

Conversation for Education: The Tool of Pedagogy in Universities

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Abstract

This essay is about conversation and community in universities. Specifically, the argument is to show how conversation that has an educational purpose is the fundamental and potentially most transformative tool of the university pedagogue, and of the university student. Ideas taken from intellectuals and researchers such as Socrates, Northrop Frye, Jonathan Swift, John Dewey, Theodore Zeldin, Gerrit Broekstra, and Kenneth Bruffee inform not only the development of the argument but the character of the pedagogical practice.

Conversation: The Tool of Human Life

In his 1988 book *On Education* Northrop Frye wrote a chapter titled, “Language as the Home of Human Life.” In it, he argues the human “unlike anything else in nature” is “a talking being.” A maker of tools, for sure, but language by far is humanity’s most useful tool, a tool that makes possible human society. For Frye, “All human societies without exception are enclosed in an envelope of culture, of certain social, religious, legal, and other practices, and most of this cultural envelope consists of words.”¹

Michael Oakeshott, I believe, would agree. For Oakeshott, conversations are the essential defining quality of humanness, indispensable not only to human progress but to the creation of civilization.² Conversations put language to its most important work, changing our lives. Conversations change our lives when, as Theodore Zeldin put it, they catch fire:

Humans have already changed the world several times by changing the way they have had conversations. There have been conversational revolutions which have been as important as wars and riots and famine. When problems have appeared insoluble, when life has seemed to be meaningless, when governments have been powerless, people have sometimes found a way out by changing the subject of their conversations, or the way they talked, or the person they talked to. In the past that gave us the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, modernity and post modernity.³

Universities began as conversations. Changing lives through conversations is perhaps the best way to describe the purpose of a university, and the role of the university professor. Conversation is at the centre of the professor’s work, in research and in teaching.

Research is not often thought of as a conversation, but Zeldin cannot understand it otherwise.

At the frontiers of knowledge, adventurous researchers have to be almost professional eavesdroppers, picking up ideas from the most unobvious sources. The discovery of DNA was the outcome of conversations between Crick and Watson, which went on ceaselessly for several years. They had only one rule, that they could

say whatever came into their heads. Crick always. . .asked naïve questions. This is how his conversations yielded new insights.⁴

Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, who, after studying the work of scientists in the Salk Institute for two years, also came to understand research as conversation. Scientists, they argue, “construct knowledge in conversation about their work over lab benches and in hallways and offices and by revising what they think in the course of that conversation. This is the conversation of ‘conjoined intelligence’ . . .made by confluent, simultaneously raised human voices, explaining things to each other.”⁵

But enough about research. Research is not my topic in this essay. Teaching is. Most of us are probably not much more comfortable thinking about conversation as teaching than as research. And for good reason. Most of us have a casually, even poorly developed, understanding of the rich complexities of human conversation — in part because we converse in easy, almost automatic, even taken for granted ways. And our educational researchers have not focused much attention on conversation as a form of pedagogy to guide us in our thinking. Many educational researchers have reduced these rich complexities of conversation into discrete and tactical pedagogical parts, such as structured questioning in didactic teaching or effective management strategies in group discussions, and this type of thinking dominates professional development programs for professors.

I am interested in what is usually referred to as direct conversation, that is, face-to-face conversation. I accept that conversations proceed in an indirect, or what is often called displaced fashion, through, say, e-mails, web-based online learning, or letters, and comparisons between direct and indirect conversations that have an educational point to them would be fascinating and important. But this is not my task in this essay. My purpose in writing this essay is to engage in some careful thinking about the nature of direct conversation in order to show how conversation that has an educational purpose is the fundamental tool of pedagogy in university teaching.

Jonathan Swift, living during the excitement of the Enlightenment, believed that conversations are a most natural endeavor. When they are all that they can be, they “. . .might be the greatest, the most lasting, and the most innocent, as well as useful pleasures of life.” Swift, however, critical of the sea of talk in which Irish and English society swam, worried that too much of it was of lamentably poor quality. We make many mistakes, he wrote, which we must avoid if our conversations are to be worthwhile. There is, he cautioned, “. . .the folly of talking too much. . .,” of repetition; of talking of oneself; of talking about matters which interest only a few; of interjecting silly or irrelevant comments; of making untimely or frequent interruptions; of making pseudo-witty or outrageous statements. Society can be “most abused,” he warned, through “. . .the degeneracy of conversation.”⁶

It is truly unfortunate that educational researchers have failed to pay sufficient heed to the advice offered by Swift and by one of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century’s most important philosophers and educational theorists, John Dewey. For Dewey, the child’s first learning is through “the social converse,” the power of which he argued was the greatest of all educational strategies.⁷

What researchers developed, instead, during the past century or so, was a body of pedagogical theory that represented teaching as a scientific enterprise to be reduced to the discrete level of strategies and tactics. Researchers who attempted to make sense of the pedagogical value of

talk in teaching and learning did so by using ideas from the fields of linguistics and group dynamics. One focus was on rules governing speech acts during episodes of talking. Many, such as Taylor and Cameron, are convinced this approach to pedagogical research has not proven particularly useful.⁸ Some attention has been paid in the latter decades of the last century to the dynamics of discussion in teaching and learning, based on frameworks offered by social psychologists such as Jones, Barnlund, and Haiman, but little of this addressed the educational significance of the talk and the construction of knowledge in settings such as classrooms sufficiently well to tell us much about good teaching.⁹

Of the many developments in the contemporary research agenda into the matter of what constitutes good human society — for example, good organizations or a good marriage or good teaching — none is more important than the emerging focus on the quality of the talk. This development moves much of the earlier preoccupation with objective interpretations of actions, such as planning and decision-making and structure, and even cultures, into the subjective realm of an examination of the actual lives of the people in these types of settings, what they are thinking about, how their thoughts shape their daily lives, how they engage with others, and importantly how they use words as a tool in all of these things. As Marshak put it, we are “. . .witnessing a rapidly growing movement of ideas away from the traditional, objectivist conception of reality towards a still not fully defined, but more subjective, constructivist ontology.” And, he concludes, a “. . .central aspect of this shift has been increased inquiry into the role of language in the ongoing creation of ‘reality’.”¹⁰ And for Broekstra, the “naked truth” is simply this: an organization is a conversation.¹¹

This could not be more true of an educational organization such as a university. A university is a conversation about learning through research and through teaching for the purposes of education. Conversation, Bruffee writes, is of such vital importance to education that “. . .with it, any of us has a shot at doing whatever we want to do. Without it, none of us stands a chance.”¹²

Uri Treisman, a mathematician at the Berkley campus of the University of California, was puzzled why students from some ethnic groups did considerably better in mathematics and science than other students from other ethnic groups. Asian-American students generally excelled; African-American and Hispanic-American students generally did not. To find out why, Treisman shadowed the Asian American students around campus. His discovery is profound. The Asian-American students “. . .were continually engaged in conversation about their work. They moved in packs, ate together, studied together, went to classes together. In contrast, the African-American and Hispanic students. . .were largely isolated from one another. They seldom studied or talked together about their work.”¹³

Because most university teaching occurs with groups of students in settings such as classrooms or laboratories, Kenneth Bruffee is much concerned about what he calls conversation in community. The conceptual marriage of these two, conversation and community, produced his theory of collaborative learning in university teaching. He is interested in the conversations students have in these settings and he explores the nature of collaborative peership as a means to enable learning conversations that advance, even transform learning. Bruffee’s work is quite possibly the most sophisticated to date on the matter of conversations in university teaching.

However, to put Bruffee’s ideas in context and before I discuss them, I will take us back more than a couple of thousand years ago to what we understand to be the pedagogical practices of

a master teacher who continues to shape our ideas and determines many of our pedagogical practices in universities to this day. The master, not surprisingly, is Socrates. I propose his commonly labeled “Socratic” method is more appropriately described as Socratic conversation. From there, I will consider the work of a contemporary researcher, Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon, who understands the pedagogy of conversation as interpretative discussion. Then, I will explore Bruffee’s idea of pedagogy of collaborative learning. From all of that, I will offer some conclusions about the point of my argument — that conversation is the tool of pedagogy for education in university teaching.

The Socratic Conversation

In the life of the free men of ancient Athens, a symposium was a popular event. They gathered for a banquet, ate and drank in abundance, and talked. Often the talk was of no great matter, consisting of a collection of solipsistic monologues punctuated by embarrassing silences.¹⁴ Sometimes the talk was a moment of great learning because it became a Socratic conversation.

Socrates remains famous as much for the reason for his death — the unexamined life is not worth living — as for his approach to pedagogy. Socrates did not write about his pedagogy; his equally famous student, Plato, did. Plato represents Socrates through dialogues in which Socrates is engaged in conversation primarily with young men. At the heart of these conversations was inquiry because Socrates believed only constant inquiry fosters the empowerment of the human condition, particularly its moral condition.

Socrates was able to transform talk, casual, ill informed, even tempered by too much wine, into conversation through his understanding of the nature of knowledge and how knowledge is constructed, his understanding of the characteristics of the engagement among the conversationalists, and how the form of the talk transformed beliefs. The beliefs people have come to them from within — from, as Plato has Socrates put it, our souls. These beliefs are not certain; they are the products of the experiences people have and which most likely have not been subjected to scrutiny. Beliefs are conjectures — guesses about the nature of things and events. Beliefs can become knowledge. Knowledge is not outside of people or revealed to them; rather, it is wrought through the human process of reading, listening, perceiving, and most importantly, conversing. People create knowledge by subjecting beliefs to practical test and public examination for the purpose of constructing knowledge. Men did not come to Socrates “. . . as empty heads bereft of ideas, nor as informed organisms lacking skills. . .”¹⁵ They came full of beliefs they wanted to examine. This examination was not a solitary event; it was a community enterprise occurring within a context of mutual inquiry.¹⁶ The responsibility for this examination belonged to the men who were his students. It was for them to uncover mistakes and inadequacies in their knowledge, and it was for the teacher to provide a setting in which this could happen. The essential task for Socrates was to elicit in as open and honest a way possible his students’ beliefs and then to facilitate a critique of them. That is, Socrates would help his students determine the limits of or errors in their beliefs. This critical feedback came not only from Socrates but from the others who constituted the conversation in order to evoke counter-criticisms among all the students in the conversation. This is the essence of a Socrates conversation.¹⁷

For Socrates, the conversation's setting had to be free and responsive, one characterized by low risk and the mutual exchange of effort. In such a setting, the students were not afraid to disclose their beliefs nor to share them. It was a setting unencumbered by threat and full of invitation. Socrates was so able to bring men together and to draw them into conversations of such intensity and purpose that they often expressed astonishment. These were conversations that caught fire.

Plato explains that Socrates did not start conversations; rather, at the invitation of others he joined and subsequently transformed conversations already in progress. He did, however, initiate a particular direction in the conversations. Such initiation was deliberate, having definite rhythms and events. His strategy was to ask the questions that had not been asked in order to show others what should be asked. Socrates created the conditions for critical inquiry to enable others to experience the difference between simply holding assumptions which seemed to justify their judgments and activities, and knowing those truths which actually would justify their judgments and activities. The experience began in the dissatisfaction with what a person believed and yet the inquiry occurred in such a careful way so as “. . .to forestall anger, hopelessness and shame.”¹⁸ Socrates practiced what Plato called refutation, which was based in an appeal to people's desire to know rather than their desire for approval, or worse, fear of disapproval. As Lessing explains, “. . .Socrates asks particular *kinds* of questions, in a particular *order* and *manner*, and with particular *aims* in mind. It is that, particularly named ‘dialectic’ by Plato, which allowed Socrates to ‘teach’ a slave boy what the square root of the diagonal of a square is, without ‘teaching’ him anything (Meno). The mere asking of questions does not constitute Socratic teaching.”¹⁹

For Socrates, there was a critical place in the conversation for what we call the text, the publicly held and shared knowledge of the culture in which the conversation occurs. Text, Perkinson explains, is “. . .the medium for educating the pupil's present knowledge and also the source of critical feedback.”²⁰ The text is presented in the Socratic conversation to be criticized; not to be received. Therefore, every bit of text and every bit of constructed knowledge from the conversation must be subjected to public criticism. As the conversation proceeds, it is essential that all understand that the conversation is not only between individuals; it is among the individuals and the text.

The full character of this complex conversational engagement was something not even Socrates could explain.²¹ It was not a competition between two or more people. Rather, there were shared conditions of trust, caring, and educational ends. Socrates was there not only to engage the conversationalists in critical examination, but to engage their hearts in the importance of the task, to encourage them in their struggles to understand, and to reassure them that yes, they will come to understand.²² They will not fail.

When Socrates was at one with his students in the conversation, when everyone examined the limits of and errors in their beliefs, he was a partner in the inquiry, willingly accepting the risks. At the heart of what he was doing was a sharing of his formal authority as a teacher. Socrates as teacher and his students were equals within the spirit of the conversation. All were essential to the construction of knowledge. No one was more important than any other. Socrates was not the source of all wisdom; rather wisdom resided between teacher and students and among teacher, students, and text. At times Socrates was inquisitor, at times soother, at times provocateur, at times teaser. Always, he was tactful, always he was there to pick up if the students faltered, to encourage if the way was hard. Socrates not only triggered,

but diminished the pains of intellectual inquiry.²³ He was, he said, in a phrase, an intellectual midwife in the birth of knowledge.²⁴

The Interpretative Discussion

Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon situates her pedagogy of interpretative discussion within the ideas of the Socratic conversation. She begins from a premise that education is to enable one to move beyond self and into community, and she affirms the value of the experiences, the rich personal histories, that each student brings to that community. The task of the teacher is to guide the students' attention towards objects that will draw out the understanding they have — understanding that, once expressed, will enrich the meaning of their experiences in significant ways. The teacher does not tell students what to find in the topics of study.

The interpretative discussion is a conversation in which knowledge is deemed to be problematic, requiring an interchange of interpretation to reach shared and personal understandings. Haroutunian-Gordon's point is that, ". . .no one, not even the teacher, has a monopoly on all the good ideas. Interpretative discussion utilizes the contributions of all, and it thrives on attention to the common task. Most of all, it teaches the great pleasure that comes from contributing one's own ideas to a common concern."²⁵

Haroutunian-Gordon's focus is as much on this relationship between conversation and community as it is on the relationship between conversation and text as curriculum artifact. The text she uses as example in her research study is William Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet*, on the basis of which students are to construct "powerful ideas" about themselves, others, and the "events in life."²⁶ The way the conversation proceeds is through questions. For example, in reference to the question why the nurse agreed to help Romeo and Juliet marry, even though such marriage was fraught with danger, Haroutunian-Gordon explains:

To answer the teacher's questions, the students must connect the facts in the play with some aspect of their experience so as to interpret or explain the facts. The teacher's question, then, draws out the students' understandings of human feelings and motives. The discussants imagine why the nurse acts as she does by knowing her relation to Juliet and by using ideas they have about human motivation to explain the woman's actions. By drawing upon their own experiences in this way, the students arrive at new ideas about the meaning of the play. Furthermore, their ideas about the play become a basis for understanding their own lives in new ways. For example, the student who comes to see the effects of long-term bitterness and hatred through a study of *Romeo and Juliet* may begin to view personal estrangements very differently.²⁷

The quality of the conversation hinges on the questions asked by the teachers and those the teachers invite from their students. For Haroutunian-Gordon, one indicator of the effectiveness of the questions is the ability of the students to understand. Just as important, however, are the abilities of all to work together, to engage in the mutual exchange of effort to understand, and to forge a community of inquiry. There is a social condition for the intellectual engagement. The talk is not to produce winners and losers; rather it is to enable understanding among members of a community.

Haroutunian-Gordon reveals the complexity of the relationship between the form of discourse and the text and the types of questions that connect the discourse with the text. In doing so, she contends the conversation “. . . glorifies rather than minimizes the importance of information that a community takes to be factual.”²⁸ Facts become meaningful in context. Teaching that decontextualizes the facts is inappropriate to education. Knowledge is not certain and is constructed through the discourse of a community in conversation about the text.

Teachers are members of this community and as such are not the only sources of knowledge for the community. There is more than one authority in the community and all have authority in some way. Teachers have to create the conditions necessary to convince their students they are prepared to share their formal authority in the conversation. Distributing authority can be disconcerting for some teachers. Students might test the terms, including the limits, of their new-found authority, the consequence of which might be a disruption to what some regard as acceptable ‘classroom’ management. Haroutunian-Gordon offers reassurances. While this might be a challenge to many teachers’ levels of comfort, as everyone in the conversation engages the matter of shared authority, it should help everyone to develop what Dewey refers to as “. . . the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder.”²⁹

Collaborative Learning

Collaborative learning happens, explains Kenneth Bruffee, when students work on focused, open-ended tasks. At the heart of their learning is conversation designed to lead the students to the centre of the intellectual process. At the heart of a pedagogy of collaborative learning is the issue of authority of teachers, as it was at the heart of the Socratic conversation and the Interpretative discussion. Collaborative learning has the potential to reform university teaching because it challenges, according to Bruffee, “the traditional, foundational understanding of the authority of knowledge.” In so doing, it challenges the authority of teachers and provokes them into “thinking in quite a different way about what it means to teach.”³⁰

What collaborative learning does is provide “an arena for conversation.”³¹ Within the arena, a knowledge community can grow and prosper through what Bruffee calls boundary conversation. These are conversations that enable people to cross boundaries of experience and understanding and to renegotiate their relationships with their original and the new communities. In universities, one critical arena where these boundary conversations occur is at the boundaries of knowledge communities. There is an initial transitional process of translation, that is, a willingness to learn the characteristics of new languages and to acquire new expertise. This is a critical step on the road to interdependence with and within the new community. The vehicle for the journey is the boundary conversation, which requires a “willingness to grant authority to peers, courage to accept authority granted to one by peers, and skill in the craft of interdependence.”³²

All of this, warns Bruffee, is easier said than done. It requires teachers to enable students to become re-aculturated at several levels; beyond initiation into the university from, say, high school; beyond initiation into a disciplinary or professional community of, say, historians or engineers. It requires the initiation into a community of willingly collaborative peers able to engage in boundary conversations. It is not a task to underestimate. Students are not

necessarily willing collaborators, are not often experienced in communities of shared authority, especially shared by their peers, and many are reluctant to criticize the ideas of their peers or their teacher.

Bruffee examines an example or model of the pedagogy of collaborative learning called consensus groups, a variation of Socratic conversations and interpretative discussion. He pays particular attention to the relationship between the exercise of authority and the character and quality of the conversation. Traditional university teaching, such as lecturing, demonstrating, or structured questioning, situates the teacher at the centre. Conversation occurs between the teacher and each student as individuals. Bruffee explains:

Traditional lecturers seem to be speaking to a socially coherent group of people. Actually they are speaking one to one, to an aggregate set of isolated individuals among whom there are no necessary social relations at all. Even when discussion among students in the class does occur; it tends to be a performance for the teacher's benefit, just as the teacher is performing for the students' benefit.³³

Collaborative learning, however, changes the pattern. The primary focus of students' attention in the conversation is each other. Within a set of questions mutually developed by students and teacher, and through the talk about the questions, the students initially form what Bruffee calls a transitional community in which power begins to be distributed throughout the community. This is followed by the evolution into an interdependence community in which the trust and intimacy are sufficient to enable students to evaluate each others' work. All of this is hard work, requiring the Socratic skills of tact, responsive listening, willingness to compromise, and negotiation.

The goal here is to create what Vygotsky called a zone of proximal development. This is the zone of what we are capable of learning next, given the situation we find ourselves in.³⁴ It is the zone where we can learn, as Ringo Starr famously sang, with a little help from our friends. Heterogeneous groups have the potential to stimulate, enrich, and extend the zone of proximal development for all group members. Teachers should, Bruffee contends, design collaborative learning tasks to help students transform the knowledge that everyone brings to class and apply it to the new problems and conditions imposed by the task of the consensus group.

Dissent is a crucial dimension in the conversation of collaborative learning. However, dissent in one group, cautions Bruffee, may just be "the essence of another group's consensus."³⁵ The dissenting voice may understand what others did not. Interdependent groups learn to embrace dissent as critical to their well-being and success. Diversity enriches by enlargening the collective zone of proximal development for all, teacher and students: "Collaborative learning models the conversation by which communities of knowledgeable peers construct knowledge."³⁶ Knowledge is constructed by teacher and students independently by talking together when they are brought together for the purposes of education. They create what Bowers and Flinders call a "classroom ecology", or what I refer to as a conversation ecology which is shaped by the mixing of the cultures of the students and the teacher mediated by specifics such as the text of the conversation, the setting of the conversation, the time of day, and so forth.³⁷

Conclusions

The Look, Sound, and Feel of Conversations for Education

To practice a pedagogy of conversation, teacher and students must be able to listen. Listening is as active a process in conversation as is speaking. If we are unable to listen, we are unable to invite and to enter the experiences of others and to move with them beyond our own experiences. For David Levin listening is a fundamental activity of bringing ourselves and others into being:

When listening really echoes and resonates, when it allows the communication to reverberate between the communicants, and to constitute there a space free of pressure and constraint, it actively contributes, quite apart from the speaking, to the inter-subjective constellation of new meanings, meanings actually born within this inter-corporeality. . .”³⁸

These meanings of which Levin writes emerge in part from the text — a proxy for the extant knowledge of a discipline or field — and from the conversationalists who act upon the text and their own experiences within a pedagogy of conversation for education.

When experiences of each member of the conversational group are interrelated with the text, no longer is the text an object imposed on the community. Knowledge in the text was developed outside the conversation, but as it is acted upon through the reciprocal interpretative acts of listening and speaking, it is reconstructed on the basis of the experiences of each conversationalist. Through this reconstruction shared publicly, one invites other listeners in and in so doing welcomes their talk. When their talk focuses on the quality of one’s reconstruction, in terms of a critique on merits of coherence, consistence, and wholeness, and on how it contributes to their own constructions, this then is the essence of conversation. When such conversational events happen, another, new text is constructed and it is this new text that unites the conversationalists into a community. After the creation of this community text, it becomes difficult to distinguish one’s own reconstructions from those of the others.

From the outside, the ecology of the pedagogy of conversations looks and sounds, even feels different than other pedagogies when practiced because conversations are socially integrated communities. Researchers in the behavioral and social sciences have shown that there are fairly reliable signs when strong bonds of social integration have developed. The language that the conversationalists use will include extensive use of the pronoun ‘we’ when referring to their community. They will make statements of solidarity such as: “we actually have it”; “we have to get it right.” For Jones, Barnlund and Haiman “The repetition of such ideas by others, nods of agreement, and looks of approval in response to these statements strengthen the impression that the feeling is widely shared among the members.”³⁹ There will also be considerable joking and laughter within the community. This is of the spontaneous, good humor type; not that of the nervous expression of tension. There will be close spatial configuration. Conversationalists sit closely and vary their location to talk directly with others. There are nonverbal cues such as direct eye contact, smiling, and perhaps some good-natured teasing. There will be early arrivals and late departures. Simply, the conversationalists want to be there, hurry to be there, and are reluctant to leave. They share not only their ideas but their time.

Such integrated communities can withstand considerable intellectual conflict because those who are secure in their associations can argue more freely. When conflict does arise, as surely it will because the nature of criticism is one of doubt and dispute, the conversationalists, especially the teacher, should not engage in conflict resolution, but rather in what Jones, Barnlund, and Haiman call conflict leadership.⁴⁰ The objective of a pedagogy of conversation for education is not consensus but knowledge, and this could very easily entail knowledge of different reasoned points of view on the matter at hand. The objective is not to avoid or suppress the conflict; rather it is to prolong or sustain it so that all sides of the issue can be examined with care and consideration, and all conversationalists are provided with opportunities to collaborate, perhaps to reconcile differences or to concede that differences are essential to knowledge of complex topics within a community diverse in experiences, interests, and aspirations. Unless the conflict inherent in the refutation process is valued, it will become dysfunctional. Northrop Frye put it this way: “. . . there is no real difference between criticism and creation, nor between education and vision; there is only our failure to abolish the difference.”⁴¹

Never To Be the Same Again

Practicing a pedagogy of conversation for education takes some nerve and a willingness to forfeit comfortable degrees of formal authority and political control. Letting a conversation take fire requires that we get beyond what Northrop Frye calls our instinctive conservatism, the desire for continuity in our social settings, the hope that the same things can continue with as little change as possible. A pedagogy of conversation pushes towards the limits of our institutional conservatism through dialectical conflict. For Frye the pedagogy in practice would create

. . . a group of individuals who have grown out of the social body, not to the point of breaking with it, but to the point of seeing it in proportion. We belong to something first; we are something afterwards, and the individual grows out of the group and not the other way round. But it is the group of individuals linked in the fraternity of social vision that constitutes the real brain of society. Society by itself can hardly distinguish the visionary who is above its standards from the criminal or lunatic who is below them. The social vision I am speaking of, the real directing force in society, is one which is aware of its own social conditioning but is not wholly imprisoned by it.⁴²

Perhaps the best way to end this essay is with a quote from someone who has thought deeper and longer than I have about the matter of a pedagogy of conversation for education, and upon whose giant shoulders, to borrow a phrase from Sir Isaac Newton, I aspire to stand.⁴³ For Theodore Zeldin, a fellow and former dean of St. Antony's College, Oxford,

Conversation puts you face to face with individuals, and all their human complexity. Our education cannot be complete until we have had conversations with every continent, and every civilization. It is a humbling experience, which makes one conscious of the enormous difficulty of living in peace when there is so much injustice, but which also gives one great hopes, every time one succeeds in having a conversation which establishes a sense of common humanity, a mutual respect. After such conversations, one can never be the same person again.⁴⁴

Notes

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4. Ibid., 54, 56.
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26. *Ibid.*, 6.
27. *Ibid.*, 6–7.
28. *Ibid.*, 180.
29. *The Child and the Curriculum and the School and Society*, 179.
30. Bruffee, *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge*, 7.
31. *Ibid.*, 20.
32. *Ibid.*, 32.
33. *Ibid.*, 31.
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36. *Ibid.*, 52.
37. C. A. Bowers and David J. Flinders, *Responsive Teaching* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990), 225.
38. *The Listening Self* (London: Routledge, 1989), 181.

39. Jones, Barnlund and Haiman, *The Dynamics of Discussion: Communications in Small Groups*, 88–89.

40. Ibid.

41. *The Educated Imagination* (Toronto: CBC Enterprises, 1963), 152.

42. Ibid., 144.

43. The actual quote is “If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” Written by Sir Isaac Newton in a letter to Robert Hooke, dated February 5, 1676, and quoted in *Correspondence of Isaac Newton*, vol. 1, ed. H.W. Turnbull (1959).

44. *Conversation: How Talk Can Change Our Lives*, 94.

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