

## Can You Hear Me? Questioning Dialogue Across Differences of Ability

Ashley Taylor  
Syracuse University

The pedagogical practice of intergroup dialogue seems to me a simultaneously important and difficult endeavour. Syracuse University offers a number of courses dealing in a variety of subjects or “social identities” from gender to sexuality to race. However, at present there is no intergroup dialogue on ability/disability. As I began to consider why this might be, I realized it was necessary to first consider how such a project of dialogue across ability/disability would occur. What would be its goals? And, are there *specific* differences — limitations perhaps — in dialoguing across differences of ability? This essay attempts to respond to these background questions. It is therefore an exploration of “dialogue across difference” and the specific possibilities and limitations for a dialogue across differences of ability. I take as a starting point Alison Jones’ critique of dialogue as an ideal of equality in critical pedagogy. In her example of dialogue across difference between a group of Maori and Pacific Islander students and their white counterpart we see difficult questions arise regarding knowledge, power, and experience, namely who emerge as knowers in this arrangement, who is empowered, and who actually *benefits* in relation to the aim of the project. These tensions trouble the aim of dialogue as generating mutual understanding, empowerment of marginalized groups, and, more broadly, equality.

While Jones’ analysis is primarily concerned with a dialogue across racial differences, I am interested in dialogue as it occurs across differences of ability — that is, between groups of individuals with disabilities and their nondisabled counterparts.<sup>1</sup> Following Iris Marion Young’s assertion that all oppressed groups “face a common condition of oppression” but experience this oppression differently,<sup>2</sup> I consider the tensions and impediments that seem particular to a dialogue across differences of ability, using specific examples to illustrate my points. This argument proceeds first by considering the goals of dialogue within critical pedagogy and its different manifestations, looking closely at how these goals are complicated by structures and relations of power. I then explore how experiences of disability and marginalization more generally are relayed in and through the dialogic encounter in ways that at once centralize and distort the communicated experience of minority group participants. Finally, I address some enduring difficulties and, perhaps, impediments, to a dialogue across differences of ability. As I intend to make clear, the complex relations of power and social structures that hold individuals with disabilities in positions of inequality relative to dominant knowledge and norms of experience work to challenge the goals of dialogue and the possibilities for mutual understanding that are central to the project.

Within critical pedagogy, as elsewhere, dialogue is heralded as an ideal of social justice, consisting of a mutual exchange of perspectives and a process of persuasion that has the potential to yield mutual understanding. For Paulo Freire, true dialogue

can overcome oppression and transform the world.<sup>3</sup> Dialogue enacts the naming of the world, a naming that fundamentally humanizes its participants through an exchange of ideas. But, for Freire, dialogue is prevented from occurring when there is inequality between participant groups, when some participants are denied the right to speak because of an unequal system of power.<sup>4</sup> Equality under this formulation, then, is prior to and a precondition of dialogue in addition to its outcome. Within subsequent scholarship in Critical Pedagogy, the function of dialogue continues as one of social justice and empowerment of marginalized social identities, with some important departures from the rather idealized sense of equality that is assumed in Freire, and which is indeed a prerequisite to his dialogic project. The central question, then, is whether equality *can* in fact be a precondition for dialogue across difference when dialogue occurs between dominant and marginalized social groups rather than between those which are (more) equally positioned or empowered.

In their analysis of dialogue across difference, Nicholas Burbules and Suzanne Rice argue that the departure from the Freirian construction of dialogue marks the split within critical pedagogy between the modernist and postmodernist perspective, the latter of which attempts to expose how power and structural inequalities operate within dialogue. The familiar postmodern position asserts that power inequalities are always at work within political and social discourses that aim to homogenize differences rather than celebrate and embrace them.<sup>5</sup> Under this view, the goals of dialogue are questioned in light of the inescapability of relations of domination within social arrangements. Burbules and Rice point out that this position, which they call “anti-modernism,” is to a certain extent self-defeating and inconsistent because it “embraces incommensurability across worldviews” as desirable rather than as failure, thus resigning any possibility of dialogic exchange.<sup>6</sup> These authors are not committed to a modernist perspective, however, but rather look to the sort of postmodernism that they see as continuous with modernism to the extent that it retains some of the latter’s goals of reason and equality while challenging its universality and failure to acknowledge structures of power. This latter version of postmodernism is one in which dialogue is still possible, even desirable, as it can be a site of empowerment through a sharing and celebration of difference. Dialogue, they argue, should be aimed at highlighting not only differences but also similarities across groups; that is, it should require us to compare our differences, an activity that implies a certain amount of similarity.<sup>7</sup> They maintain, moreover, that it is possible to work through the structural challenges overlooked in modernism and to come to a “non-dominating agreement” that retains an appreciation for (perhaps incommensurable) differences.<sup>8</sup>

If the goals of dialogue include mutual understanding, then the sort of postmodernist view advanced by Burbules and Rice is instructive because it helps us to conceive of a middle ground between the equally problematic stances of modernism and “anti-modernism.” But acknowledging differences and the oft-times incommensurable viewpoints of diverse individuals and groups is one issue, while another perhaps more pressing concern is how to grapple with the inequalities that attend these differences. As I argued above, the project of dialogue across

difference is challenged by a certain contradiction, namely that dialogue appears to require equal engagement and equally valued participation while at the same time making equality its goal. For Jones, this is an important impasse: “It is shared openness and accessibility — a prerequisite for dialogue and therefore good pedagogy — which potentially has very problematic different meanings for members of unequally positioned groups.”<sup>9</sup> It appears, then, that Jones and Freire share similar worries regarding the silencing of participants in the dialogic encounter, but Jones’ analysis is nevertheless different. While for Freire this silencing consists in a refusal by one party of the other’s right to speak, Jones’ concern arises out of a different sort of dominance, one that must be characterized as “less blatant” or overt, as consisting in structures and social meanings rather than dominations of force or overt forms of power.<sup>10</sup> This distinction is important because it points to a tension that Jones sees in dialogue itself, namely its occurrence within dominant social arrangements and its use of the structural tools (language, space, institutions of power, and so on.) of the dominant group.<sup>11</sup> Exchanges within the dialogic encounter are already cut through with “structural power differences and conflicts among voices.”<sup>12</sup> Dialogue then seems to encounter a fundamental problem, that even when participants are equally *participating* in dialogue, they may not be equal participants; that is, equal participation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for equality.

I elaborate this point by drawing on Meira Levinson’s critique of deliberative democracy, which she argues is characterized by an open (uncoerced) dialogue that aims at mutual agreement and understanding.<sup>13</sup> Because it is aimed at mutuality, deliberation must proceed by means of the equal participation of all groups and must therefore be not only formally inclusive, but also entail that all voices be equally heard and that all participants be capable of influencing the debate.<sup>14</sup> Levinson maintains that it is this latter point that poses a challenge to deliberative democracy because one group might be incapable of hearing the position of another. If some views are distorted or taken as illegitimate within deliberation — African Americans’ historical distrust of government medicine, in Levinson’s example — the potential for mutual understanding becomes a far off goal, one that seems impossible in light of the incomprehension that prevails. Jones’ argument echoes this problem as she describes the dominant group’s inability to hear the perspectives of the marginalized group even in spite of good intentions and a genuine desire to hear.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, even partial understanding is dangerous because it is fraught with the interpretive power of the dominant group. In both these analyses, the deliberation or dialogue itself takes place within a system already structurally unequal and any exchange that occurs does so within the parameters demarcated by that structure.

What, then, is meant by “structurally unequal” in my discussion? A basic, although certainly not unchallenged, tenet of disability studies is the “Social Model,” which posits that the barriers that individuals with disabilities face in society are the result of social attitudes, institutional structures, and social norms that operate, however mechanically, in ways that exclude these individuals.<sup>16</sup> Although there are weaker and stronger claims regarding the extent to which disability is a

social construct or result of social forces, Social Model proponents generally agree that were these attitudes, structures, and norms to change, people with disabilities would likely enjoy far more opportunities to participate within society. Under this view, the marginalization that people with disabilities experience is the result of structural oppression that Iris Marion Young describes as “embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols.”<sup>17</sup> For Young, the marginalization of people with disabilities emerges from a cultural and social structure that regards the dependency regularly attributed to people with disabilities as a reason for their exclusion from social life.<sup>18</sup> In addition, these dominant social and cultural forces work to define individuals from the outside, to inscribe their subjectivity as “other.” The result is “that the oppressed group’s own experience and interpretation of social life finds little expression that touches the dominant culture, while that same culture imposes on the oppressed group its experience and interpretation of social life.”<sup>19</sup> In short, members of the oppressed group are compromised in their means to communicate their experiences as these are always constituted within dominant social arrangements.

Given this rather bleak terrain of structural inequality, the apparent failure of the oppressed group to be heard by the dominant social group and to affect change within the dominant social structure, how are we to understand the goals of the dialogue, goals of mutual understanding and empowerment? In order to understand how the dialogue project is constrained by these relations of power, I now turn to a consideration of the particular sort of knowledge production and conveyance of experience that enters into dialogic projects.

The dialogic process involves an *exchange* of perspectives and viewpoints, each of which originates in the particular and sometimes shared experience of participants. In this sense, experience seems to be fundamental to dialogue. Here I make the claim, as others have, that individuals form their identities in relation to the social structures and the normative conditions of those structures that shape their experience.<sup>20</sup> To accept this claim is to acknowledge that our experience of the world and of others is constituted relationally. Whether understood as individual or collective, experience is always informed by these relations of power that work not only to recognize some experiences while devaluing others, but also to constitute the sorts of experiences that individuals come to have of themselves and of the world.<sup>21</sup> This is a rather complicated point that will be helped by some examples. First, a more general one: in his exploration and critique of social construction theses in *The Social Construction of What?* Ian Hacking uses the example of “the woman refugee” to illustrate the way in which individuals interact with their social roles and classifications. Hacking uses this example to argue that this classification comes to apply to particular individuals who have characteristics that meet the classificatory model. Having been classified as a “woman refugee,” an individual “may learn that she is a certain kind of person and act accordingly.”<sup>22</sup> Hacking calls this an “interactive kind” precisely because of the dynamic (or interactive) way in which people become aware of how they are classified and change their behaviour in relation to that classification. Here we see how an individual’s relation to the world

and experience of herself is changed by — and simultaneously changes — the structures within which and in relation to which she is interacting.

To further this discussion of experience, let us consider disability theorist Scot Danforth's view of subjugated knowledges in relation to individuals labelled with a developmental disability. The challenge of open dialogue is not an unfamiliar one to disability studies scholars. Danforth shares the vision and concern of many postmodernists<sup>23</sup> regarding the production of knowledge within exchanges surrounding the activities and care of people with developmental disabilities. Within these sites, he argues, knowledge production is always a "political activity that privileges the perspectives of some while devaluing and silencing the perspectives of others."<sup>24</sup> Danforth uses the example of how "Fred," a person labelled with a developmental disability, is at once the focus of a discussion about his life and also completely absent from that discussion; his doctors and other professionals discuss Fred's life without including his input or that of his care-providers and family members. In fact, there is a distinctive knowledge hierarchy in this example, where Fred's care providers and family members' perspectives are marginalized relative to the knowledge and experience of the professionals who have minimal contact with him. Importantly, Fred's own view is not considered as he is noticeably absent from the meeting. The notion of subjugated knowledges that Danforth cites to describe Fred's epistemological positioning is a Foucauldian notion that, when framed in relation to disability, can be understood as the "experiences, understandings, and wisdom of persons with disabilities and their loved ones that are disqualified."<sup>25</sup> In this second example, experience can be understood as *silenced* by relations of power that structure what does and does not count as knowledge.

In the first example we see how experience is constituted relative to social structures and social meanings. In the second example, we see how certain perspectives are silenced within a social structure that privileges some forms of knowledge at the expense of others. Both of these examples, I maintain, correspond to the experience of people with disabilities. When we come to understand experience as constituted relative to the dominant discourse, we must question not only the *formal* equality of the dialogic encounter — that is, the equal participation of differently situated individuals — but also the equality that is substantive of the exchange. In other words, even if all participants were granted the same opportunities to contribute and even if they were in fact *heard* (understood) by their peers (a possibility that I have shown to be troubled), we must consider how the experience of the participants is constituted and distorted in the dialogic exchange itself.

So far I have written in general terms about oppressed groups with some specific emphasis on people with disabilities as belonging to one such oppressed group. Here I discuss some worries that can be understood as of particular concern to individuals with disabilities when they engage in sharing their experience. When referring to people with disabilities as an oppressed group, I mean to employ the meaning of "social group" defined by Young as definitive of social identity and as distinct from aggregates or collectives.<sup>26</sup> Although it is instructive to speak about individuals with

disabilities and their particular experiences, such accounts often fail to show how individual identity and experience are influenced by an individual's relation to others and to the structural, political forces that shape these relations. The notion of a social group highlights the "thrownness" of some identity experiences wherein "one first finds a group identity as given, and then takes it up in a certain way."<sup>27</sup> What is important to my argument is the connection between social group experience and the structural inequalities that marginalize some individuals because of their membership in or assignment to particular social groups. Thus, the potential challenges to dialogue across differences of ability are ones that emerge out of how experience is potentially devalued or distorted relative to these inequalities.

Writing on the socio-political dimensions of disability experience, Brian Watermeyer and Leslie Swartz argue that people with disabilities experience a "silencing of a layer of their experience" because of their socialization within dominant relations of power.<sup>28</sup> People with disabilities are socialized to disguise their disability in order to gain access into social life as well as to "protect" others from their disabled body. This tendency emerges out of an individual's desire to appear as "normal" or as capable — all the attributes that typically entail access to and participation in social and cultural institutions. According to these authors, "disabled people are taught throughout life that even partial acceptance into the social mainstream is contingent on the obscuring or internal or secret managing of disabled experience."<sup>29</sup> This obscuring of experience has been called "passing."<sup>30</sup> Passing relies on and is made possible by the presumptive norms of a society that assumes ablebodiedness. Thus, passing is at once a way to cope with the structures and norms of exclusion, but also a reaffirmation of those norms; that is, because passing is a "buying into" rather than a disruption of the normative status quo, no real inclusive work is done. Even though an individual might be included based on her passing for "normal," this individual is engaged in a masking or conformity that works to reify that system which is exclusionary in the first place. Moreover, where a person is engaged in obscuring her experience, her participation in a dialogue that involves an openness of perspectives and experiential knowledge would be highly circumscribed.

Consider an example of a university student with a learning disability who does not share or "disclose" his disability to his peers, but who nevertheless struggles within a climate that has particular demands of performance and competitive attitudes among students.<sup>31</sup> At some point he overhears his classmates talking about another classmate who they know has received accommodations for her class work because of a learning disability. These classmates discuss the unfairness of what they perceive as "special treatment," while our original student listens in. Again, having chosen not to share that he himself has been labelled with a learning disability this student would probably be prevented from or at least made fearful of discussing his own experience, whatever that might be. In short, he acquiesces to the social norms of the academic institution and the broader social norms of intellectual ability. This example calls on us to consider how the social conditions that structure dominations of power and position people with disabilities as marginal create a social climate in



which individuals with disabilities strive — consciously or unconsciously — to “fit in,” to conform to the prevailing and pervasive notion of normalcy and normal ability. Within dialogue across differences of ability, this disguising of experience would complicate possibilities for mutual understanding, even as it might yield possibilities for consensus or agreement.

A further challenge to dialogue could arise in the assumptions that nondisabled individuals make about the abilities of the disabled individuals with whom they are engaged. In the words of Watermeyer and Swartz, “A familiar situation is that of a disabled person being gently coerced into receiving — and appreciating — unwanted and unsolicited assistance.”<sup>32</sup> These impositions come from the desire to intervene where differences of ability become apparent. For individuals who experience hearing, speech, or cognitive difficulties or differences, these assumptions might come in the form of unsolicited assistance in speaking and communicating thoughts and feelings, in denials of experience, and in misinterpretation of testimony (to note a few instances), all of which might result in impatience, patronization, or subjugation of perspectives. For example, consider an exchange between Lucy and Roger, in which Lucy is an individual who identifies as nondisabled and Roger is an individual who identifies as hearing-impaired and whose speech is sometimes difficult to decipher. During their exchange, Roger relays something about his experience to Lucy, who fails to understand what he said. Perhaps Lucy asks Roger to repeat himself, and, when he does, she is again unsure. Let us suppose that Lucy is a woman who is very caring and concerned with not offending others, or appearing as rude, and also with hearing others’ viewpoints. And, let us suppose that Lucy is someone who does not want to draw attention to Roger’s disability because she fears that asking him to repeat himself too many times will make him feel as though she is somehow intolerant. So Lucy, embarrassed by her own inability to understand Roger, and not wanting to appear intolerant, nods and indicates that she has understood him, giving Roger the impression that she has (or perhaps not, as it is imaginable that he might acquiesce) and then moving on. Although trite, this example allows us to consider how the dynamics of interpersonal exchange and dialogue are influenced by the normative assumptions and limitations of the individuals so engaged, evidenced also in the earlier example from Levinson. Further, it shows how even a committed and well-intentioned individual like Lucy might fail to hear — both in the literal and figurative sense — the testimony of Roger.

These examples are intended to show the difficulties of a dialogue that takes place within structures of power and knowledge that are unequal and in which the experience of some participants is distorted or unheard. I do not think it is too strong to say that when this is the case, when the conveyance of experience — albeit socially formed — is itself obstructed, dialogue is significantly challenged in its goals of mutual understanding and acknowledgment of differences. Although it is quite unexceptional that failures of communication should occur within dialogue, I do think that the above examples help to illustrate the way in which some such failures emerge out of and reify the system of normalization and silencing that marginalizes people with disabilities, whether in the academy or elsewhere. Importantly, as we

contemplate the possibilities for intergroup dialogue on disability, we must not ignore or diminish this social reality even as we wish to change it.

Addressing the challenges of dialogue across differences of ability requires a consideration of the limitations and concerns particular to individuals with disabilities as members of a marginalized group. It likewise demands a revisiting and reformulation of the goals of dialogue, a project that is important but beyond the scope of this essay.<sup>33</sup> Here, I have offered a glimpse of just some of these concerns, but enough, I believe, to demonstrate the need to look closer at the relations of power and inequality relative to people with disabilities who engage in dialogue. I am not ready to dismiss the possibilities and potentials of a dialogue across differences of ability and I certainly do not want to claim that differences of ability pose dialogical problems that are too significant to transcend. That would be to commit the harms that I wish to address. Rather, my goal is to illustrate the tensions that arise when we ask that socially unequal parties engage in a project that seems to require their prior social equality, or, at least, their potential to be equally heard.

---

1. Note that I am constructing a dichotomy here between ability and disability. I do so for strategic purposes, recognizing such a dichotomy to be problematic. For a discussion of this strategic dichotomy, see Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

2. Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 40.

3. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 88–89.

4. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 88.

5. Nicholas C. Burbules and Suzanne Rice, "Dialogue Across Differences: Continuing the Conversation," *Harvard Educational Review* 61, no. 4 (1991): 396.

6. Burbules and Rice, "Dialogue Across Differences," 401.

7. *Ibid.*, 403.

8. *Ibid.*, 408.

9. Alison Jones, "The Limits of Cross-Cultural Dialogue: Pedagogy, Desire, and Absolution in the Classroom," *Educational Theory* 49, no. 3 (1999): 306.

10. See Barbara Applebaum and Dwight Boyd, "The Meaning of Dominance, the Dominance of Meaning, the Morality of the Matter," *Education, Culture and Values* 4 (2000): 34.

11. Jones, "The Limits of Cross-Cultural Dialogue," 307.

12. *Ibid.*, 306.

13. Meira Levinson, "Challenging Deliberation," *Theory and Research in Education* 1, no. 1 (2003): 25.

14. Levinson, "Challenging Deliberation," 26–27.

15. Jones, "The Limits of Cross-Cultural Dialogue," 308.

16. See Michael Oliver, *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice* (New York: Palgrave, 1996); or Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body* (London: Routledge, 1996).

17. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 41.

18. *Ibid.*, 53–54.

19. *Ibid.*, 60.

20. See Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*; or Martha Minow, *Making All the Difference: Inclusion, Exclusion and American Law* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991).



21. See Joan Scott, "Experience," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992).
22. Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 32.
23. I regard Danforth's postmodernism as just that rather than as some form of antimodernism (to follow Burbules and Rice's distinction).
24. Scot Danforth, "What Can the Field of Developmental Disabilities Learn From Michel Foucault?" *Mental Retardation* 38, no. 4 (2000): 364.
25. Danforth, "What Can the Field of Developmental Disabilities Learn From Michel Foucault?" 368.
26. See Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.
27. *Ibid.*, 46.
28. Brian Watermeyer and Leslie Swartz, "Conceptualising the Psycho-Emotional Aspects of Disability and Impairment: The Distortion of Personal and Psychic Boundaries," *Disability and Society* 23, no. 6 (2008): 604.
29. Watermeyer and Swartz, "Conceptualising the Psycho-Emotional Aspects of Disability and Impairment," 602.
30. See for example Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963). The phenomenon of "passing" has also been variously discussed relative to race, gender, sexuality, and so forth.
31. For an account of academic norms of performance with respect to individuals with disabilities, see Wendell, *The Rejected Body*.
32. Watermeyer and Swartz, "Conceptualising the Psycho-Emotional Aspects of Disability and Impairment," 604.
33. For further critique of the goals of dialogue and possible alternatives, see Elizabeth Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy," *Harvard Educational Review* 59, no. 3 (1989), in which she discusses the possibility of "defiant speech" or "talking back" where dialogue fails to challenge inequalities.

---

This essay was generously supported by an award from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for a Central New York Humanities Corridor.