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The Hard Work of True Listening

Abstract Civic dialogue requires skillful listening and facilitation. This article explores why effective, meaningful dialogue and the art of true listening are so difficult to achieve. The article includes examples of civic dialogue gone awry and discusses a number of skills that enhance true listening and purposeful civic dialogue. It concludes with identifying organizations from within and without the museum field that provide extensive tools and perspectives for listening and engaging in difficult dialogue.

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Some years ago a museum near my home hosted a public panel discussion as part of an exhibition on prejudice. The presenters, an administrator from an urban Jewish community center, a professor and author who has written extensively on race and conflict, and a lesbian minister who is an evangelist for inclusion, told stories about their own experiences with prejudice. The director of a human rights group moderated, and after the presenters spoke, invited audience members to join in the discussion by sharing their own stories. The result was powerful, with audience members presenting one deeply moving story after another. This sounds like a model experience of civic dialogue, an example of truly engaging audiences through exhibitions and an opportunity for sustained dialogue. With such experiences, however, there is a caveat. What if the conversations and dialogues go in a direction that we're not prepared to handle? What if there are opposing perspectives, awkward moments, or worse, personal attacks or accusations? Are we prepared for the possible outcomes of engaging dialogue?

Stimulating true dialogue requires listening and skillful facilitation. At the public program on discrimination, the stories shared by the audience members were intensely personal, and the people sharing their stories were in a vulnerable position. They were exposing their pain, and in so doing, reliving it. Soon, the program shifted from one of sharing stories to one of asking questions about those stories. One audience member, after sharing his deeply affecting story of discrimination, asked despairingly, "Why is it OK to discriminate against gays and lesbians? Why don't more people speak out against this discrimination?" Panelists responded sympathetically, but they did not really address the deeper issue: acknowledging this man's pain and talking more about why discrimination based on sexual orientation does not receive the same degree of public outcry that discrimination based on race, ethnicity or religion does. They simply moved along to the next question. Were they embarrassed by the intense emotions of the man in the audience? Did they want to ensure that the conversation did not fall into one of "I'm more discriminated against than you are" or did they simply not hear the depth of the man's question? This was the point that a skilled facilitator could have assisted the conversation to a deeper level by acknowledging the question and exploring it more fully. However, that didn't happen. When the question was not fully explored and addressed, several audience members went home feeling that they had not been heard. The opportunity for deep, healing dialogue was lost.

Knowing how alienated some of the attendees were made me think long and hard about what civic dialogue really means and whether museums are prepared to engage in it. Most of our colleagues who work in museums want to do the right thing, but they are not trained to effectively facilitate difficult or deeply affecting conversations. When a program becomes emotional or awkward, what do we do? *Why is the art of engaging in civic dialogue so difficult to master?* I believe that it is because the base of dialogue is listening. And often, as both humans and professionals working in institutions, we are better talkers than listeners.

After attending the program on discrimination, I began to seek out opportunities to learn more about how to be part of meaningful civic dialogue. I participated in a program sponsored by the United Nations Association on the topic of transforming violence. The program featured Muslim speakers and was held in November 2001 as a response to the events of September 11th. The stated aim was to “teach skills and model the potential for respectful listening to elicit people’s thinking as distinct from the opinions they often repeat....Participants in the program will be trained in ‘eloquent listening’ to encourage each other to articulate their deepest insights and the complexity of their experience.” The term “eloquent listening” appealed to me. This sounded like a place to learn more about dialogue and effective listening skills, and it was. I still use what I learned that night, and I hope that my listening, if not fully eloquent, has at least improved. The program featured a facilitated conversation between people representing American and Islamic perspectives and a training in Eloquent Listening led by staff members from Transforming Violence, an organization that provides education, tools and training in violence prevention. During the Eloquent Listening training, audience members reflected on times in their own experience when they felt listened to and times when they really listened to someone else. In a facilitated group discussion, audience members identified what the listener did and what specific actions they took, during these experiences. During the American–Islamic conversation, audience members learned how to facilitate conversations and to learn by asking, “What questions do you want to be asked?” In this way, a person can ask questions that lead to deep responses and new perspectives, rather than asking stereotyping questions. Good listening means being willing to acknowledge one’s own assumptions—to recognize that a listener’s experiences and assumptions create a filter through which he or she listens. A good listener is aware of

those filters, acknowledging how they might affect his or her response, and tries to listen objectively.

What did I learn during the United Nations Association program? First, to be a good listener, it's important to value and enjoy a diversity of perspectives and have a genuine desire to know more about that person. Next, stay on topic; focus on what the person with whom I am trying to engage is saying, rather than thinking about what I want to say. Make sure I understand and reflect the content *and* the feeling of the message. In the example of the program on discrimination, the facilitator could have used this skill to hear and understand the audience's need to delve deeper into why some types of discrimination may be more acceptable than others, rather than moving along to the next question.

As a good listener, it's also important to be patient; let people develop their ideas no matter how long it may take them. Empathize, and assume that the other person has valuable things to offer. Use appropriate body language, such as mirroring what the speaker is doing and looking the speaker in the eyes; and ask what the person wants to talk about. Ask questions that evoke the depth of the other person. Simply put, be open, respectful and engaged.

Good listening leads to deeper understanding, and a trained facilitator can help make that happen. A good facilitator understands group dynamics, respects participants, listens attentively and sensitively, suspends his or her own opinions and provides a safe environment for participants to share their stories. A good facilitator serves as a guide for a group, managing group process and dynamics, and ensuring that group members feel free to fully participate. Skillful facilitation is a critical component of meaningful civic dialogue, and museums with this goal in mind will need to include this as part of their programs. Museum leaders who provide professional development opportunities for their staff to develop these facilitation skills are creating deeply engaging institutions. There are a number of sources for museum staff members to learn facilitation skills: non-profit service organizations such as CompassPoint in California, facilitation e-mail lists such as *Group Facilitation: Process Expertise for Group Effectiveness*, and consultants who focus on training facilitators. Another way to create deeply engaging institutions is to build strong relationships with community members who are skilled in facilitating difficult dialogue. Clergy and other leaders in the faith community, consultants who specialize in facilitation, and people who work to reduce violence are valuable lo-

cal resources and increasingly work with museums to facilitate programs and train staff.

I've been inspired by a number of people and organizations that help me understand dialogue more deeply. Mike Wong, a consultant in violence prevention based in San Francisco, talks about the importance of dialogue *within* organizations to create inclusive institutions. Wong notes that when we practice eloquent listening on a daily basis with our colleagues, we develop the skills for effective dialogue with our audiences and communities. The Americans for the Arts Animating Democracy program, the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience, the Study Circles Resource Center, the National Park Service's *Great Places, Great Debate* conference, the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, and Transforming Violence all provide tools and perspectives on engaging in difficult dialogue. These include asking questions relevant to the people engaged in the dialogue, having a facilitator who can help people find common ground and who can create a safe environment for people with different backgrounds, and listening with an open mind. Ongoing conversations with friends and colleagues over many years inspire me to continually explore and learn how to engage the public in meaningful dialogue. I still don't feel fully equipped to handle difficult dialogue in a public setting, but I know that I am learning. One of the most gratifying responses I heard from a colleague was after a meeting I chaired where she talked about her reactions as a Jewish person to the movie "The Passion of the Christ." She shared some deeply felt perspectives, and I tried to make sure she had a chance and felt safe enough to say everything she needed to say. Others in the group responded to her comments, and it stimulated an important, respectful dialogue. Later, she called me and said, "I really felt heard today." That's when I knew that I was doing OK.

Resources

- Americans for the Arts Animating Democracy
<http://www.artsusa.org/animatingdemocracy/>
- International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience
<http://www.sitesofconscience.org/>
- National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation
<http://www.thataway.org/>
- National Park Service's *Great Places, Great Debates* conference
<http://www.nps.gov/nero/greatplaces/DialogueSkills.htm>

Study Circles Resource Center

<http://www.studycircles.org/en/index.aspx>

Transforming Violence

<http://www.transformingviolence.org/>

Facilitation Training

Group Facilitation: Process Expertise for Group Effectiveness e-mail list,

<http://www.albany.edu/cpr/gf>

International Association of Facilitators,

<http://www.iaf-world.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=1>

Nonprofit service organizations, such as CompassPoint Nonprofit Services

(<http://www.compasspoint.org/>) and National Community Development

Institute (<http://www.ncdinet.org/ps.htm>)