

Cultivating Critical Conversations in Art Education

Honoring Student Voice, Identity, and Agency

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Generating LGBTQ+ Community Through Dialogue

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"We wonder if you could start by telling us about your interest in joining *The LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Dialogue Project*." This is the question we ask every interested younger person as we recruit participants into the project. In reply, we have heard with few exceptions that a key reason young LGBTQ+ folks are interested is because they don't know any older LGBTQ+ individuals, a few even noting that they didn't really even know "old gay people existed." Russell and Bohan (2005) observed:

In [LGBTQ+] communities/families, contact between youths and elders are not an intrinsic element of social systems, as is true in most biological families and in most other communities that face oppression by virtue of their members' identity (racial, ethnic, or religious communities). Rather, LGBT[Q+] interactions tend to be age segregated. (p. 2)

"Any contacts across generations," they continued, "must be arranged with the explicit intent of creating cross-generational interaction" (p. 2). The LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Dialogue Project takes up this explicit need by creating space and time for such intergenerational contact through dialogue.

Bringing together LGBTQ+ folks across generations is not simple; there are few models available that engage in creating sustained, longer-term possibilities for such contact (see Burke et al., 2021, for an exception). We ourselves recognized this challenge in founding the project. We suspected then that it would take years to find and create the conditions that would allow the creation of a community rooted within the diverse realities that make up LGBTQ+ communities. Community could not be assumed just because everyone identified as LGBTQ+. As Fendler (2006) argued, "Assumptions about community are dangerous when they function to perpetuate existing inequities and censor possibilities for differences"

(p. 306). Put differently, while the acronym *LGBTQ+* appears inclusive and "queer" is used as an umbrella term, differences reveal themselves within and between the letters. The tensions within LGBTQ+ communities due to gender, race, disability, class, age, and other intersecting differences require careful and complex dialogue to unpack deeper, more complicated histories and generate intergenerational community.

We, a gay educational philosopher, a gay developmental psychologist, and a lesbian anthropologist, cofounded the LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Dialogue Project with a large LGBTQ+ community center in the Midwest in the fall of 2019. Since then, the project has brought together racially, socioeconomically, spiritually, and gender diverse cohorts of LGBTQ+ younger (18–26 years old) and older (60–82 years old) adults for dialogues, storytelling, collaborative artmaking, and shared meals. The community-led research project was designed to respond to the needs of two vulnerable populations—LGBTQ+ college students and LGBTQ+ older adults—for intergenerational connection that could help participants to see one another as knowledgeable subjects, cultivate knowledge of LGBTQ+ cultures, and generate community through dialogue and artmaking. The project is built on an understanding that participants will be present for one academic year and are welcome to continue in different forms as the project expands to create alumni opportunities.

In this chapter we offer insights on the role of dialogue across LGBTQ+ generations. We look at three moments where different forms of dialogue emerged. These include a moment of dialogue as conversation, dialogue as debate, and a failed dialogue. Each is offered to show the possibilities and pitfalls of dialogue within the context of this community-led, collaborative art project.

GENERATING COMMUNITY THROUGH DIALOGUE

Dialogue, while often a keyword within education, is more an exception than a rule. Schools and universities in the 2020s are under various forms of pressure that are at odds with dialogue. This includes concerns about “cancel culture” that contribute to self-censorship from both students and teachers, legislation banning the teaching of “controversial topics,” and the continued banning of particular books, to name a few. A key educational problem is “finding ways to involve schools in creating and maintaining conditions in which inclusive, democratic, and open-ended dialogue can thrive” (Burbules, 1993, p. 151). Such work cannot merely rely on rhetorical flourishes that praise the work of dialogue, but rather requires attention to the everyday, rather ordinary experiences of being in relationship with others in dynamic educational spaces. Schools and university classes are often age-segregated, with the teacher being the sole individual from a different generation; our project challenges this age segregation by bringing together school and community for a sustained educational experience involving individuals across generations.

Conversation as Dialogue

The need for and possibilities of such sustained dialogues have been evidenced time and again through this project, despite its challenges. The need for such dialogue is often captured in and through conversation. For instance, when Emerald, a 22-year-old non-binary artist, expressed:

Through our conversations I feel like my own perspective on my queer identity has evolved a lot . . . ‘cause at the very beginning I was very clear . . . like, my name cannot be associated with this project. I was so scared of being somehow outed through this. Now I’m like, if I was outed through this freaking awesome research study, I’d be so proud. . . . Because this is so important.

A month earlier, Danie, a 69-year-old transgender woman, told a reporter for a local LGBTQ+ newspaper how through the project she had learned that she is still a relevant force and source of knowledge for youth:

The young people [in the project], right from the very start, have left no doubt that I, as well as the other

elders, have something of value that they want. It is wonderful to be sought after and welcomed by youth members. These beautiful young people want to hear from us. They are desperate for it.

Each of these comments draws upon the work of dialogue as conversation. Dialogue, as we have come to understand it, is not a monolithic thing, but rather takes different forms. One of these forms has been conversation. Central to conversation as dialogue are, as Burbules (1993) argues, two characteristics, “a generally cooperative, tolerant spirit, and a direction toward mutual understanding” (p. 112). Understanding becomes central to this form of dialogue, as participants gain insight into a range of lived experiences that are part of the emerging community. As we see with Emerald and Danie, conversations across generations prompt further understanding of one’s own self as well as others.

Debate as Dialogue

Emerald’s and Danie’s comments came during reflection and may not account for conflicts and tensions that are part of dialogue. While we seek to gain understanding with and of one another in conversation, understanding does not always come. Nor is dialogue always and only about understanding the other. There are other lessons to learn from one another through dialogue, including the opportunity to debate different perspectives about issues related to LGBTQ+ politics—including, for instance, the use of the word “queer.” While our younger participants are by and large comfortable with and often use “queer” as an identity, elder participants are often more hesitant toward the use of *queer*.

In one of the first meetings of the project an elder, cisgender gay White man, almost immediately expressed his dismay at the word *queer*, narrating his experiences coming of age in 1960s New York City and the danger of being called “queer.” Quickly upon his contribution, an impromptu debate took place where different sides were taken about and around the use of “queer.” A young participant talked about the importance of *queer* to their sense of self coming of age in the 2010s, and how not being able to use the word *queer* would be impossible to imagine. This debate as it unfolded was not about winning, but rather about unpacking the different sides that people in the room had around a rather contested and complex term. Dialogue as debate, as Burbules (1993) argued,

"does not have any necessary aim toward agreement or the reconciliation of differences" (p. 119). As that debate came to a close, the participants, including the authors, recognized that the different positions and needs of participants could not necessarily be reconciled, but could become part of the larger dialogues. This debate, as well, prompted renaming the project, which was originally called the Queer Intergenerational Dialogue Project. Through debate, the need to be mindful of terms and their historical, material, and educational impact was made manifest on the ground.

Failed Dialogue

While our above examples show debate and conversation as dialogue "at their best," we do not want to romanticize dialogue or argue that dialogue is easy or always leads to such positive experiences. Generating community involves, inevitably, failure and exclusion. The everyday realities and histories of trauma of our and our participants' lives come into play and illustrate the difficulty and effectiveness of dialogue in whatever form it takes. How do we generate community with members of a broad community that has encountered multiple forms of oppression and trauma, without those realities being reproduced?

We have learned we need to acknowledge each year the complications of coming together as an intergenerational group of people who bring with us our histories within LGBTQ+ communities. Recognizing these difficult realities is vital, so that the dialogues do not reproduce histories of exclusion. In the 3rd year of the project, while we were working to create community guidelines for dialogue, an argument erupted between elders that rendered many of the younger participants silent. This argument started when an elder cisgender White lesbian commented that she was tired of hearing "White gay men" talk, triggering for her a history of White cisgender gay men dominating conversations. Given that this was the first conversation and we had just met everyone, this comment hit some nerves (for better and for worse). A transgender woman of color followed up by saying a similar claim could be made about cisgender White lesbians. With those two statements, a heated argument ensued between elders that brought to the surface both past histories and present realities about privilege, access, and more.

This argument persisted for approximately 15 minutes before the facilitators stepped in because of time. In stepping in, we reminded ourselves and

participants that such an argument is inevitably part of our work in taking seriously the radical potential of sustained LGBTQ+ intergenerational contact. A sustained dialogue project would allow us to unpack these challenging moments and the histories they implicate—if we were able to parlay the argument into a dialogue. In the days following, we, the authors, had numerous emails and calls with the main elders who were arguing, as well as with several elders who were unsure the space was right for them. This, we felt, was necessary reparative work, particularly at the beginning stage of getting to know one another. However, a certain amount of damage was already done. This was, for us, a key moment of failure; but as Burbules (1993) reminds us, "Exploring the possibilities of dialogue also makes us become aware of *limits*" (p. 146). In this moment that would return in various ways throughout the 3rd year, we learned about the limits of our own facilitation skills, and also the need to balance the needs of the group with the needs of individual participants.

For instance, two of the argumentative elders would, due to their continued negativity, be asked to leave the project, which showed us not just the limits of dialogue, but also the limits of community. Drawing on Fendler (2006),

It is dangerous to celebrate and promote community building as if it were unproblematic. Instead it would behoove researchers to keep constant vigil and continually challenge the ways community constructs inclusions and exclusions simultaneously. (p. 315)

Generating community with and through dialogue is not, we have learned, for the faint of heart, because of this need for vigilance and for recognition that inclusion is always in question. Dialogue comes in many forms—debate and conversation, to name two—but veers off track when argument enters the fray and people talk over one another. Yet, at the same time, generating community through dialogue, including respecting the inevitability of argument, opens up possibilities and forms of understanding that are sorely needed across and within LGBTQ+ generations.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: "I DON'T KNOW ANY OLD GAY PEOPLE"

We started this chapter with our opening question. Responses to that question taught us that

many young people have had little to no contact with LGBTQ+ elders. We were first struck by these responses. Yet once this initial shock wore off and a conversation ensued, a realization occurred that the young folks were gesturing—whether they realized it or not—toward long-standing problems impacting LGBTQ+ life. This includes a reality that LGBTQ+ cultures are often (problematically) youth-focused, causing elders to become invisible and excluded from the ever-changing landscape of LGBTQ+ life and media portrayals. Second, in the aftermath of the AIDS epidemic, a large population of LGBTQ+ folks were lost due to governmental, scientific, educational, and social neglect. Yet this genocidal loss is largely devoid in the general public's imaginary, much less in school curriculum. Third, schools, a key site of intergenerational contact, have historically regulated the presence of LGBTQ+ teachers, making it uncommon for most youth to grow up having had a LGBTQ+ teacher, or even professor (Jennings 2015). A central challenge of these legacies, captured in the young participants' responses about not knowing "old gay people," is at its foundation institutional. How do we, LGBTQ+ people, have contact with other generations when institutions have at best only regulated such contact, but at worst contributed to the exclusion and death of LGBTQ+ people?

The denial of contact across generations is not unique to our current moment. Generation after generation of LGBTQ+ people have been and continue to be denied access to LGBTQ+ histories and knowledges, a reality confirmed in 2022 with Florida's passage of the so-called "Don't Say Gay" bill. With the LGBTQ+ Intergenerational Dialogue Project we are developing ways for generating intergenerational LGBTQ+ communities that recognize and share their

knowledges and experiences. Generating such intentional community requires staying with the challenges that emerge as generations meet for sustained dialogues. As we explored here, such dialogues can take many forms, including conversation and debate, which themselves can create conflict and moments of failure. Yet each is essential to this process. Such dialogues, to be sure, do not create a monolithic understanding of LGBTQ+ lives that eliminates differences. "There is no reason to assume," as Burbules (1993) contends, "that dialogue across differences involves either the eliminating of those differences or imposing one individual's or group's views on others" (p. 114). Rather, sustained dialogues allow for differences to be named and seen for what they contribute to the rich tapestry of LGBTQ+ life that is never one thing, but a multitude of possibilities.

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