

wanted a format that would ease the conversation – so that it is comfortable, allows for truth and opinion equally, keeps the door open to allow new insights to emerge, and preserves the individual voice of each partner. *Essays in Two Voices* offers a template for conducting such a conversation. It is a process that acts as a simple container that supports individual thinking, allows for another's 'voice' to be heard in its entirety, while encouraging focus to the question at hand.

So, if you are interested in having a conversation that allows each party to express themselves knowing that their every word is read and taken into account; that offers simple restraints that focus the conversation, keeping it on topic; and that gives both conversationalists stylistic freedom, use *Essays in Two Voices*.

All about Essays in Two Voices

When we got around to actually defining the idea more formally, here is what we said about *Essays in Two Voices*

Wikipedia quotes Aldous Huxley: "By tradition, almost by definition, the essay is a short piece, and it is therefore impossible to give all things full play within the limits of a single essay. But a collection of essays can cover almost as much ground, and cover it almost as thoroughly, as can a long novel. Montaigne's Third Book is the equivalent, very nearly, of a good slice of the *Comédie Humaine*. Essays belong to a literary species whose extreme variability can be studied most effectively within a three-poled frame of reference. There is the pole of the personal and the autobiographical; there is the pole of the objective, the factual, the concrete-particular; and there is the pole of the abstract-universal."

So the essay as a literary device is one part of this and holding those three poles in mind will be one of the conditions we set ourselves. We also thought that we would always try to begin with a question that is clear and miniature, so perhaps see ourselves as miniaturists as well, in an attempt to get a grip on some pretty slippery and elusive subjects.

Then writing or inventing in pairs is very common - Gilbert & Sullivan, Flanders & Swann, especially where one is words and one is music (which will be interesting as we unfold our work

together). Then again, the exchange of letters is a common device in the 19th century. In Germany there are 2 signatures (*vier Augen*, four eyes) at the bottom of business letters. Two heads are better than one. And in education, the idea of peer letter exchange (writing, learning, responding) seems to be quite familiar. And there's a little nod here to the idea of marginalia, permission to scribble in the margins each of what the other has written, without disturbing its private essence.

In another version of the definition, Victoria added something that didn't make it into the final description. She said, "Of course, sitting in France as I am ... I should point out the French for 'to try' is *essayer*." I'm sorry that didn't make it into the original piece.

The next big breakthrough came when I introduced the idea to Leif Josefsson. One should never introduce a new idea to Leif unless you are prepared to move on it immediately. And that is just what we did. Leif and I spent three days playing with Essays in Two Voices (and some other ideas, too) and produced one on essays in two voices itself. But Leif suggested we make a change to it. Instead of stopping at 250 words each, we continue to halve the number of words until we were down to 30 words or very close to 140 characters (that magical number of a Tweet). Suddenly there was a new understanding in the room. This vehicle has enormous power to concentrate thinking, to expand understanding, to bring two minds into a sense of shared experience even over long distances. In the final few words, the essence of each piece becomes almost poetry.

We learned a great deal about this approach and realized that a few more guidelines were necessary. The most important one for us was that you don't share what you are writing at each stage until that stage is done. Moreover, neither do you talk about it with each other. We discovered this the hard way. In between the 250 and 125 words on one of our essays, Leif and I had lunch together and began talking about our thoughts on the subject. When we returned to our writing, we found that we were writing the same things. Whoops! If you want to keep the writing rich with possibilities, then you have to 'converse' in writing. So, a great insight about the power of the process came from doing it and discovering it retains its power by not talking in between steps (about the question, that is!)

Basic Rules and Guidelines

- Establish the question on which the authors will write. Decide on the topic that feels specific enough for each partner to start writing. The question is directive so that the 500 words can be a sufficient container. The question needs to be clear to both writers - even if they interpret it differently.
- Establish a ground rule or agreement around being non judgmental. "What you want to write is the right thing to write!"
- The writing is done in 5 to 6 rounds: Each author writes 500 words on the question as the first round. In the second round, each writes 250 words of response to their partner's 500 words. The rounds are repeated by roughly halving the number of words so that there are 125-word, 60-word, 30-word rounds with a final 140-character statement.
- Do not share the result from each round until both have finished. Thus, moving on to the next round can't happen until you have seen the previous section from your partner.
- About working together: Feel free to share appreciative comments about the contributions. But do not discuss between each step if you sit together.
- When finished, the essay is presented in two-column format to allow for each section (round) to be presented in parallel.

Essays in Two Voices was now tested and ready for letting the world know about it. And so, this book was born – a way to convey the ideas in a manner that would open it to others while honoring the three creators of Essays in Two Voices, – Victoria Ward, Leif Josefsson, and myself.

For the curious, we have included two actual Essays in Two Voices (see *Exploring the potential of E2V*) along with a series of questions you might consider as you read them. We hope you'll read them and consider the questions. Understanding how to do an Essay in Two Voices seems simple. Understanding its potential takes a bit more thought. To help you see the potential, here are some ideas we see.

When might an Essay in Two Voices be useful

When I asked friends who had tried the process with me, “So, when do you think using E2V could be useful?”, they offered more reasons than I could have imagined. Here are some of their ideas.

When you want to open possibilities

Whether you are designing something or exploring options, essays in two voices can help to open possibilities.

- Preparing a workshop or lecture
- Imagining the goals and ambitions of a joint project
- Imagining what to do next as you are coming up to the end of a joint project
- Solving problems
- Understanding what the problems are
- Exploring vacation possibilities
- Promoting ideas to enhance productivity in an organization
- Entering a Dispute and Conflict Management session
- In prisons - better than Nonviolent Communication
- Proactively stimulating creativity
- Students exploring a lesson topic

When you want to rebuild or strengthen relationships

Relationships are built around communication. When a gap has opened up, an essay in two voices is a gentle way to begin filling it in.

- Revitalizing marriages and other relationships
- Refreshing a partnership
- Revitalizing friendships
- As part of a program teaching relational leadership, marriage and other skills.

When you want to build community

Communities depend on links of trust to give them cohesiveness and strength. Essays in two voices can build trust through greater understanding. This is particularly important when the community has weakened or strained links - or links that have yet to be formed.

- Helping communities come together (done in stages)
- Building congregational cohesiveness

When the partners in the conversation are of unequal power

Nothing seems to get in the way of communication and deep conversation than when people feel they are not at the same level -- of competence, of power, of rank, or whatever makes one feel less than the other person. (And yes, those who feel they are on the 'more' side can impede communication as well by making their own assumptions about the other person and talking 'down' to them.) Essays in two voices begins with a level playing field. It requires an appreciative attitude about the other person. Consider how differently two people can communicate under these simple rules when you are talking about:

- Performance evaluations
- Mentor/mentee communication
- Parent/child conversation starters
- Bullying program adjuncts
- Handovers from the master to the apprentice

When you want to appreciate different perspectives

Seeing the world from different perspectives creates a richer environment for everyone. Imagine the value of exploring precisely those different perspectives in a manner that honors them from the start.

- Exploring perspectives across existing differences in age, gender, race, culture, faith tradition.
- Exploring perspectives in response to a cultural experience (Can you imagine a group of 10 year olds seeing an art exhibit the same way?) by writing essays in two voices in pairs on what it meant to each.