CHAPTER 2

Reflective Dialogue across Differences in Libraries

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Introduction

Librarians encounter many sensitive or divisive issues on the reference desk, in the classroom, and throughout the library. Library users ask about fake news, they debate Black Lives Matter, or they have concerns about which bathroom to use. After the 2016 US presidential election, we both found ourselves fielding similar questions from colleagues as well. At times our colleagues have described feeling overwhelmed about what to do or how to address national and international events in our work. "What can I do?" librarians asked, whether it was about the proposed Muslim travel ban, the rescission of DACA, the ban on trans people serving in the military, or any other of the early actions of the administration. As public employees, we are prohibited from making partisan statements or actions at work, but over the last two years it has seemed even more crucial to affirm the most marginalized communities on our campus. Many members of our community have seemed unnerved, as if the ground had shifted: in light of racist, xenophobic, transphobic federal policy changes, is it suddenly partisan to speak against those beliefs or behaviors? Shifting rhetoric around library neutrality calls us to question what this means for our profession and our spaces.[*] In this ever more polarized political and

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[*] The varying perspectives on neutrality were represented at the 2018 President's Program at Midwinter 2018, "Are Libraries Neutral?" where the very meaning of the term seemed a point of debate. "Are Libraries Neutral? Highlights from the Midwinter President's Program," *American Libraries Magazine*, June 1, 2018, https://american-librariesmagazine.org/2018/06/01/are-libraries-neutral/.

social climate, we have found reflective conversation with our peers a useful way to think through and prepare for these and other tough topics.

The people who use our library are also expressing concern and asking questions as government policies change and news stories come out. How do we prepare ourselves to meet these conversations with care rather than shutting them down out of fear? How can we invite more voices to shed light on these issues? How do we pick up and repair when a conversation goes wrong? In this chapter, we walk through a critical reflection process we have used to help colleagues navigate challenging interactions in their work. Our approach to critical reflection is based on workshops we facilitated in our own institution and with library workers around our state. We provide a narrative explanation adapted from the workshops and reflective prompts to be used on your own or with colleagues, through writing and conversation. We share recommendations for creating space for courageous conversations based on our years of experience in facilitation. While you may wish to use reflective dialogue directly with students or other library users, what we describe in this chapter is aimed at conversation between colleagues.

We situate this work within critical librarianship, which Kenny Garcia has described as one that "places librarianship within a critical theorist framework that is epistemological, self-reflective, and activist in nature. According to Elaine Harger, librarians that practice critical librarianship strive to communicate the ways in which libraries and librarians consciously and unconsciously support systems of oppression. Critical librarianship seeks to be transformative, empowering, and a direct challenge to power and privilege."[1] Critical reflection is one of the primary tools of critical library practice and can be used to find meaning and guide your work. Similarly, incorporating regular critical self-reflection can provide insights to understanding more about ourselves, learning with and from dialogue with colleagues, and help us to truly hear our communities when they tell us their needs. While reflection can be deeply personal, the prompts and processes we recommend are rooted in connection: asking you to think about how you connect with your communities of users and peers and how to strengthen those bonds.

Through these prompts, you will consider interactions that went well and ones that did not to consider what strategies led to pain points or to moments of connection. You will have a chance to consider intervention strategies and reflect on how you might apply these during your work. We will focus not only on what to say when a difficult topic comes up, but also on how to forgive ourselves and others and how to learn from both our successes and our mistakes. This chapter will provide you with support to take the risk of having challenging conversations that connect across differences of social identity, access, and opportunity, with the ultimate goal of preparing for the next difficult conversation you encounter.

What Is Critical Reflection?

When we think of professional praxis, that cyclical process of incorporating theory into action, reflection is a crucial element of making change. Citing the work of Hatton and Smith, Jennifer Moon defined critical reflection as "exploring reasons for an event in the broader social, ethical, moral, or historical contexts."[2] Critical reflection is a practice of considering what happened and what could happen next.

Although the prompts within this chapter can be used for individual reflection, we highly encourage you to explore them with a partner or group. Reflective dialogue provides a space for individuals to synthesize together, potentially find shared answers, and build strength together. As the name suggests, dialogue is *not* a presentation, a highly structured learning activity, or a debate. It is a loose set of practices that anyone can engage in. Perhaps you have attended a training or a community event where a facilitator guided conversation using prompts and probing questions to move the group through various points. While a dialogue may be very carefully planned, it is not scripted in that it truly leaves space for what the participants bring and share.

You can host a reflective dialogue just about anywhere, but it is important to consider how these elements play together:

- Who will be in the room? What are their relationships to one another and to you?
- What do you want people to get out of the conversation?
- What goals do you have for yourself?
- What key topics, issues, and points of learning do you want to explore?
- How will you be participating in the conversation? Will you be more set apart as a facilitator or actively joining the discussion?

When we organize these discussions, we consider the following principles:[*]

- **We all know something; together we know a lot.**[3] These conversations work best when the topic is something that does not require formal study. The prompts in the following section will be specific to libraries, but broad enough to apply to many experiences. As you work within your community, there may be ways to adapt these prompts to be more specific and meaningful, but do not drag yourself into the details in a way that keeps people from engaging. The facilitators Kelly has worked with at Or-

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* You may wish to share group agreements with participants at the start of a conversation. We feel ambivalent about this: on the one hand, previously set guidelines can be useful to point back to in the case of conflicting behavior. On the other, unless participants feel invested in the guidelines, they may be difficult to enforce. Your context is essential in helping you make this decision. For example, in Lindsay's experience leading ongoing intergroup dialogue with students over repeated sessions, it was crucial to set expectations and begin building trust from the start; in Kelly's experience facilitating short, one-time conversations between groups of strangers, she found other ways to invite people to participate in productive ways.

egon Humanities often note that conversation comes from *big* questions, rather than *hard* questions—*big* meaning that there is room for many perspectives and facets, *hard* meaning that only an expert can answer them. Topics like oppression, respect, equity, and free speech hold depths to explore, but you will need to help participants find an entry point.

- **Create space for connection.** These conversations are not about winning. You may not convince anyone of your perspective or be swayed yourself. Instead, the intention is for participants to allow themselves to be honest as they speak and to listen wholeheartedly. This does not mean forcing anyone to speak about things they do not wish to. Not everyone feels equally welcome to speak or believes that they will be listened to: as a facilitator, think about how you can create space for everyone to participate. For example, you might include small-group activities, a go-around, and a fishbowl discussion to create opportunities for everyone to have chances to speak *and* to listen.

- **This is a practice.** One conversation won't solve these issues. Things can feel uncomfortable or awkward, and you may feel discouraged. However, reflecting over what happened can also make you more able to address the next difficult topic as it comes up. You may find that even the practice of reflective dialogue supports your ability to deal with the kinds of scenarios that you worry about in your work with library users. By gathering your colleagues and facilitating conversation, you will be practicing some of the strategies you may need while you work through the workplace interactions you find most challenging.

Who to Talk With

As you get started in this work, it may be easier to build on existing meetings or relationships, particularly if you think there may be skepticism of the value of this type of activity. Perhaps there is an ongoing instruction interest group, a committee, a department, or even an informal lunch group of colleagues with shared interests. As you think about the topics and issues you want to discuss, think about who would be willing to engage, whose perspectives are crucial to include, and what location you think would encourage a group to be willing to participate. Rooting your conversation in the interests and goals of an existing group is one way to increase support, even from possible skeptics. Even highly experienced facilitators can struggle with resistant participants, so you may wish to build up to working with uninterested colleagues. We also question the value of forcing people to talk; some willingness to engage is an important ingredient of a successful conversation.

If you have the privilege of working with colleagues who are open to reflective dialogue, you could create a formal or informal community of practice around

this work. Within that community you could decide on individual exercises that will allow you to critically reflect on and explore your personal levels of comfort with various topics. Then as a group or community, you can come together and dialogue about your experience and provide space for practicing what you learned with each other. Once you begin, you will see that your practice often leads to other learning and conversations.

Prompts for Conversation: How to Actually Do This

We have scaffolded our workshops in a progressive structure similar to the following narrative account during each of the three times we have offered it. As you read through the descriptions and prompts, consider these as a place to start or a point of departure. You will have to adapt the activities and scenarios to fit your personal comfort levels and the context of your place, community, and resources.

Pre-work: Get People Thinking before They Come Together

In order to set the stage for a productive conversation, you can invite participants to prepare in some way, either by sending some work out beforehand or by making it available as people come into the room. This can serve multiple purposes: sharing important ideas or concepts ahead of time, framing the work for the day, getting participants focused and ready to engage. We have used a reflective activity, crafted by Donna Witek, that guides you through creating your Personal Risk Framework.[4] This short yet powerful exercise asks you to list the various aspects of your identity and then to determine, through reflection, which of these are at the core or more on the periphery of who you are. By examining the ways in which you are both privileged and at risk in your workplace, as well as how your identities might result in feelings of authenticity and empowerment or fear and anxiety, this activity encourages you to explore ways to incorporate vulnerability into your work. While it is important to move your boundaries forward, it can be counterproductive to push yourself too far, too fast. Though Witek framed this activity around teaching, we have found that it is a useful way to get people thinking before we come into conversation together.

Warm-Ups: Getting Started

Once we are all together, we ask participants to jot down a situation or subject that would make them feel uncomfortable if it were to come up at work. We usu-

ally have folks write these anonymously on Post-it Notes that we collect at the beginning of each session. This activity serves as a way to break the ice and as an invitation for folks to start getting vulnerable, but in a relatively low-risk way. It can also provide talking points later during the conversation, for example, if multiple people bring up a similar issue. To further encourage our participants to begin to get to know one another, we have also used this time to ask participants to introduce themselves. If you don't have time for everyone to go around introduce themselves to the whole group, you can ask participants to pair up or work with the people sitting nearby.

Gearing Up and Digging In: The Main Event

THINK-PAIR-SHARE

We ask folks to spend a few minutes free-writing about a time when something sensitive came up in a learning environment and it went badly—or a time when it went well. Then we ask them to share their experience with a partner during a five-minute conversation, focusing on the following:

- What led to the moments of comfort and connection—or discomfort and disconnection—in these stories?
- What did the people involved do to try to resolve and repair—or deepen or avoid conflict?
- Try to identify pain points, moments, and actions that turned the mood. Are there any common themes?

When the pairs are finished, we gather the larger group together and ask them to collaboratively offer their thoughts and ideas on the questions we posed. We then capture the feedback on whiteboards or large Post-its to provide the beginning of a framework for strategies participants can apply to their work. Sometimes the ideas are quite granular but can be grouped into broader categories, but other times the broader concepts come up on their own. In our workshops, the following strategies often emerge:

- **Check in with yourself, be curious, and consider which of your library skills to apply to the interaction or situation.** If patrons ask questions that reflect an opinion that differs from your own, inquire more deeply and ask about the sources they have consulted. Maybe they are exploring a position on a topic that doesn't have strong sources of support and you have an opportunity to engage with them about how to find a broader range of information, as opposed to letting their initial question be the end of the interaction. Asking genuine questions is both an effective part of the reference interview and also an invitation for a patron to consider their topic in a new way. That said, it is also important to know your own limits and to have a backup plan. If you get a reference question that triggers you, can you refer a patron to another staff member? Look

at your institutional policies and procedure; you may find it helpful to engage in conversation with colleagues about what constitutes unacceptable behavior, such as verbal, emotional, or other abuse from patrons. It is important to note here that individual workers may be treated differently by patrons based on their perceived social identities. As Rose L. Chou and Annie Pho wrote in their exploration of the experiences of women of color librarians providing reference services, "a unique situation is created where the librarian must balance the value of providing good customer service with the demeaning feelings of receiving racist, sexist, and hetero-sexist comments on a frequent basis. Does being a good librarian have to be at the expense of oneself?"[5]

- **Resist scarcity by choosing a growth mind-set and mindfulness.** Mistakes and failure are unavoidable…and they are also a vast area of overlooked opportunity. Tremendous learning comes from making mistakes, failing, iterating, and trying again. If we are forced (internally or externally) to seek perfection and avoid making mistakes at all costs, we limit our ability to learn. Let's all take a collective breath in, and now let one out. Living in a culture that demands urgent and impossible levels of perfection can lead to intense feelings of anxiety, fear, and disconnection from other members of our communities.

- **Remember your values, mission, and policies, and root your work in them.** When dealing with sensitive and difficult conversations, it can be useful to refer back to shared values in your organization, community, or profession.

CONNECTION TO THE PERSONAL RISK FRAMEWORK

After the think-pair-share activity is complete, we ask folks to again consider their Personal Risk Framework (which they generated at the beginning of the session) and whether or not they see connections from it to the work they did in their pairs and the themes they saw emerge around points of connection and disconnection. By this point in the conversation, participants have developed more trust in the group and may be more willing to share. We also want to prompt participants to synthesize: the discussion may have offered new insight into why a particular issue is so difficult to face.

What Can We Do about It? Practical Elements
SCENARIOS

Our final workshop activity allows participants to begin practicing the strategies they collaboratively generated by applying them to specific scenarios. We ask folks to get into groups (four to six is a good size, but it will depend on the size

of your group), and we distribute prepared scenarios to each group, giving them fifteen minutes to discuss how they might respond to the situation. We purposefully do not use role-playing, as we do not want to ask folks to potentially act out trauma for themselves or others by taking on roles. As long as time allows, we then ask groups to have a volunteer read the scenario and how their group decided to respond. Often this act of sharing generates additional feedback and comments from other participants since each group has a unique scenario and there are many potential ways to respond.

Below are some of the scenarios we have used. Each is based on a real situation that arose in a library, and we have chosen them based on the concerns we have heard from peers and group participants. You may want to develop alternate scenarios, but we have found it helpful to root these in the lived experience of library workers.

- A professor asked you to come to their class to speak about "fake news." You assumed that this was building on something they had already discussed, but when you bring up a contemporary example, a student accuses you of supporting a particular political party.
- As you work with students to brainstorm possible sources for researching and writing about same-sex marriage, a student suggests that the Bible could be used as evidence against it.
- As you ask students to share what books they'll be using for an assignment, one student states she wants to use *Uncle Tom's Cabin* because she wants to understand the perspective of slaves.
- A student comes to the information desk for help with a paper they're writing about "reverse racism," which they say they've personally experienced.
- A student complains to the desk that a "gross homeless guy" is sleeping in a chair in a public area.

Responses to these prompts will vary based on the participants, and ongoing conversation can be fruitful to work through additional issues. For example, in one conversation, we discussed varying institutional policies related to personal hygiene in the library, strategies for how to safely wake up a patron if necessary, and ways to both offer resources and support to a patron and affirm their humanity. Talking through scenarios is a way to safely practice the process of applying skills and knowledge to a difficult situation, with the added benefit of a supportive group to offer feedback and new perspectives. Over time this could result in changes to policies or praxis within an organization or institution.

Wrapping Up: How to Bring Things to a Close

Often, time runs short once the learning starts—you might find yourself wishing you had scheduled a longer session. Still, it is important to offer closure to the conversation. Asking participants for a one-word takeaway at the end of the session

allows each individual to reflect upon their experiences and share once more with the larger group. Sharing resources—whether they be books, journals, standards, activities, conferences of interest, media, professional development opportunities, or any other relevant material—can be an excellent way to spark curiosity and encourage further learning. A display of materials offers a chance for participants to linger, browse, and further the conversation. Finally, it can be useful to bring along a sign-up sheet for folks in case they are interested in the creation of a formal or informal community of practice.

The Complexity of Context

We have used this general outline with different groups in our institution, as well as with a broader group at a regional gathering. Each conversation has been somewhat different, even within our very institution. Context will shape your conversation: even the same group using the same outline may react differently at different times. Our goal in this chapter isn't to address everything, but to invite you to consider the needs of your specific environment. Some issues you might consider:

- **Who is in the room?** Your conversation will be very different if people are required to be there compared to having opted to join in. There may be specific individuals who you know are especially committed or resistant to this kind of reflection. If you hold a position of authority over participants (or vice versa), that may change the tone. It will help you to consider your audience and their needs beforehand.

- **What are your goals?** Any conversation will be most useful if you can articulate what you want to get out of it. As a facilitator, you may have goals such as building rapport within a group, brainstorming solutions to specific issues in your community, or simply getting an initial discussion going about a controversial topic. It is unreasonable to try to transform people in a single conversation—for example, you could aim for people to be able to articulate their values on an issue, but not that they change their values. It is important to be transparent about these goals. Participants may also have their own goals, and you can invite them to share those. However, as the facilitator, you do have authority to shape the conversation. Sometimes this may mean setting your own goals aside to respond to the interests expressed by the group, but other times it will mean acknowledging those interests and still moving forward as planned.

- **What if someone says something racist/homophobic/classist/ ableist…?** This question has two levels: first, participants may wonder how to react to overtly offensive comments or situations in their workplace. Second, you as a facilitator may worry about how to react if something offensive comes up in the dialogue. In both cases, we encourage you to be clear and upfront. As a facilitator, you may need to remind participants of any

guidelines you have set. One piece of advice we really appreciate is to *keep talking*: you don't have to say the right thing right away, but clamming up in the face of offensive comments does not move the conversation forward.[6] You may want to practice statements that you can use to redirect a conversation or be prepared to pose transitional questions back out to the group. We want to note here that individuals with marginalized social identities often face an extra burden to speak up. Consider how this may be true for you, but also be aware of the dynamics among participants. As you model reflective dialogue, think about the messages you send by how you facilitate through these kinds of moments. Do you shut the conversation down entirely? Do you use this situation to open new questions? Do you ignore it as if nothing happened? Particularly with a group that often works together, it is important to follow up afterward, as the impact of an offensive comment can long outlast the conversation. As Robin DiAngelo has noted, white fragility often prevents meaningful engagement in racial justice, as white people avoid meaningful dialogue rather than face criticism.[7] Mistakes and discomfort are part of growth, so don't fall into the trap of perfectionism.

Who We Are, and What Inspires Us to Do This Work

Kelly

As a librarian, I have an interest in critical pedagogy—here, thinking about this as teaching and learning that is dialogic, recognizing the knowledge brought by all parties, and with a focus on making social change—that is partially based on my own strengths as a learner. I have heard that we tend to teach the way we like to learn, and I certainly see that in myself. I don't tend to like pat answers or memorizing steps; let's talk it out instead.

Just in the past year, my interest in dialogue has really been piqued by my work with Oregon Humanities, our state affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. The magic of facilitation is really that, if you create a space and ask a good question, people will generally go there with you. This also translates into one-on-one dialogue or informal small-group discussions. For me, it connects to how the best conference times are sometimes the in-between sessions, where people actually have a chance to debrief and get real; the shiny conference presentation isn't necessarily going to share the juicy, necessary stuff.

Specifically thinking about the need for dialogue about sensitive topics in libraries, because of the particular focus of my work with historically marginalized communities of students, people sometimes assume that I have a lot of answers for tough questions. After the election, especially after the inauguration, more and

more colleagues came to me asking what they could be doing to help. It was heartening, but also disheartening, because here were competent, smart, caring people feeling unsure how to help. But dialogue comes in because I truly believe that, if you cannot have a conversation with someone who you disagree with, it will be nearly impossible to make change. This chapter isn't about convincing everyone (librarians, library users, whoever) to share your opinion. It is about creating spaces for us to get kind of real together and dig into those differences.

Lindsay

My journey to this work, and ultimately "finding" critical librarianship, has been long and circuitous. I did not come to this work from a background or education in theory. Instead my lived and professional experiences, personality tendencies, values, and feelings led me to where I am now. I grew up in a working-class family in the rural Midwest and was the first person in my family to graduate with a bachelor's degree. Before going to library school, I worked at two separate nonprofits. One of them worked to eliminate toxic pollution through supporting grassroots community action against polluters, and the other worked to support the Buffalo LGBTIAQP+ through programming and advocacy. Work at each organization granted me the privilege of meeting many people who each brought a unique set of experiences and perspectives to our interactions. For me, the heart of my work lies in connection. When I think back on my formal and informal education and the ways in which I learn, I have realized I do very well when I am able to connect new ideas, facts, or problems to things I already know or have encountered. And connection is so often the precursor to things like curiosity, compassion, empathy, acknowledgement, learning, and real change. I am interested in what we can learn from one another based on our lived experiences rooted in place, our shared histories and experiences, and access (to opportunities).

Kelly and I had independently been working in the areas of critical librarianship and social justice and equity when we were asked to discuss how to handle sensitive topics in libraries at our library's annual Instruction Get Together. I was also in my first year at a new academic library and had spoken with Kelly on numerous occasions about our values, interests, and goals for our work. Thus, this endeavor was a culmination of sorts.

Conclusion

Reflective dialogue work never really stops. It is more a skill that requires practice than knowledge that can be gained passively through exposure to information. Reflective dialogues can be held in many different environments and with many different populations, so it is always important to adapt activities in a way that will

best fit your context. The questions may change depending on who is in the room, what is happening in your community, and what your goals are, but the learning and value in reflective dialogue remain constant. We have provided one model that we have used to help ourselves and our colleagues continue to answer the question "What can I do?" Dialogue can be a tool that allows us to better know our user communities, our colleagues, and ultimately ourselves. The only requirement is to be brave enough to begin.

Recommended Resources

These are some of the resources that have helped shape our approaches to this work.

- Anti-Oppression Resource and Training Alliance (AORTA). "Anti-oppressive Facilitation for Democratic Process: Making Meetings Awesome for Everyone." Last updated June 2017. http://aorta.coop/portfolio_page/anti-oppressive-facilitation/. This guide gives great overall suggestions for anti-oppressive approaches to facilitation.

- Rosenberg, Marshall, and Deepak Chopra. *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life: Life-Changing Tools for Healthy Relationships*. Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 2015. While nonviolent communication (NVC) is a broader strategy for communication, we find it incredibly useful as facilitators. You can also find videos on YouTube of Rosenberg lecturing—with puppets!

- Starhawk. *The Empowerment Manual: A Guide for Collaborative Groups*. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2011. Although this book is more focused on working with long-standing groups, Starhawk provides concrete examples of activities and strategies to use, particularly in chapter 1.

- Your local state humanities council. Search at "Find a State Council." Federation of State Humanities Councils. Accessed November 8, 2018. http://www.statehumanities.org/the-state-humanities-councils/find-a-state-council/. Kelly took a facilitation workshop with Oregon Humanities that has shaped her approach to group conversation ever since. Whether or not your state humanities council offers public training, staff may have ideas for best practices or for other local connections.

- Resources at your institution. Look for support and models of reflective dialogue happening outside the library. We have both learned lots from trainings offered by other units on our campus, including the Social Justice Education Initiative, the Human Services Resource Center, and all of the cultural resource centers. We have found that student affairs professionals often have more hands-on training in this type of facilitation and programming; we are lucky to have such excellent colleagues to learn from and observe.

NOTES

1. Kenny Garcia, "Critical Librarianship," *Keeping Up With…*, June 2015, Association of College and Research Libraries, http://www.ala.org/acrl/publications/keeping_up_with/critlib.
2. Jennifer Moon, *Reflection in Learning and Professional Development* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 1999), 75.
3. Anti-oppression Resource and Training Alliance (AORTA), "Anti-oppressive Facilitation for Democratic Process: Making Meetings Awesome for Everyone," last updated June 2017, http://aorta.coop/portfolio_page/anti-oppressive-facilitation/.
4. Donna Witek, "Developing a 'Critical Pedagogy Disposition,'" in *Critical Library Pedagogy Handbook*, ed. Nicole Pagowsky and Kelly McElroy (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2016), 207–12.
5. Rose L. Chou and Annie Pho, "Intersectionality at the Reference Desk: Lived Experiences of Women of Color Librarians," in *The Feminist Reference Desk*, ed. Maria T. Accardi (Sacramento: Library Juice Press, 2017), 248.
6. Pippi Kessler, "Active Listening for Social Justice" (workshop, White Privilege Conference, Madison, WI, March 2014).
7. Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 54–70.

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