

CONVERSATIONS AS ACADEMIC SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Terry Halliday

At the IFES English/Portuguese Africa conference in Accra, Ghana, in 2013, a Kenyan university administrator challenged us with a question I have been pondering ever since. She said, “Student groups come into my office all the time asking me for resources. I ask them, before I give you anything, what does your group contribute to our university? How does it improve our institution? How are you helping me administer this campus?”

This is a challenging question. What if IFES groups on campuses, as part of our ministry, encouraged discipleship AND did so by developing academic skills? These skills can be forms of training for Christian leadership and support the goals of the university.

1. Developing Academic Skills

What are academic skills that make a difference?

- effectiveness at making presentations
- learning how to listen
- learning how to question
- brainstorming with a colleagues

Why not have workshops inside our Christian groups – where we serve Christ, ourselves, and the university?

- Learning to think critically
- Learning to distill ideas and arguments
- Learning to present to generalist audiences
- Learning to “interview” others

This would help us confront academic pathologies

- self-preoccupation
- monologues
- stuck in the details
- pedantry
- inaccessibility [technical, conceptual, theories
- tunnel vision – narrowed Inrg to a tiny topic – radical contraction from college days

Demands are changing in many parts of the university world:

- Teaching
- Research
- Alumni – attention to taxpayers and wider publics

Here are skills that simultaneously serve the university and build leadership qualities for Christian service:

2. Making Presentations for Broad, Non-Technical Audiences

This is important in teaching – and for graduates/alumni – research funding – public presence of university

To present effectively means we must:

- we *hook* people – how? [e.g., the economist's story of the Boston fire; Terry's experience trying to meet with Jiang Tianyong, China civil rights leader, in Beijing]
- we discern the big picture
 - Boston – blocks burnt down; stimulate more econ growth than if gradual replacement of old buildings?
- we translate – e.g., through metaphor, through accessible language
- we use visuals – beauty, striking images [Boston – devastation. Terry – Wang Yu photo]
- we tell stories [Boston: fire-fighters, horses, length of ladders . . . ; Jiang Tianyong on the run]
- we have a punch line – a clear conclusion – points forward to further qns, research directions, possibilities

3. Listening

- For the problem, issue they're grappling with
- For emotion – what *excites* this person? Where does their passion kick in?
- For the big divides, debates – where do the scholarly fault-lines lie?
- For handles to help me grasp complexity

[A rule of thumb to gauge the quality of our conversation – is the other person talking more than me?]

4. Questioning

- By questioning authentically, we take a posture of weakness, ignorance – you know something I do not – yet, I am eager to know
- Maybe questioning prefaced by why I am particularly interested in what you are studying/researching/teaching – why you are interested? (Terry: on research projects – challenges to practicing criminal law in China)
- We may indicate a connection. I studied 'x' or 'y' a long time ago. Or laugh at myself—the closest I've come to that is a movie, or novel. Or I read something in the Science section of the news It piqued my interest. Or I had a friend in college
- Ask questions that press for simplification
- Ask clarifying questions – what does this mean?
- Ask what kind of academic work does it require? (e.g., reading, modeling, empirical) using what kinds of data, methods, etc.?

5. Conversing through Interviews

I use interviews extensively in my research. They can be a rich way of stimulating conversation

Merits of interviews:

- A posture of humility – you know something I don't
- A posture of affirming the other – I care about what you're passionate about
- A learning opportunity – I broaden my knowledge about something I don't know

- A skills opportunity – I refine skills in extracting manifest and latent knowledge from someone more expert than I am

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