

Restarting relationships

Bruce Beirsto, Becky Cox, Hugh Finlayson, Larry Johnson & Charlie Naylor write about an upcoming series of symposia to build dialogue and trust in support of BC's public education system

Through a series of symposia we will examine the 'hot' issues of our day to develop ... our individual and collective capacity to deal respectfully and constructively with future dilemmas.

There are many contentious issues challenging our society, from pipelines and climate change to right-to-die legislation. In education we have our own issues that often result in heated debate – among them: combined classes, inclusion, social promotion, standardized testing, accountability and professional autonomy.

In our communities and in our schools we often struggle to deal constructively with such issues. When difference leads to conflict we often blame others rather than reflecting on our own thinking and approaches. But let's take a moment to just think about why it is the case, and perhaps what we could do about it.

If these issues were merely problems we would probably have solved them by now. Information would have been gathered, research done, and decisions made. But in many cases our issues are much more than problems, they are dilemmas, which involve valid

and important but incompatible values and interests. When values and/or interests cannot be simultaneously satisfied, we must determine the best path to follow to balance our efforts towards resolving the conflicting values, accommodating the competing interests, and respecting conflicting rights.

Solving problems requires information, expertise, and intelligence. Dealing with dilemmas requires all this plus dialogue, wisdom, and patient persistence. Even then, dilemmas can never be finally resolved, which is why the most important challenges in education are eternal themes that persist from generation to generation. The education system and the profession makes progress on these issues, but as we learn more about and deal more effectively with them, new aspects reveal themselves. We don't come to final conclusions because the more we know and can do, the more we also imagine and aspire.

The openedness of dilemmas is often complicated by the

ambiguity and paradox that surrounds them. It can be frustrating, and frightening, to deal with such issues, particularly when decisions need to be made and actions taken. We are tempted to cut off our inquiry and settle on an answer. To avoid "paralysis by analysis" we may convince ourselves that we have the answer, and sometimes not just *an* answer but *the* answer.

Of course, this is a dead end. But the worst part of deluding ourselves into thinking we have the full and final answer about anything is that we then assume that those who think differently are wrong and we spend our energy trying to convince them of our point of view rather than keeping an open mind to other possibilities. And if they do not come around to our way of thinking we may begin to ignore them or to resent them. From there it is a short step to antagonism and vilification, which leads to full-blown conflict and impasse, with all its toxic consequences.

In education this may happen at an individual, school, district or provincial level – and it does – sometimes with the unfortunate but relatively benign consequence of lost opportunity for learning and imperfect actions, but sometimes with much more destructive outcomes that damage individuals and the schools or organizations in which they work.

The authors want to do something about that and so we designed a Masters program in Educational Leadership at Simon Fraser University that delves into the complexities of dialogue and decision making in schools, districts and unions. As we were designing the program we decided that we should also create opportunities for others to think together about this situation and how we might each work within our own circle of influence to change for the better.

To start the learning process, this past January, the Centre for the Study of Educational Leadership and Policy (CSELP) at SFU hosted a symposium attended by representatives from the BCTF, the BCPVPA, and BCSSA, as well as by senior district staff, local BCTF Presidents, and others from Metro districts. This experience confirmed an interest by all participants to work together over the next two years to improve our ability to deal constructively with the most contentious issues we face, and to improve our individual and organizational ability to use nonjudgmental dialogue to improve our decision-making.

Through a series of symposia over the next two school years we will examine some of the 'hot' issues of our day to develop an improved common understanding of the underlying facts as well as our varied beliefs, interests, and aspirations. More importantly, we will use these experiences to build greater trust and to develop our

individual and collective capacity to deal respectfully and constructively with future dilemmas.

Some of the questions we will explore are:

- How can we develop a shared understanding of the factual foundation of an issue?
- How might we promote dialogue and develop a fuller understanding of the perspectives, hopes, and fears of all parties?
- Will this help us to make better decisions and maintain relationships despite our differences?


This is a pragmatic response from a group of individuals with many years of diverse experiences in BC's K-12 public school system. It is based on a belief that we can change as individuals, as organizations, and as a system. We believe that we can acknowledge our history but aspire to a different future, that we can have a more constructive dialogue and that by doing so we can make better decisions and build a more collaborative public education system in BC.

The "products" of this initiative are intended to be both public and personal. Participants will increase their own understanding of the dynamics of difficult conversations and increase their competency for constructive participation in them, and they will acquire a repertoire of strategies for creating processes

that invite others to participate in a similar fashion. Each symposium will examine a particular topic – the first being issues related to implementation of the new curriculum – and following the symposium an "informed commentary" will be published which examines the factual foundations of the issue and the range of perspectives, interests, anxieties, and hopes that come with it. Over the course of the four symposia a tool kit for dialogue and decision-making will be collaboratively developed. All of these documents will be available on the CSELP web site.

Participants in the symposium series will be encouraged to attend as a team from a school, a district or a local/provincial organization and to use their experience at the symposia to support a similar initiative in their own context to build capacity for constructive professional dialogue and informed decision-making.

We are not naive about the complexity of this challenge, the depths of the dismay that some people feel in terms of the current quality of dialogue they are experiencing, or the difficulty of transformational change at the individual and collective level. However, as Eldridge Cleaver noted, if you are not part of the solution then you are part of the problem. We choose to be part of the solution, or at least to try.

If you want to join us, registration is open to a limited number of people at <http://bit.ly/1sZ5iPo> 

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