

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Theorizing Principled Collaboration

Renee Guarriello Heath¹ & Matthew G. Isbell²

1 Department of Communication, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH 03824, USA

2 Department of Communication and Media, Boise State University, Boise, ID 83725, USA

Interorganizational collaboration is often at the crux of making decisions that impact and are impacted by inherent tensions of the human experience. Many theoretical models and literature reviews conceptualize collaboration through a teleological lens where being "good" is tied to accomplishing the collaboration's goals. In this essay, we broaden the understanding of collaboration problematizing what is meant by a good outcome. We propose collaboration is a principled activity with associated processes and outcomes and advance three arguments. First, that collaboration when viewed as a principled activity changes our understanding of collaborative processes and the way we might evaluate collaborative outcomes. Second, that dialogue operates as "ethical practice" and is woven through communication in collaboration that facilitates principles such as legitimacy, accountability, and shared power. Third, a principled lens of collaboration further develops the principled negotiation process, problematizing so-called objective criteria for decision making. This essay begins by attending to certain principles associated with collaboration processes. We review the experience of communication in collaboration as being oriented toward dialogue, interests, conflict, consensus, and solutions. Building on the ways in which communication is oriented to in collaboration, we use an empirical example to posit the importance of conceptualizing and evaluating collaboration as principled. By directing attention to principles as an important component of collaboration, scholars are positioned to recognize useful responses and the implications of those responses for collaborating.

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Water contamination, human trafficking, and addiction represent just a few interconnected societal problems that often necessitate interorganizational collaboration to generate solutions that go beyond what is possible at the individual organizational level (e.g., Foot, 2015; Morris, Gibson, Leavitt, & Jones, 2013). These problems

Corresponding author: Renee Guarriello; e-mail: Renee.Heath@unh.edu

illuminate inherent tensions of the human experience articulated in Hardin's (1968) essay the *Tragedy of the Commons*, including individual versus community rights, freedom versus governance, and their associated values of ownership, responsibility, and human rights. Hardin argued problems of the commons could not be solved by technical solutions because they "demanded little or nothing in the way of change in human values or ideas of morality" (p. 1243). Interorganizational collaboration is often at the crux of making decisions that impact and are impacted by these tensions and values. It is described as "a set of communicative processes in which individuals representing multiple organizations or stakeholders engage when working interdependently to address problems outside the spheres of individuals or organizations working in isolation" (Keyton, Ford, & Smith; 2008, p. 381). In this article, we focus on interorganizational collaborations that form to solve problems affecting the broader communities in which they take place (Heath & Frey, 2004). These collaborations are unique horizontal structures of problem solving, associated with particular communication processes and principles.

As structures, collaborations are voluntary or mandated, long-term or temporary efforts of stakeholder groups from two or more economic sectors that attempt to address complex problems of mutual societal concern (Lawrence, Hardy & Phillips, 2002; Walker & Stohl, 2012). They do so by advancing a particular vision, such as a program, project, or innovation; or settling a dispute such as access and ownership rights around a watershed (Gray & Purdy, 2014; Lange, 2003). Collaboration in these structures is also a problem-solving process that incorporates decision-making but includes other communicative activities such a joint exploration and explanation of the problem (Barge, 2002). Stakeholders participate to improve the conditions related to a shared problem domain (Gray, 1989) and do this by sharing power, resources, and responsibility for outcomes (Gray, 1989; Keyton et al., 2008; Lewis, 2006).

Theoretical models and literature reviews frequently conceptualize collaboration through a teleological lens where evaluation of success is tied to accomplishing the collaboration's goals, such as decreasing illicit drug use (e.g., Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Keyton et al. 2008; Lewis, 2006). Viewing collaboration with this "instrumental rationality" (Innes & Booher, 2010, p. 9), is important for understanding how, and if, this complicated structure is able to affect change regarding a specific problem domain. Viewing collaboration in this way also leads to a flawed assumption that "if the process is good, the outcome will also be good" (Keyton et al., 2008, p. 380). Keyton et al. (2008) loosely equated "good" to mean "effective" collaboration, and argued that effective is not well defined in the literature. In this article, we broaden the understanding of collaboration problematizing what is meant by a good outcome. We consider: *What if good is conceptualized in another way?* What do we learn if we understand interorganizational collaboration as moral or principled? We propose collaboration is a principled activity with associated processes and outcomes. This rethinking of collaboration is particularly relevant to collaborations making decisions that impact the public good, and *is* a noted thread in extant research. For example, Schuman (1996) argued:

In democratic systems, the means are the ends (. . .) The way in which collaboration is practiced, including the way that process and content are managed and integrated, *is a moral issue*, whether or not it is explicitly recognized as such by the participants. (p. 137, emphasis added)

Morris et al., (2013) posited, “collaboration is consistent with a broader set of communitarian values” (p. xxii), and Innes and Booher (2010) argued collaboration calls forth a moral approach to working with others different than yourself. These conceptions of collaboration move beyond equating good with effective, and advocate for understanding collaboration outside of an instrumental rationality.

We enlist Deetz’s (1992) conception of theory to lay the groundwork toward developing a communicative perspective of principled collaboration. Deetz claimed that theory directs our “attention,” “organizes our experience,” and “enables useful responses” (p. 74). He posited that instead of asking questions such as “what is communication or information,” we should ask, “what am I able to see think, or talk about if I conceive of them in this way rather than that” (p. 74). By directing our attention to principles as an important component of collaboration, scholars are positioned to identify useful responses and the implications of those responses for collaborating. We begin by attending to certain principles associated with collaboration processes—that decisions and decision-making processes should be legitimate, accountable to diverse stakeholders, and foster sharing power among stakeholders. Next, we review the experience of communication in collaboration as being oriented toward dialogue, interests, conflict, consensus, and solutions. Building on the ways in which communication is oriented in collaboration, we use an empirical example to posit the importance of conceptualizing and evaluating collaboration as principled. This exemplar assists us in advancing three arguments. First, that collaboration when viewed as a principled activity influences our understanding of collaborative processes and the way we might evaluate collaborative outcomes. Second, that dialogue operates as “ethical practice” (Stewart & Zediker, 2000, p. 229) and is woven through communication in collaboration that facilitates principles such as legitimacy, accountability, and shared power. And finally, this lens further develops the “principled negotiation process” (Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1992), problematizing so-called objective criteria for decision-making.

“Attending” to principles of collaboration

Commonly defined as honorable or moral (Dalio, 2018), principles are “higher than any one party’s goal” (Littlejohn & Domenici, 2007, p. 118) and can serve as rules and ethical guidelines (Wiley, 2019). In collaboration scholarship, several core principles emerge thematically: legitimacy of decisions and decision-making processes, accountability to diverse perspectives of stakeholders, and the sharing of power by stakeholder decision-makers (for extended discussion see

Heath & Isbell, 2017). We offer these as important, *though not exhaustive*, principles frequently associated with collaboration.

The first principle regards the legitimacy of collaborative decisions. The principle directs scholars to consider that decisions often have social and political consequences that have left some community members rightly skeptical of collaborating stakeholders' unelected power (Coggins, 2000; Lange, 2003; Milam & Heath, 2014). For example, water rights activists Barlow and Karunanathan (2015) accused a cross-sectoral collaboration on water policy as acting as a front-group to deflect pressure from other stakeholders and thus felt their decisions were illegitimate in part because their processes were not transparent and had been usurped by powerful industry interests. In another example, Lange (2003) noted the political impact of collaborative decisions could undermine precedent legislation, as in the case of the actions of well-meaning local environmental collaborations that undercut national environmental law. These concerns illuminate the larger context of legitimacy in which interorganizational collaborations make decisions and solve problems, effectively linking decision-making processes and practices, like transparency to decision outcomes (Habermas, 1984; Inness & Booher, 2010).

A second principle associated with collaboration is accountability to marginalized stakeholders. This principle is often linked to the diversity of perspectives held by stakeholder decision-makers (Inness & Booher, 2010). An instrumental understanding of diversity views collaboration as a mechanism to access resources and as an ingredient of innovation and creativity (Gray, 1989). However, studies of collaboration grounded in ethical theory, largely building on the work of Jürgen Habermas (1984), conceptualize diversity as that which facilitates more authentic outcomes by inviting contestation into the decision-making process and soliciting diverse perspectives (Deetz, 1992; Kuhn & Deetz, 2009; Inness & Booher, 2010). In this view, diversity fosters accountability to marginalized stakeholders and equity in decision-making (Inness & Booher, 2010).

Finally, sharing power (Gray, 1989; Lewis, 2006; Lewis, Isbell, & Koschmann, 2010) emerges as a mechanism that fosters an equal opportunity to participate and influence solutions among stakeholders (Keyton & Stallworth, 2003; Gray, 1989). Sharing power has long been established in the literature for instrumental reasons such as cultivating interdependence and motivation for participating. Sharing power also represents a principle of collaboration that allows for the participation of traditionally less powerful voices, nurturing greater equity among stakeholders (Foot, 2015; Heath & Isbell, 2017; Innes & Booher, 2010). As a principle, sharing power goes beyond inviting diverse stakeholders to participate and includes the processes that foster their participation—such as consensus decision-making and rotating leadership positions (Inness & Booher, 1999; 2010; Isbell, 2012; Keyton & Stallworth, 2003).

These three principles—legitimacy, accountability, and shared power—frame our theorizing of collaboration beyond an instrumental rationality (that need only focus on accomplishing the goals related to a problem domain). Building on these

principles, we now consider the way they are communicatively accomplished in collaboration.

“Organizing experience:” Communication orientations in collaboration

As part of a multi-year, iterative process of organizing interorganizational collaboration scholarship we identified five communication patterns often associated with collaborative problem-solving; that is communication is oriented toward dialogue, interests, conflict, consensus, and solutions (Heath & Isbell, 2017). These orientations represent the ways different goals of communication are foregrounded and backgrounded in collaborative problem-solving. Though they are briefly introduced next, we return to a fuller discussion of the intersections among them, and the ways they facilitate legitimacy, accountability, and shared power in the analysis that follows.

Dialogue

Communication in collaboration can be seen as oriented towards dialogue, where dialogue is about learning, understanding, and validating one another (Gray, 1989; Innes & Booher, 2010; Koschmann, 2016; Koschmann & Isbell, 2009). Kuhn and Deetz (2009) argued collaborating stakeholders must allow for reciprocity for expression, some equality in communication skills, and the setting aside of authority relations—all tenets of dialogue. Dialogue encompasses the importance of perspective-taking in conversation with others and allows us to “reunite individual interest with social responsibility” (Makau & Marty, 2013, p. 18) while also “engaging in a way that values the relationship as much as we do our convictions” (Makau & Marty, 2013, p. 64).

Barge and Little (2002) referred to a Bohmian view of dialogue as tied to a special form or quality of conversation, that enhances collective thinking, and is marked by particular practices. In collaboration literature, dialogue has been thought to facilitate collective understanding and thinking on a path toward decision-making and thus, conceivably stands alone as a particular way communication may be organized in a conversational episode (i.e., Bohm methods in Barge & Little, 2002) or prescriptively experienced, as in a dialogic moment (Cissna & Anderson, 1998). Barge and Little (2002) advocated instead for dialogue as a “relational practice that facilitates in people creating richly textured connections with one another through language” (p. 376). This Bakhtinian orientation views dialogue as a never-ending process, where conversational moves accomplish both divergent and convergent thinking among interactants depending on the situation. Most relevant to this article, a third way of conceptualizing dialogue— as “ethical practice,” integrates dialogue as prescriptive of a particular quality of conversation with a descriptive understanding of dialogue as relational (Stewart & Zediker, 2000). Stewart and Zediker conceptualize dialogue as *praxis*, in that it is situated; there are many ways to “do” dialogue, and it is “inherently ethical” calling forth moral judgment (p. 230). These authors see dialogue

as “oscillating, relational, fluid and emergent” (p. 231). Dialogue as ethical practice explains how dialogue merges with other collaborative communication orientations to arrive at principled solutions.

Communication as dialogue is productive rather than reproductive. According to Deetz and Simpson (2004), dialogue is destructive in that our singular, monologic understanding of the other is replaced with a new understanding that could not have been known prior to the dialogic situation. Rather than *reproducing* ideas, understandings, stereotypes, and conclusions known prior to dialogue, dialogue *produces*, generates, and invents fuller meaning together with the other. An orientation towards dialogue in collaboration emphasizes sincere, mutual inquiry that allows for the civility of granting another’s dignity (Makau & Marty, 2013). In dialogue, participants create a new understanding of a person or phenomenon. They do not replace their understanding with that of others—they integrate their understandings.

In conceptualizing dialogue, scholars are careful to differentiate between what they call having say and having voice (Deetz & Simpson, 2004). Having say is reproductive; it permits verbally sharing concepts and constructions already owned. It foregrounds expression as the most important outcome of communication. Marginalized perspectives are often silenced when people with dominant, hegemonic viewpoints have say (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012). For this reason, critical scholars have warned against rooting dialogue in the conception of common ground, arguing, “Dialogic models that favor a quest for common ground inherently favor the already-dominant position of institutional privilege” (Deetz & Simpson, 2004, p. 143). Alternatively, having voice has been conceptualized as moving beyond fixed understandings and experiences with the possibility to influence “discussions in collaborative decision-making situations” (Milam & Heath, 2014, p. 370). Thus voice as a dialogic concept accounts for the ways in which participants expand one another’s conceptions in conversation. Though dialogue may result in appreciation of the other’s perspective (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005), it does not ensure that participants will agree.

Interests

The second orientation highlights how communication in collaboration foregrounds stakeholders’ interests. Gray (1989) historically argued that identifying people’s interests, as well as our own unexplored interests is a powerful mechanism for collaborative problem-solving. Interest-oriented communication is distinguished from dialogue-oriented communication because collaborative participants may engage in communication that reveals interests but is not dialogic. For example, questioning is not always done dialogically (and conversely engaging in dialogue, such as storytelling, does not necessarily lead to interest-oriented communication). Separately, interest-oriented communication conceivably has different goals than dialogue as collaborating stakeholders may be focused on expressing their own interests outside of mutuality or understanding one another. Interest-focused communica-

tion is associated strongly with collaboration. Gray's early work on collaboration drew heavily on the groundbreaking work of principled negotiation (Fisher, et al., 1992), which Inness and Booher (2010) argued was "the most directly influential theory for collaborative dialogues in practice" (p. 28). A primary contribution of Fisher et al.'s model of principled negotiation (which defines "principled" as fair) is the emphasis it places on moving from position talk to interest talk. When foregrounded, it serves the instrumental purpose of moving communicators from fixed irreconcilable (individually expressed) positions to potentially (shared) overlapping interests.

Kuhn and Deetz (2009) argued collaborating stakeholders must be open to the investigation of positions. According to Fisher et al. (1992) we frame problems in the language of our own positions. Yet if we consider what we want from a particular problem-solving situation we would find our position—often our preferred solution—is driven by other interests. Fisher et al. (1992) argued position-based language and framing of the problem prematurely limit a fuller understanding of the problem, thus limiting options for resolution (see also Gray, 1989). Fisher et al. (1992) argued people also hold many interests at one time; therefore, people are more likely to find overlapping interests. In contrast, positions force stakeholders to take, often irreconcilable stances, one way or another. Stakeholders must be critically self-reflective in order to identify their own positions and underlying interests so they can authentically engage with their values and not their preferences (Makau & Marty, 2013). Interests and values are sometimes conceptualized as one in the same in group decision-making processes (Keeney, 1994; Jaakson, 2010). Communication oriented toward interests rather than positions facilitates other frames for understanding the problem.

Conflict

Communication in collaboration may also be oriented towards conflict (Brummans et al., 2008; Daniels & Walker, 2001; Lewis, et al., 2010), which Littlejohn and Domenici (2007) explained as being present when "people experience their differences as a problem that needs special action" (p. 4). Though conflict is the outcome of seemingly incompatible interests, it stands on its own as an orientation. Indeed, talk oriented toward interests may or may not result in disagreement or incompatibilities among stakeholders. Conflict most likely surfaces from the sharing of individual/organizational interests when collaborating groups are left with the tough choices of determining which, and whose, interests and values to serve. Thus conflict is visible at the juncture in which values and interests are negotiated and prioritized (Carcasson & Sprain, 2016). Communication orientated towards conflict foregrounds unearthing disagreements, eventually move collaborating stakeholders from individual perspectives to shared perspectives.

Conflict can be one of the primary impetuses for interorganizational collaborations seeking alternative dispute resolution (ADR) (Gray & Purdy, 2014). However,

even interorganizational groups that benevolently form to advance a vision will encounter conflicts of facts; history; and cultural, religious, or other values (Daniels & Walker, 2001). Brummans et al. (2008) argued conflict in collaboration often manifests around the frames that different stakeholders hold. Framing is the “communicative process through which people foreground and background certain aspects of experience and apply a set of categories and labels to develop ‘coherent stories of what is going on and make decisions about what should be done’ given the stories their frames have created” (p. 28). Frames are neither good nor bad; they can be examined for how they organize the way particular stakeholders think. Brummans et al. argue communication focused on mining stakeholders’ interests is one mechanism for expanding incompatible conflicting frames. A conflict orientation can be navigated by re-directing communication toward stakeholder interests, therefore, dispelling ideas of linearity in the way communication orientations unfold.

Consensus

Consensus is the decision-making process most often aligned with collaboration (Innes & Booher, 1999, 2010; Morris et al., 2013) constituting a fourth communication orientation, where other orientations work as background. Communication oriented towards consensus is different than communication oriented towards conflict because consensus is about the teleological activity of decision-making and communicating conflict may not always center around decision-making. Consensus as a process is not the same as agreement, or a consensus outcome (Haug, 2015). Haug (2015) refers to several types of communication behaviors associated with consensus processes as interactional consensus and reminds us consensus is “ultimately about creating a situation where opposition is absent” (p. 22). In other words, “Consensus decision-making (...) is not about expression of agreement with a particular option, but about the absence of expressions of disagreement” (Haug, 2015, p. 22).

Haug (2015) outlines four types of interactional consensus—imposed, acclaimed, basic, and deliberative. Imposed, acclaimed, and basic consensus are practiced in ways that do not explicitly invite discussion or disagreement. Though a consensus decision may be reached in the three interactional ways it is practiced, the first three types of consensus can discourage participation and also inhibit less powerful voices. Haug (2015) advocates for deliberative consensus as it “not only gives participants the opportunity to express dissent, but actively encourages that dissent is articulated in order to make sure that no one is silenced” (p. 28). The purpose of deliberative consensus is to openly invite concerns and objections to a proposal so that they can be integrated into a future consensus decision.

Solutions

The final patterned orientation of communication in interorganizational collaboration foregrounds solutions. It is teleological communication aimed at both generating

and deciding upon strategies and tactics that honor the goals of the group. Solution-oriented communication can take many forms such as brainstorming (Mackin, 2007) or Appreciative Inquiry (AI), which has its own visioning methodology (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Solution-oriented communication in collaboration not only generates solutions but also leads to further decision-making regarding those solutions (Mackin, 2007). Stakeholder groups may arrive at decisions through formal decision processes such as consensus, voting, or unilateral decision-making (Huxham & Vangen, 2005). Both voting and unilateral decision-making can potentially undermine legitimacy because of the potential to leave out/vote out minority viewpoints (Milam & Heath, 2014). Talking about solutions, and deciding on solutions, have historically been considered problematic in groups when such talk prematurely limits options or prevents participants from developing a fuller understanding of the problem (Fisher et al., 1992). For this reason, we view solution-oriented communication as inextricably linked with dialogue, interests, conflict, and consensus.

“Useful responses”

This article now complicates any linear presentation of the various ways communication is oriented in collaboration. A principled understanding of collaboration attends to the ways communication orientations weave together as “useful responses” (Deetz, 1992) that constitute legitimacy, accountability, and shared power.

Preschool: Right or privilege?

The case below presents a snapshot that illustrates the communication orientations of collaboration and establishes the centrality of dialogue in principled collaboration. The exemplar originates from a study of collaboration on early childhood care and education (ECE), arguably a context where several complex problems intersect including education, literacy, poverty, and hunger.¹ The collaboration was comprised of leaders from the private sector (i.e., childcare centers, business owners, and parents), public sector (i.e., schools and government offices such as the mayor’s office and housing department), as well as the non-profit sector (i.e., Headstart, foundation board members). This interorganizational collaboration had been established for 12 years, won many grants, distributed funds, collected data, and advised local leaders on policy related to early childhood education and care. Prior to this interaction, the public-school district did not charge for half-day preschool. Facing budget cuts, a sliding fee was proposed by the school board to continue the program. This prompted some members of the collaboration to argue the new policy worked against their goal to standardize preschool education as an essential part of the curriculum. The excerpt features Karen, a school board member with sanctioned authority over the decision; Annette, an influential representative of the mayor’s office; and Danielle, an executive of a private foundation that the collaboration depends on for tangible resources.

Karen took the floor to discuss a controversial new policy, which she had helped to craft and the school board was about to implement regarding preschool education. The district, suffering from budget cuts, sought to charge for the formerly free half-day preschool program. It has some limited funding to offer free preschool to selective schools and sought a fair way to do so. School board and city officials endured an uproar of protests from community members who believe this cut is unfair and that the methods for determining “need” appear capricious. Lynn, an administrator for the school district, explained limited resources would be distributed to “at-risk kids . . . with the greatest needs.”

The room went silent.

A city council member complained that her office had been bombarded with emails from families who claimed that although they live in a nice area of the city, they bought their houses years ago when housing prices were lower and they do not have the means to pay for preschool. The first fifteen minutes of conversation centered around a fair method for identifying families that would have the most need for scholarships. The focus shifted with Annette, a longtime collaboration member and a current employee of the city.

Annette protested, “I think it’s more than the proposed fee and whether or not that is a reasonable amount for preschool. I think it’s a time when we’re trying to establish early child education as a part of the public trust, along with K–12 education. To say that we’re going to charge is to say: ‘We know preschool’s important with public education but if you have money and you’re coming to [our] public schools, you have to pay for your preschools.’ (. . .) It’s partially the philosophical question to me and what we want to create as Metro Public Schools—we’ve been a cutting-edge city.”

Karen offered a justification that those with economic advantages should not expect to send their children to preschool for free. “You know part of my thinking, maybe it wasn’t good thinking, but part of my thinking (. . .) is that regardless of income, if there are slots available, you can send your kid, which means I can send my kid free to preschool. I don’t think that’s right. I think I should pay! I mean this is how I feel personally, but the intent was never to penalize those who couldn’t pay. So my thinking was (. . .) those who can pay, pay. Those who can’t pay, don’t pay.”

Annette responded, “It’s almost defeating the purpose to say to middle income families that ‘Metro Public School isn’t for you. We don’t offer the same programs that we offer if you’re a poor child.’”

Karen continued to defend her position from a budgetary stance, “Yeah, I’m sorry that didn’t make too much sense to me—remember, every other school district does charge.”

Annette countered, “But that doesn’t make it right and that doesn’t make it what we want to strive for.”

Karen responded, “Well it’s right if there’s no funding stream.”

The room went silent again.

After a pause, Karen seemed to back off her argument and proceeded to break the tension in the room with a joke about her differences with Annette. She invited others to weigh in, “We can debate it. We can debate it. I mean I’m open to being

convinced, although I don't know if the rest of the [school] board members are," she chuckled.

With the invitation to weigh in, Danielle, a stakeholder from a local foundation, spoke next. "You know it's a classic signal of bureaucracy that you can't do something because it's an administrative mechanism rather than what's right and good for the kids. My larger point is the signal this is sending to the community. In terms of higher Metro city leadership I do believe the image in the community is that, 'We're about K-12, and we do early childhood education when there's a little bit of money in the bank to do it, but that is not where our heart is, we do not fundamentally believe and understand what a powerful school reform ECE is. We do not fundamentally believe it is a powerful recruiting tool for middle- and upper-class families and therefore we don't invest in it. And we'll do what we can when we can, but if we don't, tough beans!' And that's the image that I've been getting for years. This is the wrong direction."

Karen asked Danielle, "So what would you recommend?"

Danielle answered, "I'm with Annette, leave it alone."

The short-term result of this interaction was that the district changed its policy to charge for preschool. However, the staunch advocacy for preschool education by the collaboration manifested in a line item for preschool and kindergarten on the next district bond. The district passed the bond, and school district officials credited the collaboration with having won the dollars for funding. Given that credit was publicly given to Metro Collaboration, a plausible interpretation is that the group's interaction seeded a win-win solution for the district and for preschool education in the long-run.

Rethinking collaborative communication from a principled perspective

We now connect this example to the ways each orientation of communication was enacted in concert with dialogue as ethical practice. The exemplar establishes the relationship between communication and principles of collaboration.

The exemplar resulted in the collective *production* (Deetz & Simpson, 2004) of a new way to understand the role of preschool in their community bringing accountability to families in the community. In this case, dialogue is visible as the discussion unfolds when Karen demonstrates vulnerability (Makau & Marty, 2013) by disclosing her family's financial situation, which formed her own viewpoints on paying for preschool. She grounds her perspective in her own personal experience, further demonstrating how dialogue in collaboration processes allows for expression of individual understandings of the problem. Yet, she also remains open to the "other" perspective being offered. She continues to listen and invite otherness into the conversation. The other's perspective represented by Annette provides an opportunity to destroy a singular understanding of preschool education through a purely economic frame. Annette introduces a marginalized perspective (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012) of viewing preschool as a right on par with K-12 education. A principled lens highlights the way dialogic

collaboration elicits diverse perspectives that can lead to equity and accountability in decision-making. Dialogue as both destructive and generative elucidates the potential for marginalized voices to contribute to fuller understandings of complex problems and to contribute to potential solutions (Dewey, 1927). Karen invites further dialogue with Annette and others. Though this exemplar did not capture the full integration of perspectives and the destruction of Karen's singular understanding of the problem, we know that the collaboration members agreed to endorse the perspective of preschool as a right and advocated for this perspective, which eventually influenced funding in the district. The integration of perspectives is visible in the outcome, and developed more fully next. In this case, communication oriented toward dialogue fostered knowledge of what is important to the other in conversation as well as built empathy for their perspective (Makau & Marty, 2013).

In light of interest-oriented communication, Karen's preferred solution—to provide discounts for preschool education for those who qualify—reveals her narrow definition of the problem as preschool affordability. According to Fisher et al., (1992), it is not uncommon for people to frame problems as the *absence* of their preferred solution—i.e., the problem is a lack of individual affordability. Her position, “we need to make preschool affordable to some families” does not address the significant underlying interest driving her fellow stakeholders' opposition. Instead, Annette and Danielle hold the position that preschool should be free to all families in the district because their bottom-line interest is not an economic one, but a philosophical one. Thus, their own preferred solution—free preschool to everyone—is a solution to their understanding of the problem as the absence of a fundamental right.

Karen invites participation from stakeholders several times after Annette first introduces the problem as philosophical. By doing so she allows interests to continue to surface and be developed. Danielle redefines the problem in terms of interests (though her delivery is ironic, calling for a read between the lines). She appeals to the underlying interests of the group, implying the characteristics of a cutting-edge city as: In their “heart” they “fundamentally believe and understand what a powerful school reform ECE is.” Additionally, they “fundamentally believe it is a powerful recruiting tool for middle- and upper-class families” and, therefore, cutting-edge cities would “invest in it.” Understanding problems as interests facilitates a greater number of options for solutions (Fisher et al., 1992). Framing in terms of interests potentially frees Karen from understanding the dilemma of preschool as simply a question of affordability, to one of being a cutting-edge school district that understands the power of preschool education. Focusing on interests frees her from narrowly conceptualizing the problem and, thus, relying on narrow solutions to address the problem. However, because Danielle expresses interests in an ironic, sarcastic presentation, her comment runs the risk of destroying the constructive environment that is unfolding. Karen recovers the moment. She demonstrates a respect for different perspectives and shares power in decision-making through

dialogic inquiry by asking, “what would you recommend,” which works to increase accountability.

Whereas interests may be viewed as a distinct focus that communication can take in collaboration, collaborative members can better identify interests when they engage in empathic, active listening. In doing so stakeholders can engage in the communication of others while not immediately disregarding a person based on a position (Makau & Marty, 2013), thus integrating dialogue with interest-oriented interaction. Surfacing interests alone is not a sufficient practice to foster the principles of collaboration. For example, one’s values and interests could be surfaced in communication for no other purpose than to give everyone their “say”—staying at the expression level rather than learning interests as a way to seek understanding (divergent dialogue) and/or find commonality or integration (convergent dialogue). For this reason, interest-oriented communication *that is also* integrated with dialogue, (which seeks to understand the other), constitutes greater legitimacy in outcomes. This is because the processes account for others’ perspectives, and include them in ways that foster sharing power by including those perspectives in the communication situation.

As predicted in the literature, the communication visibly oriented toward conflict when stakeholders began to negotiate and prioritize their shared values (Carcasson & Sprain, 2016). Before the ECE collaboration can design policy on preschool education, they need to determine their decision criteria (Fisher et al., 1992). From a collaboration as principled perspective, there are no objective standards for making decisions because so-called objective standards tend to privilege dominant perspectives and perpetuate hegemony (Deetz & Simpson, 2004; Ganesh & Zoller, 2012). In this case, an economic understanding of the problem continues to leave those with economic disadvantages at the mercy of a “benevolent” yet capricious system rather than be institutionally *entitled* to preschool education. With care to principles, the interests and values that are prioritized by stakeholders can become the “objective” criteria that guide the group’s decision-making, thus building in accountability to marginalized groups if decision-making honors diversity and sharing power in the process. We further develop this claim.

The dispute between Karen and Annette looms largely around their conflicting frames for understanding the problem. Karen views preschool education from her organization’s historical knowledge that families pay for prekindergarten schooling. She wants the privilege of preschool education to be available to all families, so she proposes that those who cannot afford it should not have to pay while those with means should pay. Annette, on the other hand, is not disputing the price families should have to pay for preschool. Rather, she is disputing the fundamental assumption that preschool is less important than K–12 education. She is disputing the philosophy that early education is a privilege. She instead views it as a right—as part of the “public trust,” which may well be explained by her position in the mayor’s office as a guardian of public interests. Therefore, she argues charging anyone for preschool is a step backward in legitimizing preschool. The exemplar makes visible

how dialogue and interest-oriented talk can help stakeholders create more consistent frames among the group.

Conflict scholars [Daniels and Walker \(2001\)](#) contended, “Constructive argument can be critical to a collaborative processes success” positing key features: valuing and respecting disagreement; a desire to learn; a willingness to risk; open-mindedness; distinguishing between arguers and arguments; a positive regard for the other; and ethical responsibility (p. 142). Similarly, [Milam and Heath \(2014\)](#) identified gracious contestation as important to collaboration, whereby grace invokes goodwill, elegance, and mercy (forgiveness) (see also [Makau & Marty, 2013](#)). These communication practices encourage stakeholders to be “reasonable” with others in order to incorporate emotions, facts, values, and logic with contestation ([Makau & Marty, 2013](#), p. 193). Orienting toward conflict as a principled activity is as much a process of constructive argumentation as it is an attitude about communication that appreciates constructive conflict as normative in collaboration ([Daniels & Walker, 2001](#); [Milam & Heath, 2014](#)). The integration of constructive argument in the vision of [Daniels and Walker \(2001\)](#) is visible when Annette and Danielle altered the conflict frame by convincing stakeholders to see preschool as a right on par with K–12 public school education. Karen illustrates graciousness when she invites others to weigh in on the decision the school board proposes to make regarding charging for preschool. Though they did not always agree, Karen is humble, admitting her thinking might have been flawed. She uses humor to relieve the tense moment without discrediting her primary challenger, Annette. Gracious contestation, modeled by Karen, facilitates respectful and openly transparent disagreement integrating conflict, interests, and dialogue.

One could imagine Karen’s view of affordability could have easily been construed as *the* public good, which would have constrained a fuller understanding of the other stakeholders’ arguments. As mentioned earlier, collaboration can be usurped by a few voices, masked as representing all voices. The collaborative form in and of itself can be seen as a normative environment. If members are not deliberative in the consensus process, it can be co-opted to state a certain stakeholder’s views as *the* public good, thus limiting the ability of dissenting or minority opinions to find voice in the decision-making process because that voice can then be construed as working against the public good ([Ganesh & Zoller, 2012](#)). [Ganesh and Zoller \(2012\)](#) call for a conceptualization of consensus as that which welcomes disagreement, and decision-making as secondary to integration of all voices. The consensus process manifests as an agonistic approach to dialogue that encourages conflict as elemental to social change ([Ganesh & Zoller, 2012](#)). An agonistic theory allows for authority to be challenged, multiple voices to be heard, and for refuting how the dominate culture may define common ground as a legitimization tactic reifying the privileged voice ([Ganesh & Zoller, 2012](#); [Woods, 2004](#)). With a communication orientation towards consensus from an agonistic perspective, consensus becomes a dialogic process of openness towards others, rather than common ground with others. In this case, the

interaction depicts deliberative consensus when Karen does not hold her position as the only option. She openly invites dissent, saying: “We can debate it. We can debate it. I mean I’m open to being convinced (. . .)” Despite her position as a decision-maker on the school board, she draws out the other dissenter (Haug, 2015). By inviting agonisms into the deliberative process, consensus pushed beyond common ground, (i.e., preschool should be affordable). The consensus *process* fostered the divergent perspectives of Annette and Danielle, that ultimately challenged hegemonic thinking about preschool as a privilege. The eliciting of, and granting credence to, the challenge strengthened the legitimacy of the solution.

The solution of paying for preschool in the first year was acceptable because Annette and Danielle’s interests are later integrated with Karen’s to foster the shared value of making preschool a right for all students in the district. Karen’s value of wanting to be economically fair for families who cannot afford preschool, is integrated, not diametrically opposed to Annette and Danielle’s value of preschool as fundamental to education. The exemplar demonstrates how a temporary solution of a sliding fee scale was not viewed as a compromise (lose–lose) because the larger goal of establishing ECE in the public trust (honoring the group’s shared values) was accomplished at a later date through the bond. Consensus on stakeholders’ collective values and interests was encapsulated in the collective identity and authoritative text of being a “cutting edge school district.” Koschmann (2013) argued the process of communicatively moving from individual interests to shared interests and values happens when collaborative groups form a collective identity expressed in authoritative texts (such as value statements, identity statements, or missions). These texts influence the constraints and possibilities of “inventing options toward solutions” (Fisher et al., 1992). Their collective identity integrated the values and interests of affordability *and* expanding preschool as a right that serve as the decision criteria moving forward (Fisher et al.). This does not mean that everyone now holds the same values and interests, but that the group respects including the values and interests of each other as important as they work toward making decisions together. Communication associated with collaborative problem-solving was grounded in a dialogic ethical practice (Stewart & Zediker, 2000) that constituted a legitimate decision because it accounted for diverse others who are both affected and marginalized, and because it was arrived at by fostering shared power by allowing for multiple voices to influence the decision.

The interaction demonstrates the interweaving of dialogue, interests, and agonistic, deliberative consensus that challenged the dominant perspective of preschool as a privilege. From a principled stance, the various orientations of collaborative communication grounded in dialogue cultivated public accountability and legitimate decision-making because they facilitated understanding the experience of marginalized children and families. The various ways communication was oriented fostered sharing power among stakeholders, further lending credibility to the solution.

Discussion and conclusion

This article drew on [Deetz' \(1992\)](#) framework of theory as a way of directing attention, organizing experiences, and identifying useful responses. Accordingly, we proposed directing attention to collaboration as a principled activity. In doing so, we organized collaborative experience around specific principles of legitimacy, accountability, and shared power. We also established how collaboration manifests in specific communicative patterns of dialogue, interest-talk, conflict, consensus, and solutions. Building on these principles and communicative experiences, we introduced an exemplar that identified a “useful response” regarding how communication can be oriented to foster outcomes that are legitimate, accountable, and equitable.

Viewing collaboration as principled has several implications for theorizing communication in this type of interorganizational structure. First, collaboration as a principled activity makes visible the relationships between processes and outcomes. When collaboration is viewed as principled, “good” communication includes particular practices and processes that are associated with the legitimacy of outcomes. Second, we further complicate and develop the relationship between collaborating and dialogue. [Keyton, et al. \(2008\)](#) argued communication in collaboration is far too often conceptualized as “merely a component of it” rather than the “essence of collaboration” (p. 379). Our article advances this thinking relevant to dialogue and principled collaboration, where dialogue is not a component of principled collaboration but comprises the primary architecture of communication in principled collaboration. Finally, we advance a moral, rather than instrumental understanding of principled negotiation.

First, by advocating for a different lens in which to understand collaboration, we move away from teleological understandings of “effective” collaboration, and consider the importance of collaboration and collaborating in terms of legitimacy, accountability, and power. This lens does not replace the importance of viewing collaboration as effective, but provides an alternative way to understand the impact of the decisions collaborating stakeholders make. A principled lens presents a stronger case for seeing the relationships between processes and outcomes. For example, it is not clear how we would measure the effectiveness of decision made by the collaborating stakeholders in the exemplar, but we can see their communicative processes and practices were connected to their solution to fund preschool education as a part of the public trust. Their ultimate solution took into account the perspective of marginalized stakeholders adding to the legitimacy of the decision. This expands the criteria used to evaluate collaboration and provides richer explanations for why stakeholders make the decisions they do. Consider examining the exemplar absent a principled lens. We might view the decision of the stakeholders to be inefficient because they did not just implement a sliding fee scale, but instead went on to write a bond initiative that required further advocating, time, and resources. The principled lens provides greater explanatory power for theorizing and understanding collaboration that must navigate the dilemmas of the commons ([Hardins, 1968](#)). This

lens leads to future research on how collaboration as principled illuminates possibilities or constraints for processes, stakeholders, and the communities they impact.

A second contribution of this article, establishes dialogue as the “essence” (Keyton et al., 2008, p. 379) of *principled* collaboration. This article very specifically bridges dialogue and collaboration literatures. Influential scholarship has presented communication processes and practices in such a manner where each orientation could be conceived as a distinct episode, such as Isaacs’ (1999) conception of dialogue as thinking together, or the organization of “dialogues” as a noun (Gray, 1989; see Barge & Little, 2002 for discussion). Similarly, consensus processes have been studied and theorized about as distinct communication processes disconnected from dialogue or interests (e.g., Sager & Gastil, 2006). With a principled lens it is difficult to conceive, stakeholders constructively working through collaborative problem-solving without acknowledging dialogue’s central role. For example, conflict can manifest in collaboration as communication that does not serve to open discussions but rather to shut them down (Deetz, 1992). Conflict grounded in dialogue, instead, surfaces important and sometimes marginalized positions and frames as depicted in the exemplar. The same is true for consensus, which can shallowly be understood as a focus on agreement but can achieve accountability by being dialogic.

Dialogue is integral to communication associated with principled collaboration, where dialogue is both a “conversational episode,” that may take place as an organizational activity, as well as an ethical (Stewart & Zediker, 2000) relational practice (Barge & Little, 2002, p. 378) that informs communication praxis in collaborative problem-solving. This claim goes beyond previous interpretive literature on dialogue and collaboration that identified dialogic episodes (i.e., Heath, 2007) and responds to Barge and Little’s (2002) call for “research into the kinds of communicative practices that support the development of [dialogic] sensibilities in conversation” (p. 395). The development of dialogue in collaboration also goes beyond the work of collaboration planning scholars, Innes and Booher (2010), who argued dialogue, diversity, and agonisms are important components of collaboration. By explicating dialogue from a communication perspective at the *interaction level* and connecting that interaction to *particular* principles of collaboration, our work both deepens understandings of concepts important to Innes and Booher (2010) and explains *how* communicative practices oriented toward particular goals serve principled purposes.

Finally, our work advances a moral understanding of Fisher et al.’s (1992) principled negotiation theory. They conceptualized principled as “fair” (p. xviii) and argued decisions should be measured against objective criteria. Critical dialogue scholars direct consideration to the ways objective criteria may be systematically distorted with power that obscure the interests of marginalized stakeholders (Deetz, 1992; Ganesh & Zoller, 2012). Karen’s proposal to charge for preschool on a sliding scale could be viewed as fair, and the economic outcome of a sliding scale could also appear to be objective. Yet, a sliding fee scale falls short of ensuring long-term access to preschool to marginalized families who cannot afford it. With a collaboration

as principled lens the so-called objective criteria used to measure the worthiness of decisions, are not independent of the stakeholders (Fisher et al, 1992). Decision criteria should flow from a deliberative consensus process around stakeholders' collective values and interests that precedes consequential decision-making. In this way, the values and interests of stakeholders become morally accountable criteria that drive decision-making. Because decisions are arrived at through a dialogic consensus, the criteria are better positioned to account for equity and marginalization, highlighting the importance of including diverse perspectives in the process. These considerations go beyond principled negotiation by purporting decisions that flow from a dialogic practice in collaboration are more likely to be thought legitimate and accountable.

By including principles as an important component of collaboration we broaden our understanding of communication in collaboration and the implications of its practices. This essay, and the challenges it provokes, begin to move us toward a perspective of principled collaboration where collaboration is the composition of its processes and the ways in which they are practiced.

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Note

1. The case did not drive our claims, but is provided as an exemplar (Van Maanen, 1988).

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