Letter from the Editors

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Abstract

This letter from the editors of IJ-SoTL introduces one of the overarching themes of volume 16, number 2. We reflect on the place and nature of dialogue in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

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This letter from the editors of *IJ-SoTL* introduces one of the overarching themes of volume 16, number 2. We reflect on the place and nature of dialogue in the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Collaboration and Dialogue

Most of us are used to seeing co-authored articles in the SoTL field. It is, after all, typical of the social sciences to collaborate on the construction, conducting, and communication of the results of an experiment. But as we were readying this issue for publication, we were struck by the number of articles here that are overt in their use of dialogue. And that got us thinking about the use of dialogues within our discipline. It would be easy to take every instance of dialogue as something *sui generis*, and just chalk this all up to coincidence, but there are some ways to look at the structure of our interactions and perhaps bring some analysis to bear on the nature of dialogues in teaching and learning.

If we were all philosophers, we could immediately ground our discussion in the Platonic dialogues, which would dovetail nicely with our role as educators. If we were all psychologists, we could nod to Hubert Hermans' work on Dialogical Self Theory, and avail ourselves of eight different types of inner dialogues. If we all taught English, we could discuss the six types of dialogue present in literature. However, not all of us live in these silos. How do we include those of us who teach calculus, or physics, or business, or teach teachers? If we want to find common ground, we have to get more global.

In his work defining the nature of conversations, David W. Angel (2016) places all conversations along two intersecting axes: one-way or two-way conversations, and competitive or cooperative conversations (see Figure 1). If a conversation is one-way and competitive, it's a diatribe. If it's one-way and cooperative, it's a discourse. If a conversation is two-way and competitive, it's a debate, and if it's two-way and cooperative, it's a dialogue. This broad grouping resonates with us, not just because of Angel's nifty consonance, but because we can place so many human interactions solidly within it.

Figure 1. **The Four Types of Conversations. © 2016 David W. Angel. www.davidwangel.com.**

Dialogue and Discourse

As our campuses reopen and we begin to integrate the lessons learned during the pandemic into our new normal routines (whatever those may be), we may be glad we'll never have to do another class via Zoom or Webex again, or we may already be longing for the days when we could teach from our couches. The movement back to primarily face-to-face instruction is, in Angel's terms, a shift from discourse to dialogue. Unless online class sizes are very small, the nature of the virtual classroom lends itself far more readily to discourse than to dialogue. When you have to scroll through four or five screens full of students just to see them all, there's not a lot of room for the immediate give-and-take that a dialogue depends on. We're not saying that discourse is bad; its goal is to impart information, which is one of the core functions of any educational system. But unless you "stand and deliver" for each class period, and brook no questions from your students, you're probably far more engaged in dialogues now than you were when we were all virtual.

We all understand the "give" of that "give-and-take" situation. We all know why we're here, and what our function is. What we may not be prepared for, though, is the new "take" of that "give-and-take." [I'll drop the veil of speaking for all the co-editors here, because their experiences may be different than mine. I don't imagine they needed to learn the lessons I am still trying to integrate into my teaching. So the indented section from here until the final paragraph is just Joe.]
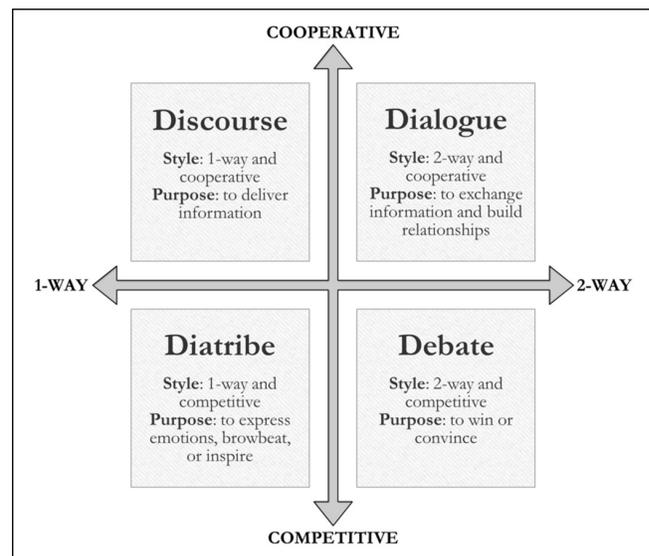
The first thing I learned in the return to dialogue is what my students have lost over the past two years. I had multiple conversations during this spring semester with various colleagues from different departments. I was excited to be back to "almost-normal," as were they. But we didn't get the same sense from our students. They didn't seem to be as engaged in their classes as we hoped they would be, and weren't performing as well as our pre-pandemic students did. Perhaps we are all victims of the golden haze of memory, burnishing what we recall of the days when only Operating Room staff and woodworkers knew what an N-95 was. But the span of just two years doesn't seem to be enough time to catch such a bad case of nostalgia.

When I thought I had developed enough of a relationship with them that they wouldn't take my inquiry as a condemnation, I asked a couple of my students if my perceptions of their engagement and performance were correct. They talked about their educational experiences over the past two years. I can sum them all up in a single word: ***fractured***. Those who were just entering their post-secondary careers felt robbed of a "real" experience of learning. Those who were already in college felt their experiences were disjointed and unconnected with each other. And they were all waiting for the other shoe to drop, all afraid that we would be going totally virtual again at any moment. And, as with all things fractured, these students were broken, in ways that I don't yet understand. To them, everything seemed so *conditional*. They reminded me of skittish yearlings, curious about the world but wary of what it could do to them. Every single student I asked could name at least one family member or friend who died during the pandemic. Most could name more than one, and did so. So, no, they admitted, they weren't as committed as they had been, because their education, along with the rest of their lives, had been reframed over the past two years.

The Standard is the Standard

Mike Tomlin, the head coach of the Pittsburgh Steelers (I'm a big fan), is known for his unique way of communicating his main points to his players. The national sports media have dubbed his turns of phrase "Tomlinisms." The coach's personal favorite is, "The standard is the standard." That means that he holds himself, his players, and his staff accountable for their actions, and they know that they cannot be excused from meeting the standard. I'm no coach; I teach English, and I evaluate students' analytic and critical thinking skills through the quality and clarity of their writing. Throughout my academic career, it's been very easy for me to tell myself that the standard is the standard; you either write clearly or you don't. It's a toggle switch, a black-or-white dichotomy. I look for clarity, and ask pointed questions when things are unclear or sentences fall apart.

However, this year has shown me that there's far more to the world my students live in than I can completely understand yet. I'm trying, then, to make room for some grey in my black-and-white default values. Writ large, at the level of discourse, the standard is still the standard. But at the level of dialogue, when I can learn to see the individual I am engaged with, it's not just a matter of skill or desire; life is more complicated than that. And complications cost you, in terms of energy. They cost my students, in terms of attention, devotion, persistence, and stamina. And they cost me, because working with a number of individuals requires far more attention, devotion, persistence, and stamina than working with a faceless group.

Hope

But there's hope as well. [And here I'll cover myself with the plural veil and speak for all the co-editors again]. Dialogue is not just a drain on our emotional and intellectual resources. Do you remember your first few days back on campus? We remember how good it felt to be engaging with colleagues without electronic mediation. Why? Because we missed the immediacy that only *seeing* the person can bring. Not just *viewing* the person, but actually *seeing* them. And that's what we hope for *IJSoTL*. It's easy to think of this journal, or any academic journal, as nothing but discourse, a one-way communication with no reciprocal response. Ideally, though, this journal is not just a solitary transmission. It can be the charge of a dialogue, if you have the stamina for it.

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