Foreword for *Nurturing difficult conversations in Education:*

*empowerment, agency and social justice in the UK*

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Difficult conversations are the stuff of life. They are, for many of us, the most personally meaningful interactions we can ever hope to engage in. They allow us to interact and share in our authentic vulnerability. But they also are the most emotionally demanding of interactions. They stretch, challenge, transform and even – as the essays in this volume demonstrate – educate us, because they invite us to confront the other in their full otherness, replete with unexpected particularities and idiosyncrasies. This, in turn, forces us to recognise that we too are always inevitably an other to our conversational partners. Each of us is capable of being surprising, somewhat mysterious, and sometimes even downright inscrutable to others, as others can be – and often are – to us. It is only through the process of conversation that this otherness that seems to separate conversational partners can be apprehended and overcome. But this otherness is not overcome in the sense of being destroyed or left behind once and for all. Rather conversation permits the interplay of commonality and difference to move to the foreground of our awareness, pushing our unavoidable existential separateness (the uniqueness of our journey from “womb to tomb”, as Cornel West often puts it) to the margins of our awareness, at least for a while.

Conversations, even the seemingly gentle ones, involve risk: the risk of being misunderstood, of being shunned or shamed, of failing to understand or be understood – in short, of exposure. But in every conversation there is also a chance that the opposite will occur: we may be deeply understood, affirmed and supported; we may more genuinely understand our self and others; we may learn and share, be heard, respected and honoured for our individual thoughts, feelings, and expressions.

We can be transformed by conversations. Perhaps the most transformative feature of conversation is that it allows one to learn about oneself. How often have I caught myself mid-conversation saying to my interlocutor something which I had not previously known that I believed or felt? Rather often. In fact, the more emotionally or intellectually demanding the conversation, the more I expect a new part of myself to reveal itself to me and - whether I like it or not - to my conversational partner. Perhaps it was a version of this experience that inspired Socrates in a famous passage of the *Theaetetus* to characterise philosophy as a kind of conversational ‘midwifery’: a space in which ideas are born. Of course, Socrates maintained that his philosophical method of maieutics aimed at truth and involved confronting the pain of perplexity and doubt. I, for one, rather suspect that Socrates oversold the pain involved in philosophical discussion (he thought it greater than the pain of giving birth to a child!) and undersold its joys.

However, even in the most challenging of conversations we find a kind of existential respite. A sense of being tethered to one another, to one’s sense of self in a deeper way than our internal monologues allow for, and perhaps even to the human conversation itself. Conversation is therefore a kind of bridge. It can be a bridge between different parts of the self, between people, between places, between cultures, between times, and between subject positions. As conversations always occur in a wider socio-political context, one in which some forms of expression are praised or taken as ‘natural’ because they are those employed by the dominants, while other ways of communicating are trivialised or treated as ‘deficient’ because they are those employed by the marginalised or the oppressed, conversations must be understood as shaped by power and yet also as offering the possibility of breaking through lines of enduring difference. As the feminist cultural critic Aimee Carrillo Rowe (2010: 218) explains: “To engage an/other is to reach across the power lines that would separate us; it is to place ourselves vulnerably in the hands of an/other and strive to acknowledge the position of an/other.”

Difficult conversations are those conversations where the bridge is shakier, the cliffs deeper, and the stakes higher. They are conversations where our mere habitual modes of interaction won’t cut it, where words might fail us, where existing structures and hierarchies most threaten mutual understanding, where we must most actively produce and reproduce, invent and reinvent the interpersonal bridge connecting self with others.

The essays within this volume eloquently and intelligently speak to the pedagogical promise and challenges involved in centering difficult conversations at the heart of the educational task. They invite us as educators to go beyond what Freire famously called ‘the banking model’ of education, to consider our role in shaping the nature of our interactions with our students, and to overcome many of our preconceived ideas about the nature and purpose of conversation in schooling and beyond. In short, they make a compelling case for the pedagogical value (and, perhaps ultimately, the necessity) of fostering difficult conversations in education. This superbly edited set of essays provides a series of academically informed and well-grounded reflections about the educational value of difficult conversations across a wide range of contexts and subject matters. Each essay provides a fascinating insight into a unique context fraught with challenges and rich hermeneutic possibilities. In addition, the editors and the contributors to this volume successfully engage us – their readers – in  a conversation about our own pedagogical practices and experiences. They do this by interspersing the text with questions directed at us to wrestle with, to sit with, to discuss with others. In other words, this volume is in and of itself an invitation to take part in difficult conversations about the nature and aims of education, about the place of vulnerability in education, and ultimately about what we believe to be the authentic roles of the educator and the learner in pedagogic interactions. It is in the spirit of that conversation that I will now share a brief biographical reflection of my own on what I have learned about the value of difficult conversations in education.

In the first chapter of *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer (2010: 23) lets us in on his private feelings as an educator, when he writes: “Long into my career I harbored a secret sense that thinking and reading and writing, as much as I loved them, did not qualify as ‘real work’.” Growing up in France in the 1990s, attending school as a foreigner, I came to believe something quite similar about ‘conversation’: I ‘learned’ that conversation – and especially difficult conversation – was purportedly the antithesis of ‘real learning’. I did not so much ‘learn’ this from my own secondary school, which was rather liberal compared to neighbouring schools and had a handful of truly excellent teachers who were supportive of questioning, conversation, and of the use of the often forbidden word ‘je’ [‘I]. Rather I learned it from my wider community of friends who went to more traditional schools. I learned from them that one could get thrown out of class for asking too many questions to the teacher about the content of the lesson, for asking a friend for a pen or a pencil, for telling a teacher that one did not understand something, for asking a teacher what evidence they had to back up their assertions, for asking a teacher for help, for asking a teacher for their first name, for asking to go the toilet too often, or even for asking a question with a tone which the teacher found to be ‘insolent’. Students rarely spoke directly to one another in an open forum about the content of the learning, because in French traditional schools (whether state run or Catholic), my friends informed me, speaking for students was typically reserved for answering the teacher’s questions, usually by repeating the teacher’s own words back to them, and even then, only when explicitly called upon. The parents of one of my French friends’ once explained the social significance of being educated in this manner as learning how to inhabit ‘one’s proper place’ in the social order: “It prepares the young for the real world,” they told me, “a world in which speaking one’s mind out of turn is not a mark of intelligence, or of social prestige, or an asset for obtaining employment, but rather a potential stain on one’s reputation, a mark of a lower social rank and of a failure to fit in”. Lest the reader get the wrong idea, allow me to fill in the edges: though parcellary, the image of France as a country filled with rebellious radicals, where passionate debates are carried out over coffee or wine (and cigarettes) long into the night on the terraces of Parisian cafes is not wholly inaccurate. But this somewhat widespread political mood of self-actualising personal and collective sovereignty may well be a direct reaction to the type of overbearing schooling I have just described: when meaningful self-expression is impossible in the classroom, it will eventually emerge somewhere else.

I personally only became fully aware of the depth of the aversion to fostering challenging conversation in education when I was in my penultimate year of *lycée* [high school] and the *Directrice* [Headmistress] of my own relatively liberal school saw fit to remind us that the ‘*liberté de parole’* [freedom of speech] and open inquisitiveness she thought we had practised there would almost certainly not be tolerated once we graduated*.* She added that we had to anticipate heavy repercussions should we dare to speak our minds too freely at university or in the *classes préparatoires aux grandes écoles* [preparatory classes for the most prestigious French tertiary institutions].

I took that warning to heart and I left for Britain to undertake my undergraduate education. It was there that I first experienced the seminar, namely, a space of learning where discussion is the sole and entire point, where educators are disappointed by silence and facile agreement, and where joy is found in the struggle to think together and against one another. But this remained for a long while a mere space for minds to debate, rather than a space for whole people to meet and converse. It was only when I began to take part in facilitating philosophy with children that I discovered a pedagogical outlook (rooted in Matthew Lipman’s P4C) that included feelings and challenging experiences alongside thoughts in the list of valued educational contributions. The effect this had on me cannot be overstated: it hit me like a lightning rod, like discovering something that I had somehow always known. True education is of the whole person – *psyche* and *soma* in equal measure – and is produced as much out of the experiences, thoughts and feelings of the learners as out of those of the educators. Today, I firmly believe that learning how to engage in difficult conversations is the highest educational good, for it is the one experience that can unleash most meaningfully all other forms of learning. It teaches us to withstand and ultimately treasure the tremendous discomfort that comes from admitting to ourselves all that we do not yet know and all that we most deeply yearn to learn.

May the voices in this volume be a bridge to support your own journey into conversational risk and may they light your way to ever new conversational horizons – they already have for me.

Bibliography

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