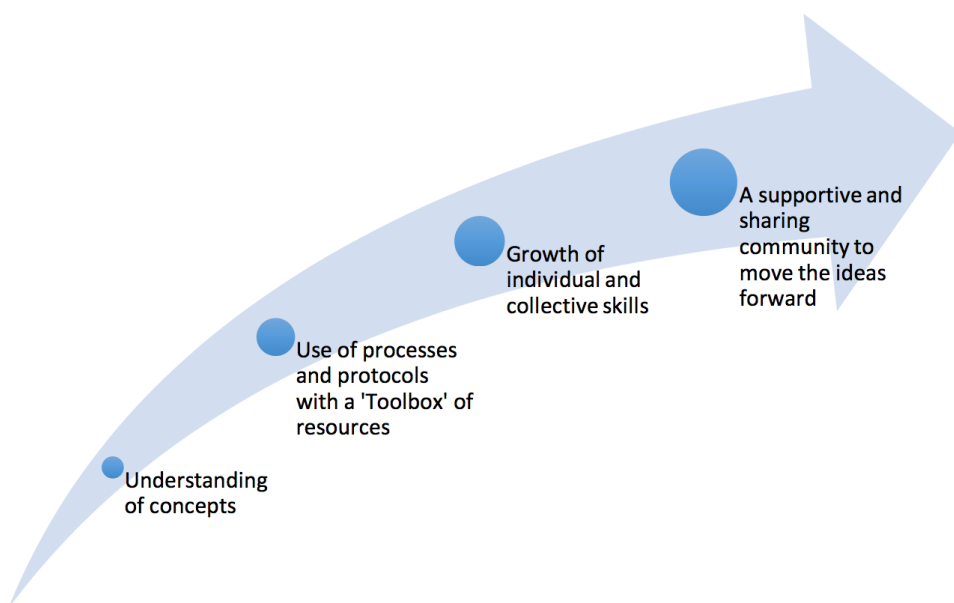


Reimagining Public Education Discourse:

A mid-term update

by Bruce Beirsto, Hugh Finlayson, Charlie Naylor



How can we avoid duelling opinions and develop a shared understanding of the factual foundation of a vexing issue?

How can we avoid taking premature positions to promote dialogue and develop an understanding of the perspectives, hopes, and fears of all parties?

How can we make better decisions and maintain relationships despite our differences within and across our schools and organizations?

Eight lower mainland school districts (Burnaby, Coquitlam, Delta, Langley, North Vancouver, Richmond, Sunshine Coast and Vancouver) are considering these questions in a two-year project involving four symposia, two this past school year and two next year. The initiative is being conducted by the Centre for the Study of Educational Leadership and Policy (CSELP) at SFU. This article provides a mid-term report

on that experience.

Each symposium introduced ideas about the challenge of constructive deliberation and some practical processes for going about it. Participants then tried their hand by tackling an illustrative topical issue (Curriculum Implementation and Autonomy in October and Attendance Management in February). In between symposia, participants practiced their skills and were encouraged

to share what they were learning with others in their work context.

As an overarching framework, the symposia consider the following four phases of a decision-making process:

Divergent Dialogue for Understanding

A process of exploration and elaboration to develop a common understanding of relevant data and any prior experience or research, and a common understanding of the perspective and interests of all those involved.

Convergent Dialectic for Integration

A process of collaborative analysis of commonly understood evidence to find opportunities for agreement based on interests rather than positions that achieve joint outcomes which neither party could achieve on their own.

Convergent Debate for Distribution

A process of respectful advocacy in which those involved state their positions and the underlying reasons in relation to unresolved issues to inform a selection from amongst the positions on the basis of consensus or authority.

Enactment and Return to Normal Discourse

The process of communicating a

decision, enacting that decision, and refining the decision on the basis of experience as it is enacted which maximizes collective capacity for constructive response.

The first symposium took a look at the role of dialogue in the early phases of a decision and how we can suspend judgment in the interests of understanding each other better and avoiding premature position-taking that impairs collaborative problem solving. Dialogue does not just mean better conversation. It is a unique and rare form of discourse that requires particular attitudes and specific skills that must be practiced.

The second symposium considered how we can continue that process by using an Analytic Framework to define the problem itself and to determine what information or research is available to us and what additional information we require in order to make an informed decision.


The framework, which is collaboratively developed, makes explicit the multiple sub-categories within the issue at hand, thereby providing an initial organization and structure for discussion so

that each person and organization can start to:

- Consider what they know and understand in terms of factual information;
- Identify what is not known but might be found out;
- Hear (but suspend judgment) on others' perspectives on an individual area; and.
- Consider what facts are in dispute and which perspectives are shared or diverse, and whether such diversity reflects conflicting views or merely differing perspectives.

Once a common foundation of understandings is developed, it is time to look for integrative potential. An integrative approach is an alternative to pure positional discourse. It involves finding solutions that meet both parties' interests. In other words, joining forces to achieve something together that cannot be achieved independent-

ly. Participants work to advance understanding, find alternatives, and enhance chances for reaching agreement by discovering innovative approaches that reflect the parties' interests, and seeking to arrange the alternatives in packages that yield maximum benefit to both. The focus is to create value through dialogue, before claiming value, as the basis of a solution.

Reimagining public education discourse begins with an understanding of the underlying dynamics of discourse and a desire to improve things. Use of specific strategies and processes can be helpful, but ultimately individuals must improve both their attitudes and their skills to improve capacity for constructive deliberation of contentious issues. Through the example of individuals and working groups participating in this symposium series, we hope that the circle of people actively engaged in doing so will grow, and who knows where that might end. In October the journey continues. 

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A Tool Kit for reimagining

Some of the contents of the symposia have been archived as a series of short documents intended as a Tool Kit to assist participants in engaging others in the project of improving their collective ability for respectful, reasoned consideration of the complex issues upon which there are widely divergent perspectives and competing interests. The Tool Kit is organized in sections: conceptual foundations, practical processes, personal skills and contextual awareness. Feel free to use the files as you wish: <https://goo.gl/AHbHMo>

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