

Facilitating Meaningful Dialogue at Arts Events

SESSION DESCRIPTION: Post-performance talkbacks and panel discussions, the norms for much audience participation programming, rarely offer opportunities for true dialogue. Structuring dialogues that both honor the art and meaningfully engage participants challenges institutional programming conventions and the expectations of audiences. Among Animating Democracy projects, Cornerstone Theater's production of *Zones* within its Faith-based Theater Project blurred the lines between performance and dialogue. The Common Threads project in Lima, OH, used evocative questions, creative exercises, and a mix of large and small group discussion formats to encourage participation. The Center for Cultural Exchange in Portland, ME, choose not to call it dialogue at all. The Warhol Museum provided daily dialogue opportunities for visitors after viewing an emotional exhibition. Most groups reported a "discovery moment" when they really understood how to approach dialogue planning.

While art can be a powerful catalyst for dialogue, the art, the setting and timing, the audience, and the goals of the dialogue need to be taken into account. What are reasonable expectations for a one-time dialogue? When should you break or respect conventions in exhibiting and presenting work? How should the art be brought into the dialogue? Share your "discovery moments" and participate in a full exchange on theory and practice.

PRESENTERS: *Lucky Altman, National Conference for Community & Justice; Dr. Patricia Romney, Romney Associates; Carrie Schneider, The Andy Warhol Museum*

RESPONDENTS: *John Haworth, Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian; Treva Offut, The Kitchen*

SESSION LEADER: *Maggie Herzig, Public Conversations Project*

Pat Romney: Grace Lee Boggs talked about knowing what we are trying to do in her presentation and this is such an important message when thinking about dialogue. When I first started working with dialogue, I realized it was so important to work closely with artists and art, to let them lead the process. There's really got to be a permeable boundary between art and dialogue so that the conversation moves across the boundary. The artist who's engaged in arts-based civic dialogue must be open to the participation of the organizations, audiences. We are not wanting to hold out art as a pure and self contained entity.

Let me ask you to go into your minds and hearts and think about one of the very best talks you've had. I'm sure there's a story connected to each of those and if I were doing to the workshop I would ask for the story, but I'm going to ask you to shout out words that describe that conversation.

The following words were said by various session participants:

- Confessional
- Perspective
- Spontaneity
- Relaxed pace
- Uninterrupted listening

Pat Romney: When thinking about dialogue what does meaningful dialogue mean to each of you? Have any of us had a dialogue where change was the result? It is my opinion that good dialogue necessitates change. Are we looking for incremental changes or systemic changes?

It's important to keep in mind the idea of neutrality in the facilitator's role, especially in civic dialogue. We often come together with strong feelings, emotions, and opinions. The idea of multipartiality is important; that is to say, when you work with groups with differences, the facilitator needs to be on everyone's sides.

Grace also said we have to move to the quantum level. Dana Zohar, in her book *The Quantum Society*, reviews the early mechanistic thinking of Newtonian physics: "The basic building blocks of Newton's physical world were so many

isolated and impenetrable atoms that bounce around in space and collide with one another like tiny billiard balls.” She continues, now on quantum particles: “When two quantum systems meet, their particle aspects tend to stay somewhat separate and maintain shades of their original identities, while their wave aspects merge, giving rise to an entirely new system that enfold the originals. The two systems relate internally, they get inside each other and evolve each other.” This is what we need to pursue in dialogue: individuals brought together into a whole, while still retaining their individuality and individual characteristics.

Carrie Schneider: *Without Sanctuary*’s project is a collection of picture postcards showing lynchings from the 1880s to the 1960s. Throughout the process, we had daily dialogue—even Friday nights and during the week for school groups. A community panel was established to advise the exhibit and we worked with people in community who participated as facilitators. As dialogues were structured, we invited viewers to write their reaction and individual thoughts. Then, they took part in dialogues in groups of two.

From the project, I learned to just be honest about myself. In working with young people, I had to be at their level. More so, I learned to meet people where they were, but still remain impartial. Everything they were expressing was very valid and I had to remind myself to appreciate that. You might see patterns of behavior, but you can’t make assumptions about where they are coming from.

School groups were there for about three hours (viewing each and having the dialogue). But the dialogue time was one hour. You need to have time for decompression after seeing those images. We organized the dialogues by anything they wanted to say in reaction to the images. From there, it would just move on its own to contemporary issues. There was really no prompting; and when there was it would be asking a deeper question, or “Did you hear about this before?” Or, “Did you learn this in school?”

Lucky Altman: Cornerstone Theater created a festival of five different plays at each of five faith spaces. The National Conference for Community Justice (NCCJ) trained 12 facilitators—some from the ensemble and others from the community—to assist in dialogues for two years. What was wonderful was that NCCJ had to really think about what it really meant to have art and dialogue. Peter Howard wrote a play called *Zones* that used civic dialogue from actual conversations. Actors then used their characters to interact with people during the post show dialogues. We didn’t want participants to talk about how the play was constructed, but to talk about issues contained in the play.

In some venues it worked beautifully. In some there was resistance. Ultimately, we wanted people to engage with their hearts and their minds rather than critiquing the play. There were five sessions of dialogues. The challenge for me became to write a dialogue series that included some artistic developments, but enabled people of a faith tradition, that is people who practiced and people who were interested in faith, could participate.

The challenge for me was to write a sequence of questions that: 1) connected with the artistic developments; 2) and with which people of faith traditions, people who practice, and people who are interested in faith, can participate. Some of the dialogue-sparking questions were: What is your name and meaning of your name? What is one cultural value passed through your family?

We had people prior to performance think about how they would feel about the play after seeing it. After the play, they put it on newsprint. Then, we had facilitators flexible and ready to talk about anything, anywhere.

So, to recap, to engage in dialogue, we followed the plan below:

- 1) Dialogue in creation of the art
- 2) Dialogue before viewing of art
- 3) Dialogue after viewing of arts

RESPONDENTS

Treva Offut: Sometimes when I’ve had dialogues they have really worked and sometimes they have failed. The Kitchen is a 33 year-old organization by artists for artists; and we’ve worked for six years expanding our community. Whatever event we invite them to, that is their impression of us. Some people that we sent invites to were excited; some weren’t interested at all.

In our project, *The Three Willies*, our biggest losses were that we couldn't have dialogue with community, and more that we didn't express what we already did with the community. Dialogue specialists should have been involved from the very beginning. And we did something new by reaching out, but they still didn't know what we did, meaning they only knew us in a narrower context.

Each school we worked with had students with a different historical context. We did workshops in schools prior to students seeing the piece, and what resonated with us meant nothing to these kids. The kids also didn't get a chance to hear what other generations said. One of the schools was an ESL school so there was a cultural gap. They had no idea what this was about. But because of the pre-planning we did in the schools, some kids were really into it and had really good questions.

John Haworth: The process is all about making curatorial choices. In museums we talk about "the surround," with questions like "How much white space?" "Is there too much ethic?" "What will the label say?" Everything from websites to post-performance discussions: it's all about the choices.

The downside is the gap. As arts managers, when you think about the surround and your choices, think about time, human resources, the cost of transactions. You have to be mindful about the price tag.

An organization needs to have more direct contact with what the artist is saying.

I also think about mediating the visitor's experience. For example, when the postcards from *Without Sanctuary* were filled out and sent in by a family member, what was their comfort zone in making something private public?

What The Kitchen did bravely was to have a discussion about the technical and that's ok. You can take any work and bring lively talk to a community.

The session was then opened up for discussion, with some points and questions raised shown below.

- You realize that people who want to talk, talk; and that those who don't, leave. Sometimes it's important that there's a break for people to gather their thoughts, and then come together to talk. (Pat Romney)
- For some of us, it's a luxury to think that you can do a theater performance, then go to a new space to discuss, etc. Most of us are working in a theater space. (Felicia Gonzales, Henry Art Gallery) By having a sufficient time in between, there can be a dialogue in the theater space, depending on sets. (Lucky Altman) In Lima, they set up little tables outside of the stage. (Pat Romney)
- There needs to be a certain intimacy to dialogue.
- Dialogue is an opportunity to gather around an issue where "I" might change and it requires that "I" engage in the critical thinking around the issue that's being presented to me. (Lucky Altman)

One way to be clear about purpose is to ask yourselves: "I want people to talk about issue, but why?" "What questions are already out there?" "What are the old conversations?" Once you have that idea, it's a lot easier to create some space to examine it. (Maggie Herzig)