OSU-Cascades offers community dialogue workshops to public

by Mark Floyd

BEND, Ore. â€“ An Oregon State University speech professor, who says she has sat through too many public meetings where opposing sides talk but donâ€™t listen, has created a community project in Central Oregon whose primary purpose is to teach participants the lost art of dialogue.

Natalie Dollar, who teaches speech communication at the OSU-Cascades Campus, says that election years are particularly good times to engage in dialogue rather than rhetoric.

â€œMany Americans tend to rely on argument, debate and negotiation when interacting with others,â€• Dollar said, â€œand these antagonistic, tension-filled methods of communicating leave us wanting more. Fortunately, dialogue is enjoying something of a renaissance, and a growing number of people are exploring it as an alternative way of interacting.â€•

Dollar and her students at OSU-Cascades are offering three sessions of a two-hour community dialogue workshop this term, centered around a theme that is certain to generate a lot of discussion: â€œWhat are the religious, scientific and spiritual views of the origins of our world?â€•

These sessions will be held on Sundays, (March 2, 9 and 16) from 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. in Cascades Hall Room 118. They are free and open to the public. The only requirement, Dollar says, is that participants come with a willingness to understand the diverse range of views on the topic.

â€œWe will ask anyone who attempts to turn this into a debate, argument or attempt to persuade to leave because this is oppositional to the goals of dialogue,â€• she said. â€œDialogue is about understanding what someone else says, bringing forth diversity of views, engaging the complexity of ideas, and working to comprehend something larger than our own identities.â€•

Dollar first began her Community Dialogue Project in 2003 after American troops went into Iraq. She had noticed groups of people supporting and opposing the invasion, but little dialogue that fostered understanding of those viewpoints, or the gray areas between extreme viewpoints.

â€œThere were a lot of people not involved in activist groups that were tense and nervous, yet wanted to talk about the situation,â€• Dollar said. â€œYet they were afraid to because they felt they would be overwhelmed, preached at, or even physically confronted. I felt an obligation as a communications professor to provide a safe place for people to engage in dialogue.â€•

When Dollar offered that first session, she hoped a dozen or so people would attend. More than 50 showed up to the first session.

â€œA lot of people wanted to get on their soapbox,â€• she pointed out, â€œbut we quickly shot that down. The idea of community dialogue is not to reach conclusions, not to reach consensus. The goal is purely to understand and be able to articulate other personsâ€™ perspectives.â€•

In succeeding years, Dollar has hosted community dialogue workshops on â€œThe Dynamics of Democracy,â€• â€œIs Our Community Divided?â€• and â€œExploring Social Class.â€• Participants in the sessions have included students at OSU-Cascades and Central Oregon Community College, faculty members of both institutions, and members of the public. Anywhere from 15 to 60 people may be at a session.

â€œAt the end of the workshop, participants may not have a different opinion than they did at the start,â€• Dollar said, â€œbut hopefully they will recognize the diversity of viewpoints that exist and respect those differences.â€•

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