

Conflict can shut down communication, the key to social justice advocacy. Robert Nash shares his insights on how some communication styles can help manage conflict and sustain open conversation with students about contentious issues.

By Robert J. Nash

“WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO BE A SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCATE?”

Communication Strategies for Effective Social Justice Advocacy

RECENTLY, I PARTICIPATED in an extremely heated discussion session for student affairs administrators, faculty, and staff at a major west coast university. This colloquium was meant to cover the broad spectrum of social justice issues. I was invited to attend this session hosted by a close friend and colleague, Dr. Ricardo G. Johnson—a well-known scholar on the topic of social justice. I attended his presentation in San Francisco shortly after Proposition 8 had passed banning gay marriage in California. One nationally known professor in the audience—a white GLBT activist—responded to the presentation by recounting how his gay stepsons had experienced terrible persecution during their youth as a result of “Evangelical Christians” in their community who always made them feel guilty for being “sinners.” During the discussion, the gay rights activist made the statement that Evangelical Christians should not be voting on public policies that affect people whose beliefs are different. His angry outburst was heartfelt, understand-

able, and, in its own way, powerful. The audience was obviously taken by his comments, and several nodded vigorously in support of him as he spoke.

Soon afterward, however, an African-American woman, and student affairs administrator, rose to speak her mind on the issue. She addressed her comments to the professor: “Please listen to me with the same respect that I paid to you when you spoke. I am one of those Evangelical Christians you are talking about, and I voted *yes* on Proposition 8. I believe that homosexuality is a sin, because it is a choice that is in conflict with God’s Truth as recorded in the Bible. If my son were to choose to be gay, I would not accept this. I would get him help from my church pastor. Moreover, I have as much right to vote *for* Proposition 8 as you did to vote *against* it. This is a simple matter of social justice!”

The professor tried to be measured in his response, but his barely concealed anger was palpable. At times, his tone was judgmental and patronizing. His reply

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to the discussion mediator, who intervened with a reminder that difficult dialogues require a free and equal exchange of ideas without acrimony, was accusatory. The professor charged the mediator with engaging in “intellectual masturbation” while innocent people like his stepsons suffered. At this point, the dialogue fell apart, as participants in the session began to take sides. A few of them spoke as previously closeted, devout Christians, a few as GLBT activists. All the others remained silent, however, feeling caught between the white, GLBT-activist professor and the African-American Christian woman. Moreover, few members of the audience knew how to deal with two equally intense social justice activists who came from completely different ends of the ideological continuum.

I listened intently to both of these passionate people. Each of them moved me in their own unique ways. My heart went out to the professor as he described the terrible mental torment and guilt—induced by some very conservative Christians—that his stepsons suffered throughout their high school and college years. At one point, his eyes filled with tears. But my heart also went out to the Evangelical Christian woman who felt criticized and belittled by what she experienced as a direct attack on her cherished religious beliefs. No longer, she said, would she apologize to anyone at her very liberal university for her fervent Christian convictions. Her voice shook as she talked openly about her religious faith for the first time in

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a public forum, something she had always felt constrained from doing at the secular university where she worked. While it was obvious to me that both of these people had a significant contribution to make to the dialogue on gay marriage, with two distinctly different takes on what constitutes social justice, I couldn't help but be severely disappointed at the outcome.

What started out as a civil dialogue meant to draw all of us into conversation about social justice on a number of controversial issues deteriorated into an airing of two emotionally charged monologues over religious identity and GLBT identity. Each of the participants talked past one another, even though both, in their own ways, were avid proponents of social justice. So, too, did many of the audience members. I left that session in San Francisco feeling extremely unsettled. Beyond the fact that two people felt justified in squaring off against one another, what was really gained? It is true that, as observers, the rest of us learned how intractable two opposing belief systems on a social justice issue can be, but was the eventual outcome worth the bother?

On my long plane ride back to Vermont, I tried to make pedagogical sense of the San Francisco encounter. My basic concern was to explore how what I witnessed might make me a more skillful educator in the ways that I communicate about controversial issues with my students. What is the most effective way for educators to make the case for social justice, particularly when one form of advocacy might be in conflict with another? As someone who has been trained in, and written about, the discipline of applied ethics, I define a classical moral dilemma as a conflict between two or more choices, each of which is defensible and neither of which, on face value, is wrong. For ethicists, the morally defensible choice depends on the strength of the arguments. If this is a valid view, how, then, do social justice advocates, who might be on opposite sides of an issue, engage successfully in dialogue with one another without insults, angry invective, and put-downs?

I decided, after much *ex post facto* reflection, that it was not necessarily *what* each of the antagonistic social justice advocates said but *how* they said it that had the greatest impact on the audience, including myself. The GLBT professor-activist and the Evangelical Christian woman were both strong advocates for their viewpoints. Their respective positions on gay marriage and religious freedom were defensible, and plausible, given their controlling background beliefs. Each appealed to the ideal of social justice in their comments. But who of the two was more successful in opening people's minds and hearts? What, I wondered, would be the best way to advocate for a particular social justice view that might *start and sustain* an open dialogue, rather than *polarize and terminate* it?

FIVE COMMUNICATION STYLES FOR ADVOCATES

AS A COLLEGE TEACHER for well over four decades, I found myself asking this question after my San Francisco adventure: is it possible for educators to be fully engaged advocates with students for a particular principle, cause, belief, philosophy, worldview, or whatever, without stepping over the line and becoming zealots whose sole mission is to promote a special agenda? I am fully aware that we are not bionic machines in our classrooms and throughout our campuses. A stance of absolute objectivity in the advocacy work we do is a pipe dream. Therefore, at times, it will be necessary for us to be open and honest about where we stand on controversial issues, including social justice conflicts of one kind or another. But what is the most effective communication style for being "open and honest?"

Because I am a lover of neologisms (new or coined words), I submit that there are basically five ways to do advocacy work on behalf of one cause or another with students: I can be a *radvocate*, a *madvocate*, a *sadvocate*, a *fadvocate*, or a *gladvocate*, or any strategic combination of these, at any given time. Each type of advocacy has its rightful time and place, and the ultimate test of its effectiveness is whether our students' attitudes and behaviors undergo change. For me, as a teacher, what is most important is to know when I am *radvocating*, *madvocating*, *sadvocating*, *fadvocating*, or *gladvocat-*

ing, so that I can avoid becoming a zealot in my advocacy work with students.

Based on my four-decades-plus experience with social activists of all types in higher education, I believe that zealotry, when it becomes blind, intolerant, and even fanatical on behalf of any worthy cause, is almost always counter-pragmatic. It produces enemies, not allies. A zealot's devotion to a cause, no matter how noble, is beyond challenge, so it ends conversation. It creates moral high grounds. It silences. It embitters. It guilts. It preaches to the choir. Worst of all, however, is that zealots tend to deny their own various privileges while accusing others of using one or another of these privileges against them. When all is said and done, zealotry for a cause produces zero behavior and attitudinal change in my students and colleagues. Thus, the question for me is one of strategy: what is the most effective communication style for openly *engaging*, rather than *enraging*, others?

- A *radvocate* lives at the most extreme ends of any ideological continuum. The upside of being a *radvocate* with my students happens when I keep in mind that the best way to solve social problems is to go directly to the underlying "roots." I need first to be a discerning "analyst" of all sides of social problems before I can become an "activist" who tries to solve them. The self-defeating side of being a *radvocate* happens when I unconsciously copy the behavior of many 1960s radicals whom I admired, and when I present myself as "lifer than thou." Or when I inhabit the high ideological ground and come off as "more moral or better than thou." I try to be on guard against the self-righteous temptation to push my more radical views on students.
- A *madvocate* teaches through anger, righteous indignation, and moral outrage. Occasionally, the shock value of this type of advocacy can shake my students out of their social lethargies and force them to change their thinking and actions. This is all well and good, but what I've found is that it can be effective only with certain students who possess strong activist personality

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types, and who are already on board with me on behalf of certain causes. The downside is that my laser-focused, occasionally defensible, self-righteous anger often results in silencing those students who think, feel, and act differently for whatever reason. Whenever this happens, as a madvocate, I create enemies, not allies, to the cause.

- A *sadvocate* teaches through a series of sad, subjective self-disclosures. These moving narratives of suffering impress certain students of mine, and they can result in a mutual sharing of honest, personal stories of pain, vulnerability, oppression, and victimization. This, too, can be effective, because it evokes important feelings of empathy and compassion in my students. But it can also result in excessive self-absorption on my, and their, parts, provoking reactions of pity from my students, and a sense that the social/personal issues are others' problems and not theirs. It also tends to cast some of my more vulnerable, underrepresented students in a victim's role, and these students get the message that they need rescuers to save them from their enemies.
- A *fadvocate* gets visibly excited about a whole host of causes (whether liberal or conservative) as each new social challenge emerges. As a fadvocate, I can be impressive with some of my students, because I am seen as someone who conscientiously keeps up with the latest social causes, and my students tell me that I can be very inspiring. I can often move some of my students to take action against injustice, inequality, and unfairness, as well as a number of other social ills of one kind or another. The dark side of being a fadvocate is that I sometimes come across to my students as shamelessly promoting the latest *cause du jour*. I overload them with my appeals to conscience

and important political work to be done. Many students tend to dismiss my social enthusiasms as just another faddish example of my zeal on behalf of my latest pet cause—although they would never say this to my face.

- A *gladvocate* teaches through invitation, generosity, and setting an example of “tenuous tenacity.” I strive to be a gladvocate—tenacious in my commitment to one or another strong belief but always trying to be tenuous about that commitment, in order to allow for other views to be expressed. This is what I mean by pluralism. A gladvocate defines *advocacy* etymologically (L., *ad vocare*) as “calling to” (not “calling out”) others so that all of us might come together in “convocation” to listen to and with, and genuinely try to understand, the strong beliefs of others. We do this to discover whether or not there is overlap in our various worldviews, and whether there are possibilities for working together to solve problems.

RETURNING TO THE SAN FRANCISCO SESSION

FULLY ACKNOWLEDGE that, as an educator, I am, mainly, a pragmatist. I want to use communication “tools” (L., *pragma*) that work, that lead to the achievement of worthy goals. Admittedly, my pragmatism is a function of my particular temperament. But, having acknowledged this, I can still have sound convictions. I can be a person of strong principle. As an educator, however, what I am striving for is to be able to “stand for” something without “standing over” others. The trick for all of us is to keep our advocacy under control by practicing gladvocacy, and yet knowing when the other types of advocacy will be most, or least, effective. This, I submit, is a challenge for every single one of us in higher education.

During the San Francisco discussion, I found the Evangelical Christian woman to be more of a gladvocate than a madvocate. She reached out to the rest of us. She was not there to convert or subvert. She called to us without calling us out. She spoke from her heart, in response to what she felt was an outright attack on her religious faith. Her strong commitment to Christian beliefs was never in question, but her communication style was more of an invitation to the rest of us (even to myself, a nonbelieving, secular humanist to the core) to understand her faith views rather than for us to adopt them. Not everyone there would agree with me, of course, but I suspect that most might.

The GLBT advocate was most effective with his audience during his sadvocacy response. I was moved when he recounted the terrible psychological pain and shame that his stepsons experienced throughout their high school years as a result of “coming out.” The professor started becoming a madvocate, however, when he put the blame for his stepsons’ suffering squarely on the shoulders of conservative Christians. Later, when he went on the attack and expressed his view that Evangelical Christians had no right to vote on a public policy proposal like Proposition 8, he crossed over the line from sadvocacy to madvocacy. It was at this point that some people in the audience began to turn against him, even though, at first, he had touched them by expressing his great pain and sorrow at the mistreatment of his stepsons.

Toward the end of the discussion, the group became polarized. Positions hardened. Feelings were hurt. Conversation turned to speechmaking. Civility gave way to hostility. I, for one, could not wait to leave the room. When it was all over, I breathed an audible sigh of relief, and I raced out of the building to catch the San Francisco trolley that would take me back to my hotel. I needed that long, hilly trolley ride, along with the hard-working, friendly driver’s ongoing, funny quips to passengers, to unwind.

When I returned to my hotel, I thought a lot about what faculty critics of student affairs professionals, such as the National Association of Scholars (NAS), call “identity politics.” Critics point out that the profession is driven mainly by a narrow ideological agenda: to expose various types of bias throughout the Western world in order to promote the cause of social justice.

But all too often, as NAS charges, social justice training degenerates into diversity bullying or multicultural guilt by both higher education faculty and student affairs professionals. These critics would point to the San Francisco conference on social justice as Exhibit A of identity politics run amok. As someone who teaches in a graduate program in higher education and student affairs administration, and who also teaches a number of humanities-oriented courses in educational studies, I am bothered by this critique. It is far too sweeping and hyperbolic. Unfortunately, however, it contains more than a modicum of truth.

USING MORAL CONVERSATION TO TALK ABOUT SOCIAL JUSTICE

THE NEXT DAY, on the plane ride home, I came to the conclusion that gladvocacy and, on occasion, sadvocacy, as teaching strategies get me closest to reaching my goals in my classrooms and seminars. On some days I’m better at realizing my pragmatic pedagogical ideals than on others. But I’m working on achieving balance. I also reflected on what I might have done to move the discussion from an angry exchange of “I’m more socially just than you are” to a give-and-take conversation that might have reached some common understanding. I have written a great deal in past years about a discussion strategy that I call *moral conversation*. In 1997, I published a book titled *Answering the “Virtuecrats”: A Moral Conversation on Character Education*. In 2008, I wrote a book titled *How to Talk About Hot Topics on Campus: From Polarization to Moral Conversation* with DeMethra LaSha Bradley and Arthur W. Chickering. I have also published widely on strategies for conversing about religion and spirituality, and meaning making in general, in a variety of venues on secular college campuses.

After considerable ex post facto, personal reflection on the social justice conflict I recounted earlier, I came to the following conclusions about what constitutes good moral conversation about hot topics, both inside and outside college seminar spaces and lecture halls. I am continuing to find ways to improve my conversational style, approach, and strategies. Moral conversation, like law and medicine, is first and

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foremost a practice. The more I work on it, the better I get. Here are some further insights I have gained in order for me to be a better moral conversationalist whenever I am talking with students about the difficult issues of the day, especially as these relate to the topic of social justice.

1 I need to work on identifying clear themes for conversations about the controversial topics. I want to avoid being an all-over-the-place gadvocate, a passionate social activist without focus or form. This is especially important in the religious pluralism course that I teach, as well in my other courses that deal with political, philosophical, and social class differences. Helping my students “unpack” the difficult issues in their own words and express their honest perspectives about them is key. Another key is for me to encourage my students to continually rephrase in their own words each other’s observations and interpretations in order to ensure that moral conversationalists are genuinely listening to, and understanding, each other’s ideas. Whatever its unanticipated benefits, the moral conversation is foremost a *means* to reach a particular end: a respectful listening to one another, *not* to promulgate, or to discover, “absolute” truths, but to enlarge, deepen, enrich, and improve one’s own truths. Gladvocates keep their conversations about social justice open-ended, and they do this skillfully, and with generosity, without compromising their own strong convictions on the topic.

2 Even the most exhaustively planned moral conversations can go awry, however. All five types of advocates tend to emerge in a hot conversation, and sometimes one person can represent each of the different types at different times in the same conversation. As a result, I need always to be prepared for the unpredictable “discussion bombs” that sometimes explode in a conversation: the dumb bomb, the hostility bomb, the self-interest bomb, the

grievance bomb, the subversive bomb, the agenda-grabbing bomb, the self-serving humor bomb, the “totally off-base” bomb, the devil’s advocate bomb, and so on. No matter how fastidious my adherence to the principles of the moral conversation, certain students, wittingly or unwittingly, will usually end up attempting to sabotage the process at some point during the semester. Such is human nature. Thus, I need to use good judgment when attempting to “defuse” the bombs, because they can easily blow up in my face, and the collateral damage can be extensive and deadly.

3 I need to remember that presence is the main staple of effectively facilitating moral conversation. My presence either establishes or undermines the legitimacy of the process from the very first minute of the moral conversation. Presence is about projecting a sense of ease, unflappability, poise, and self-assurance. Effective conversational leaders have a special kind of personal bearing: They are dignified, informed, enthusiastic, and professional, without being intimidating. They are compelling without being controlling. They are superbly prepared on the controversies to be discussed, but they can also be spontaneous, even serendipitous, when new problems emerge. They are conspicuously in charge without being arrogant. The zen of effective conversational leadership is just being present with others. It is also balancing self-confidence with humility, and rationality with intuition. Excellent moral conversation facilitators tend more toward gladvocacy, radvocacy, and, at times, sadvocacy than toward the other types.

4 No matter how “pure” my motives and reasons, I must avoid indoctrination. Whenever I am tempted to indoctrinate, I lapse into a no-win madvocacy. In contrast, no antagonistic view is to be suppressed in the moral conversation because it goes against the party line. I must

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model the avoidance of ideological pigeonholing—a pedagogical straitjacket that before long reduces conversations to agonizingly monotonous, head-nodding, yea-saying brainwashing sessions. I need always to maintain the element of ideological surprise. I must teach others to respond to questions and issues “out of political character,” at least occasionally. I need to step outside all my passionate, salient advocacy identities, particularly my role as a radvocate, in order to do more gladvocacy work.

5 I need to trust the process in a moral conversation. At the outset, I must continually lay down some clearly defined, mutually understood and agreed-upon ground rules and exercise prudent leadership by gently and persistently keeping people on track—but get out of the way whenever possible. The first rule of conversational leadership is this: *Things will most likely go wrong before they go right.* It is during those heart-pounding, utterly perplexing conversational moments when all the various types of advocates begin to vie publicly with one another. During those times, when the appropriate response is in doubt, I need to take a deep breath, or ask a question, or politely ignore a “bomb,” or, when things are at their worst, mutter something incomprehensible. I need to avoid getting locked into power struggles with students, especially the madvocates and radvocates, because, invariably, I will look like a bully, and I will end up the loser in a conversational setting. I need to learn to deal with the inevitability of uncertainty, and of occasionally looking like a fool. I believe, as a gladvocate, that, in the end, most of the time the process will correct itself, especially when all the conversationalists have made a fundamental, no-turning-back commitment to the principles of moral conversation, and when I can really and truly trust the process.

The second rule of conversational leadership, and perhaps the most difficult challenge for me, is to be less preoccupied with teaching and telling, and more concerned with listening and learning. I must be able to distinguish between active and passive kinds of advocacy,

and to know when one type might be more effective than another in my teaching about controversial issues. I need to be attentive to how group members are interpreting what is going on. No matter how messy, I need to ask for feedback on the conversational process at strategic intervals. I must make a concerted effort to see the group through the conversationalists’ eyes. I have to be a lot less reluctant, or even afraid, to hand over leadership of the moral conversation to various members of the group. In this way, all of us share equally in both the benefits and the burdens of advocacy work. I have often wondered why, at times, it has been so hard for me to cede my professorial authority. After my San Francisco experience, however, I realize that I tend to be more controlling whenever I limit my teaching to madvocacy, fadvocacy, or radvocacy. I become a stubborn, dogmatic rebel with a cause. I come off as authoritarian rather than authoritative.

6 Finally, I can never forget the principle that asking good, honest, agenda-free questions is the *sine qua non* for excellent moral conversation. All advocates, no matter the cause, must first be radvocates in asking baseline, zero-level questions that get at the socio-political-religious-philosophical roots of controversial issues such as social justice. The poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, asks us to “love the questions . . . I want to beg you, as much as I can, . . . to be patient toward all that is unsolved. Try to love the *questions themselves*. Do not now seek the answers which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. . . . Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer” (pp. 34–35).

CONCLUSIONS

INSPIRED by Mark R. Schwehn, and in the spirit of four theological virtues that are high on the preferred list of the major world religions, I believe there are four personal qualities—*humility, faith, self-denial, and charity*—that are associated with gladvocacy. In

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my teaching over a 42-year career in higher education, I have worked very hard to cultivate these virtues, both inside and outside the classroom. On some days I'm more successful than others. I only wish that I had taken more of an initiative than I did to model all four of these qualities during the San Francisco discussion.

Humility means that we work hard to attribute the best motive to others, whenever they take the risk to express their thoughts in public (even, especially, when they honestly acknowledge their ignorance, based on stereotypes). In the name of humility, then, we need to listen carefully to these publicly expressed beliefs and inquiries. We do this because understanding and compassion begin with an assumption that we are not the only ones who possess wisdom and insight regarding social justice truths. We, too, tend to stereotype and dismiss. We, too, hold fast to half-truths. We, too, are liable to understate and overstate, particularly when it comes to charging others with privileges that we ourselves possess in large quantity, regardless of our special identities.

Faith means trusting that what we hear from another is worthwhile in some way, if only, and especially, to the social justice speaker. In fact, we need to go one step further. We must have confidence that what others have to offer about their understanding of social justice, no matter how different from ours, might even be valuable to us in some way. We need to believe what we are questioning, and at the same time question what we are believing. In any conversation about controversial topics like social justice, success is measured by how well each of us is able to make the other person look good. To the extent that we try to make ourselves look good, and the other person look bad, then *we* look bad.

Self-denial suggests that, at some advanced point in any conversation about social justice, each of us will need to reexamine at least a few of the assumptions (and misassumptions) about our convictions that we cherish. This includes, of course, our pet unchecked biases and uninformed stereotypes. We will need to learn how to

surrender ourselves to the possibility that what might be true to others could, at least in theory, be true to us as well. Self-denial is the inclination to acknowledge that we are willing, and able, to search for the truth in what we oppose, and the error in what we espouse, at least initially. It means avoiding the opposites of self-denial: arrogance, unwavering certainty, and self-righteousness.

Finally, *charity* is all about looking for the good in others, including, especially, in what others are willing to fight, maybe even die, for. Charity is about exercising generosity, graciousness, and, even in some instances, affection. This, of course, does not mean ignoring, or excusing, errors in judgment, faulty reasoning, or one-sided zealotry. In my estimation, a good education is one in which our students, and ourselves, learn how to talk with one another about the hottest of hot topics. We need to learn how to communicate in such a way as to find the commonalities in our different views on social justice. And on those rare occasions when finding commonality seems impossible, we must agree to stop the conversation rather than end it forever. At which point, we then make a promise to return to the conversation later when our cooler heads and warmer hearts prevail.

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