *and* interpersonal. Although it may be that we are created through the currency of social exchange (Harvey, 1986, p. 195), the currency of communicative social exchange is anything but common. It is different for each person because of the particularity of each human's experience. Thus, although we adult educators may attempt to understand communication, we may never have the answer to the equity riddle, especially if that answer is assumed to lie within what is nonexistent—common experience brought to an agreed-upon concept of what constitutes an equitable forum. The answer to the equity riddle is only a temporary piece of an elusive puzzle, whose beauty would be destroyed if its whole were to be discovered. For, if a formula were to be found, our conversations would quickly become anemic, sterile. The motivation for our conversations and the

pleasure of our communication are derived in no small part from unpredictability, the unlimited treasure house of surprise, the ricochet. Yet, we try to reduce our interactions to a science, struggle to create simplified explanations, to probe the mystery, to uncover the secrets, to create common understandings.

Such an effort for commonality, for consensus, involves the ironing out of difference, but difference is what individuals should perpetuate if they wish to enjoy the stimulation of continued conversation. "An impoverished and unbelievable idea of community emphasizes the exclusion of conflict and the sharing of values and opinions" (Unger, 1987, p. 560). Individuals' differences ensure the survival of the unpredictable and undefinable characteristics of communication, and thus its ability to excite, to unnerve, to create. The classic work of Piaget (1965) and Kohlberg (1969, 1984) posits that learning emerges from a never-ending process of one's knowledge patterns coming under scrutiny as new information or new challenges to one's accepted morality emerge. In recent years, female writers have elaborated "a morality of responsibility and care" (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997, p. 8) that more closely matches women's ways of knowing. Such relational ways of learning are commensurate with the notion of reciprocal creation, recently considered as postmodern, but discussed by social worker and adult educator, Mary Parker Follett (1924), over 75 years ago.

Recently, Shotter (1997) has referred to two different relational stances to communication:

> The first way of talking, in which people relate themselves to each other intellectually, can be thought of as a closed, finalized, and monologic way of talking, functioning in an already existing, and sustained "disciplinary space." The other, in which people are in a more sensuous contact with each other, is an open, unfinalized, and dialogical form of talk in which new "spaces" may be opened up and others closed down, freely, moment by moment. (p. 21)

Shotter's distinction is similar to Habermas's (1984) division between instrumental learning and communicative learning, the former normative and reproductive, the latter uncurtailed and relationship oriented (p. 95; see also Mezirow, 1991, pp. 72-77) and to Bakhtin's (1984) classic distinction between the monologue in which "*another person* remains wholly and merely an *object* of consciousness, and not another consciousness" (p. 292, emphasis in original), and the dialogue, in which a speaker does "not expect passive

understanding that…duplicates his own idea in someone else's mind.…[but] response, agreement, sympathy, objection, execution, and so forth" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 69; see also Gardiner, 1992, p. 28 and Shotter, 1997, p. 25). Within people's learning experiences with and through others, whether the contact be instrumental or communicative, there is still a constant need to accommodate. But, whereas Freire's (1997) "banking" learner awaits displacement of a vacuum with a wealth of knowledge, "the engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself" (hooks, 1994, p. 11). Continuous adaptation of new information and new experiences within dialogic practice is followed by assimilation within a revised pattern—the constant confronting of difference and the need to address that difference in some fashion so that pattern is created anew.

As adults we learn by having our accepted knowledge pattern interrupted with information or with experience that does not match. Even while individuals constantly struggle to recreate pattern and so to reestablish a comfort level—a structure within which to arrange neatly one's thoughts and one's activities—it may be found that the resulting complacency causes gangrenous stagnation if its comfort becomes prolonged. If we come to understand that the strength of our connections come from the alacrity of the moves and countermoves we make within the relational language games that we play (see Cooper & Burrell, 1988), and not from agreement, we may understand that mystery and conflict stimulate our interactions. "Fear of difference is dread of life itself…conflict [is] a *normal* process by which socially valuable differences register themselves for the enrichment of all concerned" (Follett, 1924, p. 301). Speakers cannot and should not share all that which contributes to communication's outward manifestation. The question is whether adult educators can respect the mystery and the conflict of communication while simultaneously working toward an atmosphere of equity.

Habermas (1971, 1974, 1984, 1987) speaks of the ideal speech situation, and of the ability of humans to create together a rational future, free from oppression. We adult educators may find Habermas reassuring as we envision joining with our dialogic counterparts in activities that will engage each person's voice as equitable partners and as representative of our individuality, our agency. But the Habermasian pursuit of the ideal speech situation through striving for a rational manner of discourse fails to recognize the irrationality, the subjectivity, of discourse and, thus, the impossibility of its use to create, in any final sense, the ideal speech situation (Collins, 1998, p. 70). The

postmodern contention is that communication creates, that only certain voices are legitimized, and that individuals cannot escape the manipulative nature of text. The existence of many distinct cultural entities confirms, I believe, that communication *does* create as well as reflect. I define culture loosely, referring not only to ethnic groups but to groups within a workplace, a school, a church, or a social organization. For example, each person may participate simultaneously in several "cultures," each with its own code of conduct.

The realm of choice people possess is, therefore, not free but is forever bounded by the nature of the social exchange that they experience, the cultures that they inhabit. Whether as a teacher, a colleague, a parent, a friend, or a lover, everyone engages in the process of consensus building. In Canada, for example, a young girl, Reena Virk, met a tragic death in her efforts to communicate with her peers in an accepted fashion, to conform to a consensus of opinion that existed among her peers defining what was "cool" (Chisholm, 1997, pp. 12-19). She rebelled against her family's culture in a wild bid for acceptance within another; she failed and paid with her life for being "uncool." People are involved in shaping, consciously and unconsciously, the realm of choice of their "listening" to others, even while their choices are simultaneously being shaped. As cultural participants we should recognize that our communication is both uniquely autobiographical and biographical. We cannot help but express our lives within the activity of our teaching, for example, and have our lives shaped within that same activity. Our responsibility to those with whom we interact is established, therefore, because we do not simply impart information; we help to create others' autobiographies. Although the process is reciprocal, those in positions of respect (or should I say, dominance?) are much more likely to mold than to be molded. In fact, if consensus building (the politically correct term given to structured efforts to enforce conformity) is successful, we will be affirmed and validated in the activity itself, thus perpetuating the status quo of oppressive communicative relations. Small wonder that many teachers and employers neglect to encourage the empowering of students and employees!

These words do not embody a capitulation to hopeless ambivalence, but a recognition of the multiplicity and the complexity of the challenges to equitable communicative interaction. Adult educators should be cognizant of the responsibility of recognizing and addressing problems that, as humans, they help create and exacerbate, either by commission or omission. It is important that teachers emulate the practice that they espouse, if they wish to achieve an

atmosphere that encourages a transformative education (See Freire, 1997). This active practice requires reflecting upon the nature of communicative efforts openly and upon destructive and constructive tactics employed in their execution.

The Struggle for Transformative Double-Loop Learning

For the realization of transformative education an awareness of and work toward effective communication is especially important in the adult educator's practice. Relevant here is Mezirow's (1991) observation, "the problem facing the researcher who wishes to study transformative learning is finding a way to gain access to the meaning schemes and perspectives of the subjects of the research" (p. 221). I believe that that access can be accomplished in an indirect fashion because transformative learning, like communication itself, is reciprocal. Perhaps looking at a research example can serve as a stating point.

Studies over several decades into the nature of communicative patterns has led Argyris and Schön (1974, 1978) and Argyris (1993) to speak of defensive routines that inhibit effective communication and create environments that are anti-learning and over-protective: "An *organizational defensive routine* is any policy or action that inhibits individuals, groups, intergroups, and organizations from experiencing embarrassment or threat and, at the same time, prevents the actors from identifying and reducing the causes of the embarrassment or threat" (1993, p. 15, emphasis in original). Although such policies and actions sustain a pattern, they inhibit the detection and correction of error that is necessary for the achievement of equitable learning environments. Error is the discrepancy between what we, as adult educators, intend by our actions (assuming here that we do intend actions encouraging of equitable communication) and what actually occurs when we implement our actions. The failure to detect and correct shortcomings and mistakes hinders problem solving and decision-making. Such failure undermines the process of enlightened, equitable inquiry.

What are the defensive routines that have become automatic in my culture or cultures? In yours? I refer to our cultures because I think that, as adult educators, we cannot become aware of these routines without inviting or being confronted with, uninvited, radically different cultural viewpoints. Brookfield's (1988) thinking is relevant: "Becoming aware of assumptions that are so internalized that they are perceived as second nature or common sense is *problematic* precisely because of the familiarity of these ideas" (p. 90). The

process of determined enlightenment and corresponding sympathetic activity designed toward more equitable communication encouraging of difference is excruciating. Even with a realization of the value of difference in participants' various cultures, we often seek desperately to avoid changing our habitual patterns. We struggle to smooth the edges of difference, to create consensus. Perhaps, as Razack (1998) states, that is because "differences. . . cannot be acknowledged without confronting the fact of domination" (p. 169). So, although we may (rhetorically at least) grant difference the status of an "essence to be recognized" (p. 164), our voice may often be projected from "a position of innocence and non-implication in systems of oppression" (pp. 169-170), thus nourishing the medium for continued oppression. Defensive actions, through which the communicant by-passes or covers up embarrassing or threatening situations—usually those that would identify one's differences—and then covers up the by-pass, are executed subconsciously but with skill. As such, they can constitute private agendas of which even the participant and their sympathetic colleagues are not fully aware. They comprise what Argyris and Schön (1974) call an individual's "theory-in-use," which usually differs quite markedly from the individual's "espoused theory" (pp. 68-69, 87). Defensive routines lead to the creation of ineffective, self-perpetuating systems of inequitable communication.

Argyris and Schön (1974) outline the four governing values of the theory-in-use which they saw re-enacted repeatedly in their research: achieving intended purpose, maximizing winning and minimizing losing, suppressing negative feelings, and behaving according to what one considers rational (pp. 66-67). These values give rise to action strategies that include the advocating of one's position, the evaluation of thoughts and actions (one's own and others'), and the attribution of cause and effect, among others—that is, hierarchical patterns of communication. These values and action strategies, according to Argyris and Schön, lead to defensive reasoning and to single-loop learning.

During single-loop learning, individuals design actions that will help them adapt to existing situations. They adjust to the status-quo, accepting even themselves as one up or one down in a win/lose game. Interestingly, this form of communication has been identified as "male" and revered as that which most quickly achieves results (Hathaway, 1999). A more equitable form of communication, built on caring relationships, has been viewed as "female." Defensive reasoning, used as an integral component of the hierarchical posturing of the male conversation, is often considered as a betrayal by

females. The disagreements among males usually quickly dissipate, however, as males settle into their established hierarchical positions. Such is not the case for females. Disagreement often results in prolonged misunderstandings and the "silent" treatment (Armstrong, 1998, pp. 189, 213, 215, 253). The caring motivation for communication may, paradoxically, consign difference to the undiscussable, or stifle it altogether, relegating "female" conversation exclusively to the equally ineffective and anemic teddy bear dust bin of "warm fuzzies." If the tendency toward hierarchy can be mitigated, the defensive reasoning of a "male" conversation may more easily translate to a respect for the difference that is needed as a motivation for continued mutual questioning. I found, when in business for example, that males expected posturing; my challenging questions were invited. Although the purpose of my partner in conversation was sometimes to discredit my stance, I found, upon engaging with the same person on succeeding days, that, with time to reflect, we both would often have adjusted our positions.

I think it important to keep in mind, assuming that I am correct in that we simultaneously crave the inspiration of learning and resist its ability to disrupt our habitual pattern, that it is natural that, as adults, we resist progressing beyond single-loop learning, given that the increments of such learning are so small that our pattern tends not to experience drastic confrontation. Even if we are enslaved by it, we still have the comfort of a known pattern, rather than the fear and the risk of the unknown, untried path. To interrupt this tendency toward single-loop learning, Unger (1987) calls for "disentrenchment" or "denaturalization": "Society becomes denaturalized to the extent that its formative practices and preconceptions are open to effective challenge in the midst of ordinary social activity" (p. 164). Unger uses the contradictory term "negative capability" to refer to the empowerment of diversity that denaturalization makes possible (pp. 164-170). Similarly, Argyris and Schön (1978) refer to a theory-in-use which incorporates values encouraging communication that results in double-loop learning. "Double-loop *learning* occurs when error is detected and corrected in ways that involve the modification of an organization's underlying norms, policies, and objectives" (p. 3). Argyris (1993) adds that in this type of learning "behaviors are crafted into action strategies that openly illustrate how the actors reached their evaluations or attributions and how they crafted them to encourage inquiry and testing by others" (p. 55). Rather than trying to protect oneself from the threat

of embarrassment, those engaged in these behaviors encourage questioning and engage openly. *Productive* reasoning results.

Argyris and Schön's (1978) approach requires the honest disclosure of feelings and the extension of respect and understanding to one another during disclosure. These requirements draw attention to the relevance of conflicting societal norms governing verbal disclosure of thoughts and feelings. Although it is possible to digest their theory with some ease, it is difficult to conceive of a "tell all" environment which will result in a mature exchange of ideas that still respects difference and its ability to motivate continued conversation. The idiosyncratic nature of participants' interest will ensure an uneven level of commitment to such a process in most cases. Nevertheless, Argyris and Schön's process should not be abandoned, only proceeded with by dialogists constantly attuned to context. Even more significantly, such open communication presumes an atmosphere of honesty, trust, caring, and perceptions of equity among participants. All of these interconnected conditions, especially the latter, are exceptionally difficult to establish. Social interaction, as Collins so aptly stated in class dialogue, is fraught with hierarchy—parent/child; teacher/student; employer/employee—a condition that discourages openness for fear of reprisal. Even between participants of the same group, differences in experience and personality make equity in communication extremely difficult (Armstrong, 1998, p. 180).

The point is not to dismiss Argyris and Schön's research but to use it as an illuminating springboard from which to posit a variety of questions relevant to the communicative process. Researchers describe what they do, incorporating their own reflections. Given the autobiographical nature, both of research and subsequent interpretations brought to research, each researcher and each reader deconstructs the contexts in an idiosyncratic fashion, assessing applicability and garnering lessons. A cooperative examination of communication patterns, however, may provide a mirror for us to analyze and to improve our own practice. Given the complexity of issues surrounding equity in communication, and communication's own collective (if not common) process of sense-making, it stands to reason that we need assistance from others to improve our own practice.

Collins (1994) states that "the rational grounds for genuinely democratic participatory decision-making are accessible within the realm of speech communication" (p. 108). He adds that

the adult educator is confronted with the challenge of identifying, and dealing with, obstacles which prevent people from clearly expressing their needs. These obstacles to a free expression of real needs are constituted by conditioning factors which are not readily apparent to ourselves. (p. 115)

Therein lies the challenge. As adult educators we know that we must work continuously to create a pedagogy of possibility. We must strive to create an awareness of the obstacles that threaten to undermine our communication, obstacles which we often help to create and to sustain in our own practice. The assumption seems all too prevalent that we have escaped the constraints of oppression or of "bounded rationality" (Simon, 1996, p. 123) from which everyone else suffers. We are the trained, insightful experts of transformative learning who can provide students with the medium for their enlightened emancipation (See Mezirow, 1991, pp. 223-224). Such an assumption is contradictory to our own need for continuous transformation as "becoming beings." The knowledge that we, as adult educators, often consciously and unconsciously help to keep the iceberg of enlightened equitable communication underwater while simultaneously posing as the gurus, the "experts" of emancipatory learning, is, indeed, both embarrassing and threatening. But the recognition of our shared responsibility for ineffective communicative patterns that give rise to constrained learning environments is also exhilarating. It means that we can continuously be part of the shared corrective learning experiences with and through ourselves and others; that is, if we have the courage.

Epilogue: Learning the Art of Equitable Communication

I began writing this article with the assumption that adult educators, myself included, share a common altruistic wish for egalitarianism. The exercise of this writing has enlightened me; I now realize that I am interested in equitable communication primarily because I am selfish. Further, I believe that personal interest underscores everything we do as adult educators. Most of us not only hope that others will cooperate by meeting our needs, we expect, often demand it. We cannot escape our self-interest, nor, I believe, should we deny that we are more concerned with meeting our own needs than anyone else's. Ignorance of the benefits to oneself stemming from equitable communication has been responsible, in my opinion, for our often less than enthusiastic approach to learning the practice despite a commitment to the rhetoric. Putting myself into equitable communicative practice has involved exploring my own

desires and needs and examining my practice, while in its throes, for how I am using it to meet my needs.

I think that, as well as hiding our true intentions, we make the mistake of assuming that our self-focused needs and desires can be fulfilled *directly* by ourselves. I believe the process to be *indirect* and that is why I try to practice equitable communication. Let me explain. Recently, I returned from a teaching assignment in China. I did not go to Dalian University for the students' sake. I did not have a vision—a philanthropic mission to provide my services to young people who were in need of an English teacher. I was there because I was beginning to feel, in my current situation, exhausted of good questions, depleted of insightful answers. Perhaps such an adventure would restore me. By sheer good fortune, shortly after arrival I was handed a book of compiled essays used by the students (a text of philosophical articles) that provided a springboard for many an insightful exchange among the third-year English major students and myself. I became immersed, spending a great deal of time trying to create situations that might stimulate the students to speak, to enlighten me. It worked. I often left the classroom with my heart racing. The "Eureka, I've found it" had been rediscovered in Dalian, China! The students unearthed it and gave it to me. I had a vested interest in freeing my students' voices, as I found answers in their questions and questions in their answers. I discovered the obvious, as well, that what I wanted they wanted—a meaningful, satisfying life. Only the methods—the questions and the answers—differed, but we needed each others' methods. The students helped me with the process of relational learning and I helped them to help me and, in so doing, I helped them and they helped themselves. And at the end of my stay, many students told me how I had freed their voices and they brought me gifts, and I received an honorary consulting professorship from the university, and a wonderful letter from the president. And while I appreciated the accolades, the truth was that I was primarily trying to satisfy my own needs.

Yet, I did not teach in a democratic fashion, if democracy means unstructured or unconstrained "self-government" (Rodale, 1986, p. 273), or even "social equality" (Cayne, 1988, p. 285). I forced the voice of the students, *required* "equitable communication." Every class time each student was made to participate, one day taking their turn to read orally from the selected essay, the next day asking a question or posing an opinion about the essay. All comments and questions were addressed by me or by other students or both. In addition, one evening a week we held an extra class, to make up for missed

classes when I travelled in China, to which the students brought selections for a "free read." At those more-social times, we sat in a circle, especially intent on the reader as the rest of us did not have the written word to serve as a crutch for comprehension. From the selections brought to those free read evenings sprung especially powerful conversation, as students invariably chose passages or poems that held some point of great significance to them, and that they would use to initiate conversation in their search for answers to their queries. I stressed to students that I had two expectations of them: first, that they demonstrate an understanding of the curriculum essay selections and, second, that they answer the *so what* question. So what does this mean for me? How does what the author has to say interact with the experience of my life, help me to understand the experience of my life? I believe that the exercise of forcing voice was good for at least two reasons: first, it allowed me to control the dialogic process so that no one person dominated the available time. Although that may have meant that no one felt conversationally satiated, it also meant that everyone contributed every time and became, with more experience, increasingly skilled and insightful when offering their comments and posing their questions. Second, forcing voice relieved the speaker from the assumed expectation of profundity. Especially for those who were reticent, who did not believe that they could speak as well as others, I believed it important, initially at least, to shoulder the responsibility for their contribution. Not that the students took their assignment lightly, but they seemed less likely to feel, when their contribution was a requirement rather a voluntary act, that each contribution had to be intense, sagacious. The result of the relieved pressure, more often than not, was that comments and questions were, indeed, profound!

I learned in China that power grasped is not genuine. Only inferred power is genuine, only that granted to one by others and experienced in and through others. Empowered emancipatory democracy is not an individualist concept but a collective project. I came to believe, as expressed by Follett (1924), that

> all human intercourse should be the evocation by each from the other of new forms undreamed of before, and all intercourse that is not evocation should be eschewed. . . . To free the energies of the human spirit is the high potentiality of human association. (p. 303)

Putting oneself into practice, emancipating the voices of others (and in so doing one's own) has to do with forever reciprocally creating and releasing power within equitable communication. It has to do with participating in the practice of democracy. The students and I worked toward nourishing the power of our

potential to discover and to create our lives during the living. In China, I found that releasing power, that living democracy, that encouraging equitable communication meant recognizing and cultivating the mutuality of autobiography and biography, wherein "through dialogue, the teacher-of-the students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges; teacher-student with students-teachers" (Freire, 1997, p. 61). Freire's reciprocal teaching and learning activity is consistent with Follett's (1920) observation that

> the seeing of self as, with all other selves, creating, demands a new attitude and a new activity in man. The fallacy of self-and-others fades away and there is only self-in-and-through-others, only others so firmly rooted in the self and so fruitfully growing there that sundering is impossible. We must now enter upon modes of living commensurate with this thought. (p. 8)

The Chinese students and I did enter into such modes of living and so we still do, nourishing and creating each other anew through dialogue in different venues—mailed pictures, handwritten letters, and electronic communication. Active engagement with the lives of others is both the product and the process of equitable communication. One cannot easily leave behind one's autobiography.

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