

# THE TEACHING EXCHANGE

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## *Discussing Discussion*

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While Brunonians surely love to talk in class, few of us really know whether all that gab is effective. Ask yourself: what exactly is a "good discussion"? For whom is it good? And how could one know?

At first, my answers to those questions were pathetic: great discussions were great because... well, because *I* thought they were -- like the students who agreed with me! Unsatisfied, I've continued to ask myself these questions since two colleagues, Larry Wakeford and Bil Johnson, taught me about socratic seminars.

In a socratic seminar, the teacher splits the class into two concentric bands, an inner and outer circle. Using a brief text, those in the inner circle weigh different readings, moving together toward a richer, more nuanced sense of meaning. Meanwhile, those in the outer circle listen to both the content of the discussion and its structures, gaps, successes, and challenges. In particular, each outer circle member records specific behaviors of the inner circle members based on questions such as:

- ☐ What three or four topics did the seminar emphasize?
- ☐ What three or four topics arose but were not pursued?
- ☐ How many direct references were made to the text?
- ☐ How many references were made to previous discussions in class?
- ☐ How many references were made to previous readings in class?
- ☐ How many times did a participant build on or refer to a comment made by another?
- ☐ How many times did a participant ask a question of another participant?
- ☐ Were any terms clarified? Which ones? By whom? Why?

- ❑ Was there evidence that someone changed his or her mind in discussion? What was that evidence?
- ❑ How many times did each participant speak? Who spoke the most? How many people did not speak?
- ❑ How many women spoke, and how often? Men?
- ❑ What did other participants do while someone spoke?
- ❑ Whom did speakers address when they spoke?
- ❑ What did the seminar leader do during discussion?

Once the inner circle completes their discussion, the outer circle reports their findings. And therein lies the method's genius.

It turns out that these outer circle questions reveal a great deal about the unspoken structure, rules, and ethos of the course. Take criteria: using these questions, the entire class could conclude that a good conversation was one in which students made regular references to the text and to each other. In addition, the questions revealed my own prejudices, talents, blind spots, and idiosyncrasies. As we reviewed the outer circle members' comments, I found myself admitting that, indeed, I hadn't handled an exchange well, or that, no, I wasn't aware that I scratched my nose.

These outer circle wrap-ups regularly taught me about discussions, and consistently pointed out weaknesses in my facilitation skills. After much time testing out techniques, questions, and tricks to address those weaknesses, I've found that the following tips are useful for most student-centered, collaborative discussions.

*1. Assume students don't know what they are supposed to do in a discussion, spell that out, and stick to it.*

Most Brown students don't know how to talk with each other, in large part because they have learned, here and elsewhere, that class discussions require forcefully stating their own opinions and with equal force dismissing those of others. Once informed that serial monologues do not good discussion make, they are eager to learn new tricks. Thus this explicit list of things that we endeavor to do in discussion:

- ❑ Extend and enrich our knowledge through discussion
- ❑ Be precise, clear, direct, and honest

- ❑ Admit when we're confused or ignorant
- ❑ Search for relationships among ideas, things, and people
- ❑ Ask questions about what we read, hear, and experience
- ❑ Respond to questions about what we've said
- ❑ Avoid vague and sweeping generalizations, particularly about people
- ❑ Use "I" instead of "you," "we," or "one"
- ❑ Respect others' voices, styles, and ideas
- ❑ Explain how and why we think what we do
- ❑ Share our experience of the text with examples and explanations
- ❑ Listen with the assumption that others know things we do not
- ❑ Ask for help if we do not understand, and offer help when others need it
- ❑ Keep our minds open to opinions different from our own
- ❑ Consider the implications of our words
- ❑ Question our own ideas and the assumptions upon which they depend
- ❑ Request clarification about ideas (instead of correct wrong ones)
- ❑ Articulate disagreements about ideas (instead of attack people)
- ❑ Suggest other positions (instead of declare truths)
- ❑ Judge and criticize ideas only with both rigor and care
- ❑ Create an environment in which we can achieve these goals

While such broad expectations are useful, students need means by which to meet them. Indeed, I encourage people to use specific questions, such as:

- ❑ What do you mean by what you just said about ""blah""?
- ❑ Why do you use the word ""blah""? What do you think that means?
- ❑ You just claimed "blah", and I don't think I agree. What would you use to support that claim?
- ❑ I don't see ""blah"" in the reading. Can you show me where you found it?
- ❑ I don't see the connection between what the two of you are saying. How does ""blah"" follow from "yadda-yadda"?
- ❑ When you say ""blah"", you seem to be assuming "yadda-yadda". Is that true?
- ❑ What you said makes sense for your example, but I'm thinking about "blah". Does that change your view?

While these questions can initially seem goofy or intimidating, eventually students who have grown comfy attacking others when confused often find that such questions are both useful and ennobling.

*2. Assume people don't know what you are supposed to do in a discussion, spell that out, and stick to it.*

Try this experiment: ask your students whether they believe that you are secretly assessing their intelligence and human worth during discussion. I'll bet that most will state that you are. Showing them what you actually are trying to do as facilitator allows everyone to focus on the goal of good discussion. I explain to my students that my role is to

- ❑ Ask questions to give direction and impetus to the discussion
- ❑ Ensure that questions are understood -- or rephrase them until they are
- ❑ Examine answers and draw out implications, reasons, and assumptions
- ❑ Insist on clarity, precision, directness, and honesty
- ❑ Raise additional questions, issues, and textual references
- ❑ Listen actively and respectfully to all participants
- ❑ Encourage multiple interpretations and differences
- ❑ Encourage productive conflict and difference
- ❑ Discourage aggression and violence
- ❑ Propose connections between ideas
- ❑ Resist false consensus
- ❑ Call out rhetorical coercion toward the "right" answer
- ❑ Refer backward to past and forward to future issues in the course
- ❑ Explain my own perspective in a responsive, limited, and appropriate manner
- ❑ Create an environment in which we can achieve our shared goals

All well and good -- at least until that outer circle critiques your performance! It's only fair, though, to promote, even to model, the kind of self-reflection you are asking from your students, and that self-reflection will make you a better facilitator.

*3. Spell out the rules, if you have any (and you probably do).*

Even if you don't think you do, chances are good that you have a few hard and fast rules, and you must spell them out clearly; it's unfair, after all, to trot them out only after they've been violated.

My single rule is: "All participants are accountable for what we do and say in class, and we are required to engage honestly and directly with others who are struggling with the implications of those actions and words." Though single and simple, it's pretty useful. Most students are eager to explain that odd, aggressive, or confusing thing they just said, and the rule gives aggrieved parties a relatively non-threatening means to raise touchy feelings.

When happy exchanges fail, this rule allows you to make clear what is and is not acceptable. Uncomfortable or not, you must call out inappropriate comments immediately. Rest assured: every student pays attention to your response to interruptions, dismissals, and attacks; your doing nothing confirms that anti-community tendencies are valued traits in your learning community. What's more, the aggressor may not even realize that she just said something aggressive -- and may appreciate, after your explanation, a chance to say, "My bad," and to restate her point more productively.

Finally, and in more clichéd terms, this rule allows you to dodge the conundrum of politically correct speech and to focus instead on the group's good faith effort to understand, but not necessarily accept, each other's perspectives.

#### *4. Consider whether discussion suits the instructional situation at hand.*

We've all had moments when we've pushed conversations toward our own ends and into the familiar game, "Guess What's On The Teacher's Mind" -- moments indicating that discussion doesn't suit the moment. Discussion works best when a group of people are actively seeking to figure something out, to develop a more thoughtful sense of possibilities, or to accomplish some other collective goal; it involves risk and failure, multiple perspectives, stops and starts, and general bumbling -- not useful attributes in all instructional situations.

If you have ideas to share *in medias res*, it's far better to stop discussion, give a brief lecture on those ideas, and ask the group to apply them than to pretend your extended commentary doesn't transform the dynamic. Even better, consider writing

down your thoughts and setting them aside. Then, at the end of class, you can make the point you were so eager to make -- that is, if you are still sufficiently eager.

*5. Work outside of class with the silent, timid, and troubled.*

I never call on quiet students. Never. It seems like a good way to insure they stay quiet forever. After all, students often have good reason for being quiet, ranging from private personal issues to anxiety about their own authority on a given topic.

While all students have a few bad days, there are always students who think they are too shy, inarticulate, or stupid to participate, and those folks deserve special attention. I work one-on-one with those students in office hours to talk about strategies for participation; we set small goals ("This week, try to formulate a good question and ask it") and then check in afterwards. This always encourages their participation, and those students invariably appreciate the effort.

Furthermore, in each of my classes there have been students who do not speak for perfectly legitimate political reasons. I teach a course that engages questions of gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity, issues crucial to identity and personal experience -- a climate ripe for presumptions about tokenism. Thus I try to consider the silence of students as, potentially, a refusal to speak from a dis-empowered, token position. These students, too, deserve special attention from the instructor, who can help them break through that silence without compromising their sense of integrity.

*6. Get the voluble to shut up already -- and shut up already your own self.*

Silence doesn't spontaneously occur, of course. I covered a colleague's seminar once, and after listening to one group of people dominate discussion, I asked, "Would any of the women in the room care to speak?" The men looked stricken; the women laughed and then happily began talking.

You must quell domination of discussion, and you have to do so without humiliating talkative students who are doing what they've been taught to do. My most effective tactic is to ask, "Does anyone who hasn't spoken wish to say something?" This generally produces silence for a bit, and then several people start talking. As it turns out, "quiet people" don't actually want to be quiet; they are just hoping for a breather.

Put differently, silence creates the context within which some can loosen their tongues. You may not like silence -- indeed, you may have been striving unknowingly to quash it. You can determine your silence-tolerance by counting to yourself whenever there is a break in conversation; if your palms are soaked by the time you reach "Four," then you're probably failing to create that context of silence on a regular basis, and you need to shut your yap more often.

Teacherly shutting up has two temporalities. The first (see above) is what old-school teachers refer to as the "Seven-Second Rule": when silence descends, count to seven silently, to enable students to move thoughts from brains to mouths. However, if you're like me you'll have to come up with contrivances for longer stretches with a tightly closed pie hole. In recent years, I have found myself increasingly saying something like, "I realize I'm talking too much, so I'm going to shut my big mouth for five minutes, starting now." It works wonders, both for them and me.

#### *7. Build a toolbox of things to do to promote good discussions.*

I've already provided several approaches to thinking about discussion, but the real workhorse strategies for me are listed below.

Turn and Talk: Every so often, a group embarked on a good discussion reaches an odd, stumped moment: everyone seems slightly blocked, unsure of what to say or how to say it. When those moments arrive, try out the turn and talk: ask everyone in the group to turn to the person next door and take five minutes to discuss the question, "Why are we stuck?" The cacophony that follows will indicate that people were eager to talk but weren't sure how to dive in. After they regroup, request reports that share something insightful one person learned from their partner.

Free-writing: Like the "seven-second rule" and the "turn and talk", free-writing provides those who cannot think fast on their feet a chance to get their ideas together and contribute more thoughtfully. Free-writing is "free" because it is merely a thinking exercise for students preparing to do something else; you never require students to read it or turn it in, and you actively dissuade them from thinking about grammar, punctuation, syntax, and so on (classic writing blocks all). At the beginning of class, ask students to write for a few minutes on a given topic

designed to provoke discussion. Early in the semester, my questions tend toward interpretation ("Find some instances where bell hooks uses "education," and from those try to determine what she means by that term."); later on, I'll ask them more analytical questions ("What aspects of Freire's theory seem most applicable to you in our present educational context?"). You can also ask them to generate open-ended, provocative discussion questions by free-writing. Discussion can commence with "Does anyone have anything that she or he wishes to share?"

Small Groups: Small groups can be productive, focused opportunities for students to interact, but they can also be spaces in which loud-mouthed students settle into monologues, or those less academically driven can chat about *The Sopranos* out of ear shot. The key is purpose: you must provide a clear outcome that you want from the group, and a clear sequence of tasks needed to accomplish that outcome. Who will record the group's thoughts? How will each group share with another? And how will you know whether the group did what you asked? Remember, too, that you'll have to be an active and vigilant facilitator for several conversations, and that takes movement, inquiry, and good multi-tasking skills. That is to say: small groups are more, and not less, work than large group discussions.

Jigsaws: One good task for small groups to take in is the jigsaw. Instead of asking students to talk about, say, the entirety of John Dewey's *Democracy and Education*, you can ask them to split into four or five groups to tackle different portions of that text. They are then each responsible for summarizing that section with the rest of the class. After a set time, you can have the entire class meet to put the jigsaw puzzle back together, or, better yet, you can create a new set of small groups, each of which contains one member from the previous groups. That way, each new group can put the jigsaw together on their own, and every student is responsibly engaged.

Vocabulary and Text Dumps: "So, what did you think of the reading?" must surely be the worst possible opening question for discussion. How in the world can a student answer that -- and what is an instructor supposed to do with that answer? It benefits everyone to have a sense of how everyone else reacted to the reading before discussion starts, particularly when the reading was difficult. For these situations, use vocabulary and text dumps. Tell the class that you want them to go through the reading and find either specific terms and/or sentences that they found challenging or confusing, and have them write the terms or sentences on the board,



with citations so that others can find them. As some students squeak the chalk, tell the others to find items that they, too, found difficult, and to put a check next to those items. After a while, you and they both will have a pretty good chart for guiding discussion on the board. Ask the students to help explain the confusing terms or challenging sentences -- with books open to those pages -- in discussion, and provide assistance only when it is essential that you step in for clarification.

*8. Discuss discussion.*

I end at the beginning, which is both a title and a suggestion. If you are using discussion in your class, it's likely that you're teaching listening and responding, that you're modeling productive means to engage different opinions, that you're reflecting actively not only on the what but also the how of learning. Embrace those activities; discuss discussion with your students throughout the semester, paying special attention to the problems and concerns as they arise. The quality of discussion can only improve by such analysis.

Let me add that I'm not being merely, or even primarily, altruistic in giving that advice. Taking discussion seriously means reflecting not only on students' learning but also on your teaching; it means that, by definition, everyone's opinion is important and legitimate. As a result, your students' insight regarding your facilitation can be a powerful and valuable source of knowledge, one from which you can benefit. After all, you're working hard to teach them to talk openly and honestly about ideas you have found important enough to make them your calling. Why not reap the benefits of your good teaching -- and to that very end?

***possible PULL OUT QUOTES:***

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