

**Creating Meaningful Dialogue: A Case Study Examining
Wake Forest University's "A Call to Conversation" Program**

Katie McMillan

Department of Communication, Wayne State University

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Dr. Donyale Griffin Padgett

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Introduction

The Associated Press (2016) recently claimed that Americans were more divided than ever, citing clashes across the country based on a growing list of issues, including politics, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, and social justice. The polarization extended beyond headlines and into homes, with discourse surrounding the 2016 election cutting family Thanksgiving visits short on both ends of the political spectrum (Chen & Rohla, 2018). While the election of President Donald Trump shocked some (Healy & Peters, 2016), others saw it as natural progression of increasing political polarization in America (McCarty, 2019). Disconnect and division have continued into 2020, with one Pew Research Center study finding that few Democrats or Republicans have close friendships or conversations with those from the opposing party (Dunn, 2020).

While college campuses have traditionally been havens for free speech and the open exchange of ideas, many institutions have recently had to balance those rights with increasing public safety concerns (Combs, 2018). As calls for a return to civility continue, many have looked to higher education as a potential leader in creating conversations and forging a path across America's growing divide (Scobey, 2019; Kafka, 2018).

Case History

Wake Forest University (WFU), a private research institution located in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, launched the A Call to Conversation (C2C) program in 2017 as part of its capital campaign after members of the campus community expressed a desire for more honest, personal engagement and less small talk. WFU wanted to invert the traditional model of having an administrator speak to large groups about institutional priorities, and instead listen to small groups of stakeholders about their priorities (Public Relations Society of America, 2019).

C2C began as a small pilot, with alumni and parents participating in moderated conversations over dinner at a volunteer host's home. Interest in C2C grew via word-of-mouth and internal marketing, and in late 2017 the pilot was introduced to the entire campus. In 2018, C2C was introduced to a national audience, with expanded formats including the traditional dinner party, an informal option at a restaurant or park, events tailored specifically to campus and community audiences, and a virtual option. To date, C2C has hosted 688 events in 40 states, with more than 4,500 participants (WFU, n.d. 1).

All C2C events are based around a predetermined discussion topic, with groups of 8-16 participants led in conversation by a trained moderator. Topics include leadership and character, diversity and inclusion, gender, faith, identity, sustainability, legacy, and more. Prior to the conversation, all participants receive a discussion prompt to consider in advance. Moderators use a three-part model to guide conversations, which encourages participants to first reveal something about themselves in relation to their discussion prompt, to connect as a group around themes from each other's revelations, and finally, to empower the group to develop a connection and identify key takeaways (WFU, n.d. 1). Each C2C event ends with a group photo, which is emailed to participants as a way of encouraging them to exchange contact information and continue building their relationships.

Significance

With C2C, Wake Forest tapped into a desire among its community to connect and have meaningful conversations around potentially divisive topics. The program has brought together intergenerational participants with differing opinions and backgrounds for respectful, if heated, dialogue, and more than 80% of past participants would return for another conversation (Public Relations Society of America, 2019). C2C was hailed by *The Wall Street Journal* as a model for

modern civil discourse (Korn, 2018), and received the Public Relations Society of America's Silver Anvil Award for internal communications in 2019.

A study of the program will be useful for other organizations or individuals seeking to mitigate tensions or build relationships among those who may have significant differences. This brief analysis explores some of the specific dialogic features utilized in the C2C program.

Theoretical Basis

This case study will be guided by the dialogic theory, which asserts that organizations should be willing to interact with its publics in honest, ethical ways to create effective communication channels (Taylor et al., 2019). The theory has roots in philosophy, rhetoric, psychology, and is grounded in the interpersonal communications concept of unconditional positive regard for the other (Rogers, 1957). Dialogic theory was tailored to public relations applications by ethicist Ron Pearson in 1989 (Kent, 2002), and later redefined for the internet era by Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002), who emphasized the need for a carefully negotiated exchange beyond the surface exchange of ideas that takes place via mass media.

In public relations applications, dialogic theory is characterized by a shift in emphasis from an organization's ability to manage communications to their use of communications as a tool for managing relationships (Kent & Taylor, 1998). The theory is based on the assumption that dialogue is a complex and often misunderstood and oversimplified process, and that true dialogue is a long-term process based on interpersonal relationships built via mutual respect and commitment to growth (Taylor et al., 2019).

Kent and Taylor (2002) identified five features of dialogic communication, including mutuality, propinquity, empathy, risk, and commitment, that combine to create an orientation toward others. These features can be viewed as dialogic best practices that transcend industry

and delivery channel, and present an objective opportunity to assess public relations campaigns and programs such as C2C, and, more broadly, to inform and influence more meaningful communication in an increasingly divisive world.

Literature Review

The principles and features of dialogic theory have been applied by scholars in multiple public relations contexts, including corporate social responsibility, nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations, and social media (Kent & Taylor, 2016; Briones et al., 2011; Kent, 2013). Within higher education, dialogic theory has also been used to identify strategies for connecting with potential students (Gordon & Berhow, 2009) and fostering inclusive cultures for marginalized voices (McAllister, 2012).

While foundational scholars asserted that dialogic encounters must take place in person (Taylor, et al., 2019), more recent studies have applied dialogic theory to interactions on social media, websites, and other digital channels (Wirtz & Zimbres, 2018; Wang & Yang, 2020). No matter the delivery channel, scholars consistently use Kent and Taylor's (2002) features to identify and assess dialogic communications.

Themes: Features of Dialogic Communication

C2C has effectively tapped into the public's desire for meaningful conversation through the strategic use of Kent and Taylor's (2002) dialogic principles. This study will analyze the program's structure and the documented experiences of participants.

Mutuality

In dialogic exchange, the principle of mutuality elevates the public as an equal with the organization, and views participants as people rather than strategic objects (Kent & Taylor, 2002). In its description of the C2C program, WFU directly references this foundational dialogic

feature by stating that “when we openly share ideas and listen to one another, we see each other as human beings rather than stances or opinions” (WFU, n.d. 1).

Mutuality also recognizes that when individuals advocate for their own unique beliefs, mutual growth is possible for the individual and an organization, and that mutual growth should be the primary goal for all parties (Kent & Taylor, 2002). WFU assures participants that they will not be solicited for anything — particularly donations — beyond their time and honesty, and that C2C’s desired outcome is simply that participants value the experience enough to seek further conversations with each other and with the university (WFU, n. d. 1). Participant Justin Browning expressed the principle of mutuality in his explanation that “if you’re not willing to see someone else’s side, you’re never going to make any progress” (Loll, 2018, para. 7).

Propinquity

The dialogic principle of propinquity is characterized by communications about timely issues, a temporal flow that considers the past and present while looking to the future, and active engagement from participants (Kent & Taylor, 2002; Taylor & Kent, 2014). C2C has displayed a commitment to hosting timely conversations in its recent expansion of topics, which now include coping with uncertainty and connecting in a virtual world (WFU, n.d. 1). Further, in ending every event with a group photo and email, C2C places emphasis on how to use the experience to build new and continuing relationships in the future (WFU, n. d. 1). One student participant, Dominic Peters, explained that “my goal was not to have just one conversation, but to turn that one conversation into an opportunity to do this again with friends” (Neal, 2018, para. 14). Peters’ expression demonstrates a deep level of commitment to the program and the conversation, which aligns with the dialogic ideal that engagement is a long-term process, not a one-off event (Taylor & Kent, 2014).

Dialogic engagement requires that participants commit themselves fully to the encounter, and assumes participants' willingness to interact (Taylor & Kent, 2014). C2C's emphasis on this high level of engagement is evident in its program format, which requires that all participants silence their cellphones and come to the conversation prepared to engage based on the discussion prompt (WFU, n. d. 1).

Empathy

Empathy in dialogic practice refers to an atmosphere of support and trust, characterized by respectfully facilitated participation, confirmation of each individual's voice, and a communal orientation (Kent & Taylor, 2002). C2C's format, which is facilitated by a trained moderator, assumes a communal, positive orientation by requiring participants to avoid judgment or interrupting one another, and to connect based on similarities from their own unique experiences (WFU, n.d. 1).

C2C's commitment to empathy is apparent in participant testimonials, including student Bam Purcell's observation that, "...whenever I spoke, everyone stopped and listened. I felt heard..." (A Call to Conversation, 2019a). Another participant cited the benefits of the program's face-to-face format, explaining that "empathy is developed when you can see the look on another person's face...when someone is stuck to their phone, it prohibits the opportunity to develop empathy" (A Call to Conversation, 2018). Finally, a third participant expressed that they "liked the way the conversations were so positive and encouraging, even if one disagreed" (A Call to Conversation, 2019c).

Risk

Dialogic exchanges are also characterized by risk, which includes vulnerability and the unconditional acceptance of each participants' uniqueness and individuality (Kent & Taylor,

2002). C2C facilitates risk among its participants by opening every event with an icebreaker based on personal self-revelation (WFU, n. d. 1). Dialogic risk also recognizes that an encounter should be spontaneous and unrehearsed (Kent & Taylor, 2002). C2C moderators are trained to guide an organic conversation without scripting (WFU, n. d. 1).

C2C moderator Hu Womack describes the dialogic principle of risk in his explanation that “the meaningful connections we can make are the result of sharing personal stories ... learning about each other from this place of vulnerability is a powerful thing” (A Call to Conversation, 2019b).

Commitment

Commitment in dialogic practice is characterized by honesty and authenticity, as well as participants’ commitment to being open-minded to ideas with which they may disagree, and to approach the conversation with the intent to understand, not to persuade or win (Kent & Taylor, 2002). In hosting timely, topical conversations around the personal experiences of its participants rather than only their opinions, C2C is built around a culture of honesty and authenticity in which individuals are speaking from their own lived experiences (WFU, n. d. 1). After a level of trust and empathy is established among a group of participants, C2C moderators are trained to navigate conversations to avoid scenarios in which closed ideological corners dominate open and constructive exchange (Neal, 2018, para. 7).

C2C participant Caroline Bryant also cites the program’s inclusion of a meal to create a sense of shared community and open-mindedness, stating “being able to exchange ideas over a meal creates a relaxed, non-combative atmosphere — it’s a conversation, not a debate” (Neal, 2018, para. 8).

Lessons

The broad interest and participation in the C2C program showcases the appetite for meaningful conversation among WFU's stakeholders. While the goal of creating dialogue is somewhat vague and difficult to quantify, WFU has invested in the creation of a culture of conversation, and in doing so has expanded and strengthened its community. With C2C, the university has built mutually beneficial relationships with key stakeholders on- and off-campus, while offering hope that college campuses can still serve as havens for the open and lively exchange of ideas. The success of C2C supports the foundational idea that true dialogue takes place face-to-face (Taylor et al., 2019), but the program's recent virtual expansion opens the door to future research about digital communications designed to mirror in-person interactions.

This brief analysis outlines how WFU used the dialogic theory and the specific features presented by Kent and Taylor (2002) in building the C2C program. An understanding of the dialogic theory, its features, and its application in this specific program will be helpful in informing other organizations seeking to build relationships and create meaningful conversation at a time of general divisiveness.

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