**Dialogue in Women’s Leadership Development Programs: Caring to be Critical**

**ABSTRACT**

Women’s leadership development programs (WLDP) have been suggested as programmatic additions for achieving gender-equity in organizational contexts. These programs are conceptualized as transformative learning spaces, which afford women the opportunity to explore previously uncritically examined assumptions and create new perspectives of themselves as leaders. This paper explains how these types of transformative learning environments are predicated on dialogue that encourages critical reflection in the context of caring relationships. Recognizing that women may arrive in leadership programs with varied capacities for both relational learning and critical reflection, this paper seeks to explore the communication practices needed to create the dialogic conditions of care, connection, and critical reflection. It outlines the results of a qualitative study that examined critical incidents of dialogue in a women’s leadership development program to demonstrate the ways in which facilitators communicate to create these conditions. The results suggest how taking a communication perspective on dialogue may increase a facilitator’s capacity to establish caring yet critically reflective learning environments with women who exhibit a variety of ways of knowing.

Keywords: Women’s Leadership Development (WLDP); Transformative Learning; Dialogue; Coordinated Management of Meaning

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**Introduction**

While the number of women in management and leadership positions suggest that the glass ceiling may no longer be an apt metaphor for the experience of women in leadership, women still face significant challenges (Eagly & Carli, 2007). One of which is the fact that while gender expectations are shifting in regards to childrearing and housekeeping, organizations have not necessarily kept up with changing gender norms (Galinsky, Aumann, & Bond, 2011). Organizational contexts that undervalue caregiving make it difficult for both men and women to attend to family obligations while climbing the leadership ladder (Slaughter, 2015). The result is that women often find themselves conflicted about advancing in their careers at the expense of family life (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Sabattini & Crosby, 2009).

Consider, for example, the lived experience of a Gen-X woman who recently “dropped out” of corporate leadership after having remained for 6 years as an assistant vice-president in a large insurance company. In reflecting on her experience as a woman climbing the corporate ladder, she notes,

Being a women that grew up in the 1970’s I was very aware of the struggles that women before me endured in paving the way for women of my generation. As a 20- something, I felt compelled by these visions to make the most of opportunities, climb the corporate ladder, and break through the glass ceiling. I never questioned the idea that women could “have it all” until my 30’s and I began my family. I was suddenly struck by another strong message of my youth--the importance of family. I suddenly realized that having it all wasn’t so easy. There are two tapes running my head--one that equates being a strong woman with achieving as much career success as possible, and the other that continues to identify with the role of caregiver and homemaker.

What can organizations do to better support women such as this as they navigate the internal trials of the leadership labyrinth such as this? Flexible work arrangements, work-life balance policies are essential. However, efforts to support the rise of women leaders need to go beyond the structural level and recognize the deep-rooted cultural assumptions that need to be changed at the internal level (Bilimoria & Liang, 2012). Gender sensitive policies and structural change are not enough to help women overcome the internalized assumptions that stunt their ability to fully embrace themselves as leaders. Critical examination of these assumptions is needed to allow them to authentically express their leadership potential. Learning to navigate a cultural history that often holds women to outdated expectations and personal perceptions requires profound reflection, not just development of skills and techniques (Debebe, 2011; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2002). In other words, women leaders need to examine the ways in which they view themselves in relation to the world around them to develop their full leadership potential.

It is within this context that recent literature suggests adding women’s leadership development programs (WLDP) to organizational strategies for gender-equity (Debebe, Anderson, Bilimoria, & Vinnicombe, 2016; Vinnicombe & Singh, 2002). Debebe, et. al. (2016) suggest that taking "a transformational learning perspective on women's programs gives us insight into how women build a leader identity by clarifying their values and developing new ways of perceiving, thinking, and acting to pursue their goals” (Debebe, 2016: 241). This type of transformative learning requires environments that are predicated on care and connection while also encouraging critical reflection on deep rooted assumptions and development of new ways of thinking and being (Carter, 2002; Mezirow, 2000; Mezirow & Associates, 2000; O'Hara, 2003).

In contrast with general leadership programs that focus on enhancing leaders’ performance with emphasis on skill acquisition and development to distinguish oneself from others, WLDPs approach leadership development from a relational frame that encourages participants to discover their leadership identity in connection with others (Sugiyama, Cavanagh, van Esch, Bilimoria, & Brown, 2016). WLDPs remove gender pressures that may prevent women from freely and openly examining their unique leadership experiences. They also allow for the use of gender-sensitive teaching and learning practices that are more compatible with women’s caring, connected, and relational ways of knowing (Debebe, 2011). However, while women may be traditionally socialized for more connected ways of knowing, not all may present with relational learning styles. Moreover, to achieve the dialogic conditions for transformative learning conditions of both care and critical reflection are needed, and women have a variety of capacities for critical evaluation and reflection (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997; Belenky & Stanton, 2000).

In my own work within an adult women’s leadership program, I witnessed the transformations that occur when women were given the opportunity to speak, talk with others, examine their long-held beliefs, and challenge the ideas of others. I became curious as to the ways in which facilitators communicate to create dialogue conditions that encourage supportive relationships while also stimulating critical reflection with a diverse participant group. It seemed to me that there was a need to engage in particular dialogue practices to create the conditions for both care and critical reflection with women across different ways of knowing.

In this paper, I outline the results of my inquiry into the ways in which facilitators communicated with adult women in a leadership development program to create the dialogic conditions for transformative learning. The paper is divided into 4 parts. First, I provide a conceptual framework to better understand the dialogic conditions for transformative learning. Then, provide a model for facilitating this type of specialized talk with women who arrive with different ways of knowing. Next I provide an overview of my study. Finally, I detail the study findings, which outline the ways in which facilitators in a women’s leadership program created dialogic conditions for transformative learning.

**Dialogic Conditions for Transformative Learning**

Transformative learning is that learning which transforms existing perspectives to make them more inclusive, open, and reflective (Mezirow, 2003; Mezirow & Associates, 2000). Experiencing transformative learning means to make new meaning based on questioning of one’s own and others’ experiences (Cranton, 2006). This occurs, in part, through a process of critical reflective discourse that examines beliefs, feelings, and values in a critical, rational manner (Mezirow, 2003).

However, further research has suggested that care and connection is also important in the transformative learning dialogue process (Carter, 2002; McGregor, 2004; O'Hara, 2003). Relationship has been shown to be especially important when working with women learners (English & Irving, 2012; English & Peters, 2012). In an interpretative study of eight women working within feminist nonprofit organizations, English and Peters (2012) found relationships were a key element in promoting transformative learning for these women. It is with this in mind that women’s programs have been suggested as important additions to leadership development initiatives. Debebe, et al. (2016) suggest that the gender specific nature of these programs provide safe-spaces for women to engage in dialogue about the challenges that face them as women.

However, we are cautioned against movement too far in the other direction--toward viewing transformative learning as a primarily intuitive, creative, and emotional process (Brookfield, 1986, 2000, 2005; Gunnlaugson, 2007). A shift in this direction, at the expense of critical reflection, is problematic because it can marginalize reason, and thus avoids the social critique that is an essential element of the endeavor (Brookfield, 1986, 2000, 2005; Gunnlaugson, 2007). English and Peters (2012) found this to be true in their research with women. These authors suggest that growth and development occurs within the dialogue and constructive conflicts that arise between role models, mentors, and friends (English & Peters, 2012).

**Facilitating transformative dialogue**

With this in mind, the development and facilitation of women’s leadership programs is a challenging endeavor. Programs need to be designed and facilitated in ways that maintain a delicate balance between care, connection and critical reflection. Facilitators are called upon to help program participants build and maintain relationships with each other while at the same time encouraging critical assessment of perspectives (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Cranton, 2006; Vella, 2008; Walton, 2010).

Participation in this type of critical reflective discourse requires the ability to articulate and critique underlying assumptions of one’s own and others’ thinking (Belenky & Stanton, 2000). Due to their historically marginalized place in social discourse, women will arrive in leadership development environments with a variety of ways of knowing and capacities for participation in this type of critical reflective dialogue (Belenky & Stanton, 2000; Kilgore & Bloom, 2002). Women’s ways of knowing (WWK) provides a language to name and examine the different ways that women think based on their situational, social, and historical contexts (Belenky et al., 1997).

This model highlights that while some women may come to a leadership program with well-developed capacities for critical reflective discourse, some women may not be used to stating their own opinions and have limited resources for critical dialogue. Others may have the resources, but lack confidence in their abilities to engage in the process. Thus, program facilitators need to be able to identify the basis for their participants’ thinking and support and affirm while also challenging and stimulating growth. Facilitators need a conscious strategy for dealing with the multiple ways of knowing (Belenky & Stanton, 2000). Their challenge is to create dialogic environments where those that are silenced might be drawn out, to support received knowers in trusting their own voice, and to help those that are separate to connect with others in collaborative learning. This is a difficult task. Consider how one might create an environment where a participant that is silent, or unaccustomed to stating their own opinions might be drawn out while there are a number of separate knowers in the room. Separate knower are those that are able to step back and doubt ideas, which is that which often associated with critical reflection. However, within a group of mixed knowers this type standing back and taking a critical stance may further silence and confuse those at different stages of knowing.

Researchers recommend several practical approaches to creating dialogue that support transformative learning (Brookfield, 1986; Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Cranton, 2006; Vella, 2008). However, this literature falls short of explaining the ways to manage the moment-to-moment facilitation, and none specifically address the specific challenge of working with adult women and their unique ways of knowing.

Recent literature proposes that Mezirow’s ideal conditions for discourse may be limiting our understanding of the ways in which the dialogic conditions for transformative learning may be created (Gunnlaugson, 2007; Gunnlaugson & Moore, 2009). In response, more generative views of discourse are being considered as a lens upon which to study transformative dialogue (Gergen, McNamee, & Barrett, 2001; Gunnlaugson, 2007; Pearce & Pearce, 2004). Within these views, dialogue becomes more than a conversation between two people (Gergen et. al., 2001). It is seen as an relational, emergent process informed by specific conversational resources and patterns of action that enable participants to go beyond the mere exchange of information to co-create new meaning together (Buber, 1958; Dixon, 1996; Gergen et al., 2001; Pearce & Pearce, 2001). In this spirit, dialogue is emergent. It does not just happen, but neither can it be planned. The participants in dialogic moments have been likened to jazz musicians who interpret others’ conversational moves and simultaneously shape their responses in ways to which the other person can relate (Gergen et. al., 2001).

Taking a communication perspective on dialogue allows for this type of improvisation and coordination of action. A communication perspective involves paying attention to and appreciating what we are making in the communication process (Pearce, 2007). This conception of dialogue includes behaviors such as suspending judgment and presencing, or “whole body sensing and listening” to the emerging meaning that is being created. Gunnlaugson (2007) suggests that the result of such practices is a meta-awareness that “opens a collective learning space where moment-to-moment attention can permeate the conversation” (pg. 141). The goal is to focus attention on the meaning we are making through the individual conversational turns and larger episodes of a conversation and not exclusively on the messages exchanged (Parrish-Sprowl, 2013). Thus, taking a communication perspective on dialogue expands our focus to include not just content but also the dialogic quality of the communication process.

…if we attend to the quality of what people actually say and do in communicating with each other, then we think we have a better idea of how to invite and prepare the conditions for these [dialogic] moments to occur. (Pearce & Pearce, 2004, p. 46)

When facilitators monitor what is going on in the communication process, they have increased their capacity to attend to the epistemological differences of their participants and create dialogic conditions. A facilitator paying attention to the dialogic quality of the communication process will engage in what Pearce (2007) refers to as “episode work.” This involves pointing out differences, asking the appropriate question at the appropriate moment, and using silence and other “speech acts” to respond to the variety of forces and hierarchies of meaning that are playing out in a dialogue (Pearce, 2007; Pearce & Pearce, 2004). When skillful at this in-the-moment facilitation, facilitators possess an increased capacity to move a group forward and disrupt those conversational acts that do not support dialogue (Pearce & Pearce, 2004). For example, when a subjectively knowing participant simply acknowledges another participant’s perspective as valid on its face, the facilitator will respond in a way to encourage questioning. Or, if a participant is exhibiting “separate knowing” the facilitator will invite this participant to “try on” alternative perspectives. The result, Pearce and Pearce (2007; 2000, 2004) suggest, is a trusting, collaborative dialogic space that develops common understanding while allowing for critical examination of existing perspectives.

**METHODS**

Having set the background and conceptual framework, in this section I will provide some details on the specifics of my study. The setting for this study was an all-women’s university in Central Massachusetts, which offers a unique degree completion program for women. A requirement is to complete a three course, Women as Empowered Learners and Leaders (WELL) Program designed specifically for reflection on personal goals, strengths, professional life planning, and issues related to women in the workplace. Each of these courses is designed to engage participants in dialogue around these topics to empower them to take ownership of their lives and change how they view themselves in the world. The content, as well as, the process followed in this all women’s leadership program provided a context that supported the type of reflective, transformative dialogue that I wished to explore in this study.

I interviewed facilitators that taught in the WELL Program with a minimum of one year of teaching experience in an in-person format that were able to produce a critical incident of dialogue. I used a two-staged qualitative data collection process using a variation of the critical incident technique. This process included a written dialogue description form to solicit recalled episodes of dialogue that the facilitators felt demonstrated the dialogue components. This was followed by a semi-structured interview with the facilitator to elaborate on the dialogue episode and the communication behaviors used to create them. The critical incident technique has been used as a research method across diverse fields (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005). It is viewed as a flexible set of principles to describe a particular activity gained through either direct observation or recalled critical incidents (Butterfield et al., 2005; Flanagan, 1954). For example, it may be used to study the effective and ineffective ways of doing something through direct observation of the task, or to determine characteristics critical to a certain activity through report from memory of the participants. This data collection process provided a way to obtain incidents of dialogue that included the components of dialogue in the absence of the ability to observe/record these interactions.

To analyze the data I used coordinated management of meaning (CMM). CMM is a practical communication theory developed first by Pearce & Cronen (1982). Their theory is based on social-constructionist view of communication, which affirms communication as the primary social process. What drew me to using this theory to help analyze the data is CMM’s emphasis on the processes of coordination. It asks us to look at communication, not just through it and its resulting meaning. It provides several heuristics for researchers and practitioners to be able to deconstruct communication to appreciate the ways in which participants in particular episodes of communication are ‘dancing together’ to create meaning, and the resources they are using in the process.

There were two stages of the analysis process. Phase one was to describe and interpret each of the critical incidents. This involved two steps. First, I read and re-read the written dialogue description forms, interview transcripts and my field notes to create serpentine diagrams of each incident as described. Serpentine diagrams are a CMM tool used to “storyboard” or timeline of the turns of a particular conversational episodes.

These serpentine outlines became the framework upon which I developed a thick description of each of the recalled critical incidents of dialogue. Here I used the CMM hierarchy model as a tool to identify the multiple layers of stories the facilitators and their participants used to make sense of the sequences of turns. The hierarchy model suggests that we have a number of contextual resources or stories that we use to make sense of a situation. It gives us a way of thinking about how our self-concept, the relationship we have with the other participants, the type of interaction, etc. influence how we make sense of what is going on in any situation. These stories of course change places in the hierarchy as different forces enter into the situation.

For example, an facilitator may have entered into an episode where participants are giving presentations using the idea are certain norms and expectations that are followed during this type of activity, which inform the ways she views herself and what actions she is required to take. In an episode of giving participant presentations participants go to the front of the room, the facilitator keeps time and facilitates questions at the end, etc. But, when a very nervous participant demonstrated that she really might faint if asked to go to the front of the room to present that served to be an implicative force that changed the facilitator’s contextual framing of the episode and her relationship and care for participant’s well-being superseded the normal protocols for giving participant presentations.

Once I had a detailed description of each of the individual incidents. I moved to phase two of the analysis, which involved reading and rereading each of the incident descriptions and serpentine diagrams. In addition, I entered and coded the text of dialogue turns into a *dedoose*© to help me identify patterns and in the contexts, behaviors, and participants ways of knowing across the incidents.

**Findings**

These analysis steps led me to three primary findings regarding the ways in which facilitators create the dialogue conditions for transformative learning. The first is to describe the ways in which facilitators created a context of care. The second is that critical reflection occurred within this context of care. The last demonstrates the ways in which facilitators adapted and responded to a variety of ways of knowing.

**Creating a Context of Care**

The facilitators in this study consistently demonstrated care for their participants. Care is demonstrated in the ways in which they structured and facilitated class activities. Each suggested that they established specific ground rules for participation at the beginning of the course, which had contributed to the ability of participants to engage in constructive discussions especially when opinions differed. In addition, they actively monitored the conversation. For example, while quietly listening to two participants discuss their differing views on expectations of women, one facilitator observed behavior in the conversation that was becoming increasingly hostile, and was able to respond to disrupt the negative energy without shutting down the discussion. Facilitators in the study were also noted to present material and modify their session plans in ways that addressed their participants’ needs and concerns. For example, one facilitator shifted her expectations around how participant presentations should be made when she realized that the participant was exceptionally nervous. She cared more about the participant’s well-being than the customary norms of giving a presentation, and thus merely shifted the group’s attention to the back of the room where the participant was sitting.

Moreover, facilitators regularly provided their participants with verbal and non-verbal demonstrations of approval and support. For example, writing participant’s idea on the white board, or using facial expressions and body language that demonstrated a participant’s comments were worthy of further discussion. One particular facilitator described how she smiled and moved toward a participant to demonstrate that while the participant’s ideas were off-topic and perhaps controversial, they were worthy of further discussion. These findings are summarized below.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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**Critical Reflection in the Context of Care**

It is within this context of care that facilitators promoted critical reflection. Care for participants informed the ways and types of discriminating behaviors used in the dialogue incidents. Rather than challenging or defending perspectives the facilitators used questioning or probing. These behaviors are more about engaging with and understanding vs. separating from or challenging others’ ideas. They sought to gain an understanding of the other’s perspective to appreciate the similarities and differences of the underlying logics. Each of the facilitators used questioning or probing at least once in their recalled incidents. Probing behaviors were often in combination with caring turns. For example, one facilitator utilized a combination of non-verbal communication and questions to encourage participants to expand on their feelings and underlying perspectives of their contributions to the dialogue. She specifically noted that she would ask follow-up questions such as “Why do you feel like that? What makes you feel so strongly about that? In another incident, after the facilitator and other participants provided extensive support and approval of a particularly silent participant that had found her voice, the facilitator used probing to encourage the participant to get more clarity on her next steps. She asked the participant, “What are your next steps going to be? You’re saying this is what you want to do, how are you going to accomplish that?”

While the facilitators sought to engage participants in critical reflection through open-ended probing questions, participants were observed to engage in more active challenging of each other’s ideas. In several of the incidents, there were participant exchanges that involved actively challenging other’s ideas. Participants pointed out how they saw material differently, challenged assumptions and perspectives on women’s roles, and questioned each other’s beliefs about things ranging from pop-culture “role-models” to the Bible. These exchanges were supported by the facilitator’s focus on modeling care and concern for participant in the ways they set up and interacted with participants verbally and non-verbally. Several of the facilitators specifically noted that establishing specific ground rules for participation at the beginning of the course contributed to the ability of participants to engage in constructive discussions especially when opinions and differed.

It should also be noted that critical reflection was established through extending, relating and synthesizing of ideas. The facilitators in this study consistently sought to make connections between participants and their ideas. For example, one facilitator made a conscious decision to invite other participants into the dialogue to help another see that she demonstrated leadership. This facilitator noted “…Obviously, it would have been one thing for me to say that I consider you a leader, but to have her peers within the class, that I think was more beneficial for her.” Another facilitator made these connections by setting up activities in a way that ensured that participants are able to come to their own opinions and perspectives of material presented. While moderating participant discussion stemming from the video she showed in class, instead of responding to each individual comment offered, she looked for select opportunities in the dialogue to summarize, relate several participant ideas, and connect them to her lessons for the day. This behavior encouraged participants to come into relationship with vs. distancing themselves from difference to develop new ways of thinking. These findings are summarized below.

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**Ways of Knowing**

Facilitators used different dialogue behaviors to support participants at different ways of knowing. With those participants who were more silent, the facilitators demonstrated more caring and supportive behaviors. For example,one facilitator underscored the way she engaged a participant in the report out of her small group discussion. Knowing that the participant was not particularly comfortable speaking in a large group, she guided and supported the participant through the process. She used questions that set small focused tasks for her to follow. Another facilitator also worked with a participant that was particularly silent. Throughout the program, the facilitator made an effort to connect personally with the participant before and after sessions. She did not allow the participant’s way of knowing impact her view of the participant. She stated, “Every participant, to me, has her own way of communicating and learning, and her comfort level, and I don’t think it impacted anything.”

With subjective and received knowers the behaviors facilitators continued to be supportive but worked to make connections with other participants and ideas. For example when working with a participant that would often speak off-topic, one facilitator encouraged the participant to use her voice while also having faith in the women in the group with more constructed ways of knowing to help move her ways of thinking to be more expansive and discerning. Another facilitator also demonstrated a level of patience with a participant that had a particularly received way of knowing. This participant arrived in class with a strong belief in the Bible, but was unable to truly articulate or defend these beliefs. The Philosopher combined care with establishing and setting expectations throughout the course. The result was that the participant made a significant leap in the ways in which she was able to interact around her beliefs.

In general, the facilitators demonstrated the ability to adapt in the moment to a variety of knowing styles. For example, a facilitator encouraged one participant that was vocal with her perspectives to reflect critically on their views using probing questions. At the same time, she encouraged a less vocal participant to participate by praising her written work and asking her share her ideas. These findings are summarized below.

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Insert Table 3 about here

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**Conclusion**

WLDP have been suggested as transformative learning spaces where women are given the opportunity to examine and rethink existing perspectives. More specifically, WLDP are proposed as safe spaces that follow gender sensitive teaching and learning practices which facilitate leadership growth and development (Debebe, 2011). However, transformative learning spaces need to be more than caring environments where women are able to come together and share their lived experience. Transformative learning requires dialogue between caring interlocutors that challenge existing ways of thinking and build new meaning. Program developers and facilitators are responsible for holding the delicate balance between care, connection, and critical reflection to ensure that this can occur. The goal of this paper was to provide guidance in ways in which this might be done through analysis of critical incidents of communication which occurred in a women’s leadership development program.

This research first demonstrates some of the ways in which facilitators can establish caring contexts. The findings demonstrate that facilitators model care through their consideration of the participants’ needs when establishing activities and setting class expectations. This begins with establishing appropriate ground rules for engagement between and among participants. However, facilitators go beyond this baseline requirement. They demonstrate and model care in the ways in which they interact with participants. They often express their approval and support of participants’ contributions to the dialogue and make connections between the participants and important topics or points of view. Moreover, they are continually monitoring not just what is being said in a discussion, but what is being made by it. Making sure to disrupt those turns in the dialogue that are counter to the development of care, while encouraging those that support critical reflection.

It is within this context of care that the facilitators encouraged critical reflection. The study did not often find dialogue behaviors such as challenging or defending of ideas. In contrast, the facilitators consistently worked to foster critical reflection through more subtle and caring behaviors of probing, relating, and summarizing of ideas. The implications of which is to encourage participants to come into relationship with vs. distance themselves from different perspectives and this in turn helps to develop new more open and inclusive frames of reference.

In addition, the facilitators in this study were able to hold the tension between care and critical reflection through carefully monitoring the dialogue process. As suggested by my framework, the adult women in this study arrived in the session with a variety of ways of knowing. So, in order to encourage those that were more silent and received in their ways of knowing, facilitators needed to lean more heavily toward dialogue behaviors of care and connection. Conversely, with those that were more subjective or separate knowers they focused on encouraging them to be more critical (through the types of behavior noted above). The facilitators in the study demonstrate how appreciation of women participants’ ways of knowing and tailoring communication behaviors to these helps to engage and support them in critical discourse. These findings suggest that to create the dialogic conditions for transformative learning facilitators need to take a communication perspective on dialogue.

Taking a communication perspective means recognizing that dialogue is a highly relational, emergent process rather than an ideal to be achieved through specialized conditions and specific action. (Gergen et al., 2001; Pearce & Pearce, 2000, 2004; Stewart & Zediker, 2000). Viewing dialogue as emergent, relational and contingent places a different emphasis on how it can be created in practice (Pearce & Pearce, 2000). Rather than following set logic and rational procedures, it requires an ability to monitor what is going on in the communication process (Gunnlaugson, 2007; Pearce & Pearce, 2004). The facilitators in this study actively monitored conversation allowing them to act at critical moments of the dialogue. Their attention was not only on what was being said, but included non-verbal cues and the ways in which the participants’ participated in the class so that they were able to respond in ways that helped participants of variety of different knowing to actively participate.

Central to the idea of taking a communication perspective is recognizing that meaning is co-created. This means that establishing caring yet critical environments is not solely the responsibility of program facilitators. Participants have a place in creating conditions that foster transformative learning. This was evident in the findings of this study. The facilitators in this study embraced the diversity of participants’ experiences in the class to help move participants’ views of themselves and their place in the world. Of note, is that the incidents of dialogue examined in this study involved engagement between women participants with mixed ways of knowing. Facilitators in the study acknowledged that some of the participants in class participated actively with connected ways of knowing. While there were incidents that involved more silent knowers, in each class there were some participants that were capable and confident in sharing their perspectives. These participants served as partners with the facilitators in creating turns that inspired critical reflection.

The question thus remains as to whether facilitators that are presented with more homogeneous groups of women participants would be able to create the same dialogic conditions. Would, for example, participants with a less diverse age range or experience level have enough variety of experiences and ways of knowing needed to create the tensions that occurred in the dialogues between the women that varied in age from early 20s to 50s with a variety of different leadership experiences? With this in mind, it is recommended to undertake this study with women of more similar age, experience, organizational contexts, and ways of knowing.

It should also be acknowledged that a few of the critical incidents suggested that the participants involved may have experienced a change in their ways of knowing, or how they viewed themselves in relation to the world. However, based on the limited information available this cannot be viewed as evidence that the dialogues observed resulted in transformative learning outcomes. Further studies that combine evaluation of the dialogue conditions with some more formal evaluation or screening for transformative learning outcomes among the participants involved in the dialogue would be needed to make this claim. It would also be inappropriate based on the data to suggest that the existence of these dialogue conditions leads to transformative learning in all cases. Dialogue conditions are only one of the elements suggested by literature as necessary for transformative learning to occur.

With this in mind, however, we can conclude that researchers and practitioners interested in developing transformative learning spaces for women’s leadership development need a generative view of communication to guide their work. The findings suggest that an adequate communication framework for facilitators working with adult women in an academic based leadership program is one that fosters relationship while encouraging critical reflection. However, this is not the only context in which women’s leadership development programs occur. Additional research in organizational contexts and across different populations using a communication perspective of dialogue is recommended.

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**Table 1**

**Findings – Context of care**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Summary of finding | Dialogue behaviors observed | Examples |
| Facilitators consistently demonstrated concern and regard for participants’ needs and feelings | * Modeling care in organizing classroom activities and managing classroom interaction * Approving of participants contributions to class in verbal and non-verbal ways | * Changing expectations for delivering participant presentations * Writing participant ideas on white board, providing positive feedback, moving toward participants |
| Facilitators maintained environments where participants were able respectfully challenge each other | * Actively listening, observing and monitoring the dialogue | * Setting specific ground rules that enable participants to challenge each other * Stepping in to redirect conversation that was becoming less constructive |

**Table 2**

**Findings – Critical Reflection in the Context of Care**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Summary of Findings | Dialogue Behaviors Observed | Example(s) |
| Facilitators quietly challenged participant’s perspectives | * Probing and questioning participants ideas | * Following up participant ideas with questions, such as “Why do you feel like that?” |
| Participants more actively challenged each other’s perspectives | * Challenging and evaluating ideas, defending positions | * Questioning personal beliefs, choices. * Providing justification for beliefs and actions. |
| Facilitators made concentrated effort to connect participant’s ideas | * Extending dialogue between participants * Relating and summarizing participant comments | * Inviting participants into dialogue vs. responding herself * Summarizing several comments vs. responding to individual contributions |

**Table 3**

**Findings – Responding to Ways of Knowing**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Summary of Findings | Dialogue Behaviors Observed | Example(s) |
| Facilitators cared for and supported silent knowers | * Modeling care * Setting boundaries | * Helping a participant with reporting out small group discussion |
| Facilitators connected subjective and received knowers with different perspectives | * Extending | * Engaging women with different ideas and ways knowing in discussion with each other |
| Facilitators adapted to variety of ways of knowing | * Listening * Observing | * Encouraging critical reflection with a vocal participant, while supporting a more silent participant to share ideas with praise |