

Intellectual Conversation

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One of my favorite metaphors for a discipline or a field of study is a conversation. Scholars are always interested in some conversations more than others, and thus are drawn to particular disciplines because that is where the conversations that most intrigue them are happening. For example, we can see philosophy of education as a kind of conversation, or at least some overlapping clusters of conversations. We have a variety of topics we are interested in, from questions of educational purposes, values, ethics, and responsibilities, to issues of democracy, diversity, agency, and power. We study the ideas of many of the same people and share commitments to certain theories, methodologies, and ways of doing academic work. Our field has an intellectual lineage and history that shapes our present. At the same time, I think most of us recognize, at least on some level, that good conversations are typically expansive. That is, while we share passions, ideally, we also seek new voices, insights, theories, and perspectives to fuel our passions, to challenge our ways of seeing, and to open us up to new conversational possibilities. Our vitality as a field of study depends on a delicate balance of maintaining tradition and critically and creatively reimagining that tradition. As we mentor new scholars into our field, I think most of us hope that they will both have some sense of our history as well as some ways of pushing us in new directions, helping us to think differently about our shared questions. While it is easy to talk about this balance between tradition and novelty in the abstract, it is much more challenging to enact it practically. Yet, it is precisely this balance that I think Mary Jo Hinsdale is seeking in her call for responsive mentorship.

The vision of responsive mentorship that Hinsdale offers is a compelling one. She asks that we teach students, as mentees, the dominant discourses and traditions of our fields of study, yet at the same time, we also carefully listen to their voices, especially for what they might tell us about the limitations of our own ways of seeing. As part of this attentive and responsive listening, we ought to deeply question our discourses and traditions, allowing diverse worldviews and alternative perspectives (especially those coming from traditionally marginalized students) to interrupt what we take for granted. This disruption can then open up new possibilities for how we think about, and engage, ideas and each other. In many ways Hinsdale's vision of responsive mentorship nicely parallels Lisa Delpit's arguments about the culture of power.¹ Delpit claims that one of the most difficult challenges we face in education is communicating amid difference. Surely this challenge is present in mentoring relationships across lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, culture, and power. Delpit further argues that there is a culture of power in education, that is, certain ways of writing, interacting, citing research, and presenting ideas. Disciplinary fields represent cultures of power, and in them we have preferred, and concretely valued, ways of doing things. For example, if we veer too far from the implicit and

largely unwritten codes of philosophers of education, our work will get rejected from the annual Philosophy of Education Society conference, from philosophy of education journals, and in general, we will have a tough time entering conversations in this field.

Delpit is realistic about these codes of power. She does not simply call for students to adopt these codes, but neither does she think we can pretend they don't exist. She offers, "When I speak, therefore, of the culture of power, I don't speak of how I wish things to be but of how they are."²² She adds that when working with students, especially those who come from outside the culture of power, "I tell them that their language and cultural style is unique and wonderful but that there is a political power game that is also being played, and if they want to be in on that game there are certain games that they too must play."²³ Essentially Delpit argues that we need to teach students to survive and subvert. We need to teach them the codes of power, as well their typically arbitrary nature. This information can then help students to strategically use these codes in order to access power. Only then will their voices be heard and will they be able to break into conversations, including disciplinary ones, so as to impact these conversations and contribute to shifting power dynamics. Part of what it means to mentor students is to help them to understand the norms in a field so they can become contributing conversational partners, adding sometimes new and different ways of seeing and doing, and in the process, helping to remake our disciplines.

I read Hinsdale as also calling for survival and subversion, though perhaps attending a bit more to the importance of subversion, and especially subversion of exclusionary and sometimes downright racist disciplinary norms and practices (as witnessed in the example of the Chicana sociology student). Like Delpit, she also focuses on the role of the teacher or mentor, and the posture or disposition they must assume so as to truly welcome diverse voices into disciplinary conversations. Hinsdale's focus on listening is important. I completely agree with her implicit claim that we in the academy typically do not listen well to others, especially others who are "strangers" to us. I am very drawn to Hinsdale's call for learning to listen differently: closely, attentively, reflexively, and in ways that cause us to regularly question our own stances and academic positions. Her invocation of Emmanuel Levinas is thoughtful, particularly the imperative to ethically respond to the otherness of the other, and to allow them to change us. When we don't listen responsively to our mentees, we do violence to them and their ideas. This is definitely a compelling vision of mentorship, and one necessary if we hope to genuinely diversify the academy.

While I agree with Hinsdale's vision, I am left uncertain about how we can best enact it. The disposition of responsive listening sounds great in theory, but is challenging to imagine and cultivate practically. This is especially the case because many of us already believe that we are committed to diversity, that we do listen responsively, and we are already open to otherness. Our own self-assuredness is a barrier to actually hearing others. My only real critique of Hinsdale's thoughtful

essay is that I wish she had said more about how we can become increasingly responsive in our engagements as mentors. How can we, for example, learn to listen differently? Are there ways to practice this habit? Drawing from Alphonso Lingis's notion of a community of strangers, Hinsdale suggests that there are no methods we can follow to become better listeners or mentors; rules from a mentoring manual are not likely to provide much help. Similarly, Gert Biesta asserts that the problem with the community of strangers model is that "it cannot be brought into existence in any deliberate or technical way ... [it] is not the result of work, it does not come into existence through the application of a technique or technology."⁴ Rather, it comes from how we respond to each other, not what we say, and how genuine we are in our responsiveness.

Yet, in order to help people to cultivate more genuine and open responsiveness, they need to practice this, and to practice uncovering and naming the unwritten codes of power in their fields. Delpit offers us some guidance here, arguing that we need to learn a "special kind of listening," one that involves questioning our assumptions, being quiet more often, trusting people's experiences, actively seeking alternative perspectives, and recognizing the limits of our knowledge. She also calls for humility, saying "we must learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness."⁵ I argue that while often seemingly intangible, these dispositions and habits of responsive listening can be learned. In part, we learn them through being in conversation with others and listening for assumptions, values, passions, and silences. We also learn them when we actively create structures to support listening in ways that involve generosity, tolerance, compassion, and an abiding commitment to the value of diverse perspectives.

In discussing how we can create more vibrant, diverse, and healthy academic communities, Donald Hall suggests that we explicitly teach students and new professionals to "become more supple and skilled participants in the wide variety of conversations that comprise an academic career."⁶ The abilities they need to do so are not mysterious or unknowable. Moreover, they can be modeled, practiced, and to some degree taught. While perhaps not easily codified in something like a mentoring manual, I worry that the image of a mentoring relationship as involving a community of strangers may inadvertently lead us away from recognizing the work we can do in the here and now to diminish strangeness and consequently mentor more responsively. In the end, however, I am inspired by the new, more collaborative and relational model of mentoring that Hinsdale offers, and think it is much needed if we ever hope to create a more inclusive and diverse academy.

1. Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom* (New York: New Press, 2006).

2. *Ibid.*, 39.

3. *Ibid.*, 40.

4. Gert Biesta, "The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common: Education and the Language of Responsibility," *Interchange* 35, no. 3 (2004): 321.

5. Delpit, *Other People's Children*, 47.

6. Donald E. Hall, *The Academic Community: A Manual for Change* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2007), 76.