Pedagogic Principles

*“I learned I could be friends with someone I hated.”*  
*(Fellow, 2010)*

1. CEDAR is premised on the fundamental insight that knowledge is collective, not individual. What we know, we know as part of a group. Our categories, ways of understanding, moral judgments, boundaries of what is permissible and prohibited, basic frames of meanings, fears and desires—all are, in a strong sense, social. We hold them together with others and not simply as individual beliefs.
2. As knowledge is collective, an important part of what we know is bound up with whom we trust. Almost always, we are called upon to grant moral credit to some source in matters that are, by their nature, morally ambiguous. We may not dispute any particular “fact” or “set of facts” (the building of a mosque in lower Manhattan, the knifing of a gay marcher in a gay pride parade in Jerusalem, the murder of a Jew in Paris, the establishment of hidden cameras in the Muslim neighborhoods of Birmingham, U.K.) but the frame of the act, the set of relevant external bits of information, and the histories needed to explain them will frequently be decided on the bases of our group belonging and the moral credit that we, as members of a group, grant to a source of such data.
3. Those communities within which moral credit is granted (and so the very structuring of our knowledge developed) tend to be what many call communities of belonging. This is no less true of secular communities, which have their own beliefs, codes, and myths. Communities of belonging are, however, not universal, but are bounded (just as families are bounded). They have their own histories and their own trajectories, their own languages and jokes, their own obligations, taken-for-granted worlds, their own flavors and smells—their own understandings of home. They may be more or less open, more or less ascribed,  and their boundaries may be more or less permeable; but they do have boundaries and always define some “us” as against some “other.”
4. This takes us to CEDAR’s second premise: that these communities are real, live, active entities, within which human actors are born, thrive, live, die, and make sense of their worlds and the worlds of others. We cannot live without these communities, despite all dangers that arise from them. Consequently, and unlike almost all similar programs in interreligious and interethnic dialogue, our programs do not stress what we have in common with the other, but accept and attempt to build on our differences. For our differences are precisely the markers of these different communities of belonging that define who we are and provide the settings of our lives.
5. Our goal is to see just how far we can build trust and, hence, a common store of knowledge across different communities. Can we, as a group made up of individuals who are members of different communities of belonging, nevertheless construct a minimum framework of trust, in some small arenas of knowledge that will allow us to construct a shared world of reference that can be drawn upon when events divide our different communities?
6. To what extent can we grant moral credit to the other, to him/her who is not a member of our group, and so share some common frame of understandings and knowledge despite being members of very different communities, tied to different myths, obliged by different commandments, and loyal to different particularities?
7. When framed this way, the unique nature of our program becomes evident. Almost all similar initiatives stress what we have in common; the removal of boundaries and the “oneness” of all participants. We reject that approach as offering, at best, an immediate transcendence of difference, but providing no resources for resilience when differences again divide and may require mediation among them to secure civil peace.
8. Hence, at CEDAR we set out to construct a set of experiences that are both shared, but leave room for all particularities: dietary restrictions of members of different religious communities; time to fulfill obligations for prayer, and so on. The hope is that by sharing experience we can build trust, even as we remain loyal to our own particular communities of trust, belonging, and knowledge.
9. Shared experience, what we call “embodied knowledge,” is central to our program and attempt to construct new communities of understanding across different communities of belonging. Shared experience provides the necessary bases for constructing frames of knowledge across our different communities of belonging.
10. Hence, the more pragmatic aspects of the school’s philosophy: shared practice (rather than simply shared ideas or meanings); focusing on knowledge as a knowledge *for*rather than a knowledge *of*. Conditional knowledge, which is always knowledge framed toward specific purposes, can be shared across communities, even as our categorical propositions, our “assertive” knowledge, remain firmly rooted within different communities of belonging.
11. Two outcomes are sought: (a) to widen the circle of trust, those to whom we may grant moral credit, to include those who may not be members of our moral community; and (b) the very reframing of that knowledge necessary to work and share a world with the other, from knowledge *of*, to knowledge *for*—from those propositions that we categorically assert, to those that embody conditional knowledge relevant to some shared purpose. Both, hopefully, bring us to a point where experience precedes judgment rather than the other way around.

*“We learn from our differences.”*  
*(Fellow, 2009)*