Strengthening Contexts for Scholarly Dialogue: Micro-Moments of Inclusive Excellence

In consideration of the importance of advancing critical thinking skills, Halpern (2014) identified four essential practices: adopting habits of thoughtful deliberation, building proficiencies in analysis and inference, refining processes of knowledge transfer from familiar to novel environments, and reflecting on personal views. Critical thinking incorporates insightful understanding and evaluation, and it fosters associated judgments. It is central to advancing knowledge. When it is offered in a context of scholarly dialogue, critical thinking becomes the vehicle for personal understanding and shared debate.

Even as it facilitates collective understanding, though, scholarly dialogue can foster disagreement and sometimes outright dissent. How best to fine tune shared knowledge and understandings has challenged academicians for generations (Damrosch, 1995). Often inciting the challenge are individuals’ beliefs about what sorts of reflections and ideas are legitimate; how they should be studied and understood; the fiscal implications of addressing them; and whether “the way we’ve always done it,” as an established precedent, ought to be valued and respected. In other words, efforts to advance collective understanding typically invite emotion, a rapidly experienced, neurologically mediated reaction (Byrne, 2015; Kahnemann, 2011) that will influence attending, remembering, and reasoning, and that can derail the fine tuning required for scholarly dialogue.

Under challenging conditions such as those so frequently characterizing the course of scholarly dialogue, individuals share emotion, whether unintentionally or intentionally, through rapid, involuntary facial expressions (Li et al., 2018) and sometimes through subtly dismissive behaviors like sighing, eye-rolling, or eye aversion. The process transpires quickly, in micro-moments—milliseconds of time (Ball, 2018) during which individuals make interpersonal decisions about whether or not their thoughts and ideas have legitimacy and whether they, as individuals, belong and warrant inclusion.

In view of the power of emotion, a fifth critical thinking practice might serve to augment the four identified by Halpern (2014). That practice is actively addressing and attending to emotion-laden micro-moments. Handled poorly or overlooked by group members, those micro-moments will almost certainly deny stakeholders’ equal access to discussion. Handled well, discussed openly and from a perspective that recognizes emotion’s impact on scholarly dialogue, they will support inclusion and advance the engagement of stakeholders who might otherwise believe their voices have been silenced.

Scholarly dialogue does not follow a linear path. Instead, it is fraught with the products that emerge naturally as artifacts of critical thinking. These emergent artifacts are embedded in the complexities of language. They are interpretable in terms of individuals’ lifetime lived experiences. And they will inherently invite or inhibit equal participation of all discussants in scholarly dialogue. Strengthening contexts for scholarly dialogue requires not only thinking critically for informed judgment, but willingness to examine and address the subtle implications set in motion by expressed emotion. It demands that each discussant consider habits of mind and habits of speech.

Calling out and examining communication micro-moments as they engage or dismiss stakeholders will foster sense of belonging for all. It will strengthen the context of scholarly discussion. And it will nurture practices that encourage inclusive excellence, shaping a welcoming and inclusive environment that will magnify the quality of individual thought and proliferate the fruits of scholarly dialogue, even as it welcomes the emotion that is fundamental to its conduct.

References
Li, X., Hong, X., Moilanen, A., Huang, X., Pfister,

Laura Cox Dzurec, PhD, PMHCNS-BC, FAAN, ANEF
Senior Scholar
Widener University, Chester, Pennsylvania

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