

Preparing Students for Leadership in a Pluralistic World

Diana Denton and Peter Laurence

Introduction

Moral purpose and commitment are not just intellectual constructs. They stem from a deeply held experiential spirituality. This workshop presented a program designed to help students learn how to explore that spirituality in an environment of facilitated open dialogue, and to become leaders in communicating across differences. This process is equally effective in exploring spirituality in non-traditional or in interfaith groups. Workshop participants experienced aspects of the program for themselves, and had an opportunity for interactive discussion of the process.

The presenters have designed a program for training students in the leadership skills needed to facilitate the exploration of spirituality and its inherent values, or the values inherent in various religious traditions. The program begins with the students participating in a session that combines some basic meditation techniques with facilitated dialogue on the experience of spirituality in a pluralistic world. Communicating across differences is a critical skill to be introduced at this point, along with the essential techniques of facilitating effective small group dialogue. Follow-up sessions reinforce these skills and experiences.

Participants in the Institute workshop were taken through the same process in a shorter time period. It was presumed that these participants would have an interest in providing their students with this kind of experience, and resources for doing so were introduced. Upon completion of the workshop we expected that they should have developed some understanding of the experiences and skills required.

Presenters

The two presenters have had extensive experience in interfaith and spirituality workshops and in small group facilitation. Peter Laurence is Executive Director of EDUCATION as *Transformation*, a project based at Wellesley College that serves as a resource to schools wanting to address issues of religious pluralism and spirituality on campus and in their educational programs. He is also co-editor of the “Studies in Education and Spirituality” book series with Peter Lang Publishing, and has served as Chair of the Board of the North American Interfaith Network and a member of the Assembly for the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago (1993) and Cape Town (1999). Diana Denton is an associate professor in the Speech Communication program at the University of Waterloo in Canada. She teaches courses on leadership, conflict management, spirituality, and interpersonal and team communication. She has served as consultant to numerous corporate and educational groups in the areas of communication and spirituality. Her publications include a single-authored book examining explorations of the self and spirit - *In the Tenderness of Stone: Liberating Consciousness Through Awakening the Heart* and two co-edited books: *Spirituality, Action & Pedagogy: Teaching From the Heart* (Peter Lang Publishing, “Studies in Spirituality and Education” Series, 2004) and *Holistic Learning and Spirituality in Education: Breaking New Ground* (SUNY Press,

2005). She is currently Chair of the Board of the Forge Institute (2005) and a co-developer of the Forge Institute College Program on trans-traditional spirituality.

Program

For purposes of this program, “spirituality” was defined as that which connects us and transcends all boundaries. Within the circle of spirituality we encounter each other as different individuals and as members of different groups. Those groups are identified in various ways – religious, ethnic, racial, political, etc. Encounters across differences that are not perceived as occurring within the context of spirituality can lead to hostility and violence. Within the context of spirituality these differences can be peacefully explored through the process of dialogue.

1. Personal Reflection

Personal reflection is an essential component of the experience that students will need in order to become leaders of discussions that explore spirituality across differences. Self-development is increasingly recognized as vital to the maturation process of effective leaders. In this workshop a core element of the program, the process of contemplative listening (Denton, 2004), was introduced to participants. They were invited to move into an inner contemplative state through a focus on the breath, and to reflect on a moment in their own lives that they would describe as spiritual. Attention was given to the affective and sensory aspects of this experience. Following this inner practice, participants explored their contemplations with a partner, listening for qualities and commonalities of the spiritual in their experience. During a large group debrief of this activity descriptions that emerged included:

- Community
- Light
- Focus
- Bonded
- Connection
- Gratitude
- Peace
- Liberation
- Warmth

This gathering of qualities acted as an entry point into further explorations of the spiritual. Rather than beginning with definitions of spirituality, personal experience was used as a vehicle for entering the conversation. The process of moving from inner reflective practice to intimate sharing with another highlighted the processes of contemplative listening. Resource materials were distributed at the end of the session consisting of the following:

Reflections on Contemplative Listening

Contemplative listening is two-fold – learning to listen to the inner voice of the self and learning to listen to another.

Listening to self

Self or inner listening is an invitation to stillness, to attend to the gift of the moment, to question, to listen to the small still voice of the self. Listening inwardly is a listening from the heart – with compassion and care. How do we open our hearts? We can begin by learning to listen inwardly to our emotions and our body – the images, sensations and feelings of inner experience.

As we begin the contemplative practice of inner listening we need to allow ourselves to:

Listen to the silence

Listen with our questions

Listen with an openness of heart

Listen with patience, not demand. Let things come to you in their own time

Listen with trust in your own wisdom

Listen with humility

As we open to inner listening we allow ourselves to be present with another, to listen to the insight and wisdom and inspiration of someone who is different than we are.

Listening to others in depth

Listening contemplatively to another invites us into a sacred communion. We need to breathe into this space, allowing the words of the other to touch us with intention and grace. We need to welcome the gift of their presence with the gift of our own. Listening deeply to another requires an open, responsive heart and attentiveness to the practice of listening. This practice invites us to:

- Listen to everything as if you were hearing it for the first time.
- Listen without judgment, with care and compassion.
- Suspend assumptions. Don't assume that others have had the same experience you have. Listen to their experience.
- Listen to the speaker's intention. Don't jump to conclusions. Don't be reactive
- Listen for understanding. To do this try to:
 - Empathize with the other, put yourself in their shoes. You do not have to agree or believe in what they are saying
 - Ask open-ended questions
 - Clarify what you are hearing
- Honor the pauses, the silences. Don't jump too quickly to fill them. Learn to be comfortable with silence.
- Identify your filters. Notice what your own internal comments and assessments are as you listen.
- Listen with humility
- When you speak – speak from your heart, authentically. Use “I” statements. Share your own feelings and responses.

- And finally, listen with gratitude...to the life that you are hearing unfold. Listen with your whole heart.

Adapted from “The Art of Contemplative Listening,” by Diana Denton in *Spiritual Development in a Diverse World: Theory and Practice*, Forge Institute, 2004.

2. *Facilitating Small Group Dialogue*

Techniques and groundrules for facilitating small group dialogue were discussed with the workshop participants. They were then asked to form groups of 3-5 people and address the following question: *How do you feel about traditional, institutionalized religion?* It was felt that this was a sensitive enough question to provide some lively discussion, with differences of opinion highly likely. Resource materials were distributed at the end of the session consisting of the following:

GUIDELINES FOR INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

From these tenets, guidelines for our dialogue can be formed:

1. We will not argue or try to prove that one tradition is more “right” than another.
2. We will seek to learn from one another, to listen and share rather than argue and pronounce.
3. We will come together as equals, as a gathering of seekers without hierarchy within and among traditions.
4. We will speak honestly, as far as we understand our own tradition and experience.
5. We will speak from our own understanding and experience, using “I” statements.
6. We will ask questions out of a desire to understand, rather than to call into question the validity of another’s statement.
7. We will approach each other with the understanding that our understanding is limited.
8. We will approach each other by first acknowledging and then setting aside our preconceived ideas or prejudices.
9. We will look for both commonalities and differences.
10. We will look to explore not only the historical and intellectual dimensions of our traditions, but also to understand the whole of the spirit and heart of each religious experience. We do this so that we might emerge enlightened, broadened, and deepened.

Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions. Adapted from the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 20:1, Winter 1983. pp. 1, 4.

GROUNDRULES FOR DIALOGUE FACILITATORS

For true dialogue to occur it needs to take place within a protective environment of mutually accepted rights and responsibilities, rooted in two fundamental values: respect for each person and trust in the process of dialogue. Dialogue works best when each participant is willing to develop certain skills that enhance the process. The dialogue facilitator must possess these skills and reinforce them with the participants.

Rights	Responsibilities	Skills
1. Each person has the right to define him/herself without being labeled by others.	1. Each person must be willing to seriously question his/her assumptions about the "other."	1. Each person should be able to evaluate and articulate his/her own attitudes, values and positions on issues within the context of the dialogue.
2. Each person has the right to express his or her beliefs, ideas and feelings.	2. Each person must allow others the same right of self-expression that s/he expects for him/herself.	2. Each person should learn how to temporarily set aside his/her own views and feelings in order to be more sensitive to what the other is saying.
3. Each person has the right to ask questions that help him/her understand what someone else has said.	3. Each person should ask questions that respect the other's right of self-definition, even in times of conflict or disagreement.	3. Each person should learn how to respond to questions in ways that help others understand.
4. Each person has the right not to change or be coerced to change.	4. Each person must accept the others as equal partners in the dialogue.	4. Each person should learn to deal with different points of view while maintaining his/her own integrity.
5. Each person has the right to expect that what is said will be held in confidence.	5. Each person must agree to hold what others say in confidence.	5. Each person should learn to deal with others from a position of mutual trust, based on an expectation that others come to the dialogue in a spirit of honesty and sincerity.

The *Guide for Dialogue Facilitators* and the *Rights, Responsibilities and Skills of Dialogue* are adapted from materials originally produced for the National Conference for Community and Justice.

3. Developing Leadership Skills and Qualities

As indicated earlier, a first step in preparing students for leadership in a pluralistic world requires an emphasis on self-development through inner inquiry and self-reflective practice, as well as communicative facility in dialogue with others. Yet, there is still further grounding that students need if they are to emerge as leaders. They must learn to develop and apply the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to be effective and perceptive leaders. Facilitating dialogue across

religious differences increases the leadership challenge. In this role they may be called upon to be facilitators, coaches, change agents, or process consultants. At the end of the workshop, time was provided for feedback from the participants regarding the training process for students. They were asked to identify leadership skills they thought would be important for students to have or to learn in preparation for facilitating explorations of spirituality. These were their responses:

- Knowing how to access resources
- A commitment to being changed
- The art of asking questions
- Skills of gate-keeping
- Comfort with ambiguity
- Open to multiple perspectives
- The ability to recognize stereotypes
- A desire to serve others
- Willingness to let go of their own agenda
- Understanding how change happens
- Motivated to encourage pluralism
- Knowing how to be in the conversation
- Fearless -- willing to take risks

While this list is not definitive, it offers insight into the specialized requirements of a training program designed to develop leaders who can facilitate dialogue about spirituality and/or across religious differences. To explore the possibility of using this program on your campus, feel free to contact:

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