The Conversable World: Finding Our Compass in A Post 9/11 World

Michael Welton, Athabasca University, Athabasca, Canada

ABSTRACT

This article explicates the idea of conversation as the primary opening for learning to occur in all domains of society. The “age of conversation” emerges in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This historical analysis is followed by a discussion of the features of “good conversations” to create benchmarks for creating democratic learning cultures at work and in public spaces. The author argues that these benchmarks must be translated into lived reality if people are to create empowered workers and developmental work.

KEYWORDS

Age of Conversation, Consultative Virtues, Deliberative Democracy, Democratic Learning Cultures, Empowerment, Good Conversations, Identity, Listening Skills, Public Debate, Public Spaces, Public Spheres

INTRODUCTION

The language of “conversational learning journey,” “deliberative democracy,” “communicative action,” and “authentic expression” has woven its way through adult learning theory in our time. This essay proceeds from the presupposition that the art and practice of “good conversation” is the essence of the human learning process. A conversation breakdown (or refusal to engage one’s partner dialogically) thwarts the learning process, leaving conflicts and problems unresolved (between individuals, workers and management and citizens and governments). We examine three themes: first, we explicate the idea of conversation and its discontents and the appearance of the “age of conversation” in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England and France. This historical analysis anchors our understanding of the evolutionary movement towards acknowledging the power of dialogue in human life. Second, we delineate the essential ingredients of good conversations. One of our purposes here is to create benchmarks for creating democratic learning cultures at work and in public spheres. Finally, we probe the meaning of identity—searching for a fluid and porous understanding—in our multicultural and religiously pluralistic world where frozen identities close the door to open and respectful entry into the horizons of others. This probe into the meanings of identity is meant to alert us to the ways forms of prejudice can distort and block open learning process to building democratic work and public cultures.

This topic has great urgency. Our daily lives are pervaded by a “climate of fear,” as Nobel literature prize winner Wole Soyinka expressed it in his Reith lectures at Oxford University a decade ago. Soyinka thinks that our earlier collective fear of the atom bomb has been replaced with a more insidious fear of the threat of terrorist actions disrupting everyday normalcy. The old distinction between soldier and citizen has been dissolved. We could be blown up having coffee in a café, sunning ourselves at some foreign resort, running a marathon or scampering to catch a subway. The danger seems impossible to identify with a clearly defined opponent. It is intangible. The mood of our uneasy times is incredibly bellicose, dark and veneful. The “war on terror” taints everything it touches.

DOI: 10.4018/IJA VET.2018070102
And it does touch everything, from our popular television shows—such as the defunct 24 as well as endless films that even celebrate torture and racist lawlessness such as American Sniper. One can’t read the Sunday newspaper without feeling queasy, with a sense of dread tingling our nerves and spoiling our lovely morning coffee. Every day brings a new jolt. If terror doesn’t do the trick, fear of rising sea levels will spoil the day. American scholar Samuel Huntington’s infamous “clash of civilizations”, lampooned a few years ago now appears to be unfolding in horrific ways. But the trouble with Huntington’s notion is that the belllicosity implicit in this phrase trumps the great Kantian humanist dream of dialogue amongst the civilizations and the ethical commitment to building, painstakingly, a cosmopolitan international order.

The war on terror is the dominant narrative of our time. It frames the world into “us against them.” It easily permits religion or ethnicity to be used as the distinguishing mark of one’s enemy (or, in some distorted fashion, religious belief impels the violent act itself). Dividing the world this way, us versus them, each perceiving the other as both an enemy and an inferior, shreds the tapestry of the conversable and habitable cosmopolitan world. It tears apart the ideal of a common humanity. It canalizes immense human energy into channels of aggression and violence towards the feared other.

It closes the door on learning and critical self-reflection. The feared other cannot be heard. When we separate ourselves from the other, or divide the world into friends and enemies, conversation—from smallest to highest levels of talk—is stopped dead in its tracks. All learning shudders to grinding halt, like a train forced to stop for an emergency. It is imperative, then, for us to understand as well and as deeply as we are able not only what stops conversation, but what conditions (both institutional and personal) nurture the spiritual movement from self-centred, first-person preoccupations to adopting the position of the third-person other who raises questions and themes for consideration.

CONVERSATION: ITS MEANING AND DISCONTENTS

In his recent book, Conversation: a history of a declining art, Stephen Miller (2006) believes that good conversations do not “just happen.” He thinks that Americans, in particular, are not “preoccupied with the quality of their conversation” (p. xi). In fact, Miller scans the conversational landscape and finds much to be dispirited about. We seem to be living, he thinks, in the age of the screed, the rant, the diatribe. Talk shows either promote aggressive in-your-face talk, or, like Donahue or Oprah, encourage venting and sharing of opinions, all taken as equally valid. Some right-leaning news broadcasters like Fox and CNN foster the screeching commentator. Academics, for their part, are taught to deliver monologues. Even an admirable Centre for Dialogue, such as Simon Fraser University’s downtown Vancouver, convenes “dialogues,” which can turn out to be little more than individuals simply giving an opinion, with little connection to anything anyone else has spoken. In his carefully crafted book, Together: the rituals, pleasures and politics of cooperation, Richard Sennett (2012) cites British philosopher Bernard Williams, whom he says “writes scathingly about the ‘fetish of assertion’, that impulse to ram home your case as though its content is all that counts. Listening skills don’t figure much in this kind of verbal joust; the interlocutor is meant to admire and so to agree, or to counter with equal assertiveness—the familiar dialogue of the deaf in most political debate” (p. 18).

We cannot take good conversations for granted. David Hume (1711-1776) said that “Freedom is necessary for conversation, but conversation will not flourish simply because there is freedom. Without a ‘polite’ citizenry, conversation will suffer” (Miller, 2006). The word polite nests within the ethos of the celebrated “age of conversation.” It also opens up worlds of marvellous scholarship of the historical origins of the conversible world. Benedetta Crevari’s (2005) fine scholarly study of the conversational style of the French nobility in the seventeenth century, The age of conversation, reveals that the nobility gradually learned in their salons to adopt a civilized and outwardly respectful attitude to their conversation partners. They could not be vulgar or rough, they had to be polite with each other; they had to use their ingenuity and manners to keep conversations flowing and entertaining. But, by around 1715, noble conversation to entertain would be transformed into conversation to