

Communicating Across Difference

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Agenda

- Introduction
- Motivation
- Thesis: Higher education should help you communicate across differences
- Analysis: What does communication across differences amount to?
- Synthesis: What can we do to help people learn how to communicate more effectively across difference?

Introduction



- Executive Director, TDI Center, Michigan State University, USA
- Professor of Philosophy, Faculty in AgBioResearch and Environmental Science and Policy
- Team science, communication, interdisciplinarity

Motivation

- I find myself living in a country marked by deep differences
 - We must find a way forward together, which entails finding a way to communicate across our differences
 - This is a principal reason why I'm thinking about these things, but I won't focus on this much
- I'm an analytic philosopher who uses dialogue to help complex groups communicate more efficiently and effectively
- I will lean on this perspective to make sense out of the thesis of this talk, which is:

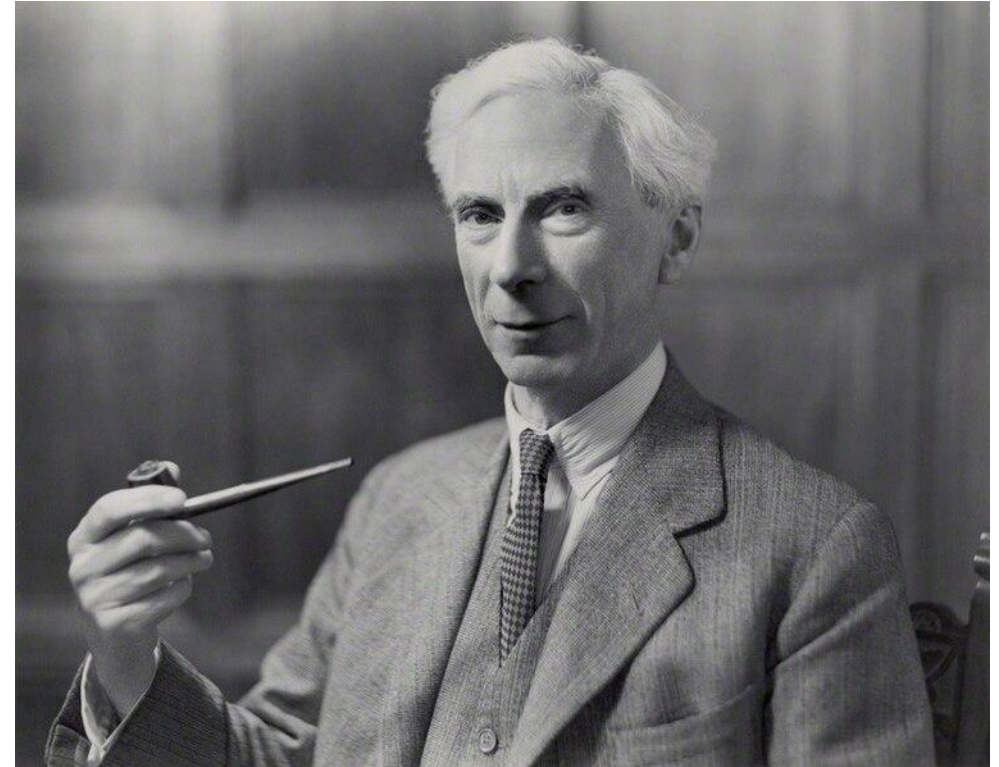
Thesis

- *Higher education should help you communicate across differences*
 - That is, it should provide you with tools and resources that enable you to have a wider range of productive conversations with people who are different than you than you would have had otherwise
 - In some ways, this is obvious – you take philosophy classes or physics classes, you learn their concepts and methods, and then you can talk in an informed way about philosophy and physics

Thesis

- How do differences factor in?

“Knowledge is a form of union of Self and not-Self ... true philosophic contemplation ... finds its satisfaction in every enlargement of the not-Self” (Russell 1969, 159-60)



Thesis

- Education sensitizes you to differences you didn't know were there
 - New concepts give you new classification devices that help you see two things as different, and new methods give you ways of applying those concepts
 - Seeing new domains is a function of differentiating the homogeneous background into a more resolved picture where variation is made salient
 - Think of zooming in on Planet Earth
- Once sensitized, you are in a position to talk in an informed way about those differences

Thesis

- But this is less a talk about higher education and more a talk about communicating across differences
- The remainder of my talk has two parts:
 - *Analysis* – What does *communication across differences* amount to?
 - *Synthesis* – How might we facilitate it?

Analysis

- Arguably difference is the whole point of communication:
 - Think of communication as making common – the word derives from the Latin verb *communicare*, which is “to share” or “to make common”
 - If we were exactly the same in every respect, then everything would be common, and we would have no need to make anything common
 - Different perspectives, information, and experiences create opportunities for learning, and *learning* often involves making things common across those differences
 - The point: difference motivates and focuses communication, understood as making common

Analysis

- But difference can also be an obstacle:
 - If you and your interlocutor do not share enough in common, there may not be enough mutual understanding to make something common
 - If you don't know what you can take for granted, then you can't know where and how to initiate the process of making something common
 - Example 1: someone trying to communicate a detailed predictions of quantum mechanics to a person with no mathematical or scientific training
 - Example 2: in making an argument designed to convince someone, you must start with premises that they accept, which entails that they understand them

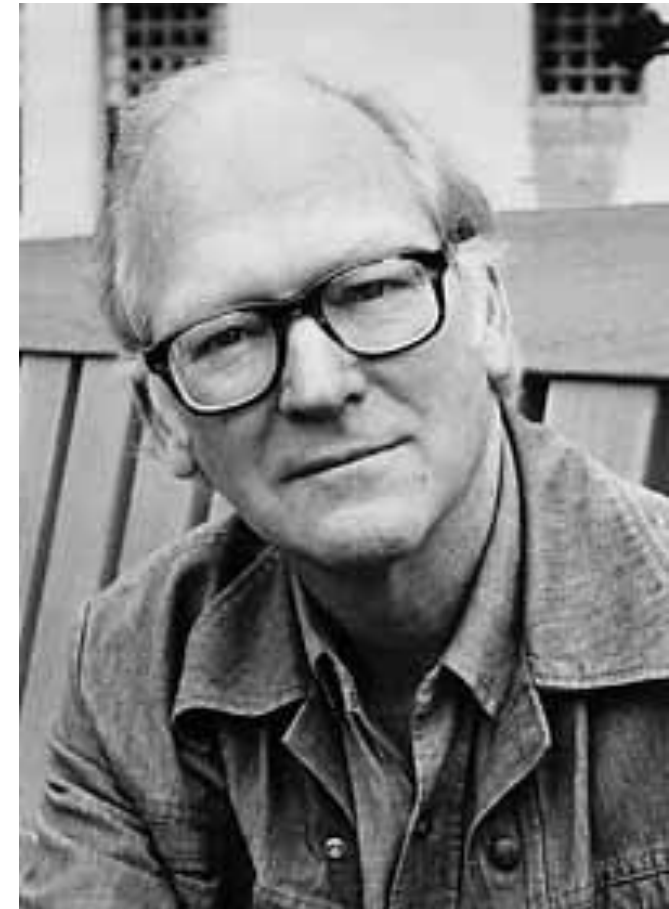
Analysis

- Too much difference, then, is a deal-breaker for communication
 - Which is to say that there must be similarity for communication to be possible
 - “If a lion could talk, we could not understand him” (Wittgenstein 1958/1986, 223)



Analysis

- Too much difference, then, is a deal-breaker for communication
 - This is built into a very influential theory of linguistic interpretation by the philosopher Donald Davidson, who endorsed a “principle of charity” as a key part of his account
 - “Charity in interpreting the words and thoughts of others is unavoidable ... [W]e must maximize agreement, or risk not making sense of what the [speaker] is talking about” (Davidson 1984, 27)



Analysis

- Digging deeper into this: Communication as *informational* and *relational* (Hall & O'Rourke 2014)
 - In communication, something is *made common* – *information*, or the meaning
 - There is also something that *makes it common* – the process, which is essentially *relational*
- Both of these are needed to make something common:

Analysis

- Informational communication
 - Shared informational infrastructure (e.g., complementarity, consistency) supports expansion of knowledge and conceptualization
 - Informational expansion requires consistency and complementarity, although inconsistency and lack of complementarity can be useful:
 - The former can force belief revision and improvement
 - The latter yields repetition which can take the form of corroboration and reinforcement

Analysis

- Relational communication
 - Shared relational infrastructure (e.g., trust, respect) is needed to join different people
 - Much of what we learn from others is delivered in the form of testimony, which is rooted in trust

Analysis

- But both informational and relational communication can also run into trouble if differences are too pronounced:
 - Informational communication can run into epistemic trouble – people don't share enough of a conceptual framework to make out what the other person is saying
 - Relational communication can run into axiological trouble – people don't share enough by way of core values to find a way forward together

Analysis

- To summarize:
 - Our ability to communicate across difference depends on the presence of similarity – arguably, a substantial amount of it
 - *The point of communication is to manage difference, which is often in view much of the time, but it is made possible by similarity*

Synthesis

- What can we do to help people learn how to communicate more effectively across difference?
- I want to focus on *dialogue* as a mode of communication that is especially well positioned to improve how we manage differences

Synthesis

- Dialogue defined
 - “A dialogue is a joint activity between at least two speech partners, in which a turn-taking sequence of verbal messages is exchanged between them, aiming to fulfill a collective goal” (Tsoukas 2009, 943)
 - “co-construction of meaning in pursuit of a goal” (Hall and O’Rourke 2014, 120)

Synthesis

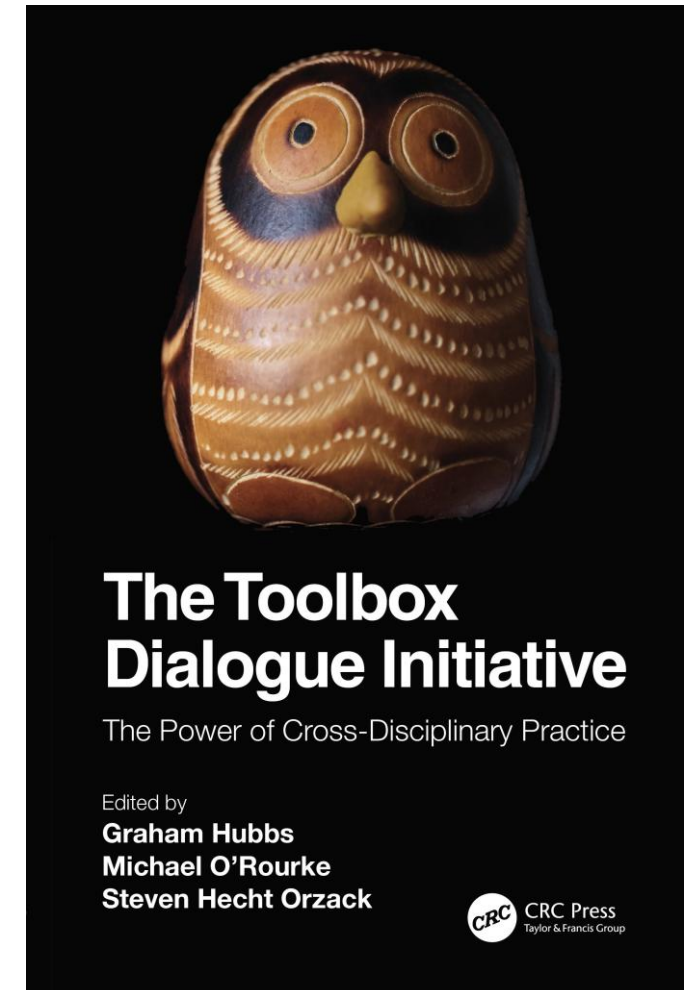
- Dialogue defined
 - As such, dialogue emphasizes collaborative communication, which is marked by relational characteristics such as deep listening, vulnerability, and a commitment to work together in creating mutual understanding
 - Dialogue encourages relational connection that motivates a collective search for common understanding about a topic of interest to the participants

Synthesis

- Structured dialogue – how this can help focus communication across difference
 - Structured dialogue is dialogue that has been focused in a particular way – e.g., dynamically in terms of turn-taking, or thematically on a focal topic
 - By structuring dialogue, you can get down to communicative business more quickly and also stay focused on themes that are especially relevant
 - This is a form of what Bohm (2004) called “limited dialogue”

Synthesis

- Toolbox dialogue as an example – Hubbs et al. (2020)
 - We use structured dialogue to improve communicative and collaborative capacity in crossdisciplinary teams and groups
 - Our structured approach is grounded in philosophical concepts and methods
 - We use these to identify and map abstract common ground occupied by representatives of different types of expertise as experts
 - In Toolbox workshops (such as the one tomorrow), participants build on this common ground mutual understanding as experts



Synthesis

- The Toolbox dialogue method structures dialogue with prompts that express stances on particular topics, collected in a survey-like “Toolbox” instrument
 - Participants rate their agreement with and then talk about these prompts, coordinating their reactions and their perspectives
 - We work to meet the participants where they are at, and we lightly facilitate the workshops so that the conversation is about them

Synthesis

Disciplinary Differences

Your Code: RPKZ9BP

1: Disciplinary knowledge is always deeper than interdisciplinary knowledge.

Disagree

Agree

1

2

3

4

5

Don't Know

N/A

2: An interdisciplinary effort can be successful even if no participating member understands all of the relevant disciplinary content of the effort.

Disagree

Agree

1

2

3

4

5

Don't Know

N/A

3: One can be an interdisciplinary expert without being a disciplinary expert.

Disagree

Agree

1

2

3

4

5

Don't Know

N/A

4: Certain disciplines are treated with more respect in the liberal arts.

Disagree

Agree

1

2

3

4

5

Don't Know

N/A

5: Differences in conceptual frameworks impede useful integration in interdisciplinary research.

Disagree

Agree

1

2

3

4

5

Don't Know

N/A

6: Differences in temporal and spatial scales prevent useful synthesis in cross-disciplinary research.

Disagree

Agree

1

2

3

4

5

Don't Know

N/A

7: Successful responses to Grand Challenges (e.g., climate change, food insecurity) requires the combination of disciplinary perspectives.

Disagree

Agree

1

2

3

4

5

Don't Know

N/A

8: Incorporating one's personal perspective in framing a research question is never valid.

Disagree

Agree

1

2

3

4

5

Don't Know

N/A

BACK

NEXT

Synthesis

- Other prompt examples:
 - Scientific research must be hypothesis driven (cf. Donovan et al. 2015)
 - Validation of evidence requires replication
 - Objectivity implies an absence of values by the researcher
 - Applied research is more important than basic research
 - It is clear how we will measure the success of our collaboration
 - It will be difficult to integrate our research methods in this project

Synthesis

- How can structured dialogue help?

Synthesis

- Building similarity by making common ground salient:
 - Prompts function as boundary objects that provide a common foundation for the dialogue (Star and Griesemer 1989)
 - This depends on instrument design
 - The prompts need to map the conceptual space occupied by the group so that participants recognize the topics and stances as relevant to their crossdisciplinary interests
 - The prompts ensure the requisite level of similarity to support making common expert perspectives across the group

Synthesis

- Negotiating difference across multiple dimensions
 - These can include (Eschen et al. 2025):

Category	Subcategory
International	Nation of origin
	National locations of research
Interorganizational/Interinstitutional	Academic partner institutions
	Non-academic partners
Interdisciplinary	Disciplines
	Methods
Intercultural	Culture
	Natural language
Interpersonal	Career stage
	Personality
Interstage	Work packages
	Collaborators

Synthesis

- Negotiating difference across multiple dimensions
 - For many crossdisciplinary teams, we aim to address the Problem of Unacknowledged Differences
 - Obvious similarity, hidden difference: If the problem comes first and you gather people together around the problem, this can ensure a feeling of similarity which makes this the problem to address (Bosque-Pérez et al. 2016)
 - You know you're different but you don't know how
 - The dialogue can foreground these differences and make them available for joint consideration

Synthesis

- Negotiating difference across multiple dimensions
 - For others, though, it is necessary to address the Problem of Unacknowledged Similarities
 - Obvious difference, hidden similarity: If the team comes first, this can ensure a feeling of difference, depending on the context, which makes this the problem to address (Bosque-Pérez et al. 2016)
 - You may or may not believe you are similar, and a dialogue like this can help make those similarities salient
 - This seems to be a way of thinking about what people in polarized political environments struggle with

Synthesis

- The goal of Toolbox dialogue is to build relational and informational infrastructure to support more efficient and effective communication and collaboration
 - This support takes the form of mutual understanding along relational and epistemic dimensions
 - Toolbox dialogue expands similarity and positions participants to communicate across difference

Conclusions

- Higher education should enhance your ability to communicate across differences
- The point of communication is to manage difference, but that requires a substantial amount of similarity to be effective
- Dialogue is a mode of communication that is especially well-placed to facilitate communication across differences
- Structured dialogue can help make dialogue an efficient vehicle for communication across differences
- The Toolbox dialogue method is one example of structured dialogue designed to help facilitate such communication

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