

DIALOGUE AND TRUST

By Jim Knight

When I was an undergraduate student at Wilfrid Laurier University, I stumbled into a philosophy of education course taught by Dr. Robert Litke, which ultimately changed my life. I left the course very interested in education and deeply affected by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire's book challenged me then, and it still does today. I find the book to be wise, provocative and humanizing, and, among many other things, it offers a concise summary of some of the necessary conditions for dialogue, and ultimately trust to flourish. Dialogue, Freire says, requires love, humility and faith.

LOVE

"Love," Freire writes, "is ... an act of courage, not of fear... [a] commitment to other people" (p.78). Dialogue, Freire writes, "cannot exist ... in the absence of a profound love for the world and for [people] (p.77)." This sounds wonderful, but what does Freire mean by the word love?

Margaret Atwood has famously written, "The Eskimos have 52 words for snow because it is so special to them; there ought to be as many for love." Apparently Atwood may be wrong about the number of words for snow in the Inuktitut, but she is right that we need many different definitions for love. Few words in English have been more trivialized that

"If I do not love the world – if I do not love life – if I do not love [people] – I cannot enter into dialogue."

The Pedagogy of the Oppressed, page 78





the word, and too often it seems like a vague empty term. However, thanks to writers such as Freire, I have come to see love in very specific ways. My definition is shaped by my reading of Dallas Willard, a former philosophy professor at University of Southern California. Willard defined love as “engaging your will for the good of another,” genuinely wanting what is best for those around us, or truly having an attitude of benevolence for others. Simply put, when two people engage their wills for the good of each other, the opportunity for dialogue presents itself and the foundation for trust is put in place. For this reason, love is a necessary pre-requisite for dialogue.

The opposite is also true. If we go into a conversation using dialogue as a method to get buy-in, or to manipulate someone into buying what we are selling, a strategy, idea or advice, we aren’t going to have a dialogue. The heart of a dialogue is each conversation partner’s mutual desire for what is best for each other, or simply put, love.

HUMILITY

“Dialogue,” Freire writes, “cannot exist without humility” (p.78). Since dialogue is a back and forth form of conversation, we need to go into the conversation, open to, perhaps even expecting to change our opinions if we want to engage in dialogue. People who are sure they are right, and who aren’t interested in learning from others, won’t experience dialogue.

“[Dialogue] cannot be an act of arrogance ... How can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own?”

The Pedagogy of the Oppressed, page 78



“Many political and educational plans have failed because their authors designed them according to their own personal views of reality, never once taking into account [the people] to whom their program was ostensibly directed.”

The Pedagogy of the Oppressed, page 83

To be humble doesn't mean we choose to have low self-efficacy, or worse that we pretend to have low self-efficacy. We can, and should, believe in our ideas and be open to learning, and willing to be wrong. When we approach others with a desire to hear what they have to say, rather than with a desire to put them in their place, then we are moving toward a more dialogical way of being.



FAITH

“Faith in [people],” Freire writes, “is an *a priori* requirement for dialogue; the dialogical [person] believes in other [people] even before he meets them face to face” (p.79). Simply put, if we are going to have dialogue with someone else, we need to believe in them. If we dismiss people as having nothing to teach us, then dialogue is pretty much impossible.

What does it mean to believe in other people? It means we believe they can and want to do good. It means that we believe they can teach us something. We approach them as learners not as judges, expecting that they can and will teach us something.

One way to understand what it means to believe in people is to consider thinking about what it looks like when we don't believe in others. This lack of belief can show up in many different behaviours. First off, if we see a conversation as a one-way kind of conversation, where our goal is to give advice, to tell people what they've done right and wrong, to tell people what their next steps should be, we won't experience dialogue. A school where the professional development is designed to tell teachers what to do is often a school where teachers eventually stop thinking for themselves and tell the coach, “Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it.”

TRUST

When we approach others with love, faith and humility, trust should be the natural outcome. Freire writes, “it would be a contradiction in terms if dialogue – loving, humble and full of faith – did not produce this climate of mutual trust” (p.80). Trust is established by dialogue, but it will be diminished or destroyed if love, faith and humility are not there. “False love, false humility, and feeble faith in [people] cannot inspire trust” (p.80).

I have found Freire's simple descriptions of the conditions for dialogue and trust to be very helpful. If we sense people are hesitating to trust us, for example, we can reflect on whether we truly are engaging our wills for their good, communicating that we believe in them, and approaching them with humility. When our words and actions embody love, faith and humility, others will trust us, and when trust occurs, we may find ourselves swept up in important, life-changing conversations. [CP](#)

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