Collaboration as Reflexive Dialogue: A Knowing “Deeper Than Reason”

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In a recent essay, Kurt Spellmeyer argues for a pedagogy that is “conducive to dialogue,” that encourages a way of knowing “deeper than reason,” and that embodies an “experiential pluralism” which encourages and “values difference as a common resource for the enlargement of life-worlds” (279). Spellmeyer rightly notes that the central mission of education should be reflexive: to help students “in their particular struggles to decide who they have been and what they will become” (281). We believe that collaborative inquiry affords one of the few opportunities for students in the academy to engage in an intellectual experience at what Spellmeyer calls “the deep level of life-world politics” (278). The collaborative inquiry projects we describe offer students an experience that allows them to transcend the limits of their personal knowledge while drawing on it at the same time.

Lisa Ede and Andrea Lunsford have suggested that because collaboration provokes so many dialectical tensions, it can be “a particularly fruitful site of paradox and promise” (136). The paradox of collaboration is that through the process of interacting with others, individuals (re)discover their selves. As one of our students put it, “Collaboration involves the loss of individualism, but it results in the gain of the individual.” The paradox of collaboration also contains its promise. Borrowing from Gadamer, we might say collaboration allows for a “fusion of horizons” that results in an enlargement of one’s perspective, what we call a more “complicated understanding.” If collaboration is to provide a way for students to negotiate multiple (and often contradictory) positions, it must involve two recursive moves: a dialectical encounter with an “other” (a person or idea) and a reflexive engagement with the self.

Because we see collaboration as simultaneously dialectical and reflexive, we have been able to move beyond limited and limiting either/or conceptions of collaboration that pit the needs of individuals against the desires of the group. While we are sensitive to the criticism that collaboration can result in “groupthink” and can prevent people from discovering and using their individual strengths, we have more often seen collaborative inquiry serve as a catalyst for individual transformation. The ability of the socioculture to
support individual learning has been well documented by thinkers such as Dewey, who observed that in group work "individuals still do the thinking, desiring and purposing" (24). As we see it, collaborative inquiry simply exposes and highlights the creative and ongoing dialectical tension that is always present between individuals and their worlds.

Several years ago, when we began assigning collaborative inquiry projects to our composition classes, we were attracted to an image of community represented by the "connected classroom" where "everyone was free to "voice their uncertainties" and where members would unproblematically "nurture each other's thoughts to maturity" (Belenky, et al. 221). We encouraged our students to engage in "dialogic" collaboration which emphasized the process of thinking and writing together as opposed to "hierarchical" or more product-oriented forms of collaboration. By emphasizing the process of collaboration, we tried to overcome students' previously unhappy (often tortured) experiences in groups that focused elusively on drafting a paper. As one of our students told us, "Too many times collaboration meant being shuffled into a group of people you didn't know to write a paper you had no interest in. Eventually people would place all the responsibility on one person. This is mock collaboration." Strongly influenced by the literature on feminist development and epistemology, we designed collaborative inquiry projects where small, self-selected groups of students chose a topic based on their common interest, conducted research and interviews, and composed a single paper—-together. Separately, students kept journals in which they recorded their information and reflected on their growing understanding of their topic as well as the group's thinking and writing processes. Our students' interpretation of this classroom agenda was clearly echoed by one male when he noticed how open and receptive he had become to his partner's ideas, "Oh Christ! I'm turning into a woman! It's a conspiracy!"

Composition theorists Joseph Harris, John Trimbur, and Susan Jarratt, as well as scholars in other disciplines, have discussed a number of potential problems with this uncritical notion of community which too often emphasizes consensus and connection at the expense of conflict or difference. Philosopher Iris Young argues that the ideal of community (expressed in the notion of the connected classroom above) "presumes subjects who are present to themselves and presumes subjects can understand one another as they understand themselves" (2). Young goes on to note that "practically speaking, such mutual understanding can be approximated only within a homogenous group that defines itself by its common attributes" (13). As we began to listen more carefully to our students' reports of struggle and resistance or epiphany and transformation during collaboration, and as we reflected more deeply on our purposes for having students engage in these experiences, we realized that dialogic collaboration tended to favor those groups who were already united by virtue of shared beliefs or sociocultural backgrounds. While we had focused our attention on ameliorating the
gender biases found under individual or mastery models of learning, we hadn’t considered if other kinds of differences were being eclipsed or muted during these four and a half week long projects. If they were, then our intentions for pursuing collaborative inquiry in the first place (to encourage “real talk” and the development of more complex perspectives) were being sorely compromised. We began to explore how we might create more opportunity for authentic dialogue between and within individuals.

Bakhtin tells us that dialogue is the force that drives intellectual and moral development. However, given the diverse nature of the academy today, Australian feminist educators Jane Kenway and Helen Modra observe that authentic dialogue is much harder to foster because it relies on assumptions of similarity and equality between participants that may not actually exist. They caution that we can no longer act as if the conditions for community (reasonableness, trust, and shared understanding) are “always present or always capable of achievement.” Instead, they suggest that “perhaps we would do better to see dialogue as the goal of pedagogy, not the condition for it” (163). After studying the dynamics of several hundred collaborative inquiry groups, we would go further and suggest that “reflexive” dialogue—dialogue that may lead to the construction and examination of one’s own position—should be the aim of a pedagogy intent on enlarging, complicating, or challenging students’ experiences and belief systems.

Originally, our projects invited students to dialogue in three ways: with each other, with “experts” outside of the group, and with themselves in their journals. The first two kinds of dialogue offered the potential for dialectical encounters with “others,” while the journal encouraged a reflexive encounter with the self. In redesigning these projects, we asked students to compose reflective memos to each other twice a week, in addition to keeping a personal journal. Instead of writing a single paper together, students produced three separate essays on their common topic and coauthored a foreword which examined and attempted to account for the differences and similarities in their perspectives. Thus, rather than being diluted or erased during the process of collaborating and writing, difference became the basis for further dialogue and reflexivity. At the completion of the project, students submitted the foreword, papers, memos and journals to us.

In the rest of this essay, we will use the experiences and reflections of two collaborative groups to illustrate how these projects operate at the “deep level of life-world politics” by inviting students to bring their personal knowledge to bear on issues that are of real concern to them. Both groups pursue topics that raise complex moral and ethical questions for the individuals involved, but each group experiences the process of collaboration quite differently. The first group investigates the Roman Catholic Church’s position on premarital sex, and the second group examines issues of diversity and racism at the University. Students in each group use their conversations with others and with themselves to arrive at a more complicated understand-
ing of their topic, an understanding which shares some aspects of the group's perspective, but which has been individually processed and individually "claimed." When a person populates the ideas of others with his or her own "life-world" experiences, Bakhtin tells us that the "externally authoritative" word becomes "internally persuasive" and that individual becomes the "author" of his or her own perspective. In the following narratives, we show how the authoritative discourse of the Catholic church and the public and politically correct discourse of diversity is slowly and critically assimilated into the languages and belief systems of the students within these groups. The reflexive kickback that occurs from collaborating with others is what makes the experience deeply meaningful; but, as we shall see, it is also what makes it so difficult and, at times, deeply disturbing. We believe the kind of collaborative inquiry we describe, although not without its risks and challenges, has the capacity to change the way we write and think, as well as the manner in which we invite/honor/validate experience within the academy.

Tim, Courtney, and Lee

Two things stand out about these three state university students who come together in a collaborative group project: their youthful candor and their homogeneity (all three students are white, middle-class, and Catholic). Each has chosen to work with one of the two partners based on previous group experiences in this classroom. Tim is a soft-spoken, caring male who hopes to major in journalism; Courtney is an exuberant and outgoing literature major and former Army brat; Lee, the most introspective and quiet group member, plans to become a teacher. The group begins their collaboration by bantering possible topic choices back and forth. Tim notes in his journal,

We didn't really agree on anything until we started going off on tangents. . . . We started talking about premarital sex and sparks seemed to fly. We really got into the discussion when we found out we are all Catholics.

When students take time to explore common interests, experiences and passions within the group before choosing a topic, they are more likely to establish a camaraderie that will help them work together for the next four weeks of their project. In our experience, the most successful groups will choose a topic that already has some moral, ethical or political resonance for individuals, or one that, because of its complexity, will cause individuals to discover and unravel deeper personal layers of significance during the course of collaborating. Tim, Courtney and Lee are fortunate to have rather quickly "sparked" upon a subject close to them all, but one that none of them had previously examined: their wavering Catholic faith. Courtney's journal reveals their immediate connection to this subject:

Sex, sex, sex. The Catholic religion. What a heated subject for us good ol' Catholic boys and girls. We talked about the warped mentality that goes with living in a Catholic family. The subject got me going. . . . The one and a half hours just flew by.
Once the group has agreed on the topic (premarital sex and the Catholic church) Lee begins to write about the issues emerging from the group's discussion: “Can we still go to church and yet not believe everything it teaches? We all had feelings of being hypocritical.... We work together well yet each of us brings a slightly different view of the Church. I think our similarities and our differences are key.”

John Trimbur argues that group agreement does not necessarily signal consensus; rather, agreement can be used “as a critical instrument to open gaps in the conversation through which differences may emerge” (614). These students will use their common experience of being Catholic to identify and examine the distinctions among their beliefs. Because the group has succeeded in locating a common ground, their differences will not appear as overwhelming later. If groups do not or cannot initially establish some basis for solidarity, through shared purpose or experience, collaboration becomes much harder; differences may become disruptive and can curtail rather than invite reflexive dialogue. The key to establishing group solidarity as well as moving the group forward is communication; continual talk keeps the group immersed. This group's initial conversations have helped create a foundation for openness, trust, and receptivity among them. Tim reports in his journal that he and Courtney “shared very personal experiences having to do with sex. . . . We both felt it was important to talk about them in order to get to know one another better. This must all be part of the group bonding process.” Courtney also reports that talking with Lee and Tim about their sexual histories “was essential in order to work with them. . . . This will help us with the project; just getting in touch with our individual needs, pasts and feelings.” While Courtney welcomes the enthusiasm of her group, she also acknowledges that she is “a bit apprehensive to see what will be uncovered.” Not all groups choose topics as personal as this one. Many students have been well schooled in keeping a clear demarcation between the public and the private. And yet educator Madeleine Grumet has pointed out the necessity of connecting these realms: “If we are to bridge the gap that divides the public from the private in our culture and our consciousness, then we need to think of schooling as a time and a place where those oppositions can be mediated and reconceived” (33). Collaborative inquiry suggests one way to mend the opposition because it involves both a public encounter with an "other" and a reflexive encounter with the "self." Together these students will read their own and each other's personal lives as open texts to be explored in relationship to their topic.

After establishing group rapport through this personal sharing, they admit that the role the church has played in their lives has heretofore been a relatively unexplored or closed subject for them all. Tim takes the first step of moving outside the group when he offers to interview his own parents about their views toward premarital sex. In his journal Tim reveals that he's
“scared to death” about this interview, mainly because his parents have never
“been very open about sex.” Tim’s decision to approach his own parents on
the topic of premarital sex may be read in a number of ways, but significantly,
Tim’s parents, combined with the doctrine of the Catholic church, have
served as the major “authorities” for him on this issue up to now. Encour­
aging students to interview live “authorities” rather than rely exclusively on
library sources exposes them to a view of knowledge as a dynamic, mean­
making process. Interviews promote the possibility of a true dialectic
because people talk back and ask questions in ways that books can never do.
These students learn that public attitudes and positions toward major issues
are formed by people as real as their very own parents.

At the same time that Tim is conducting his interviews, Lee is at home
reflecting on her flagging Catholic faith. She hasn’t attended Easter mass
that morning but rationalizes, “I’m not a bad person because I don’t go to
church.” Instead, she writes the lyrics of “Only the Good Die Young,” a Billy
Joel song, in her journal. “Some of these lines made me think about how I
view my faith. . . . I never really thought about ‘the price you pay.’ Am I paying
by sacrificing myself? What am I ‘hiding behind?’” She answers her own
question when she realizes she’s been hiding behind the Church doctrine
which has provided her with safe, comfortable answers: “I do hide behind the
church; they give me a set of rules to follow. It’s easier than figuring out stuff
for myself.” Collaboration not only entails the interplay of ideas reverberat­
ing within the group, it occurs when the individual collaborates with herself.
Lee’s journal allows her to negotiate between her inner thoughts and the
public and political authority of the church: it records an intense moment of
insight for her: “How can I make an educated choice if I don’t know the
choices?” The journals provide these students with an intellectual and
emotional space to pose questions about the group topic, to reflect on group
discussions, interviews and research findings, and to untangle connections
between their own personal feelings and their subject. In most cases, the
journal serves as a resource for each student to negotiate the group’s
collective voyage. If their subject becomes murky or if the intensity of the
collaborative process threatens to consume them individually, they use their
journals to renegotiate their equilibrium. These journals act as a reflexive
mirror for the students to see themselves through the thinking of others.

When the group reassembles to listen to Tim’s taped interview with his
parents, Courtney realizes “that maybe parents aren’t as far into outer space
as we initially believed.” Tim’s interview with his parents provides a base line
for the group to extend their inquiry to determine why the church has
retained its rigid policy on premarital sex when many churchgoing Catholics
are opposed. After listening to the opinions of Tim’s parents on the issue of
premarital sex, the group decides to conduct two more interviews, one with
a Catholic laywoman, and one with a professor of religion at the university.
For groups that are relatively homogeneous, either in terms of members’
ethnic and/or socioeconomic backgrounds or because of similar views on their chosen topic, consulting outside sources is essential for providing the critical distance needed to complicate their understanding of the issues they are investigating. When groups are composed of more diverse individuals, outside sources can often help the group see how their separate positions may also be connected within a larger theoretical framework. Thus, in the same way that dialogue within the group leads to individual, reflexive encounters with the self, dialogue with people and ideas outside of the group can lead to group reflexivity.

After setting up an appointment for the group to meet with the local chaplain, Lee reads through the literature she has collected from the Catholic Student Center on campus and writes that it makes her "kind of sick." She realizes, perhaps for the first time, that she is reading propaganda, which her own educated mind will no longer allow her to disregard. Reflecting on this irony, Lee writes, "Can I believe in the literal teachings of the church? Will it fit into my life, into my definition of myself?"

In their interview, the chaplain refuses the possibility of all dialogue, staunchly reiterates the standard Catholic position on premarital sex, and suggests that young people who engage in sexual activities outside of marriage are not serious about one another; their actions are "frivolous." She tells the group that "it's dangerous when two people who aren't married enter a bedroom; one may leave his brains at the door, while the other envisions future hopes and the belief that the act will bring about a future."

Afterwards, the students stand outside the Catholic Center for a moment to talk. Lee is angered by the thought that someone might consider her actions "frivolous." Tim resents the chaplain's intrusion into his belief system, saying that "doubt is a very bad thing to have." Courtney begins forming intellectual arguments against the Catholic church. As they glance backward, they discover that the chaplain has been watching them through her office window. This episode, which makes them feel unfairly judged, finds its way into their final paper: "The eyes of Gatsby, the eyes of God? No, it wasn't a billboard... it was the eyes of the Chaplain, peering through the blinds, scrutinizing our every motion. The motions of the guilty. The confused. The angry." Together and separately their anger simmers. They attempt to diffuse their emotions by writing in their journals. Lee discusses how the interview haunts her ("It seems to follow me everywhere"), even affecting her personal relationship with a potential boyfriend. At first, Courtney tries to adopt a humorous attitude ("I learned that the Catholic solution corresponds with Nancy Reagan's 'Just say No'"), but she admits that she too is unable to dismiss the chaplain's words. From this encounter emerges the group's powerful metaphor of the "locked chest." Tim's journal entry reveals another paradox that collaboration often uncovers: the ideas which we find most alien or threatening in the external world are often the very ideas we have most denied or repressed within ourselves. Dialogue (real
or imagined) with the “other” outside of the self exposes the “other” inside the self:

I have locked all my feelings regarding the Church’s view on sex in a chest in my mind, to which I believed I possessed the only key. I locked those views away, forgot them, and developed my own views. Somehow the Chaplain has gotten hold of a key I never knew existed and she has unlocked that chest in my mind. Now everything has come flooding back in a great wave and I’m powerless. . . . Now I feel like a sinner. Arrgh!

Lee writes that the chaplain’s interview “seemed to open up something inside of us—we haven’t figured out what.” Each of them, according to Lee, begins to “reevaluate ourselves and our beliefs.” Courtney admits that for herself and for Tim, the conflict may lie in the fact that their own real life actions have been exposed and they resent having to deal with them: “We finally understood how the interview caused the chest—the chest that Tim and I locked when we became sexually active—to reopen.”

The interview with the chaplain establishes an even tighter cohesiveness within the group. Although Courtney, Tim and Lee experience similar emotional reactions to the interview and commiserate with each other, they begin to articulate their different attitudes toward the Church. Identifying their different perspectives now becomes as important as bonding around their similarities had been at the outset. Together, they decide they need to reexamine their own history as Roman Catholics to see how their views on premarital sex have evolved so they can better understand “why this subject interested us, affected us and confused us.” The group constructs five questions for each of them to consider in their journals and that Lee believes will help them “see diversity in the group.” Their questions include comparing their ideas from childhood with their views now, examining what surprised them about their reactions to the interviews, describing what changes they have noticed in themselves since the project began, and exploring how they think this project will affect them “as people.” This last point reminds us that many failures of the intellect arise from the attempt to separate ideas from the very contexts that give rise to them. The reality of any idea is that it must live in a world of people, and collaborative inquiry affords these students the opportunity to clothe their ideas in lived experiences.

As they share their journal responses, they discover that each person wants to achieve different personal goals with this project. Lee, the student with the most conservative stance at the start of the project, writes:

I was kind of shocked when I came to college. . . . There seemed to be a lack of morality. . . . This opposite view clashed with my upbringing. I think this project will [show me] a way to incorporate myself in the church which is beneficial and relevant to me. I just can’t forget about the church because it has helped shaped the person I am today.

Since she’s involved in a sexual relationship, Courtney wants the project to help her construct a personal view of premarital sex because she feels mixed-
up and uncertain. Suddenly she is no longer sure if premarital sex is right: “You never know; it’s a Catch 22.” Tim wants to be clearer about the overall power of the church in his personal life. He was surprised that the chaplain said that premarital sex was dangerous because “people can get hurt.” He asks, “Can’t people get hurt in marriage too, then?”

These students are attempting to leave one community (childhood, represented by their belief in the rules prescribed by parents and church( for another: the in(ter)dependent world of adulthood. However, they are discovering that such transitions are never clean or straightforward. As Joseph Harris has pointed out in his discussion of communities, “The borders of most discourses are hazily marked and often-traveled ... and the communities they define are thus often indistinct and overlapping” (17). As the students slowly begin to reestablish their equilibrium, they will not return to their original intellectual positions, individually or collectively.

If the interview with the chaplain opened a chest which revealed the group’s guilt and recrimination, the next interview provides the moment of epiphany the group needs to crystallize their thinking. The professor not only supplies the counter-discourse that the students need to examine their emotional reactions to their first interview, he also offers them a new way to make sense of their personal experiences, not by ignoring them but by recontextualizing them within a larger, ideological framework. Lee reflects later that “the interview with the chaplain helped us see where we were coming from, and the interview with the professor helped us see where we’re going.”

Courtney sees this interview as a kind of personal pardon. “What a breakthrough! I am no longer a sinner.” Through the professor’s eyes, she begins to understand the function the Catholic church played for minorities in early America who wanted and needed the structure the church offered. She realizes that the Church no longer serves this purpose and that educated Catholics, like herself and like Tim’s parents, have begun to question this role of the church. For Courtney the question now becomes: “How do I make my own decisions and still be a Catholic?” Similarly, the interview helps Tim begin to understand the Church’s role in dictating rules of personal behavior: “Wow. The reason Catholicism was the way it was [was because] people wanted the answer. The most important part of the interview was when he stated that the problem may not be premarital sex, but rather the rules of the Catholic Church. It is these rules that cause members of the Church distress and confusion.” Elated that the group has a found a new focus, Lee writes in her journal, “We now see the chaplain’s argument in a new light (like Catholic immigrants, we have now become educated). The church is going in one way and society is going in another. Premarital sex is a small part of a bigger problem. . . . It is just the part that is affecting us at this time.”

After the paper has been submitted, the students have a few days to read through their journals and write a final reflection on the project. Courtney,
Tim and Lee each comes away from this experience with his or her own set of insights. Lee says she doesn’t consider herself to be “Catholic” anymore; rather, she is an “independent with a Catholic background.” She also realizes that she is unable to “totally break off from the church because it is a part of who I am.” Tim has clarified his own intellectual position with the Catholic church and has moved away from its authority: “I’ve realized that my problem with the Catholic Church is not just its views on premarital sex . . . The laws of the church limit my personal growth and choice.” For Courtney, Catholicism has mainly meant, “What I should do; what I shouldn’t do,” but now she realizes that “everything can be challenged.” In each case, collaborative inquiry has led these students to a more complicated understanding of their subject and themselves. The students do not reach neat and tidy answers, but they do develop new perspectives and questions that might be used for further inquiry. This project succeeds in pushing these students further into “the messy middle” of the learning process. As Lee notes, “If I have learned anything, it’s that there is reality in confusion and myth in certainty.”

Several years later, we still find this group’s experience a powerful example of learning that goes “deeper than reason.” Their recognition that Catholicism no longer “means” in the present what it “meant” for them in the past has led to both resistance and transformation as individuals and as a group. Together, they resist any attempt at further “colonization” of their mental worlds by the chaplain; but they do refuse any genuine exchange of dialogue, among themselves or from people outside of the group. Separately, they are each open to change; indeed, they seem determined to not stay the same. Courtney explains,

You have to be willing to listen to what your partners and interviewees are saying and allow yourself to be influenced by it. If a person doesn’t do this, they are not allowing themselves to re-educate themselves . . . New ideas cannot be developed and the person remains exactly where she started.

Listening and opening oneself to another, however, is more problematic, and the kind of dialogic collaboration we have just witnessed becomes more difficult when students come from diverse backgrounds and situations, have different “ways with words,” hold dramatically different levels of prior knowledge about their subject, or are simply not open to being changed or to changing their way of perceiving the world. Courtney, Lee and Tim encounter few obstacles that might interfere with or disrupt the dialogue within the group or with themselves; it would be a mistake, then, to offer their experience as a model for all collaborative inquiry.

To illustrate the “paradox and promise” of collaborative inquiry further, we want to highlight another group’s experience. Both groups reveal the kinds of complicated understandings that can develop when individuals immerse themselves in their topic through talk and writing for an extended period of time. However, since this second group’s inquiry is not fueled from
a common reservoir of life experience, their collaboration is more disruptive, less dialogic, but no less transformative. In this group, students kept individual journals, but also wrote memos to each other during their investigation. Instead of producing a single paper, they wrote separate essays on their common topic, but coauthored a reflective commentary that examined their different perspectives.

Avery, Serena, and Emily
Avery, Serena and Emily are first-semester students in a first-year English class. Emily was valedictorian of her public high school graduating class. Although she comes from a working-class community less than fifteen miles from the university, she lives on campus. Avery had been a "day" student on scholarship and work-study to a prestigious private boarding school in the area. He continues to live at home and commutes to the university. Serena is from another northeastern state. Serena and Emily chose to work with each other, while Avery did not express a preference, saying that he would "work with anyone." Throughout the semester, Avery, who describes himself as marginalized by his sexual minority status, has been quiet, almost shy.

Emily and Avery's initial ideas for topics immediately reveal why finding common ground may be more difficult in this group. While Emily's suggestions are reminiscent of safe, generic high school research paper topics (Are private schools better than public schools? What purpose do guidance counselors serve? Why do reporters report what they do?), Avery wants the group to investigate topics that are more political and incendiary. He suggests they examine "various criteria which contribute to a rape culture by learning more about the work of the University's Sexual Harassment and Rape Prevention Program, or issues of diversity or racism on campus." Avery wants to consider a topic that involves minority populations because he feels "people learn the most from those least like themselves." As we shall see, though, people only learn "from those least like themselves" when they have the desire, the ability, and the opportunity to engage in dialogue and become self-reflexive. And even then, the kind of dialogic collaboration the first group experiences is not always possible. What is possible, however, is for individuals to begin the conversation with each other and themselves. The memos the second group writes to each other will assist their efforts to communicate by creating a liminal space for them to voice what they are not able to say and to listen to what they cannot hear during their group meetings.

Although Serena and Avery are both keen to pursue the problem of the lack of diversity on campus, Emily is not. The topic's potential for divisiveness leaves her feeling vulnerable. In her journal she admits to being worried that "our differences on the subject will result in big problems." She is "anxious" because the controversial topic will cause "arguments and disagreements [which] will get in the way of work." In her first memo to the group, Emily says she feels like an "oddball" because
I didn’t know enough to contribute anything important to the conversation. I felt so
g ignorant. That is not to say that I’m not aware a problem exists, it was just that I was
completely lost about some of the words and names that were casually dropped. I had
no clue as to what political correctness means, and when Avery mentioned the presiden
tial candidate he voted for, I realized how sheltered I am. I had never heard of this
woman! I know these are reasons I should want to do our research project on these
subjects because this is how I can learn about them, but for now my ignorance only scares
me away.

Serena’s first memo also shows where she is situated at the start of the
project. While she has an awareness of some of the terms and issues
surrounding diversity, her understanding is based more on popular opinion
than informed knowledge, experience or earned insight. “Everyone,” she
says, “is “somewhat racist. Why should I have to pay for the mistakes my
ancestors made? (I could be shot for saying this but) I believe they truly didn’t
think they were doing anything wrong.” Although she doesn’t want the group
to think “I don’t comprehend the seriousness and permanent damage done
to the African American culture, as a culture they need a better self-image.
Affirmative Action just created tension between minorities and whites, [and]
welfare programs create dependence rather than independence.” However,
Serena, who, has just recently asked to be moved to the international
students’ dorm, wants to understand more: “I have so many questions. What
is this subliminal racism that exists in our culture and how can I identify it?”

Avery uses his first memo to the group “to sound off in general about my
feelings on race, politics and society.” His three-page exposition begins with
a quote from Sister Souljah which supports his idea that “racism is synony
mous with white supremacy.” He introduces the equation, “race (white skin)
+ power = racism,” that will serve as a focal point for much of the group’s
later discussions. Avery speaks passionately and eloquently about the long
history of oppression: from slavery to the plight of young black men dying in
the inner city to the “truth” represented by rap music. As if in answer to
Serena’s comment that white people in the past didn’t believe what they were
doing was wrong, Avery writes,

I for one feel ashamed at the masses of white people for caring so little about the
injustices WE have perpetrated in the name of Christianity, “progress,” and “civilized”
society. How many more riots and how much more violence do we have to see before
changes actually occur. Sister Souljah is angry and radical; her goal is not to comfort
liberal whites and tell them what a good job they are doing.

Unlike Emily who wants to “learn” more, and Serena who has “so many
questions,” Avery’s interest in pursuing this topic does not seem to be related
to his ignorance or confusion. He has specific ideas about what the problem
is, why it is a problem, and what can be done to solve it. The information will
not be new territory for him. The readings and interviews mostly affirm and
confirm his beliefs. From the start, then, the student’s different and unequal
knowledge positions affect the dynamics of the dialogue. In many ways,
Avery already owns the position the women are seeking to understand. Since he is much better read and informed, his role in the group becomes one of shepherding the others, sometimes quite emphatically, toward a specific (politically correct) understanding of racism. He becomes a self-appointed devil's advocate within the group. However, this kind of strong, vigilant stance does not invite the kind of shared, open, exploratory inquiry that occurred in Tim, Lee and Courtney's group. At times, the women will find Avery's knowledge and observations enlightening. Serena notes, "Some of Avery's research really woke me up when it comes to subliminal racism." And Emily writes, "Avery really made me stop and think. I had never noticed how "black" is used in our society only to describe 'bad' things. Is this a factor in our hidden prejudices?" At other times, they resent his unyielding passion and insistence. In *Community: Reflections on a Tragic Ideal*, Glenn Tinder writes that if people are "to enjoy equality" they must "be addressed and listened to in matters of the greatest moment. I am not accorded dignity by someone who feeds me but does not care what I think .... The decisive signs of respect are serious listening and speaking" (70). At times, it appears Avery is actually attempting to "feed" the others from his knowledge stores. His memos, often scorching diatribes that seem directed to a larger audience than this group, are thick with examples of the injustices done to minorities.

It would be easy to depict Avery's single-mindedness as close-mindedness; however, we think that such an interpretation would greatly distort the complexity of Avery's position. Whereas, Courtney, Lee and Tim all share the "experience" of having been raised Catholic and bond together around their joint questioning of that common experience, Avery's knowledge and conviction arise out of an experiential authority these women simply do not have. Avery has struggled long and hard to arrive at his current position and often becomes frustrated with the naivety and ignorance of others. Unlike the first group who chose to share their personal stories so they could "work together," Avery only alludes to the source of his hurt and rage, speaking of his own oppression in the most general, vague terms in his memos to the group: "I have been on the receiving end of prejudice and discriminatory harassment more times than I care to remember, and I want to get across to you that such verbal abuse hurts." He wants them to know that his knowledge of racism and oppression is legitimated by his experience, but he is intentionally ambiguous because he is not comfortable enough to share the specifics. As a result, Serena and Emily misinterpret his anger as "rudeness" or "unreasonableness."

At one particularly heated meeting in the study lounge of Emily's dorm, the group argues about the truth of the racism equation. Avery, perhaps frustrated by his attempts to get the women to digest an understanding of racism they cannot (yet if ever) swallow, asks, "How many times do I have to tell you?" And yet, that's the point. Avery can't tell them. Spellmeyer, drawing on the work of Scott Momaday, notes that words don't have a
meaning until they are embodied in the life-text of a person, “until they take on the power to explain the reader’s circumstances to himself” (268). The meaning of “race (white skin) + power = racism” has not yet become personal knowledge for Emily or Serena in the way that it has for Avery. In Emily’s memo response, we begin to sense the complexity and difficulty involved in just trying to get the conversation started in groups where different ways of thinking, speaking (and experiencing) exist but members attempt to operate according to rules that pretend they don’t:

You can tell me as many times as you want, but I don’t have to agree with you. I extend the courtesy of listening to what you have to say, but where does it say that your opinion is better than mine? If I disagree without trying to see your point, you have the right to express your anger. There’s nothing wrong with us disagreeing. We just have to respect everyone’s opinions.

Emily’s comment suggests an intellectual stance of relativism. If she cannot use personal knowledge to gauge the truth of his “words,” she may see Avery’s perspective as simply “his opinion”; and, from a relativist position, “everyone has a right to their opinion.” All things being equal, perhaps this “rule” might apply; but as Avery points out, all things are not equal: “Should we respect the opinions of the KKK?” he asks. Avery strongly believes that people must not let “abusive, sexist, homophobic comments go unchallenged. It is imperative that we let the perpetrators know loud and clear that what they are saying is offensive and will not be tolerated.” As he sees it, people do not have the right to such opinions because the situation now is “no longer a free exchange of protected speech.” And if the situation is on longer open and free, the hermeneutic circle is ruptured: dialogue can no longer lead to understanding or “fused horizons.”

In any case, listening is not the unproblematic activity that the first group allowed us to assume and that this group may mistakenly believe. If Avery thinks that Emily and Serena don’t agree with his ideas because of lack of information, he will simply try to provide them with more “facts.” If he feels they just don’t “get” what he is saying, then he will repeat the same points (more loudly) or in a different way. Of course, neither strategy will allow the women to “hear” any better. If Emily feels that Avery “chooses” not to listen because he doesn’t acknowledge her right to her “opinion,” she will see him as unfair at best and impolite or bullying at worst. It would seem that for her, proper “rules” exist for conducting rational conversation that include “listening to the other point of view” and addressing one another in “civil” (dispassionate) voices. Avery’s “delivery” and manner of speaking seem unreasonable (and, more importantly, discourteous) to the women. Emily writes in her journal that Avery “was downright rude! Yelling doesn’t get your point across. If you yell at someone it’s going to make them less inclined to listen.” Later, in her memo, Emily reminds the group to “keep our tempers in check and our voices at speaking level, especially when we are in
a study lounge where people are trying to study.” And Serena writes that the group “got entirely out of hand. Because of our yelling and arguing, we accomplished nothing. In the future we need to criticize less and listen more.” Avery responds to their appeals for civility by writing, “It is a bourgeois, elitist, intellectualist attitude to think that discussion has to always be quiet, scholarly and rational.” In Avery’s long memo to the group, we begin to sense how the different life experiences and communication styles these students bring to their inquiry can complicate face-to-face dialogue.

The memos, however, have established a liminal ground where the group members can more easily examine their own and each other’s perspectives. More importantly, these reflexive musings do not remain private like the journals in the first group. In his memo, Avery reminds the group that their topic is an “extremely sensitive, controversial, incendiary issue” and it is only “natural” that they will get “angry or impassioned about certain points.” Furthermore, he believes that “when people get angry, they tend to be honest about their true feelings.” Indeed, Avery writes that he has previously been so “quiet, reserved and passive [that] it truly feels liberating when I blatantly tell someone how I feel. If I raise my voice it is not a personal indictment of you or your views.” But, as both Adrienne Rich and Magda Lewis and Roger Simon have pointed out, women can be silenced and alienated by what seems to be a “discourse not intended for her.” Avery doesn’t realize that many (white, middle class) women have been socialized to feel that anger is not natural or honest, that it is a personal indictment of them, and therefore, it is always to be avoided or prevented. When Avery also goes on to explain that anger is part of his family’s communication style, because Emily can “relate” to this idea, she is able to consider it reflexively:

Because of my upbringing I always assume that once people start to yell while they’re arguing, that means they have stopped listening and that they no longer care about what the other person has to say. Avery explained to me that in his family, they get their point across to me by yelling and raising their voices. That really helped me see where he was coming from. I’m not saying that I won’t cringe if we start a screaming match again.

However, Avery has another, deeper reason for his anger. In his final reflection (written to the teacher and unfortunately not shared with the group), Avery provides more insight into the experiences that have given rise to his position:

When I was young, I was often teased by my classmates. From the first grade on, I was the object of ridicule, offensive taunts and cruel jokes. It was during these incidents that I first began to contemplate the ramifications of being “different.” Later on this awareness became more politically based and I learned the power of self-respect, speaking out, and kinship with others who are also oppressed and have the ability to empathize. . . . The ironic part is that I want to remember the severity of the pain . . . so I will never lose the feelings which accompany it—anger, frustration, even rage.
Avery has alluded in his journal and memos to having been on the "receiving end" of hurtful comments, but he has not openly talked about why the group's topic, in addition to being politically and morally important, is so personally significant to him. If Avery's intentions in this research are indeed to enlighten the others rather than to expand his own perspective, then he may not see the need to be reflexive about the topic; after all, he knows in the deep sense what he thinks and feels. Furthermore, it's not likely he would find it easy to question a position he has struggled so hard to reach, as he notes in this final reflection: "I am proud of my militant edge. I am emerging from a nebulous, pale, listless state into something with more color, shape, texture and definition."

In contrast, neither Serena nor Emily began the project from a position in which they were heavily invested. For the most part, they find it easier to challenge and critique their assumptions that are mostly composed of hand-me-down notions and ready-made ideas rather than knowledge they themselves have spent time and energy constructing. As the project progresses, Serena continues to question her assumptions. In her journal she asks, "Why am I able to separate Jeffrey Dalmer from the rest of the white race and not Mike Tyson from the black race?" After their interview with the head of Affirmative Action, she writes, "I thought I knew everything about Affirmative Action, but I found myself embarrassed by my lack of understanding." When the group interviews the Assistant Director of the Office of Multicultural Affairs, Serena admits, "I was ashamed for not knowing more about Malcolm X's life. I was embarrassed for not having more of an interest to begin with. Once again I caught a glimpse of the racist side of myself."

Perhaps the best example of Serena's openness to being changed occurs when she and Avery attend a meeting of the Black Students Organization. For Avery, feeling like an outsider is a fact of life; for Serena, the experience is extremely uncomfortable. As the only white woman in the group of twenty-five (mostly male) black students, Serena says in her memo that "no one spoke to us and we were pretty much ignored. I learned a lot about the kind of person I am. I am a product of white culture. I like "white" music. I like the "white" English form of speaking. I don't know whether this is right or wrong." Later in the paper she writes for the project, she elaborates further on how she felt:

I did not understand their inside jokes. Who is the rapper who caused people to laugh at the sound of his name? I did not speak in the same way as they did. What does "stringin'?" mean? For the first time in my life I was the different one and it did not agree with me. I wanted to be accepted. I wanted to be fluent in two cultures like they are. Where they are able to switch from "white" English to "black" English without thinking, I only know one language.

However, when Avery gives Serena a copy of the video, Jungle Fever, we begin to see that reflexivity has its limits. Serena says this was "one of the worst movies I have ever seen in my life (and I didn't dislike it for racist
reasons either).” While Serena has made a gallant attempt to examine her own hidden prejudices, she cannot tolerate and, therefore, think reflexively about “bad” language: “I agree the language was appropriate in the scenes with drugs and uneducated white people, but not for the main characters. The black couple were educated. It seems (and I could be wrong) that Spike Lee is putting down his own race.” Serena is offended by a conversation in the movie that “ripped apart the morals” of white women: “I don’t appreciate the assumption that all white women are after sex with black men just because they are curious.”

Some of our beliefs are easier to “put on hold” than others. Educator Lisa Delpit makes it poignantly clear what’s at stake when people try to communicate across cultures:

> We do not really see through our eyes or hear through our ears, but through our beliefs. To put our beliefs on hold is to cease to exist as ourselves for a moment—and that is not easy. It is painful as well, because it means turning yourself inside out, giving up your own sense of who you are and being willing to see yourself in the unflattering light of another’s angry gaze. (297)

Few people can sustain an ongoing dialogue that resists permanent closure by continually turning back on itself and reexamining its own truth. And yet, Delpit insists that this openness and reflexivity “is the only way to learn what it might feel like to be someone else and the only way to start the dialogue” (297).

Nonetheless, by the end of the project, both Serena and Emily peer into their locked chests and come to the realization that they are prejudiced. Serena writes, “When I began, I had a somewhat righteous attitude regarding prejudice and racism. I discovered that I am not as perfect as I had originally thought. This project has begun the process of positive change. I can see a transformation occurring.” Whereas Serena is energized by her enhanced awareness, Emily remains more cautious: “After reading many articles, arguing with Avery and Serena and examining my own beliefs, I realized I was prejudiced. But I am still not comfortable admitting this.” Admitting she is prejudiced is as far as Emily is able to go on her own at this time, as she honestly explains in her final reflection:

> Realizing how and why I am prejudiced is a big step in my emotional and mental development, and I am not prepared to take that step. I was already occupied with adjusting to college life, and trying to sort out my prejudiced feelings only complicated my adjustment. I am not yet ready to examine and discard my ideals I have formed while growing up. I am not ready to evaluate where I stand in my own life. In a way my inability to examine my own feelings on our topic allowed me to understand how important it is for people to recognize their prejudices.

Although Avery does not (re)confront his beliefs about racism during this project, he does begin to see his method of communication with others in a more complicated way:
I am struck by the anger which flares up in my writing so often. I like that part of me because I equate it with power, with successfully getting my point across to the others. I know that not everyone sees anger that way, and that to many it is seen as threatening, irrational and incendiary. This way of making people understand may at times seem like coercion. In many ways I suppose I am an absolutist, and I realize the dangers involved in these absolutist politics.

Toward Reflexive Dialogue
In both of these groups, collaborative inquiry has generated difficult questions, doubts, and recriminations; and yet, the Pandora's box still contains hope: the promise of new insight. Out of the locked chest have come more complicated understandings of the historical power and influence of religious authority in the personal lives of individuals. Out of the locked chest has come a growing awareness of the subtle and invisible forms of discrimination and racism that exist in this society as well as within the minds and hearts of all people. The promise of collaboration, the creation of individuals with intellectually and morally complex visions, leads yet to another paradox: the sometimes uncomfortable burden of enlightenment. Through collaborative inquiry, previously invisible and unexamined beliefs and practices are exposed and held up for inspection. Some students, like Courtney, Lee, Tim and Serena, will grasp at the opportunity to "enlarge their life worlds"; others, like Emily, will hover cautiously on the precipice, not yet ready to face a knowing "deeper than reason"; still others, after struggling for so long to reach their current position, like Avery, will stand steadfast and refuse to budge. Enough now. Too much is at stake.

As Spellmeyer, Harris and others remind us, the purpose of education is to initiate a reflexive dialogue: to provide students with "the chance to reflect critically on those discourses ... to which they already belong" (Harris 19), and to assist them with their particular struggles of being and becoming, to help them see, as Lee says, "where we're coming from and ... where we're going." The hope that lies in Pandora's Box is that Courtney, Lee, Tim, Serena, Emily and Avery will continue their self-reflexive journeys, although it is unlikely they will be able to do so alone because it is only when we come to see ourselves in the "gaze" of the "other" that our understanding of ourselves is transformed.

For this reason, those of us in positions of power need to see ourselves in all these students, but we need to look particularly carefully at students like Avery. For Avery represents that part of us that is at once impassioned, articulate, politically aware and well-intentioned while at the same time, protective, unyielding and unsuspectingly dogmatic. Like Avery, we have earned our insights through hard experience, and it is easy for us to feel impatient with those who are not willing to convert.

But we must remember that conversion is not the mission of a liberal education; understanding and self-transformation are. And, thus, if collaboration is to change the academy, it must begin with a change in the way we
present our own ideas to our students. As Spellmeyer notes, "The gospel carried to the wilderness is neither welcome or useful there. Any knowledge which might be useful must give people something 'deeper' than one gospel or another" (281). If we are to engage in authentic dialogue with our students and with each other, it must be a reflexive dialogue, one that leads all of us to a more complicated understanding and to a way of knowing "deeper than reason."

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Notes

1We have found Ede and Lunsford's distinction between hierarchical and dialogic collaboration a useful one for thinking about and examining the work of our students. Hierarchical collaboration is product-oriented with a sharp division of labor and the group intently focused on getting the text written. Dialogic collaboration is more concerned with group processes than end products, and members' roles are more fluid and shifting. See Chapter 5 for further discussion of these two different modes of collaboration. Needless to say, most business and scientific work (as well as academic collaboration) follows a more hierarchical model.

Works Cited


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**Read Reader**

*Reader: Essays in Reader-Oriented Theory, Criticism, and Pedagogy* is a semiannual publication addressing reading, readers, and reader-oriented approaches to texts, including literature, visual images, and student writing. Recent titles include "Women Reading/Reading Women" and "Reading the Image." Future essays will address such topics as reading early nineteenth-century American fiction; theories, stories, and conversations of literature; defining the profession by our practice of response; and reading Dürer's *Melencolia I*. *Reader* is published in the fall and spring at yearly subscription rates of $8.00 for individuals ($10.00 outside U.S.) and $10.00 for institutions ($12.00 outside U.S.). Contact Elizabeth A. Flynn, Editor, Department of Humanities, Michigan Technological University, Houghton, MI 49931.