On Discussing a New World: An Interview with David I. Backer

Derek R. Ford | Education | Interview | October 29th, 2015

Operating within the fields of social and political movements, one often encounters calls for discussion: the discussion of politics, strategy and tactics, social positions, organizational structures, and so on. These calls are ubiquitous in education, too. We discuss readings, films, and so on. There are even “discussion sections” in higher education. But what exactly is discussion?

In his forthcoming book, “Elements of Discussion,” David I. Backer argues that what passes for discussion today is really something else, something more like recitation. Discussion, he says, is distorted, and the book seeks to reclaim discussion as an emancipatory political form of action and being-together. While Backer explores discussion (and its corruption) in philosophical ways, he also offers diagrams of what genuine discussions can look like: from spatial arrangements to habits of speaking (and silence). Because the Education Department at The Hampton Institute is situated at the nexus of politics and pedagogy, we wanted to interview Backer about his book and his project to reclaim discussion. Backer received his PhD from Teachers College, Columbia University, and is currently a Visiting Professor at Cleveland State University.

Derek Ford: Hey David, thanks so much for agreeing to chat with us about Elements of Discussion. Now, this book is situated both in philosophy of education and critical theory, but it's not written as a theoretical text. In fact, it reads almost like an instruction manual. Can you speak a bit about how you constructed the text?

David Backer: In my research I found a large literature about how to facilitate discussion and an equally large literature taking a critical stance on discourse, speech, and language. Usually the first kind of text is practical but superficial and the second profound but hard to apply. I think one thing philosophy of education can do is find a middle ground here and give a sense of depth to educational practice. Discussion is a good example: You have to do certain small, tiny things which end up having a big meaning. So I wanted to write a text that could express both the small and the big.
I think voice is really important too. The voice for Elements is manual-ish but tries to maintain a kind of aloof poetic weirdness too. I was aiming for something between Strunk and White in *Elements of Style* and Donald Barthelme’s *“Manual for Sons”* in *The Dead Father*.

**Ford**: There also seems to be that tension in work on activism. On the one hand there are those manuals put out by groups like the Midwest Academy that try to distill organizing down to a formula. And on the other hand there are more philosophical books on organization and social struggles that are insightful but border on the arcane. I bring this up because your book reads like an activist book. I know that you were very active in Occupy Wall Street, can you speak to organizing in that movement, and if it did or didn't make its way into the book?

**Backer**: Organizing with Occupy in New York City was an inspiration for this book and the research that went into it. I've been thinking about those experiences and trying to make sense of them since. In the Preface I try to make clear that I haven't come up with any of the ideas in the book, but rather they're the result of things I've come upon from/with others, an important part of them from Occupy. I mostly worked with the Empowerment and Education working group, and the Occupy University subcommittee--specifically the horizontal pedagogy workshop in OccU. Elements is kind of a reportback from what we learned together in horizontal pedagogy, which was an experiment in figuring out how to teach, learn, and study in ways we felt addressed the political contradictions we were resisting: oppression, exploitation, the many faces of neoliberalism... One thing we tried was combining methods we'd encountered before Occupy (Brazilian philosophy-with-children pedagogy, psychoanalysis, Harkness teaching...) with the consensus-based facilitation procedures used to run general assemblies and meetings.

**Ford**: *Elements of Discussion* is both a political and an educational text, and while these two things are certainly intertwined, are there differences between the two? For example, is leading discussion in a school different than in a union meeting? Or, even more broadly, what is the relationship between education and politics for you?

**Backer**: Really important question. There are so many possible responses. One that comes to mind (and I'm speaking very schematically here) is the difference between dynamus quo and status quo. Assuming like Myles Horton did that there is no such thing as neutrality, education might be a form of intentional becoming, a dynamus quo. Politics in this case would be a status quo. Politics would be the existing set of arrangements or relations or systems of coordination, whereas education entails changes to that existing status quo. Education is “delta” (in terms of the delta sign for change) politics, or changes in politics--learning, unlearning, teaching, studying politics. So it might not matter, for sake of this question, if the discussion is happening at a union meeting or a school. What matters is whether that discussion is facilitated in such a way as to be educational and not just political--whether that discussion creates the conditions for changes in the status quo politics of that moment.

**Ford**: We already spoke briefly about the way in which your book was written, but I would like to ask you more specifically about the choice(s) that you made in constructing the book. That is, the book doesn't follow the received format of presentation, in which you survey the literature, identify gaps, make contributions, and so on. Why did you make the choices that you made regarding your method of presentation?

**Backer**: I wanted to write a text that could be read quickly by different kinds of people: teachers, students, activists, professors, even professionals who have to sit in terrible meetings all the time. I wanted it to feel approachable, respectful, but also, as my colleague Diane Corrigan at Cleveland State said, for it to “stretch” the reader as a challenge, and I wanted it to be true to my politics and philosophy. I wanted it also to be rereadable: that it could give you something at one time and then something else later.

**Ford**: And how and when did your interest in discussion arise?

**Backer**: I think my interest in discussion started when I was a teacher in Quito, Ecuador. Out of necessity I switched pedagogies from a Socratic style of facilitation to more participant-based
interaction. I was an ignorant gringo and a lot of my students wouldn't pay attention to me trying to be Socrates. I had them talk to each other about poetry and other readings and I saw a transformation: they came alive and got into it and started saying and doing very interesting things in class. I was studying critical pedagogy at the same time for a master's degree, and I started understanding the neocolonial significance of my role at that school. I started wondering if my pedagogical change to discussion-oriented interaction was resisting that neocolonial role, and what the social-political significance of that shift entailed generally.

Ford: In your classes, do you always lead discussions, or are there times when you teach?

Backer: It's so interesting that you distinguish teaching from leading discussions! I think that indicates how entrenched recitation and non-discursive pedagogies are in educational interaction. I know what you mean by the question, though. Interactions like discussion and recitation flow seamlessly into one another, at least in institutional contexts like schools, and I use both of them depending on what the moment requires. However I do aspire to have a discussion-based pedagogy, which means reducing recitation whenever I can. That means arranging chairs differently so students aren't all facing me, waiting for students to speak to one another, prioritizing student questions, using students' language whenever possible when speaking about course material, and working towards students facilitating their own discussions and choosing their own material to discuss.

Ford: That is a helpful distinction. Given that, I would perhaps define teaching in part as the act of deciding when to switch from discussion to recitation. Is that objectionable to you?

Backer: I think that's unobjectionable: knowing when to shift between forms of interaction is an important skill in teaching, though it's rarely put in those terms.

Ford: And one final question. What are you working on now, or what do you plan on working on next?

Backer: There are a couple things. First, I'm interested in cooperative school governance and administration. No matter how much discussion you facilitate, if the relations of production in your institution are exploitative or rooted in exploitation or don't explicitly challenge exploitation then discursive interventions in the status quo like discussion are limited. On the other hand, discussion doesn't stand a chance if there aren't community-oriented relations of production governing the institution the discussion occurs within. I think the most powerful educational intervention right now could be a discussion-based curriculum at a school owned by its community members (parents, students, teachers, neighbors, etc). I'm interested in theorizing this idea from the diverse economies perspective put forward by J.K. Gibson-Graham and seeing there would be interest in a cooperative school (there are already a few hundred in the US and over 900 in the UK). Second, I'm interested in intersectionality. I need to study that paradigm closely in general, and there are some interesting questions about discussion and intersectionality I'm thinking about: Can participation in discussion have an effect on participants' sense of category memberships, for instance? If subjectivity is discursive, can changes in discursive practices like discussion reorient or disorient the subjectivity inscribed?

Ford: I look forward to that! David, thanks so much for taking the time to answer my questions. I really appreciate it. I am looking forward to continuing this conversation and bringing more voices into the discussion.

Backer: Thanks!
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