

## **Bill Isaacs**

### Reflections

- *This was a fine session*; it was good to meet everyone, good to begin to extend and talk across disciplines, and think about what we have been learning. There is value in this, in building the field(s), and in deepening our capacity as thinkers and practitioners.
- *There is a difference between deliberation and dialogue.* This did not come out as strongly as in retrospect I think could be the case. I think this distinction cuts across both fields or can be present in both. This is not just an intellectual difference, but also practical one. Deliberation comes from the root *delibere*, which means to weigh out. Dialogue comes from two roots, *dia* and *logos*, and connotes “meaning moving through.” One refers to a process of weighing out before deciding (whose root means to cut out, similar to homicide and suicide); the other to a flow of meaning. I believe deliberation is a natural precursor to dialogue; I think dialogue arises once there has been space to weigh out options, and realize that none of them are quite right. Deliberation if done under the pressure of needing to choose can certainly lead to decision. But it can produce, if there is time, intention, and desire, a realization of a need to gather between the categories of previously thought out subjects. To “gather between” is the meaning of intelligence (*inter legere*).
  - I think it might be fruitful to explore more carefully the relationship between these two and how they might play out during various exercises in deliberative democracy, whether formally organized or in the mode of a community building exercise; or in a more strict, alternative dispute resolution or consensus building process. I suspect both are again needed for both, with different emphases depending on context and the structures driving the situation.
- *There is value in exploring the challenges of practicing what we preach.* This challenge is always present, and rarely maturely addressed. I want to say that I certainly did not intend my reflection on the nature of our process to have a chilling effect on our interactions, which I worried it did, whether out of an attempt to inquire further and reflect or out of reaction! In addition to attempting to bridge the worlds of deliberative democracy (DD) and Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR), we were also bridging between intellectual reflection and different kinds of practice. I detected at least 4 and probably more kinds of practice in the room—I do not know everyone well enough to say this with any completeness: Fishkin-esque randomized deliberative democracy work, ADR consensus building work (Jay, Larry, David+) community organizing/new governance process conversations (Carolyn+), and dialogue ( Dan, myself, perhaps others). The rare thing is actually in my mind not just interdisciplinary interaction but the willingness to take a look at *how* we are talking and not just *what* we are talking about. This is typically a source of immense discomfort for

people, but without it, I believe no substantive transformation takes place. Now if one has no desire for substantive transformation, then the need is less...

- *There is a more general theory of conversation lurking here.* One mode is to map out, as Archon did, different modes and where and why they fit. But I would suggest there is another way to think about this that stems more from how conversations system unfold. I think we could produce a more general language or grammar of conversation. I have been working on this and am now writing about it. I think of a conversation as emerging in some social field, with some set of boundaries or container, and some kind of “center” or focus. I think the different practitioners I see make different conscious and sometimes not so conscious choices about each of these three things: field, container, and center. I think, depending on the situation, that there are transformations and patterns in how all this works that are relatively stable – in other words I do not think there are 500 ways this all happens, but much fewer. I am not sure what they are, and as it was put, “it all depends”. But depends on what? I think on these three things and how they form in whatever context it is:
  - *DD* for instance looks at widely or precisely representative (selected somehow) “containers”, with a field of exchange that values scientific or externally valid data and knowledge, and a center on a decision or choice or vote. (A “container” is a bounded space for exchange).
  - *ADR* makes a particular set of claims about the way you produce the field (think of this as the process of engagement) that is different from DD. It value process management and has norms about what this means. Its container is narrower and typically more issue focused, and its center is a choice or a resolution. “Field” is the quality of social exchange, mood, feeling, energy that emerges among the people. Center is the focus or core window. In conversations there are be none, or many; they can be linked in a finely woven (subtle) way or not linked at all, etc.
  - *Dialogue* as I and some others practice it is a social intervention method aimed at the upstream structures of thought and feeling that are governing a particular problem or situation. It takes the potential of the intervention challenge in the situation, and then tries to form a container that can hold as many of those factors as possible at first; lets the field form as a result of “suspending” assumptions and bypassing or moving through deliberation to a point of collective inquiry, and lets emerge (versus defining in advance) the center or core of the matter.

Hope this stimulates some conversation and further interaction among us! Lovely to meet everyone...