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Dialogue on Finding our Voices in Research

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Dialogue on Finding our Voices in Research

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“If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings” Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, p. 69.

Dialogue between Faculty Member 1 (FM1) from Boston, Massachusetts, USA, and Faculty Member 2 (FM2) from Xi’an, China, that took place between September 10, 2014-November 20, 2014

Background to this Dialogue

FM1 was asked to teach a series of research sessions this past summer, August 2014, to a group of Chinese faculty members from Xi’an who have begun the research process as a new path to their profession. I thoroughly enjoyed this experience. I, myself, having been a tenured professor at a private university in Boston and now at a public research university in Boston, have published case studies, peer-reviewed articles, journalistic articles, chapters, and a book. However, during the last couple of years, I found myself becoming more silent and I wasn’t sure why.

After one of my sessions with the Chinese educators, one particular teacher and I started to talk. It wasn’t just any kind of conversation. We talked for over two hours and the topic was on finding our voice. What does that mean to us? How did we lose it? What if we have been silent for a very long time and now need to find our voice? Because the conversation with the Chinese teacher was so thought-provoking, meaningful, and reflective, we decided to engage in a dialogue on this very topic of finding our voice for undertaking research. Below you will find our free-flowing dialogue on this topic.

We were really incorporating the essence of a dialogue as promoted by Bohm (1996) in getting into a free-flow of consciousness and also applying Isaacs (1999, pp. 80-81) four dialogic behaviors of listening³ to each other, respecting our respective thoughts as they unfolded, suspending any judgments of anything that was being shared, and voicing, being able to say whatever was within us that needed to be stated as the dialogue continued to unfold.

FM2: Thank you for giving me this chance to do this free-flowing dialogue with you. Since 1994 I have been teaching English as a foreign language at my university which is known as the “Cradle of Teachers” in Northwest China. My university has a history of 70 years and is an

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³ Listening is being described here as “listening” to the each other’s voice in the written dialogue between us, as FM2 and FM1 communicated between China and the U.S. via email for this ongoing dialogue. Our dialogue commenced on September 10, 2014, and came to a natural ending on November 20, 2014.

important teachers training university in Western China, and now it is striving to become a major comprehensive research university distinguished by its teacher education. Besides the emphasis on research, a lot of attention is also being paid to the modernization, internationalization and globalization of higher education. It is with such goals and expectations that my university sent my colleagues and me to America this summer.

Talking about voices brings me back to my early days as a green hand teacher, when my confidence in my ability to teach well was thwarted by two things, both of which had something to do with my voice. For one thing, my voice was not loud enough to be heard clearly in a class of about 50 students. For another, I was advised by an experienced authoritative male professor, in a very serious manner, to speak more like an intellectual rather than like me. I have solved the former problem with an amplifier. However, for a very long time, I have suffered from the latter problem with the thought that my voice is not sophisticated enough to communicate knowledge and wisdom. I have published some research articles and taken part in some textbook compilations, and I enjoy teaching more and more. But still, I'm not sure about the use of my voice, as I told you during our conversation that unforgettable afternoon.

FM1: I am thinking about the part above where the male professor you mentioned above said you should speak more like an intellectual and I am thinking about how we speak and how we express ourselves are such a reflection of what we are thinking; it is a reflection, or maybe a synthesis of what we read, our experiences, the questions we have, what we think about. In other words, *how we speak*, is a representation of just who we are, not something imposed on us by another person. And yet, don't we all have someone or something imposed on us in various ways? I do remember Isaacs (1999, p. 79) saying that "all great practices begin with the individual," and so I see that how we all speak needs to first emanate from deep within each of us and not be imposed by someone else.

I think the imposition I am experiencing right now is self-induced. I am finding I am in a reflective, observant state of taking things in that interest me, that I am deeply attracted in learning more about. To be specific, after many years of designing graduate programs, teaching, and consulting to many kinds of organizations, I find myself wanting to do community development work. And that community development work will encompass the systems thinking lens, which is a deep passion of mine and the significant field that I have devoted my studies (and life!) to. I am attending seminars, talking with people in the community, reading articles in this new area. But my voice is silent. I do not know what to say about it yet, where I can make a difference that is really meaningful. I remember reading once in a book on spirituality that in order to articulate something to the outside world, we need to articulate it to ourselves first. And I see that being connected to what Isaacs (1999) said about all great practices, which I am referring to here as reflection and dialogue, as being with ourselves. I really do believe that is where I am now.

FM2: Or it may work the other way around. Terry Eagleton (2005), the British literary critic I'm studying for my doctoral program, remarked, "Our selves are made manifest to others all the

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time in language, action and the body. Indeed, unless we were intelligible to others, we would not be intelligible to ourselves.” (Eagleton, T., 2005, p. 319). Either way, we need our own voice, don't we?

What you said about imposition really made me think a lot. If there is an agenda for finding our voice in research, should the very first thing be to free ourselves from those impositions? On careful consideration, I realized the feeling of frustration and lack of confidence I have been carrying all these years, which could be regarded as a kind of imposition, is also self-induced. That professor was just offering me some kind advice from his own standpoint.

But still, we do need help to find our voice. Last month, I attended a seminar (called a salon here) held by the department I belong to, where my colleagues and I talked about how to do research in the field of college English instruction for non-English majors, with the aim of helping the teachers and graduate students find their academic interests. What takes place in a salon, I think, is that voices are encouraged. I enjoyed such an occasion just as I enjoyed what you guided us to do in Boston. In the first couple of your sessions, you encouraged us to talk about our academic concerns within groups, write down our topics on a large piece of work sheet, tell everyone what our topics are about, and then ask for peer evaluation. I enjoyed the whole process although I didn't come up with some proper research questions. However, I did find myself on my way to a research I care about. As to the salon, although there was a lot of talk about the difficulties in teaching and doing research, the chairman (a doctor and professor) sincerely shared with us his own experiences, which are very useful to me, and one message was conveyed that research should be based on problem solving.

But, as my colleagues said, the problems we want to solve seem to have been thoroughly investigated by others, so how can we find our own foothold in research? Another thing is, it seems that nowadays, in order to solve the long existing problems, more and more advanced and fancy methods are needed, without which the research would be of no use. It is not just we English teachers who are faced with such anxieties. Behind our own individual quest for our own voice there is a bigger quest, isn't there? The way Chinese scholars do research is very different from yours and one of the big differences lies in the lack of some proper academic training and scientific methods. In the context of globalization, there is a concern in Chinese academia, especially for social sciences and humanities, the so-called "loss of voice." It seems that our academic import is far outrunning the export and it is difficult for us to get ourselves involved in the international academic exchange and collaboration. Some Chinese scholars argue that the modern Chinese language has not yet developed a set of vocabulary for scientific research and academic dialogue with the international society.

I am also really interested in community, especially learning community. I started my English learning at the age of 12 and it was a very lonely process. My teaching career has witnessed the transition from behaviorist approach to cognitive one, with more and more emphasis placed on

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function and communication instead of drilling and translating. However, this summer's program made me realize that having been trained mainly by a behaviorist approach, sometimes I just paid lip service to cognitive approach. To some extent, I am a victim of the behaviorist approach. For a very long time, I have been learning and teaching English just for English's sake instead of using it as an excellent tool to do more sophisticated things. I am equipped with two languages, yet I'm not confident enough to use either of them in research.

Also, many Chinese students are used to learning the so-called "dumb English," which is why I'm now designing my English classes with more vigilance and thinking about putting my students into some learning community to facilitate their English learning and make it less lonely and more meaningful. I also learned this summer from one of the professors that there is now some humanistic approach to language instruction, which really interested and excited me. I hope, by helping my students use English to think, speak and communicate, I can find my own voice.

Now, I want to come back to my previous loss of voice due to the influence of male authority in my early teaching life. I'm not a professed feminist, but I do feel that the difficulty I have experienced doing research is deep-rooted in the long tradition of treating men and women differently. Thomas Hardy wrote in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, 'It is difficult for a woman to define her feelings in language which is chiefly made by men to express theirs' (in Eagleton, 2014, p. 72). So, my question is, Does the same thing happen to women when they try to express their own ideas in research?

FM1: That is such an interesting question. I think that is worthy of investigation into the literature and having a conversation with other scholars to uncover their own unique experiences....great questions! In fact, women trying to express their own ideas reminds me of key thoughts that were expressed in the *Lean In* book by Sheryl Sandberg that I just finished reading this summer. It's about women leaning into their careers, finding their respective voices, being invited to the [executive] table at work.

I had an insight this past weekend and it connects very strongly to the stage of observing that I am in right now that I was talking about above. I realized that when I was first becoming immersed in my field of systems thinking that, in addition to digging into the literature, I was also in a very observant state. I was like a sponge, as a colleague remarked to me...just taking it all in. That is where I am now. So, if that had been my mode of learning and absorbing before, I am there again. I think I need to honor that stage and know that I will find my new "voice" once my new area of research becomes crystallized.

FM2: During the course of this program, most of the professors are female, and they helped me a lot, not only because they encouraged me to voice my opinion, but the way they delivered their lectures also impressed and inspired me a lot. I was there in the classroom, listening to and

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observing those lovely professors, including you, taking it all in, also like a sponge. I totally identify with what you felt in the course of finding a new voice.

FM1: I'd like to go back to some points you made above when you said, "the problems we want to solve seems to have been thoroughly investigated by others, so how can we find our own foothold in research"? The fascinating thing with research is that we can take off from where others have left off. For example, what others have investigated usually has left "gaps," as it is referred to, where we can then undertake our own investigation to fill those gaps in knowledge and that is the research we can undertake. I always look at research as putting a puzzle together. Everyone has important pieces of knowledge that has been uncovered with their research and at some point there will be enough solid data and keen insights to help solve the really entrenched problems we face. Which now leads to your question about systems thinking.

Systems thinking is like putting a puzzle together for me, too. What I mean by that is that every piece of information that we uncover is used to put together that "big picture," which is what systems thinking is. It is seeing the whole of something, with its interactions and interconnections. Systems thinking also uncovers the dynamics that are inherent in any situation. Every living system (a human body, nature, families, even our own classrooms) is made up of these dynamics. There is also a connection between the "big picture" of a situation and the fine details that make up that situation. So, we can work with the fine details that are presented to us and that will help with our making changes to our system. There is a saying in the systems thinking world that one can think globally and act locally. I think that sums up what systems thinking is.

One other aspect that I have been thinking about is that as we uncover our respective voices, we are not alone in this process...none of us have to be alone. We have a network of friends, colleagues, even the literature that we consult that can help us find and shape our voice and this process is how we begin to conceptualize new knowledge.

FM2: As Eagleton (2005) points out, when analyzing the meeting of Stephen and Bloom in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, "one must find a way of being original – of inaugurating something radically new – on the basis of what one receives from the past and present" (p. 306).

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