

Practical Effects Of The New Conversation

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A Just Radio production first broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in 2011.

Introduction

Olivia O'Leary follows historian and philosopher Theodore Zeldin as he tries to change the way people talk to each other. He wants to make the world a better place - starting with the London Borough of Lewisham.

Prof Zeldin believes there are substantial social benefits to be gained from encouraging people to strip away social conventions and talk about things which go beyond gossip, argument and chit chat. He wants people to talk about who they really are, and what they want from life. He calls it 'new conversation.'

Guests at his 'conversation dinners' spend several hours talking to just one other person. They are required to follow a menu of conversational gambits such as: When have you felt isolated and what do you do about it? What would make the world a better place and how could you make that happen?

Olivia follows Prof Zeldin as he introduces his 'new conversation' to a wide range of people including former MPs, Pilates teachers, furniture store staff and unemployed teenagers. She asks why such people would want to be told how to talk to each other by an elderly Oxford academic.

Prof Zeldin's ambitious plan is to turn the borough of Lewisham into a place where the entire quarter of a million inhabitants can get to know each other. He argues that his approach will break down isolation and alienation, and even create more satisfying jobs.

But Prof Zeldin's efforts to sweep all along with him on his adventure hit a barrier when conversation dinner guests accuse him of staging a glorified version of Blind Date. And he meets resistance elsewhere from community groups who refuse to talk to people from other parts of the borough.

But with the support of the local council, Prof Zeldin pushes on; staging a mass conversation dinner in a park, and even hatching a scheme to enable local GPs to get to know their patients better. It's an uphill struggle, but Prof Zeldin is not a man to give up easily.

Main Speakers

O = Olivia O'Leary

T = Theodore Zeldin

A Mayfair Dinner Party

P = Philip Mould

A = Peter Ainsworth

L = Lily Pollock

O

It is a Mayfair dinner party, with a twist. Antiques Roadshow expert Philip Mould has asked 30 friends along to his art gallery to act as guinea pigs for Oxford Professor Theodore Zeldin.

P

Ladies and gentlemen. It is a huge pleasure to have you all here this evening. It's an evening to have fun with. You will know why shortly, when I ask Theodore Zeldin, a man who speaks from a mountain with compassion, good sense - and, also just look at him. Isn't it extraordinary how a face suggests a man. A combination I think, between Bertrand Russell and Einstein, or at least he uses the same shampoo.

I would be very grateful if you could just play this small social experiment with us. Ladies and gentlemen I would like to introduce Theodore Zeldin.

T

Thank you very much. The purpose of this is to invite you to participate in an adventure. A great adventure for me is to discover who inhabits the world as individuals. So, this dinner is part of that adventure. You are going to be invited to speak to just one person in this dinner. You will be given a menu of conversation. This menu invites you to talk about subjects which are of importance, and to induce you to avoid gossip and all the things that you normally talk about.

It is not just to entertain you for an evening, because I think it is the beginning of a movement, as important as the building of the railways or natural science or anything else, that people should learn to understand each other. I wish you luck and bon appétit.

O

The dinner guests can choose from a menu of about 20 conversations starters, such as: 'when have you felt isolated, and what do you do about it?', 'what would make the world a better place and how could you help that?' questions which explore what life is for.

After about an hour, former Tory MP Peter Ainsworth and Pilates teacher Lily Pollock, slip out for a quick break.

L

We've got to 'what have you rebelled against in the past and what are you rebelling against now?' and we're just about to go into 'what most delights each of your five senses and what sensations do you avoid?'

A

Actually, it is rather extraordinary because we've never met each other, but now it almost feels like we're kind of friends. Am I allowed to say that?

L

We are - yes! Yes, definitely.

A

And, because of this process actually, we'll definitely - I hope - see each other again a lot because, we've connected.

O

After 3 hours of lively and increasingly noisy conversation the guests give their verdict on it all.

?: What is wonderful is I like a bit of structure I realise in a conversation, because it forced us to go into areas that maybe we wouldn't have done otherwise.

Emma: We had tears within the first few minutes..

?: We did. We had tears. I was of course hugging away in my usual fashion. Then we got to senses and Emma told me one of the senses she doesn't like is physical touch!

< laughter >

?: And, at that stage, I'd basically been hugging her for the last half an hour!

O

At the end of the evening Theodore Zeldin reveals his ambitious plan to introduce new conversation to the entire population of the London borough of Lewisham.

T

We're trying to start an experiment in south of London where people are very closed in and don't know more than a very small number of people. And they cannot get in life because they have no connections. One has got to talk to such people, and prove to them that they are interesting, important people. And, that is why I would love it, if some of you who found this worthwhile, would be willing to collaborate with us and talk to people you have never met, who will show you sides of life you've never imagined.

O

We'll be following Professor Zeldin as he tries to introduce his new conversation idea in multi-ethnic Lewisham. He thinks that by changing the way people talk to each other he can help to address their problems of social isolation and alienation. He even thinks, as we'll see later, that it could help to create a new, more satisfying kind of job. Is he being hopelessly ambitious? Will people resent a 78 year old Oxford Professor telling them how to talk? It seems there's always someone telling us that standards of conversation are declining. At the moment, the finger of blame is pointed firmly at modern communication technology.

The Art Of Conversation

Elapsed time: 5:08

D = Dave Palmer

G = Guy Cook

Are text messages, mobile phones and emails killing off the art of conversation? Well that's the suggestion from a report by British Gas's telecoms division, it's author is Dave Palmer.

(see: <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/conversation-killer-7284194.html>)

D

46% of our survey actually admitted to sending texts in order to avoid wasting time in a conversation. That probably is one of the most worrying figures that came out through the survey.

O

Professor Guy Cook works for the Open University Centre for Language and Communication. For years, he and his colleagues have been studying all the different ways that we use language. Professor Cook says that there's no real evidence to support the suggestion that we converse less, or less well, than we used to. And, he's very keen to defend what Professor Zeldin calls 'chitchat'.

G

The majority of human talk, face-to-face talk, is taken up by things which can be dismissed as trivia. Human beings spend a lot of time in what we might call 'chitchat' or gossip. They repeat things, they grumble, they argue with each other, and we know that lovers are supposed to exchange sweet-nothings and so on and so forth. But, these uses of language perform a very important social function for human beings. And, for that reason, I find it slightly disturbing when people seem to disparage the important function of casual talk in human society.

O

So, is Professor Zeldin barking up the wrong tree? What's wrong with the way we talk to one another?

T

In the past we engaged in conversation which showed that we acknowledged our place in the social order. In academia, in business, we argue and that is considered to be conversation, and somebody has to win. We follow the rules of etiquette, we say the right things at the right time, and that is conversation in the old way.

The new conversation as I conceive it, is one where we are trying to put ourselves in the skin of another person. And see why they think the way they do, who they really are, and likewise enable them to discover who one is, and this is a process of mutual discovery, and when we do that we establish trust.

O

What about the chitchat? You've had a long hard day in the office, you're meeting your pals in the pub for a drink. There's this lovely burble of friendship and being together, it's not too demanding but it's terribly reassuring. What's wrong with that?

T

Oh no you can do it. I don't mind if you do it. The kind of conversations I'm talking about are things that you have rarely, they are fortifiers which we don't do everyday. We listen to the birds, they're clicking away and making their little noises, but their song comes only occasionally.

New Conversations in IKEA

Elapsed time: 7:52

J = Jan

O

Theodore Zeldin believes that serious, honest, one-to-one conversations can change what we thought was unchangeable. And, he has been trying out his ideas in all sorts of places. In Leeds, he's organised conversations between police and community leaders. In London, between Armenians and Turks, divided by the bloodiest of histories. In Paris, between wealthy professionals and people from the poor suburbs.

In 2009 he worked with the Swedish furniture giant IKEA, staging conversations in which the shops' staff in Wales revealed the things that they really wanted to do with their lives.

< a member of staff reading a story to children >

O

This led to an experiment where staff, instead of being silent cogs in a wheel, were allowed to be their full interesting selves; to talk to customers and to share their interests, such as gardening or music; or in the case of Jan - children.

Jan's storytelling was recorded by Poppy Sebag-Montefiore for a film about Professor Zeldin's IKEA project.

T: I have particularly enjoyed listening to you doing that.

J: Really. I enjoy it, actually. I love the children.

T: How does this fit in with your work in IKEA?

J: Very well actually.

T: People realise that you are a human-being not just a machine for selling.

J: That's right. The more people talk, the more things will change, and change hopefully for the better.

The Oxford Muse

Elapsed time: 9:19

O

Since 2001, the nerve centre of Professor Zeldin's conversation operation has been the Oxford Muse foundation based at the University of Oxford. Which, among other things, organises regular 'Conversation Dinners' as he calls them, for students, staff and other local people.

Simon is a third year physics student and is attending a conversation dinner for the first time. You might think that University life would be a hot-bed of conversation, but Simon says that he's surprised at how few opportunities he has at University to meet different people, to talk about different things; real things.

Simon: So far I have questioned my motivations in life and my attitudes towards relationships. Things that I wouldn't normally talk about with my friends back home. We might talk about the Dark Ages or whether a lizard could swallow an egg whole, but not those sort of things.

New Conversations in Lewisham

Elapsed time: 10:21

S = Caroline Shovlin

K = Kevin Sheehan

J = John Reed

O

Professor Zeldin's latest project and perhaps his most ambitious so far is to introduce new conversation to the London borough of Lewisham. There are many different isolated communities in the borough and he wants to find a way of generating conversations between rich and poor, young and old; and between the many different ethnic groups.

He calls the project the Lewisham Muse, and he is launching it at the borough's prestigious Horniman museum, with a conversation dinner to which community leaders and local representatives have been invited.

T

My idea is that we should have communities of difference. The tendency at the moment is to try and find your soul mate. I think that is a disaster because it just doubles your own imperfections. But, learning how to deal with people who are different, is to accept the fact that everybody is different. You can be more than what you are if you absorb something from them. And, the way to do this is by having conversations, which really challenge you and make you think about what is important to your life, and which open new directions in your life.

O

At the end of the dinner, Professor Zeldin asks people there to help him and his team setup similar conversations, which might bring together different and isolated sections of their own communities. First to volunteer is Catherine Shovlin who runs the Bold Vision community group in the Telegraph Hill district of the borough. It seems a perfect match.

S

Our key objective is tackling the social divide on Telegraph Hill. There's houses that are split up and there might be a refugee family, there might be an old lady who knows nobody, there might be struggling students and there is not enough connection between those groups. The nice thing about this is that you have a meaningful interaction with a total stranger.

O

Concerned about the innate problems of isolation in inner city areas Lewisham borough council is actively supporting Professor Zeldin's initiative. Kevin Sheehan who took part in the Horniman dinner is the council's head of strategy and he's very taken with Professor Zeldin's ideas.

K

What it made me think was, it was something that could complement some of the other things that we were doing. And, because we recognise that in the 21st century the state can't do everything, and a lot of the richness in people's lives comes from those people who they live amongst. So, part of what we're doing as a council is trying to encourage more of that.

New Conversations at Hill Station Cafe

Elapsed time: 13:04

C = Cedric

J = John Reed

S = Caroline Shovlin

O

So, it was with high hopes that the first Lewisham Muse conversation was held at the Hill Station Cafe in Telegraph Hill, with community leader Catherine Shovlin acting as host.

S

Most people who are here tonight don't know each other, and they all belong to communities and know other people. So, by making a few bridges tonight maybe we start to make bigger bridges.

O

About two dozen people have turned up. John Reed who works with Professor Zeldin will be the one organising the Lewisham Muse project.

J

This is a menu of conversation. It contains 25 topics of conversation about life. The idea is to find someone you do not know, and sit with them for a while, an hour and a half with one person, and working your way through this menu of conversation. It's been described by the Evening Standard as the anti-Twitter dinner date.

O

But suddenly, there's a problem. Several people express confusion and scepticism about the whole premise of the evening, among them Cedric.

C

I thought it would be a group discussion rather than some sort of imaginary blind date. I don't mind using the 25 topics, but as a group discussion that's impacted on this community or this area.

J: Well shall we just give it a go?

C: What give your theory a go? Is that what you're saying?

J: If you really don't like it...

C: John, are you saying shall we give your theory a go?

J: It's not such a theory.. it's just a method.

C: Your method. Are you saying we should give your method a go?

J: Erm yeah.

O

So the conversation gets underway, with some people taking part well.. a bit reluctantly. John Reed steps outside to reflect on what has happened.

J

Well essentially we had 2 people who were apparently sceptical about the idea. Somewhat confused about what the idea was. Also, somewhat, I think, challenged and possibly slightly fearful of the idea of actually sitting with a stranger, and talking about life with some topics. And, in a way that's a test of the idea, if at the end of an hour and half talking to a stranger with the menu they can feel comfortable with the idea, and feel that it's something they want to participate in in the future, yeah that would be a successful outcome.

O

By the end of the dinner though, everybody was feeling very positive about the whole exercise, even Cedric.

C

Throughout our conversation, I didn't tell you what I did, I didn't need to say that, and you just talked about what you're interested in. It was a fascinating conversation. We spoke for quite awhile without this aid, and then we realised, oh let's look at this thing. Then we used it as a way of sort of going to another level. It was very useful.

O

Cedric and others agree to hold further conversations and to try to draw in more people from around the locality. Encouraged, John Reed and Professor Zeldin push ahead with their plans for the Lewisham Muse, setting up a series of conversation dinners involving various local groups. But a few weeks later, news filters back to Professor Zeldin that the Telegraph Hill meetings, publicised as 'kitchen conversations' are effectively just the usual sort of group discussions about shared local issues, the diametric opposite of what he was trying to encourage. It's a disappointment.

T

What the Telegraph Hill example emphasised was the reluctance of people, which we have seen in other groups also, to have relations with groups other than our own, to think about things other than what they already think about. It is just innate conservatism of a kind which has existed for all the centuries. People like what is familiar to them.

O

But still, I suppose people in Telegraph Hill were hoping that something might come out of conversations which would help the immediate problems of older people who were isolated, single mothers who felt themselves both isolated and under pressure, immigrant families perhaps who felt isolated because of language problems. So, can't you understand that they wanted to focus in on particular local issues?

T

Of course, I understand that is what we want to do, but I'm not there to comfort them in what they want already. I am saying that change and new possibilities occur when you meet people from outside your habitual entourage.

O

So, how's that going to help an isolated old person in Lewisham?

T

Because we are going to say: "look, you have experience of different kinds, there are all sorts of people very different from yourself who might be interested to meet you, and who would benefit from what you have to say". We then give him a sense that he is not a nobody, but he has something to offer other people who are completely different.

O

Theodore Zeldin has plans to extend his experiment by using personal information which emerges from his new conversations to build individual written or videoed portraits. Ideally, he would like the entire population of Lewisham, nearly a quarter of a million people, to take part in one-to-one conversations and then produce portraits. These could then be made available in a public building or on the internet, allowing a sort of 'virtual conversation' in which Lewisham becomes the first borough whose inhabitants can actually get to know one another.

New Conversations in Deptford

Elapsed time: 18:52

J = John Reed

S = Dr. Surinder Singh

J

I represent the Lewisham Muse which is a burgeoning project of the Oxford Muse foundation.

O

John Reed has organised a conversation dinner in the Deptford area of Lewisham, bringing together a variety of local youth workers and professional people. Professor Zeldin decides to take part himself, and paired with local GP, Surinder Singh, comes up with another practical application, not only for new conversations but also for the personal portraits.

T

What would you say is the weakness for you of the present GP system?

S

Deptford and New Cross is an area of very high turnover. The last time I looked at my figures we've turned over around 20,000 patients in the last 10 years.

O

Professor Zeldin persuades Doctor Singh that new conversation could provide a solution to the problems that he and his fellow doctors have in getting to know their rapidly changing patient population. He suggests organizing conversations with patients which would generate information for written portraits which could be kept on each patient's file as a strictly confidential resource for the medical centre doctors. The two men continue their conversation after the dinner.

T

What I hope we might be able to do together is facilitate the Doctors getting to know a patient without having seen them often. So if we produce these Muse portraits, where the patient will say I live in a slum and my grandmother is always having rows and.. It means that the Doctor immediately knows at least what is one of the problems which will impede better health.

S

Yeah, and that's potentially a great idea - obviously not withstanding the confidentiality issue. But, I mean that is a potential way forward. Just looking at the patients I've seen today, I've seen a dozen new patients that I've never met before. That's just completely typical Tuesday day surgery for me, and it is a shame that I don't know them. So, yeah absolutely, a great idea.

O

Doctor Singh has since discussed the idea with the other Doctors at his medical centre, and they've agreed to approach members of their patient consultation group, to see if they will take part in a new conversation trial. Meanwhile more conversation dinners are being organised. One event has involved the Young Mayor of Lewisham, 17-year-old Kieza Silveira De Souza, who brought a group of 14 to 18 year-olds, to hold conversations with local artists and film makers.

?

I like the structure of it, how it got us talking. It did really get me to understand and know more of the point of view of other people who I might not of necessarily met as well. I think it's a good idea so long as the information in them is used in a way that will benefit the community. So long as people do come out of there feeling a bit more enlightened. Or, even the networking aspect of it as well, getting people to talk to each other is a really good thing. The more people understand each other then the less discrimination, prejudice and all those sort of things.

New Conversations And Work

Elapsed time: 21:57

O

Professor Zeldin is convinced that new conversation can generate new and more fulfilling types of jobs, but how exactly?

T

At the moment, work is organised for industrial purposes, that's to say I want to make money by establishing a factory which will produce lollipops. So, I advertise for workers who will produce lollipops. I don't say to the worker: "who are you really?" I just want to know whether you can make lollipops, but you're an individual who has all sorts of talents, and most of those talents will not be used in making lollipops. And, what I'm saying is we ought to organise our work as a function of what people's talents are, what their ambitions are, rather than from industrial purposes.

O

But, isn't that incredibly utopian? The thought of people who in the private sector put up money for enterprises that create jobs, they're not social workers, they're interested in making profits.

T

Yes, well leave them to that, and we have got to find ways ourselves, of course. I'm not going to change these people who are trying to make money. I first of all insist I am not trying to be utopian. I'm an historian who has studied history and seen how every utopia has failed. So, we've got see what we can do in practical terms. We've therefore got to carry out little experiments to see what might happen if we do things otherwise.

The Future Of Conversation

Elapsed time: 23:30

G = Guy Cook

K = Kevin Sheehan

O

The Lewisham Muse project is gaining some momentum. More than 60 local people attended a conversation dinner in a marquee in Mountsfield Park, in the Catford area of Lewisham, generating further interest in staging similar events. Professor Zeldin is still a long way from making Lewisham a borough in which everyone knows each other but Kevin Sheehan of the council is optimistic.

K

I've been nicely surprised that things have happened since the Horniman because in a sense we helped that along. But really, since then, things have happened of their own accord, and that's great really because I don't think you could do things by deeds of decree. If it's going to work - that's how it's going to work.

O

But, Professor Guy Cook of the Open University, remains sceptical about the value, or indeed the possibility, of changing the way we converse.

G

It is something of a myth in current society that if people can talk about things, then problems can be solved. Sometimes that is true. At other times, we have to acknowledge I think, that if people talk to each other they may simply deepen their disagreement, and in fact that maybe why people avoid certain topics.

Trying to change what human beings do with talk would be like trying to stop people eating and sleeping, and digesting, it's a function of human beings that they use language in this way.

O

Professor Zeldin knows that he faces an uphill struggle. People are practical creatures and he has to find a way to persuade the ordinary citizens of Lewisham that new conversation has something real to offer them, that it's not merely an academic exercise, more like psycho-analysis or therapy, than the kind of conversations they're used to having. He has to persuade them that it's not a waste of their time. So, how is he going to engage large numbers of people in his experiments when their natural instinct seems to be to resist?

T

Well occasionally some of them come and they do have a conversation with somebody who is completely different and they are amazed that this is interesting.

O

So give us an example of how you want people to change the way that they have conversations? Take an ordinary person. Take me - how can I change the way that I converse?

T

Be honest. Say what you really think. That is what I want to know. I want to know what humans are like.

O

Interviews are not new conversations, they're often not even honest conversations, so at the end of our time together Professor Zeldin and I decided to do it his way, with one of his menu topics of new conversation. What does the world need to make it a better place? He invited me to go first.

O

Something that I've been aware of all my life, is that conversations between men and women - conversations I have with men - are not always honest. And, I would like for those to be more honest. Can you have an honest conversation with a woman?

T

I do have honest conversations with women. My ability to talk is due to the encouragement of women. Women are more able to talk about emotions and how one should live than men, who are stuck with their politics and their sport.

O

We are, but sometimes we're too kind, even in say, husband-wife relationships. It might be very hard to say: "listen, you know, you're a bumbling old idiot. You get almost everything wrong. I love you dearly, but you aren't exactly my knight on a white charger". I might destroy somebody by saying that.

T

Truth is never painful.

O

Oh yes! It can be very painful.

T

You cannot say truth is painful. It is very painful that people have wars. It is disgusting that people have wars, but it is a fact. You can't say: "don't tell me that there is a war"...

< fade out >