As student affairs practitioners, we are asked to meet people where they are. As social justice educators, this could mean meeting people in some very triggering places, and yet—this is our responsibility.

Each one of us has limited knowledge of the various affects of social injustices on people, and only slightly more knowledge of the ways these injustices affect us. Their impact is everywhere. When we examine the language we use, we don't always recognize the impact of saying 'you guys' to refer to a mixed-gender group, or describing where the stairwell is to a group of people trying the find their way up one floor. We don't always think twice when using words like 'crazy', 'insane', or even 'gay' to describe something ridiculous or stupid. For many people, these are words that are so common in our vernacular that even reading them on this page isn't alarming. Yet each of these ideas imbeds an assumption, also referred to as a dominant narrative. Whether the assumption is that everyone is able-bodied or that it's okay to use identity labels as adjectives that conjure negative associations, the impact can be very belittling, isolating and painful.

Dominant narratives are generalized assumptions that dismiss other's experiences and reference the experience of privileged groups to refer to everyone. They can be overt or very subtle when expressed; sometimes they are so subtle they surface as assumptions that underlie what is not being said. However obvious or subtle they are, in a facilitation setting, we can find them challenging to work through, if we even notice them ourselves.

There is one common way that dominant narratives are couched when voiced by participants—Perfectly Logical Explanations (PLEs). In order to not be judged, individuals who voice dominant narratives will simultaneously provide context to justify their perspectives. "I'm not racist or anything; this is just the experience I had growing up." "I hear people of ___ particular targeted group use that word, so I think I should be able to use it, too. It's not fair that only some people can use it." Imbedded in the dominant narrative itself, is the act of "PLEing", which can make it especially hard to challenge in a dialogue or other social justice education setting.

As social justice educators, we have a responsibility to address these dominant narratives when they come up in facilitation settings. More so, we have the responsibility to acknowledge the dominant narratives that we introduce, if we realize that we've done so. It is unrealistic to assume that we can address everything or that we will even be able to name every dominant narrative that exists. Recognizing that each introduction of a dominant narrative pulls the power away from any experiences that are counter to it, it is our responsibility to try. This strategy of balancing the power of the narratives in the dialogue is referred to as 'multipartiality'.

The word 'multipartial' differentiates itself from strategies of 'impartiality' and 'partiality.' To be impartial, or neutral, as a facilitator, means to aim to give equal time to every narrative that is voiced. Dominant narratives already carry more weight in society and have more power, so continuing to give them equal time maintains this dynamic. To be partial as a facilitator means advocating against these dominant narratives and pushing for the recognized validity of counter narratives. Although this lessens the relative power of the dominant narratives, it still does not balance the power in the room, allowing for an equitable exchange of perspectives and experiences. To be multipartial as a facilitator means to invite participants to dissect the nuances of dominant narratives in order to recognize their limitations and encourage the contributions of counter narratives in order to recognize their existence.

Being multipartial in actual facilitation requires practice, patience and a willingness to take risks. Many times, multipartial facilitators ask questions that participants have never had to think about before—asking participants to unpack elements of their life they have taken for granted. This kind of introspection and collective sharing is crucial to understanding the complexities of many social issues, and learning about how we have each been affected by and perpetuated these narratives. We believe multipartiality is the key to effective social justice education, and know it to be a complicated skill to understand. We invite you to call in to the Dial a Dialogue on Wednesday, January 26th @ 12-1 EST -- (218) 339-2500 Access Code: 148331#.