

Forester, J. (2009). *Dealing with Differences: Dramas of Mediating Public Disputes*. New York: Oxford University Press.

### Review by Tami L. Moore

Community-university engagement scholarship often refers to “the public” as a group outside the university who are potential partners and/or information resources. David Mathews of the Kettering Foundation has defined “public” differently, emphasizing the processes by which “the public” emerges through exchanges among members of the community: “The public does not appear as a constituency, audience, or market. Rather, it shows itself as a dynamic entity more like electricity than a light bulb, more a set of interactions or practices than a static population” (*Mathews, 2005, p. 72*). Mathews’ notion of *public* as process puts community members—including representatives of higher education institutions—at the center of community building and deliberative democracy. Higher education outreach and engagement activities—partnerships, community-based research, service-learning—are public work in Mathews’ sense. Engagement of this sort can be “messy” in the same ways that John Forester (1993) has described multiparty negotiations and collaborative planning, in that they require the negotiation of differences in culture, values, and organizational structures. “Many applaud [this sort of] public participation in . . . government,” but in Forester’s opinion, “few . . . seem to know how to carry it out successfully in practice” (*p. 133*). Forester addresses this knowledge gap in his book *Dealing with Differences: Dramas of Mediating Public Disputes*. Avoiding “gimmicks or recipes” for a “foolproof” process (*p. 150*), Forester draws on previously published profiles of practitioners (*Forester, 1999, 2006*) to offer “hints and tips, clues and cues to how we might deal practically with deep differences in politicized and contentious public and private settings” (*p. 9*).

*Dealing with Differences* reflects Forester’s “careful analysis of how [participatory processes] can work” (*p. 11*) to address issues ranging from land use to negotiations in the Middle East peace process. “We can often do much more than we think,” he writes in the introduction, “when we have to deal with differences of power, interests, and values, and this book shows how we can do it” (*p. 3*). The book is organized in four parts, each comprising of two chapters: The first chapter in each part lays out key concepts, and the second provides ideas about how to move forward in the face of these realities. In Part 1, Chapter 1, Forester highlights challenges

that get in the way of resolving public issues: assessing participants, designing processes to facilitate (mutual) transformative learning and mutual gain, and capacity building. As in each part of the book, the second chapter describes moments of “surprising success” (p. 40) from practitioner profiles that resulted in “possible working agreements that others might so easily see as impossible” (p. 41).

Forester makes a key point in Parts 2 and 3: Mediators and participants must deal with difference to facilitate collaborative work through multistakeholder task forces, and to achieve confidence and a sense of ownership in the final agreements for all participants in the process. However, stakeholders’ values run deeper than their interests, in that these values are a more powerful force in shaping behavior in negotiations. Participants typically come into the process with what he calls “facile” (p. 104) and “self-fulfilling” (p. 105) presumptions about the other parties and “the supposedly ‘inevitable’ outcomes” (p. 104) that can undermine the possibility of mutually beneficial agreements. Chapter 3 highlights themes that characterize values-based disputes, and suggests general facilitation guidelines for designing a process to address them. The “lessons from practice” (p. 89) included in Chapter 4 suggest a way forward in the face of difference on deep issues. Generally, the answer is always the same: “when values conflict, assume the need for all parties to learn” (p. 90) about each other and the issue at the heart of the conflict. “Irreconcilability” must be reconceived as the product of a negotiation process, rather than an appropriate premise from which to start conversations.

The practitioner profiles throughout the book tell us that, even where there are deep value differences, such as in the negotiation of HIV/AIDS prevention programs in Colorado outlined in Chapter 5, common ground exists. Effective facilitators in contentious situations such as this one create opportunities for participants to explore one another’s histories and hopes for the future. When participants have time to tell and listen to others’ stories, have informal interaction over meals, or take field trips together to learn about other communities, they are able to find shared interests that transcend value differences. These become the basis for agreements that meet everyone’s needs. The section ends with a practical wisdom for structuring learning opportunities for multistakeholder groups. Forester argues that we must learn to deal with difference to facilitate collaborative work, and to achieve confidence and a sense of ownership in the final agreements for all participants in the process. Chapter 6 presents a very direct premise: “Because we can expect...obstacles [in negotiating public space], we should consider

how we can respond practically to them—so we do better both in our day-to-day meetings, and in the ways we design them in the first place” (p. 123). This is especially true of community-university partnerships, and other engagement activities.

The final section of the book emphasizes specific practices to facilitate deliberations in a contentious arena. In Chapter 7, Forester draws examples from practice to “distinguish” and “integrate” (p. 152) dialogue, debate, and negotiation. “We can,” he writes in the introduction to the chapter, “pay more attention to practical deliberative options, to dialogue, debate and negotiation as these might not only involve many interdependent and networked stakeholders, but enable collaborative and participatory planning processes to achieve greater justice, greater recognition, and greater efficiency, too” (p. 15). Mediators highlighted in Chapter 7 achieve these goals through three techniques: fostering dialogue as a way to build trust and a foundation for future work; moderating debate to “clarify critical differences between parties” (p. 152); and mediating negotiation, to craft arguments to which all participants are willing to commit. Throughout the book, Forester allows the reader to “hear” (p. 150) the power of humor and irony in the mediator’s practice in each of these phases. “Having a sense of humor has very little to do with being funny” (p. 172); therefore, Chapter 8 highlights critical moments when humor has helped in facilitation and draws out lessons from professional practice about how to use it. We learn that humor “accomplishes politically astute work . . . by encouraging engagement rather than resignation, by welcoming rather than punishing multiple points of view on painful topics and difficult issues at hand” (p. 172). In Chapter 9, Forester returns to the list of practical challenges facing anyone doing public work—assessing participants, designing processes to facilitate (mutual) transformative learning and mutual gain, and capacity building—and articulates lessons learned by listening to experienced practitioners reflect upon their work. He summarizes the lessons this way: “Integrating inclusive participation and effective negotiation takes skill and preparation, thoughtfulness and a sense of humor, commitments to fairness and joint gains, and more . . . but not rocket science” (p. 180).

Pursuing the public good, as Mathews (2005) and Forester understand it, requires involving many voices from across a community in conversations about the future. Forester cautions his

readers not, however, to rely on the process alone to ensure a desired outcome because

[No] natural process guarantees that diverse voices will respect or even inform one another instead of becoming just so much shouting and noise, or worse. At times, though, advocates of multicultural, pluralistic societies can get stuck in their own celebrations of inevitable . . . conflict (p. 20).

Constituent efforts to mark and protect their position—posturing, exaggerating, withholding information—are the “regular, systematic obstacles that we can expect to arise in participatory settings” (p. 123). By focusing on what is surprisingly possible in public deliberation, this book shows us that difference is “ineradicable and not yet paralyzing” (p. 186).

“Disputes . . . signal the *absence* of agreement, not its impossibility” (*emphasis in original*, p. 177). This is true in community-based settings, and it is also true when the conflict is between university administrators or researchers and community organizations. The lessons Forester derives from narratives of professional practice point to important skills to be developed by emerging community-based researchers through the graduate curriculum, especially because skill and experience are more important than good intention in these situations. *Dealing with Differences* will be an excellent resource for anyone engaged in the public work of the university, from maintaining partnerships to establishing community-based research projects, or creating service-learning opportunities related to planning, community development, public policy deliberation, or local government. Through this book, Forester makes a useful contribution to the current understanding of what is required for university members to engage in public deliberation and public work in a productive way.

## References

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## **About the Reviewer**

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