

Deepening Dialogue in Silent Spaces: An Exploration of Pedagogical Informed Practice in Adult and Community Education Spaces within Communities in Contention

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Abstract: The rise of political populism has posed significant challenges for democratic societies and for the academy. Populist movements often emphasise a division between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, pushing narratives that thrive on polarisation. In such contexts dialogue between social and community groups and populist movements is crucial for the health of democracy. However, within the academy, and specifically within adult and community education in formal, informal, and non-formal spaces, populism tends to undermine the practice of dialogue by promoting exclusionary practices, rejecting, and indeed silencing the legitimacy of opposing views. This article explores the theoretical foundations of dialogue and silence as critical components of communicative discourse. It posits the theories of Freire (1970, 1996, 1998, 2010), Greene (1973, 1978, 1995), Brookfield (1995, 2009), Lederach (2003), Bar-on (1989, 2007), and Giroux (2005) as a means of scaffolding a collaborative theoretical framework for conducting meaningful dialogue amongst and between communities in contention. In doing so it aims to offer practitioners of adult and community education a conceptual framework to support participatory dialogue that engages with contentious and complex narratives. This article offers the concept of silence as a societal response to conflict, the construct of dialogue as

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one means to deconstruct the silence, the acknowledgement of truth being multifaceted, and the complexity that arises in dealing with identity in communities in conflict, where the practice of dialogue is challenging, elusive, and subdued. In concluding, it suggests where arts-based methodologies form the backdrop, there is hope for shared understanding to emerge organically.

Keywords: Dialogue, Silence, Competing Ideologies, Pedagogical Tools

Introduction

In recent years, the rise of political populism, spurred on in part by the rise in nationalism has posed significant challenges for democratic societies and for the academy. Populist movements often emphasise a division between ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’ between ‘us and them,’ pushing narratives that thrive on polarisation. In such contexts, dialogue between different social and community groups and populist movements is crucial for the health of democracy. However, within the academy, and specifically within adult and community education formal, informal and non-formal spaces, populism tends to undermine the practice of dialogue by promoting exclusionary practices and rejecting and indeed silencing the legitimacy of opposing views.

This paper explores the theoretical foundations of dialogue and silence as critical components of communicative discourse. It posits the theories of Freire (1970, 1996, 1998, 2010), Greene (1978, 1995) Brookfield (1995, 2009), Lederach (2003), Bar-on (1989, 2007), Giroux (2005) and others, as a means of scaffolding a collaborative theoretical framework for conducting meaningful dialogue amongst and between communities in contention. In doing so it aims to offer adult and community education practitioners a theoretical framework to support participatory dialogue that engages with contentious and complex narratives.

The aim of this paper is to critically enquire how silence and dialogue works in communicative discourse, within and amongst communities in conflict. The theoretical perspectives employed in this paper suggest several constructs, the construct of silence as a societal response to conflict, the construct of dialogue as one means to deconstruct the silence, the acknowledgement of truth being multifaceted, and the complexity that arises in dealing with identity in communities in conflict, where the practice of dialogue is challenging and dialogue itself can be elusive, and subdued. In concluding it suggests that where arts-based methodologies form the backdrop, or at the very least serve as an intervention, there is hope for shared understanding to emerge organically.

Silence as a critical component of communicative discourse

Brookfield (1995) noted that 'silence is socially and politically sculptured' (p. 24). He referred to Marcuse's (1965) concept of repressive tolerance to illustrate how passive acceptance of entrenched and established attitudes and ideas is often repressive, not liberating. To counteract this false consciousness, he suggested that the role of an educator is to clear a space for multiple voices previously silenced by dominant ideologies. Brookfield (2009) guarded against educators adapting a one-dimensional understanding of silence in educational settings. As Ellsworth (1992) points out it is mistaken for critical educators always to assume that silence represents voicelessness or loss of voice. This view betrays deep and unacceptable identity, gender, race and class bias and neglects the possibility that silence is often a politically sophisticated, deliberate choice. (Brookfield, 2009, p. 328). Connolly (2003) suggests that 'a central function of community education has been the provision of a forum for listening to the voices of otherwise silenced people' (p. 9). Silence in this context reinforces the need to establish a pedagogy with adult and community practitioners, that is informed by and taps into discourse that is often muted.

However, such an aspiration is not without risk. Often, within political populism grassroots silencing of conscientious objectors occurs. Communities become subdued in this process, adversely impacting the potential for dialogue. In acknowledging the deep-rooted societal silence that accompanies violent conflict, Fitzduff (1999) reminds us of the risks associated with breaking the silence between communities of enemies 'the price for talking in some communities is often high ranging from cynical questions to accusations of betrayal or death' (p. 86). Freire (1996) argued that 'human existence cannot stay silent, nor can it be nourished with false words, but only with true words with which men (sic) transform the world' (p. 69). Freire described silence in the context of oppression. 'every person however ignorant or submerged in the "culture of silence," can look critically at his or her world through a process of dialogue with others and can gradually come to perceive his personal and social reality, think about it, and take action in regard to it' (p. 104). Freire agreed that the importance of silence in the context of communication is fundamental.

Freire (2010) in writing about the roots of Brazilian 'mutism' stated that 'societies which are denied dialogue in favour of decrees become predominantly silent' (p. 21). He elaborated 'silence does not signify the absence of response, but rather a response which lacks a critical quality' (p. 21). Hawes (2006) suggested that 'dialogue can serve as a way to practice being silent and focused, listening and mindful' (p. 268). Li (2001) notes that 'silence and speech form a continuum of human

communication' (p. 157). Jaworski (1993) adopts a different approach. He advised that instead of searching for a final definition of silence, a critical inquiry into silence should focus on how silence works in different communicative contexts.

Silence is not always negative; it can also be experienced as empowering. Silence can be an act of understanding that reaches beyond what mere words can express. Vygotsky (1987) cited by Wegerif (2008) stated that 'as people get closer to inter subjective understanding in a dialogue, their need for explicit articulation becomes less, words and phrases become abbreviated, and they retreat towards the silence of a single consciousness' (p. 350). Vygotsky (1987) cited by Cheyne and Tarulli (1999) referred to 'inner speech as a unique form of internal collaboration with oneself' (p. 15). According to Knapp, Enninger and Knapp-Potthoff (1987) 'the practice of presumably unintentional silence may originate from long-term acculturation and embodies semiotic experiences' (p. 289).

Cultural silence

There is another aspect to cultural silence. People will be unwilling to publicly express their opinion if they believe they are in the minority. They will also be more vocal if they believe they are a part of the majority. Thus, the more marginalised you become, the less you speak. Silence itself can never be simply a sheer lack of voice. In respect to social relations there is no such thing as pure silence. Silences are, at least, always discernible by a definite gap or open place in the familiar refrain – whether of music, conversation, chatter. Silences like these are often themselves a sign that something is out of the ordinary, even terribly wrong. Kulkarni and Lemert (2012) observed that 'since the 1990s, development theories have focused on the voice/silence trope as a corrective to the inability of global development policy to consider, precisely, the silence of targeted populations' (p. 1). Spivak (1988) cited in Kulkarni and Lemert (2012) posed the question, 'can the subaltern speak?' They concluded that 'Spivak makes an important point as to the social dynamics of silence among the lowest strata of postcolonial societies, themselves lodged in the lowest tier of globally stratified societies' (p. 3). According to Freire (1996) 'those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggressions' (p. 69). In order to do this, Freire emphasised dialogue as a 'fundamental precondition for true humanization' (p.118).

Dialogue: A Conceptual Framework

Dialogue refers to a process of communication in which participants engage in an open exchange of ideas, often with the goal of reaching mutual understanding, resolving conflicts, or creating shared meaning. Dialogue emphasises epistemological

curiosity, collaboration over competition and listening over argumentation. Long being a proponent of the practice of dialogue, Freire (1970) notes, 'I engage in dialogue not necessarily because I like the other person. I engage in dialogue because I recognise the social character of the process of knowing. In this sense, dialogue presents itself as a component of the process of both learning and knowing.' (p.15)

Several theoretical frameworks (Coulter, Gilmartin, Hayward, Shirlow (2021), Allport (1954), Jameson (2014, Nugent, 2014) have emerged to guide dialogue practices, especially in conflict interventions, community engagement, and democratic and participatory governance. In practice, dialogue is often facilitated by practitioners in community organisations, civil society groups, and educational institutions. Structured dialogues typically follow a set of principles, such as active listening, respect for diverse perspectives and a commitment to mutual understanding. These principles are especially important in politically polarised contexts, where entrenched viewpoints and mutual distrust can hinder constructive conversations.

Freire (1970) advocates unity between theory and practice, 'in order to achieve this unity one must have an epistemological curiosity-a curiosity that is often missing in dialogue as conversations' (p. 19). He notes the 'fundamental goal of dialogue in education is to create a process of learning and knowing that invariably involves theorising about the experiences shared in the dialogue process' (p. 22). In bringing people together, in planning dialogue, practitioners need to develop a language appropriate to the context, a language that moves beyond identifying the codes and semantics that alert to difference, instead it needs to develop a language of unity.

The Possibilities of Dialogue

While populism presents significant obstacles to dialogue, there are still possibilities for meaningful interaction between community groups in politically polarised societies. One such possibility is the creation of deliberative spaces where participants from different political and social backgrounds can come together to discuss shared concerns. These spaces must be carefully designed to foster inclusivity, mutual respect, and a commitment to finding common ground. Another possibility is the use of local-level dialogues, which may be more successful than national or large-scale dialogues in overcoming political polarisation. At the local level, individuals are more likely to interact with people from different backgrounds in their everyday lives, making it easier to foster trust and mutual understanding. Community groups can play a key role in organising such dialogues, focusing on specific issues that affect the local community, such as education, healthcare and housing. Additionally, cross-community dialogues aim to bridge divides between groups that are often pitted against each other by populist rhetoric, and or nationalism. Such dialogues can focus

on common concerns, such as economic inequality, environmental sustainability, or social justice, which transcend political ideologies, and create greater understanding amongst groups of 'others'.

Dialogue as an educational pedagogy in response to silencing

Freire (2010) placed great importance on dialogue and the dire consequences of anti-dialogical action which he described as 'a theory of action based on anti-dialectics - diametrically opposed to one stemming from dialectics' (p. 102). This course of action, he emphasised has the potential for cultural invasion and he reasserts the role of dialogue within a humanistic approach 'humanism is to make dialogue live, dialogue is not to invade, not to make slogans' (p. 104). Freire suggested that dialogue is an educational pedagogy in response to the silencing of the oppressed. Freire (1998) recommended dialogue as a means to perceive reality. Dialogue is a methodological approach to overcoming difference and division. Dialogue builds bridges in the human experience. It explores humanity as an interconnected being. Dialogue is a response to what Freire (1996) noted as 'the problem of humanization' and is brought on by the process of dehumanization of the 'other'. Dialogue invites discussions that attend to emotions as well as abstract reason. Dialogue assumes that to understand is to understand differently, we calibrate our pre-existing views to accommodate that difference. It is by being our authentic self, when we can express our values, beliefs and our needs, when we are truly heard by the other that true dialogue occurs. Hawes (2006) affirmed the experience that dialogue is an act of co-creating mutual understanding. She suggests that 'our commonalities and our differences form the conditions for mutual understanding' (p. 264). She referred to Freire's thoughts about dialogue as 'an act of love that requires hope humility and faith in humanity, that becomes an equal relationship that builds mutual trust between the participants' (p. 267). We experience joy in recognising our shared humanity.

Deepening Dialogue

Deep dialogue is a methodology of engaging in dialogue that goes beyond surface level one-dimensional thinking and response patterns. It aims for participants to engage in conversations that reaches into emotional contexts and explores entrenched rationality. It is dialogue that is honest. It is dialogue that exposes insecure ontologies. It is risky business. Where dialogue, deep or otherwise is muted, the silence is deafening. In responding to cultural silence, the task of developing positive encounter dialogue between groups of 'others' is critical. According to Bar-On, Litvak-Hirsh and Othman (2007) 'dialogue can be understood as learning how another group feels and thinks differently from one's own group' (p. 52). On the other

hand, acknowledging the asymmetrical power relations in constructing dialogue is not without its challenges particularly in an educational context.

Freire (1998) suggested maintaining 'epistemological curiosity' so that in the process of learning, 'authoritarianism and the epistemological error of the banking system can be circumvented and outmaneuvered' (p. 32). This helps to prevent a 'simple passive pretense at dialogue' (p. 81). He highlighted the importance of listening 'only the person who listens patiently and critically is able to speak *with* the other' (p. 110). Hawes (2006) acknowledged 'with dialogue, the outcome, (consensus, conversion, victory) doesn't drive the process. The process *is* the outcome' (p. 263). She asserted that 'the turn to dialogue has come about in order to help people, who cannot talk to one another without arguing, dominating, withdrawing into silence or fighting, begin a process of mutual understanding' (p. 236).

Lederach (2003) elaborated 'many of the skill-based mechanisms that are called upon to reduce violence are rooted in the communicative abilities to exchange ideas, find common definitions to issues, and seek ways forward towards solutions' (p. 22). Lederach stressed 'dialogue is necessary for both creating and addressing social and public spheres where human institutions, structures and patterns of relationships are constructed' (p. 22). Lederach noted that the 'processes designed to explore these deeper issues will need to have a goal of creating spaces for exchange and dialogue, rather than the goal of creating an immediate negotiated solution' (p. 57). He elaborated 'the most critical parts of the processes are the cultivation of internal self or intra-group spaces where safe and deep reflection about the nature of the situation, responsibility, hopes, and fears can be pursued' (p. 57).

Bar-On (1989) described the shift in consciousness needed for former adversaries to engage in meaningful dialogue, and to begin to develop an understanding of how asymmetry of power relationships contributes to silencing of communities. Listening to silent voices requires that the dominant side provide potential new space, as its hegemonic stories do not traditionally give space to silenced voices. The dominant side has to reconstruct its own stories, to understand how its own narratives prevent recognition of the legitimacy of the weaker side's stories. (p. 34). According to Bar-on, Litvak-Hirsh & Othman (2007) 'telling a story from one side of the conflict can silence the other sides voice, particularly in a context of asymmetric power relations. For example, a Jewish Israeli reference to the 1948 war as a war of independence (for Israel), silences Palestinians who see it as their catastrophe' (p. 36).

Freire (1998) asserts the importance of silence in the context of communication as fundamental. 'It affords space while listening....and allows me to enter the internal rhythm of the speaker's thoughts and experience that rhythm as language. On the other hand, silence makes it possible for the speaker who is really committed to the

experience of communication, to hear the question, the doubt, the creativity of the person who is listening. Without this, communication withers.' (p. 104).

Populisms and Truth

The origins of populist truths, though contemporaneously positioned, usually precede a chequered, historical and painful past. In divided societies, where historical grievances, legacy issues and political populisms dominate, truth becomes a heavily contested space. The narratives that people tell about their identity, history, and political struggles are deeply intertwined with their community's sense of truth and influenced by intergenerational aspects of constructed identity. O'Hagan (2008) stated 'what cannot be talked about can also not be put to rest, the wounds continue to fester from generation to generation' (P. 105). Dialogue is essential to address the intergenerational effects of silence and conflict.

When nations, and communities are in conflict, their socially and historically constructed narratives, highlight the impact of populist rhetoric and uncovers the positioning of competing truths. Within this context, the potential for meaningful dialogue to support community relations remains very challenging. Within protracted inter-community conflict like in Northern Ireland, Israel, Palestine, South Africa, to name but a few, political populism often frames and disrupts the attempts and experiences of dialogue within these communities. Dialogue becomes fraught with challenges, but skilfully managed, dialogue also hosts the potential for transformation.

Lederach (2003) emphasised 'issues of identity are at the root of most conflicts' and recommends 'a move towards, not away from, the appeals of identity, practitioners need to be attentive to the voice of identity' (p. 55-57). Similarly, Hogan (2010) posits that when the practice of education is successful 'it contributes to the unforced disclosure of a vibrant sense of personal identity' (p. 3) The process and practice of dialogue has embedded within it the capacity to recognise the other's right to exist. Giroux's (2005) theory of border pedagogy, embedded within critical theory recognises the powerful potential for meaning making when colliding paradigms present themselves. In reference to MacIntyre (1981) Giroux notes, 'I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations' (p. 111).

Nugent (2014) posits that dialogue often centers on issues of identity, legacy, and the political future. Intra-community discussions are typically marked by the tension between ideas of legitimacy, recognition, betrayal, hierarchies of victimhood, truth and justice. Within the practice of dialogue, seeking compromise can be experienced as a necessary path to progress, whilst other see engagement in dialogue as a betrayal to their communities suffering, as upholding the fear of continued marginalisation

and even eradication, essentially hosting the foundations of an existential threat. Having constructed community truths around a history of struggle and experiences of victimhood, questioning these truths can be seen as undermining the community's identity. (p. 120).

Adult and community education practitioners and theorists are becoming more acutely aware of silence as a semantic process, a process of communication, and in observing how codes of silence occur in post conflict societies through gaps in communication, across interfaces and boundaries and through what Marcuse (1965) refers to as 'repressive tolerance'. Repressive tolerance, Marcuse argues, takes two main forms: (i) the unthinking acceptance of entrenched attitudes and ideas, even when these are obviously damaging to other people, and (ii) the vocal endorsement of actions that are manifestly aggressive towards other people (Oxford Reference).

Freire (2010) acknowledges 'from a semantic standpoint, words have a basic meaning and a contextual meaning' (p. 87). Within societies in conflict, an insider is privy to semantic understandings of how groups of 'others' relate, how they tap into each other's reality, to acknowledge who they are. The suppression of culture reinforces semantic silences and offers ways of knowing that suggest why cultures implode in conflict under the burden of suppression. This deep level of semantic understanding is helpful for intra community dialogue, and in negotiating what can and cannot be talked about yet, within cross community, inter community dialogical spaces.

The Limits and Possibilities of Intra-Community Dialogue

While dialogue within communities of others in conflict is important, intra community dialogue is essential for addressing internal community divisions. However intra community dialogue is also limited by several factors. Political populism, with its reliance on simple narratives and clear-cut distinctions between good and evil, can make it difficult for communities to engage in the kind of nuanced discussions that are necessary for meaningful dialogue. Nevertheless there are also significant possibilities for intra-community dialogue to foster greater understanding and progress. Within communities, there are individuals and groups who recognise the need to move beyond the populist rhetoric of the past and engage in more constructive conversations about the future. These dialogues can focus on common concerns, such as economic inequality, social justice, and the legacy of violence, which affect all communities. Furthermore, intra-community dialogue can serve as a stepping stone to inter-community dialogue, creating the conditions for communities to engage with each other in a more meaningful way. By addressing the internal divisions and contradictions within their own communities, they may be better equipped to en-

gaze in dialogue with the other side, moving beyond the entrenched narratives of political populism.

Arts based methodologies

Lederach's (2005) 'moral imagination' contributes understanding of how the ability to articulate one's ideology can lead groups of 'others' to develop a paradoxical curiosity towards each other. Greene's (1973) philosophical imagination has a role to play in arts-based methodologies that support inter community understanding. Greene (1978) noted that 'one of the great powers associated with the arts is the power to challenge expectations, to break stereotypes, to change the ways in which persons apprehend the world. Greene (1995) suggested that 'the extent to which we grasp another's world depends on our existing ability to make use of our imagination' (p. 4). She noted that 'to identify oneself with a one-dimensional view is always to deny a part of one's humanity' (p. 9). Greene (1973) emphasised 'in a multifarious culture, no single schema or category can be sufficient for organising the flux of reality. Abstractions-racist, blue collar, capitalist, dissenter, politician-inevitably obscure the existence of particular persons with their ambivalences, their hopes, their fears.' (p. 9)

Greene (1995) suggested it takes 'a fourfold vision derived from feeling, sensation and intuition as well as mind to encompass one's experience adequately and humanely' (p. 9), Greene (1978) also acknowledged 'The crucial problem...is the problem of challenging what is taken for granted and transmitted as taken-for-granted: ideas of hierarchy, of deserved deficits, of delayed gratification and of mechanical time schemes in tension with inner time.' Greene (1973) highlights 'there is always a flux in the things and ideas of this world and there is always the need to catch the flux in networks of meaning' and 'whatever the networks, the focus should be on that which dislodges fixities, resists one-dimensionality and allows multiple personal voices to become articulated in a more and more vital dialogue.' (p. 22).

Dialogue and silence as positive encounters

Dialogue can help to identify, and indeed articulate, the widespread forms of silencing that occur within the response of mainstream and civil society to contentious issues, and the ambivalence or banality that arises as a result, the detachment of 'right thinking' people towards a world of perceived violence. The role of dialogue in adult and community education is to provide a space where the multiple forms of silencing can be recognised, acknowledged and managed in a way that encourages creative and constructive processes that support positive encounters. That being said, sometimes

mutual understanding emerges organically, to elucidate, the esoteric nature of silence is explored through the following vignette.

Beckett's Happy Days Stories

Recently I had an opportunity to participate in and reflect upon a silent encounter of a mass of people in the centre of Enniskillen town in County Fermanagh in Northern Ireland. Enniskillen is a pleasant market town. 25 years since the Good Friday/Belfast/Northern Ireland Agreement² put an end to 30 years of conflict between Ireland, Northern Ireland and Britain. Enniskillen is now a relatively peaceful town but with a deeply troubled past of protracted political conflict. It is for the most part economically resilient, with people of varying religious and political persuasions now living in co-existence. The silence I refer to occurred spontaneously, and lasted for moments, it was neither contrived nor planned. However, it held a deep resonance, a lasting impact for those of us who were caught up in the moment. It occurred at the centre of the town, on Church Street at the interface between the Catholic Church of St. Michael's, and the Church of Ireland Cathedral, St Macartin's that stands directly opposite in close proximity. The Happy Days Festival brochure sets the scene, 'The Anglican Cathedral (St Macartins) and Catholic Church stare each other down 20 paces apart. And the blushing pink Methodist Church a few doors away, a beauty inside. They all look back on Blakes Pub, likely where Beckett may have sipped his first whiskey and Guinness'

A mass of people had gathered outside of the Catholic Church at the entrance. The crowd was eagerly awaiting an opportunity to enter the busy Church to attend the 'Precious Little Afternoon Recital' on offer as part of the Samuel Beckett Happy Days festival. Spontaneously a happy bridal party emerged. The bride and groom stood to greet their guests on this bright sunny day. The bride was radiant, and the groom was handsome, the bridal party celebratory, chattering and frivolous. The overall ambiance was congenial. Onlookers admired the wedding party, seemingly satisfied that they could enter the Catholic Church for the recital when the bridal party had dispersed. I with my daughters enthralled by this happy occasion.

Directly across the street, '20 paces away' St Macartin's Church of Ireland Cathedral was thronged with people. Suddenly amidst and in contrast to the bliss of the wedding party, a lone piper emerged playing a lonely recital of *Amazing Grace*. A funeral was taking place. The mourners began to emerge from St Macartins, carrying the

² <https://www.ireland.ie/en/dfa/role-policies/northern-ireland/about-the-good-friday-agreement/>

coffin. Sadness, grief and suffering was carved onto the faces of the mourners. Suddenly a hush descended upon the wedding party, the tempo of laughter and gaiety almost immediately subsided; the bride and groom stood steadfast. Silence erupted and filled the air. The lonesome piper slowly passed filling the air with the lonesome rendition, known to all. People bowed their heads towards the passing entourage.

Humanity was shared in those moments, understood and respected. Without any formal rules of engagement, the correct response was 'known'. Sometimes silence is the only response, the humane response, the cure, there are no words that could have suggested or imbued a deeper empathy. The cortege passed; the silence slowly drifted into oblivion in much the same way that it began. The crowd dispersed, some to a wedding, some to a funeral and I with my daughters to a splendid rendition of Haydn's *Ariadne auf Naxos*.

I knew that I had encountered a significantly powerful moment in time between two tribes. Each may have attended each other's funerals, albeit from the outside looking in, even fewer would have attended each other's weddings, thanks in no small part to the rules of engagement imposed by church and society. This incident might be construed as the polite silence of civilised company or 'a retreat towards the silence of a single consciousness' except in the knowing, the meaning that subjectively emerged. The moment was transformed by silence. It was indeed a precious little afternoon.

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