ENGAGE DISSENSUS!

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What might it mean to envision academic work and relations as a “community of dissensus” (Readings 1996, p.180)? This is an idea that “presupposes nothing in common” among people and resists any inclinations (conscious or unconscious) to slip to assumptions of unity through appeals to a common idea or identity. It avoids the question, 'who are we?' (except in the most strategic moments) that immediately evokes a sense of 'who we are not.' With such a commitment to dissensus we seek to make differences more complex. People come together around an “incalculable obligation” to engage questions of "whether and how thoughts fit together" (pp. 191-192, italics my emphasis).

Engaging dissensus is not about fostering a culture of criticism, for which universities have become so well known, where speaking counts more than listening, and where shadows of Reason, Truth, and Experts subsume diverse knowledges and questions of heartfelt curiosity. Nor is it about creating a benign gathering around difference where people’s perspectives are respected but kept in their place, and where conversations leave people’s deeply held assumptions about themselves and the world safely and comfortably intact. An academic community has more responsibilities than to create forums (so familiar within universities) where people’s independent work is shared without engaging the relationality of their ideas and the new ones that emerge.
By engaging dissensus, we pledge to dive into the borders, disciplinary divides, silences, and thresholds experienced within universities. We do so with close attention to the ways in which individualism, competition, and exploitative legacies of knowledge generation that have characterized relationships within and beyond the university are accomplished as local practices. We do so with an ear to the ways in which conversations of academic excellence are currently subsuming those of justice and ethics, and where too much concern about the numbers of publications, scholarships, and grades, can, if allowed, take over questions of how people might live and think together in more humane ways.

**What does engaging dissensus feel and sound like?**


In this space of dissensus alarms go off with talk of 'like-minded people' and glosses over taken-for-granted or uncertainties that hint of the sneaky presence of conformity. This is a space where 'tell me more about that' replaces 'that term has been coined already'; or, 'that relates to my research'; or, 'power? I don’t want to go there'; or silent thoughts of 'that’s crap.' It involves the seeking out of exactly these moments when people retreat or withdraw from conversation out of disinterest, lack of respect, laziness, or discomfort. The perceived ‘wrong’ or ‘naïve’ question becomes precisely the right one to be asked and engaged with a spirit of generosity, an openness to vulnerability (on the part of the asker and listener), and a willingness to explore the architecture, biography, and implications of a wondering.
What language and daily practices might we speak now to realize thought as a shared process? Here, people are listening for new ideas that emerge where engineers, educators, pragmatists, dreamers, entrepreneurs, ecologists, politicians, artists, and activists collide through and beyond universities. As wars are being forged in the name of 'freedom' and 'justice,' with growing poverty, unemployment and an unprecedented displacement of people worldwide, fostering a culture of consent is a frightening prospect.

What if dissensus?

All the more important in political and social times where divisions among people are taking on new shape and where spaces of dissent are in serious jeopardy.

Reference