

**Title: Sheila Heen, Difficult Conversations, Part 1 of 2**  
**Podcast: Half Hour of Heterodoxy**  
**Episode: 69**

### Transcript

**Chris Martin:** Sheila Heen is my guest today. She's the coauthor of "Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most" published in 1999. It was a New York Times Business Bestseller and has continuously been in print since then. Its 10th anniversary edition, which included an update, came out in 2010. She's also the coauthor of "Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Arts of Receiving Feedback Well," also a New York Times bestseller. She's also a lecturer at Harvard Law School.

We mostly talk about difficult conversations between faculty and students in this episode, which is the 1st of two episodes with Sheila Heen.

We recorded this using Skype because of technical problems with the application we normally use so you may notice the audio quality is not as good as it normally is.

**Chris Martin:** Hi, Sheila. Thanks for joining us on the show.

**Sheila Heen:** Delighted to be here.

**Chris Martin:** So let's start with your book, *Difficult Conversations*. What counts as a difficult conversation?

**Sheila Heen:** Well, we kind of went with the simplest answer which is that if the conversation feels difficult to you, it counts. Right? So if it's keeping you up at night, if you feel stuck like I'm just not sure how to approach this conversation, or sometimes that means I didn't expect it to be a difficult conversation, it went in a direction that I didn't expect and now I can't quite let go of it. I'm dwelling on how, when, and what I should have said, et cetera.

Often, they involve strong disagreements, often then strong emotion follows that, and sometimes there's also history in the relationship. Probably the biggest proportion of them happened in ongoing relationships whether those are personal relationships or professional relationships.

**Chris Martin:** And you mentioned individual differences as something that people should consider when they are thinking about conversations as difficult or not difficult. Tell me about the research behind that and how people can get perspective on when a conversation is difficult for the person you are talking to even if it's not difficult for you.

**Sheila Heen:** Yeah. Well, so there are a couple of aspects to that. One really we stumbled upon while we were writing, *Thanks for the Feedback*, which was some evidence that individual sensitivity to feedback or to any outside stimulus, meaning how upset do you get and how long does it take you to recover before talking about a negative trigger or in terms of positive

feedback like how happy does that make you and how long do you sustain that kind of bounce in your step?

Some evidence that individual sensitivity can vary by up to 3,000 percent, and so then we are in relationships with each other, reacting to each other but the range of our reaction and the duration of our reactions to each other, there's just a huge set of differences. And I think most of us know this instinctively. We have noticed it. That there are people in our lives who overreact, is how we would describe it to everything.

**Chris Martin:** Right.

**Sheila Heen:** Or there are other people in our lives who are incredibly insensitive so we take ourselves sometimes as normal and any variation as somehow wrong in one direction or another. So that's part of it. Part of it is just wiring.

And the other part of it I think has to do with identity. It has to do with the story we tell about who we are and what this situation suggests about us. Right? Am I the good person here or the bad person? Am I competent or incompetent? Am I lovable or worthy of love or respect maybe in the professional world?

And if that feels like it's at stake, then the conversation is suddenly not just about whatever topic we are talking about. It's also about who I am and how I am seen by other people but also by myself.

**Chris Martin:** So when it comes to academia if you are doing research in an area like political science or history, you may have even gotten into those topics because you are fascinated by things like war and violence and trauma depending on your research area. And so some of our listeners find that even though they are fascinated by these areas, some students find them triggering or traumatic and/or puzzled by this dynamic, and I think it is difficult because if you are an academic or if you've just read history out of personal interest, you know there have been terrible wars and people had just been pretty terrible to each other throughout history.

So how do you suggest professors talk about issues like war and genocide and trauma?

**Sheila Heen:** Yeah. It's such a conundrum or maybe it's a dilemma. In other words, often students are signing up for course partly because of their personal history and wanting to find some answers and some ways in which they can in that field start to make a contribution to change things. And then the topic of the course itself or some of the things that we need to discuss are really hard. Right? They are not making it up that they are field with adrenaline and anxiety and that some of them are in fact experiencing some PTSD reactions and to actually conduct the class and have the learning. That's what the class is about.

So I teach at a law school and in law school in particular, part of what our job is to equip law students and later lawyers with the ability to shift perspectives and see all sides of an issue and also, to be able to respond to arguments or ideas or values or accusations in the moment. So there

is that way in which maybe in law school in particular, the fact that you are triggered in class is part of the learning which is how do you even though you got adrenaline going because you've just been cold called or someone else just said something incredibly wrong or offensive, et cetera, how do you respond and also see that person with some compassion and empathy and openness to learning something that you didn't understand about their point of view? And I think that's the dilemma that all of us are wrestling with these days in both public and private discourse but also of course then in the classroom.

**Chris Martin:** So are there any classroom exercises you like to use to help with this?

**Sheila Heen:** Well, it's a great question. Partly for me, it's being as transparent as I can be with the students about why we are doing what we are doing and what the purpose is. I find that often students are more open to tolerating the discomfort if we don't have an assumption between us that discomfort shouldn't exist in the classroom. But when it does, it has a purpose. It has a purpose that is intended to benefit them. And that we are all noticing and acknowledging that the impact isn't equal on all students in this classroom.

It's the combination of me trying to be transparent like my jobs – so I teach negotiation, right? My job is to help you be able to manage negotiations when they get really difficult and difficult conversations. And there isn't a way I can do that for you unless we actually put you into difficult conversations and cases where you actually feel the difficulty and get some practice managing it and building your skillset right at the edge of where you feel you are able to cope and operate.

So I think that it's the combination of me trying to be transparent about why we are doing what we are doing and what it's purposes that benefits them combined with that happening inside of a relationship between us that my students at least have a sense that I think I'm well-intentioned and that I care about them and I care about the struggle, and that sort of road that we need to navigate together. So maybe that's the third piece of the puzzle which is to say, I'm not going to have all the answers. I'm not going to make the right judgment calls all the time. There are going to be mistakes that I make and things that I don't see or understand. I'll say the wrong things sometimes and so will you. And that's the task for us collectively here, to sort of navigate all of that together and maximize the learning for you.

**Chris Martin:** So if students come to their classroom with this perception that the world is easily divided and the people who are good and evil or morally right or morally enlightened or morally unenlightened, do you find that – sorry, go ahead?

**Sheila Heen:** Each of which has a Twitter account.

**Chris Martin:** Right. How do you get students with that attitude? I mean there's some evidence that maybe a certain subset of very young students right now or students in high jam are even more politically sensitive. How do you get students like that to understand that in a longer term, there is a purpose to learning about a range of views and that to some degree you should trust the instructor because they probably do have a purpose in mind that you would figure out later on?

**Sheila Heen:** There are a couple of things that have been helpful to me on that front. One is just to talk about that tendency which is that it's – so if our brain – the easiest thing for our brain to do is to categorize people into the good people and the horrible people. Oddly enough, the good people always tend to be present on our side, the horrible people on the other side. But that sort of black and white view isn't really reality.

And the way that I tend to come at it simply because of what I'm teaching is to have them first think about it for themselves that in their most challenging conversations in their real relationships, often there are things they have contributed to the problem. They didn't treat a friend as well as they wished they had. It's true that the memo or paper they turned in could have been better that they procrastinated probably longer than they should. And that doesn't that they are a bad person. It just means that there is something for them to learn.

So I'm actually having them reflect on themselves and to get out of the tendency to see ourselves as either black or white. Obviously, this is all related in part to Carol Dweck's on fixed mindset like I'm smart or not smart, et cetera and how I am is how I am versus a growth mindset which is I'm more complex and I'm constantly evolving.

And so, I'm first having them think about themselves a little bit differently and then I'm in a better place to remind them that the other people in the room and in this debate are also more complex than just this issue or set of arguments.

And maybe the second thing is that I tend to ask a pair of questions or regularity which is what's wrong with what they are saying, which is what of course we all jump to, right? We are listening for what we can rebut. But to follow that with, and what might be right about what they are saying?

And that particularly as an advocate but also as a learner and a person in relationship with everybody else in your life, listening for what other people are right about even when we think they are 90 percent wrong actually has a – it's part of what helps us have richer conversation.

**Chris Martin:** So there is also the problem of some people and this is maybe not such a problem in academia but in real life, people who are Machiavellian or high in what psychologists call psychopathy which is not serial killer psychopaths but people who appear to be very empathic but actually have very little empathy for you so they are very good at fooling you.

So if you are trying to cultivate this habit of being good at conversations and good at difficult conversation and good at listening, how can you also be careful about being manipulated?

**Sheila Heen:** That was not what I thought you were going to end that question.

**Chris Martin:** OK. Where did you think it was going?

**Sheila Heen:** I suddenly thought you were going to flip it and say, “How do you not become manipulative?” which is ...

**Chris Martin:** Well, that’s also a good question to answer.

**Sheila Heen:** It’s a question that sometimes we get which is that I’m helping students think about what influences other people and then they say, “Well, but what if I use this for bad purposes? Are you teaching me to manipulate other people?”

And my response to that is, if you were just doing it to get your way and you don’t actually care about their interest or the on-going relationship, et cetera, it’s possible that that will work for you for a couple of rounds but they are going to catch on pretty quick if you are not authentic about it.

Now, let’s flip to the other side which is the question that you actually asked which is, I now suspect that this person is just trying to manipulate me. And I think that when we feel frustrate by someone and we wonder whether they are really operating in good faith or they are a good person or they really care about us and care about what we are saying or they are just pretending to, I think we are a little bit quick to jump to the diagnosis, the clinical diagnosis for what’s wrong with them.

And sometimes, some small percentage of the time, you probably know the percentages, that might be true. More often, they are just so busy trying to get their point across or they just don’t yet have the capacity to fully understand or the experience to fully understand what we are trying to say or what our experience is. And so, it could be not a failure of sort of ability as much as a failure of skill or capacity right now temporarily, meaning over time they may come to understand something more fully more in a more nuance way that we are trying to get across to them.

And I don’t know, I find that there are times where I’m arguing with someone and I’m really clear about what they are wrong about and what they really don’t get about what I’m saying. And then if I fast forward for six months, if we assume it’s an important issue between us, looking back I actually do have a better understanding of where they were coming from but in the moment it was really hard and it has taken me time to see what they were trying to help me see so that I need to ...

**Chris Martin:** Do you have an example that you can share that’s not too personal?

**Sheila Heen:** I think if we want to talk about conversations about race, it’s always hard for us to understand what it has been like to grow up and to live in the world as someone who has different characteristics who the world reacts to and makes assumptions about. So it doesn’t have to race, right? It’s just that race is a particularly loaded and complex topic for us but it can be growing up in your family versus my family and what that led me to expect and understand and react to now.

And the more we get to know people, I think the more we start to understand, “Oh yeah, I can see why that is such a big deal for them and why that was even harder than I think I appreciate it.”

Is that helpful?

**Chris Martin:** Yeah, that’s helpful.

**Sheila Heen:** I’m curious about your thoughts on this front.

**Chris Martin:** On the issue of race in particular or just in ...

**Sheila Heen:** Race in particular or also just sort of the access of time between us. I think sometimes we analyze conversation or exchange or a class as a short-term moment in time or hour when particularly as teachers, part of what we are doing is planting seeds that are going to take time to really take root and it’s hard for us to predict how they are going to take root and grow or not because we just don’t have a very clear view of the soil that we are sowing into and it’s super varied in the classroom. But I’m just curious about your thoughts or reactions and experiences.

**Chris Martin:** But when it comes to the classroom, I have actually only taught a class on the science of happiness, which actually covers a lot. It covers Gottman’s work on relationships for example and work from organizational psychology. So it’s not the traditional positive psychology course that’s really just focusing on character strengths and hedonic definitions of happiness.

And it has been fulfilling to see student feedback but I think one of the things that’s just challenging about being an academic is you see this feedback at the end of the semester but that’s probably not a representative of the feedback – of the impact or lack of impact your course has two years down the road which no one can really predict and there’s no mechanism that allows you to get feedback from two years in the future unless occasionally a student will write to you two years later and say, “Thank you for teaching me this course. It has had an impact on my life.” which is really fulfilling which happens once in a while but ...

**Sheila Heen:** But rare. Right.

**Chris Martin:** Yeah. So you don’t really know. I think that issue of time can be different. I mean definitely the teacher-student is definitely different from the spousal relationship because in our relationship, we really get to know someone over time. So once you’ve gotten to know them ...

**Sheila Heen:** Hopefully.

**Chris Martin:** ... hopefully, yeah.

**Sheila Heen:** Yes.

**Chris Martin:** Hopefully or not. It varies. But when you do, you have a sense of what their values actually are. And when it comes to students, you're dealing with people with very diverse values, values that are different from yours.

So I do think that when it comes to talking to students, I try to be receptive. So for example, I change the way I talk about religion a little based on feedback I've gotten from students because I realized they were interpreting circular humanism different when I was teaching about it than I had hoped for. They interpreted it as extremely critical of religion.

And so I do take feedback into account. At the same time, I have had students say – like one of the students who did think I was a little too critical of religion came back later and said, “Now, I see things differently and I see why maybe that was necessary to include in the course,” which was also unexpected.

So I mean overall, I would say just the structures of academia are different so it's very difficult, if not impossible, to know in the long term what impact your course is having. I suppose if you get really bad feedback semester after semester then you should probably change something.

**Sheila Heen:** [Laughs] Perhaps. Well, I think that part of the structure that's built into academia also doesn't service well in terms of our own learning. So first of all, if we expect students to learn, I think we have to model that ourselves that we need to show the students that we are learning something from them and then we are more likely to have them be open even when they are skeptical perhaps.

But the second structural aspect is the kind of feedback that we get. So course evaluations are just that. They are evaluations. They are assessing based on some set of expectations of what I hoped to get from this class whether I got what I hoped to get and how I felt about it.

**Chris Martin:** And partly, that they also just – they reflect how entertaining you were as a teacher.

**Sheila Heen:** Totally. Totally. Like did I look forward going to class or did I dread it? How painful was it over time in terms of both the workload and the class attendance? So in *Thanks for the Feedback*, we talked about three types of feedback. And evaluation rating or ranking based on some set of expectations or criteria is the easiest to collect whether that's online or in-course evaluations but it's actually the least helpful in terms of our own learning. What you really want to be doing is collecting the two other kinds, which is appreciation and coaching.

So appreciation is sort of do I see, do I get you, do I notice the effort that you are putting in? It's a big piece of what makes life sort of satisfying and relationship satisfying. When are talking about marriage, it's a big piece of what is going on, where spouse feel taken for granted or not.

And then coaching is anything designed to help you get better. So students get a lot of coaching from us, right? Comments on their papers, et cetera. And then at the end of the term, they get a grade which is evaluation.

What happens for us as teachers is that we wait around and then after the course ends, we collect evaluation, which actually often is hard to interpret in terms of what was it that could have been better? And so, there's no reason that we have to wait around and have that be the only feedback that we get.

So like when we are working on *Thanks for the Feedback* book, and by the way, those three kinds of feedback, appreciation, coaching, and evaluation, we didn't make that up. Actually, it comes from a book called *Getting it Done* by Roger Fisher, Alan Sharp, and John Richardson. And when we were working on that chapter, I decided I think for the first time in a more structured way to actually use this in my classroom. So I handed out index cards to everybody about halfway through the term and I said, "On the index card, just write down one or two pieces of coaching – if it were possible, one or two things we could do to make this class experience even more valuable for you in terms of your learning."

So I collected all the cards. And then I went home and I read them. A night of heavy drinking followed. [Laughter] Because it was like 75 ideas for what I could change which suggests that – because every piece of coaching also suggests a little bit of evaluation like about whether this class is good to begin with or not.

And I realized actually that I needed the appreciation in order to hear the coaching. So the next term, I changed what I did. And when I handed out the index cards I said, "OK, on one side, write down one or two things you particularly appreciate about this class and on the flipside one or two things that if we could change them, they would help your learning."

And those cards actually were incredibly helpful because they – once I knew that they saw how hard I was working to make their learning as deep as possible then I could take the suggestions and ideas that they have and I didn't feel compelled to follow all of them but I could come back and say, "You guys had some really good suggestions. Here are a couple of things that we are going to implement right away."

And that's modeling a kind of openness that I think we don't talk about as much as we should maybe in academia. I mean we think of teaching as a negotiation so I'm negotiating for student's engagement and willingness to take risks, to raise their hand to say things, to hang with us when the going gets tough, to be willing to fail and self-reflect on that. And if that's what I'm negotiating for, well, I'm going to have to have to walk my own talk and model that in how I teach. And I think it counters that who is the smartest person in the room sort of vibe that often underlies academia.

**Chris Martin:** Right. One thing that I found good about the modern era or the era that we are living in, is that with cell phones and electronic tools, it's a lot easier to get feedback so you don't necessarily need to use paper forms that we photocopy and set aside.

**Sheila Heen:** Yeah, say more about how you would do that.

**Chris Martin:** I use something called Poll Everywhere. It's PollEverywhere.com. There are some special features you can get with the premium account which I don't have but it's just a very easy way to do a single question or two-question survey and get the results right there. So for some class discussions, it's useful because you can actually present the results that you just got from a discussion question. But it's also useful for something like evaluations because in that case, you can ask a single question and not show the results to the whole class but of record the results and it only takes about 3 or 4 minutes of class time. So I use that for my mid-semester evaluation.

**Sheila Heen:** That's awesome. And so, I would then just be thoughtful about the question I'm using because an evaluation question is the easiest one that people think of to jump to mind. I'm reminded of an app that was developed for leaders where they can tap team members to get some feedback. And what the app developers were finding is that people were starting to use it and then not using it over time, that the engagement was falling off and they were wondering about why that was.

And I said, "Well, what was the app asked?" And it asked, "How am I doing?" which is an evaluation question. And if I get 3 stars out of 5, that doesn't tell me anything about what my people want from me or what I should change. So the question just needs to really be a coaching question or an appreciation question, maybe a combination. But, "What could I do that would make a difference to you?" is going to get much more useful answers whatever the mechanism.

So I'm curious what questions you are using that you found more and less helpful. I mean in addition to of course polling that is about the content of the class and that's obviously driven by what you are trying to teach.

**Chris Martin:** Yeah. The question I've been using so far which is now in retrospect inferior to the one you just suggested is, "Comment on anything that you think has been going well, anything that you think has been going badly." So I've not said, "Evaluate me or evaluate the course," more just what has been going well and what has been going badly. But I think the way you have put it better because that actually mentions the student.

**Sheila Heen:** Yeah. And also, you want to signal to students that, "I'm assuming that you do have comments rather than if you must."

**Chris Martin:** Right.

**Sheila Heen:** Like it's an exception if you have a comment to make rather than I assume you do because we are all on this together. So list one thing you appreciate and then one thing – one suggestion idea you have says to them, "I expect that everybody has some." And so when I've learned not to say, "If you have any feedback for me," if I just assume they do, I actually get more engagement and participation.

**Chris Martin:** All right. Well, we have to wrap up part 1 and I look forward to talking to you in part 2 of this interview but thank you for joining us today.

**Sheila Heen:** It was a total delight.

**Chris Martin:** Thanks for tuning in. You can of course find *Difficult Conversations* at any bookseller. You can also find a small group study guide, and a two-page preparation sheet for a specific difficult conversation at [stoneandheen.com/book#difficultconversations](http://stoneandheen.com/book#difficultconversations).

As always, if you enjoyed the show, please leave us a review on iTunes because it helps other people find out about the show. You can reach me at [podcast@heterodoxacademy.org](mailto:podcast@heterodoxacademy.org) and you can follow me on Twitter at [ChrisMartin76](https://twitter.com/ChrisMartin76). Thanks for listening.

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