

Deepening Dialogue Through “Affirming Inquiry”

Keys to “affirming inquiry”

1. **Mutual vulnerability** – begin the inquiry by sharing ones’ own experience or lack of experience. Demonstrate that there will be similar levels of vulnerability and “feeling exposed”.
2. **Mutual contribution** – demonstrate commitment to engage and contribute to the dialogue and to the learning environment. This may mean sharing ones’ confusion, uncertainty and/or inexperience and what it means. It is important that all participants are challenged to give as much as they take from the dialogue experience. These contributions go beyond individual narrative sharing to grappling with complex social issues, surfacing and confronting conflict (in its many forms) and seeking solutions and positive transformation.
3. **The inquirer’s need or desire “to know” must be subjugated to the subject of inquiry’s agency to decide to engage or answer.** This isn’t simply being “PC”... it is respecting and prioritizing the subject of the inquiry’s agency to decide if they will engage or address your inquiry. This also means the subject can still be assertively pursued (or probed), but with their permission.
4. **The affirming process begins with an invitation to share (mutually); travels a generative, creative and imaginative journey of possibilities; and ends with an expression of appreciation, affirmation and/or gratitude.** Inquiry posed by facilitators or by participants are offered to open-up and

Comparison of types of inquiry

	Interrogation	(object of) Curiosity	Affirming Inquiry
Goal of the inquiry	Seeking “proof” or facts supporting discordant experiences/narratives to the inquirer	Seeking explanation or insight into the experiences/narratives unfamiliar to the inquirer	Participating in the mutual exploration of experiences/narratives by sharing and invitation to share
Inquirer’s attitude	Doubt, suspicion, skepticism close-mindedness	Naivety, assumed normalcy, unexamined privilege	Openness, humility, reciprocity
Likely reaction/feelings of the subject of inquiry	Defensiveness, anger, mistrustful, rejection, isolated	Tokenized, “othered”, commoditized, exploited or used	Mattering, engaged, affirmed



Integrating affirming inquiry with LARA method

Affirming Inquiry can be used in combination with the LARA/I method of communication (see handout) as a rubric for exchanges between participants seeking to surface and/or clarify particularly complex, potentially controversial or emotionally-charged topics.

Sharing Informed Considered Perspectives vs. (uninformed, unconsidered) Opinions

Participants should be encouraged to, and held to a standard of, coming to dialogue ready to participate in sharing perspectives that they have critically, reflectively considered and can definitively identify what have informed their perspective. This is contrast to participants who, in a reactive way, assert their opinions without having critically or reflectively considering them AND they are unprepared to share how these opinions were informed. This often manifests itself as participants “staking out a position” or “refusing to acknowledge” other perspectives without being open to a honest and generative exploration of multiple perspectives. Exploring multiple perspectives through affirming inquiry can be generative and allow great spontaneity and imagination in moving from current social issues/concerns to a co-created image of a more just society.

Educational (Dialogic) Exploitation

Educational exploitation in dialogue is a form of misuse or abuse of power and assertion of privilege by participants or poor technique by facilitators. This occurs when an ongoing pattern of disproportionate or asymmetric sharing by marginalized groups/individuals or benefit by privileged groups/individuals in a dialogue goes unchecked. This sort of dialogic exploitation can happen at an individual level or a group level.

1. Experience Parasites – individual level
 - a. This is a pattern of relying on the experiences (particularly those that are hurtful or creates vulnerability) of an individual to benefit the group without a similar contribution from other participants and/or a clear benefit to the individual.
2. Cultural Strip Mining – Societal/Group level
 - a. This is a pattern of relying on the experiences of a social identity group to educate another group by sharing their experiences (particularly those related to discrimination, oppression, collusion, etc.) without a similar contribution from other groups or a clear benefit to the group doing the educating.

