

## **Students Comment on *Community Conversations***

*Professors have forwarded student blogs to Paul Born on occasion, especially after he has attended one of their classes by telephone. Each one of these quotes has been selected from real students and has not been modified in any way. Even though we have sought permission from these students, we have not published their names as we have made these quotes available on the internet.*

*We are currently offering a special promotion. If you purchase at least 20 copies of *Community Conversations* and/or *Creating Vibrant Communities*, Paul will host a one-hour complimentary conference call with your class.*

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The book by Paul Born is really one of the few books I read in my university time that gives you applicable methods and techniques to apply core concepts. I have really enjoyed this book and I think that social change is built on simple construction blocs such as community conversation. We spend half of our life talking but I wonder how much of that talking is about helping others, listening, and collaborating? When we dream together and engage each other we shake mountains.

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The phone conference held last week with Paul Born was very inspiring and encouraged me to dive further into his book. Born seemed to touch on so many key points but I particularly liked his chapter on engaging. Specifically he points to the importance of engaging because "once people engage in the ideas of others and experience authentic and passionate conversations, they begin to move from talking to doing". This is central as the whole point of community conversations would be to create change. Born states this happens because "listening to others, entering into their meaning, and joining creative energies to dream of real solutions leads to engagement: the shared commitment to find an implement decisions." As part of this shared commitment which leads to decision making, Born identifies the importance of engaging multi sectors. This I thought was key for Born to acknowledge. Born is essentially tapping into the age old saying that 'two minds are often greater than one.'

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Paul Born's book, *Community Conversations* was the assigned reading for Monday night's class. Consequently, our group was assigned the book as our presentation topic. To be honest, I did not have any expectations with regards to the book. I was unsure if it was going to be a novel or if it was going to be theory driven. After reading the book and presenting certain chapters to the class, I feel that our group was given the advantage on our conference call with Paul Born on Monday evening. I was quite impressed that we were given the opportunity to have a discussion with the Author of a book we had just made a presentation on. It is rare that students have the opportunity to discuss a literary work with the actual author and able to question his/her beliefs and motivations with regards to the book. There have been many cases where I've read a book, academic journal, or just newspaper article where I wish I could've sat down and discussed certain topics brought up in the article. Fortunately for us, we were given that opportunity on Monday.

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As it seems a bunch of us have, I have also just started reading Paul Born's book *Community Conversations*, and I am really enjoying the way it is written. It reminds me of the book *A Million Little Pieces* by James Frey, insofar as the way it is written (let me explain). It is an account of what happened told as though you, the reader, are in their presences of the characters some how (I know I could have come up with a more closely related theme book than *A Million little pieces*, but it is the most recent book I've read in this style). These types of books have a way of drawing me in, as weird as it sounds, the style of writing resembles a conversation with the author, rather than the author talking at you about the event/story/situation.

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This past week I've been reading sections of Paul Born's "*Community Conversations*," focusing specifically on the chapters of *Conversing*, *Engaging* and *Collaboration*. I found these topics to be very interesting, considering I was reviewing the texts of Barack Obama's President Elect acceptance speech. The parallels between Born's book and the rhetorical content of the speech made me think about how simple change is when using the correct tools to build a message, sell the product, while benefiting an entire population.

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In his book, as Born outlines the process which he underwent to have a "community conversation," free of bias and judgment, I was slowly becoming convinced that such a conversation could take place. Being a communications student and having been taught about the idealistic nature of Habermas' ideal speech situation, I had my reservations that a true community conversation could be achieved. According to Professor Eaman's characteristics of the ideal speech situation, no jargon is allowed. Born stated in his book that "community conversations for collaboration are jargon-free zone." The ideal speech situation and the community conversation both require that everyone is on the same pedestal, and that power-relations do not get in the way.

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A number of things stuck out for me in the first chapter of Paul Born's book *Community Conversations*. Born points out some instrumental factors which must be involved for effective conversing. In this he draws attention to the importance of *Listening!*, engaging someone else's meaning, suspending assumptions and gaining trust. These, I believe are all key elements and Born is correct to emphasize them. *Listening!* as Born intends it, refers not just to hearing others, but to hearing them with the purpose of bringing about change that is best for all; that leads to dialogue and active engagement.

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According to Born community engagement can only be developed through community conversations that are built on trust and listening. "When people get used to thinking together, they build the foundation for working together. They are engaged and share a common purpose and commitment to the outcome (33)." This concept of community engagement can be translated into our everyday lives and the work we are doing in working with or building our own NGOs. It is incredibly important to engage individuals from all walks of life into the cause one is working for if the goal is to foster sustainability and create change.

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In the situations that Paul Born discussed, where it was either members of a system or several organizations coming together or a similar project, I definitely think that he hit

on an important point when he mentioned that all members of a system must be present. This will definitely help, although not eliminate, preventing some potential problems from happening. Additionally, if it is a case of poverty or homeless people or anyone that is more marginalized, then bringing them into the discussion and letting the organizations put a face to the project can only help to bring in the emotional connection that is so important.

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I think that face-to-face communication is a good way to create a sense of equality. Born (2008) refers to something he calls the "space of unknowing" (pg. 40) in his book *Community Conversations*. Basically this entails un-learning everything we think we know about a certain person or group, and really listening to each other in order to understand the whole system and how we can all work together to create change. Face-to-face conversations allows for people to go to this place of unknowing, and then work together to move up from that. Born (2008) says, "The simple act of holding a multi-sector conversation can help people suspend assumptions and move together into a space of unknowing" (pg. 40).

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Born (2009) mentioned over the phone that he was once going to a conference to talk about crime, but that he nearly refused to go if there were no gang members present. He says that instead of having a conversation with the educated elites, we need to include everyone in a multi-sector conversation in order to forge an understanding – a.k.a. go to the place of unknown by "*Listening!*" to what other people are saying. This is the kind of face-to-face, present in the moment conversation that assists in creating an intense human connection.

So, you've got the cop and the gang member sitting in the same room together, reading each other's signals, assessing what one another has to say, and hopefully starting to empathize with one another, taking the first step towards substantial change.

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Paul emphasized in his book that there were 10 techniques for community conversations. These techniques are very useful and can be applied to our everyday lives. They involve face-to-face conversations which bring people together for good communication. But as we talked to Paul on the phone students brought up the fact that we were having a good conversation yet it was not face-to-face. So this brought in the idea that good conversation can occur even with the medium of technology. We were able to ask him questions and listen to him using the system of the telephone.

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A global community. It's a simple phrase, but a much more difficult idea to achieve. And as Paul Born pointed out in class this week, seeking community and social change is especially difficult in such chaotic times when the notion of "community" is being taken for granted. So then, as Born asked the class: "What is the dynamic that causes a system to engage?" Perhaps the better question is: how does one begin to cross physical and cultural boundaries and bring different communities together? This is a big question without a right or wrong answer. There are, in fact, many answers. But one answer could be what Born calls a "compelling vision." Born effectively sums up the idea of a "compelling vision" in his book *Community Conversations*, "Imagine if we were able to create a vision that compelled our community system to change in the way a baby creates a family. This would not be just any vision, but a vision so

compelling that it would capture the imagination and heart and innate desire of a whole community" (p. 75).

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On Monday July 20th, we got the privilege to have a telephone conversation with Paul Born, author of *Community Conversations*. While I thought the book made some extremely relevant points, some of the steps outlined in collaborating and engaging for social change seemed a tad unrealistic. I was extremely pleased though that some of the issues I felt were in the book were raised by others in the class. For example, when he was questioned that his book did not deal with conflict that can arise in community development, Born flat out admitted that he did not focus on this and will venture down that road for his next work. I thought that was a fair answer, and he seemed quite open to constructive criticism. Although opinions were lashed out, everyone seemed to be on an even playing field (which as a side note is a key factor for a group, whether it is a single-sector or multi-sector).

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Well, talking to Paul Born was fun... I must say that we had a bit of an advantage because we read his book *Community Conversations*, which gave us prior insight to the way 'he sees it', so asking him questions about how people engage wasn't as intimidating as I thought it would be. The thing that really got me was the fact that almost every other person in the class' question related to technology and how it impacts the way people communicate. The question originally extended to our class was what cases a system to engage that creates a desire to change? The answer to that question seems obvious. As Paul Born said over the phone, it is about figuring who can help with a problem and getting them to converse with others.