

Promoting Critical Thinking Through Discussion

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ABSTRACT

Being able to think and speak effectively and thoughtfully is a valuable commodity to function successfully with civility in a democratic society and must be practiced. A form of discussion called Socratic seminar, enhances teaching and learning at the college level in this regard by encouraging the development of thinking skills and student voice. In this article, readers are offered an opportunity to view the author's initial experience with this form of discussion at the college level within a teacher education program from theoretical and practical lenses.

INTRODUCTION

Developing the quotient for critical thinking is the bedrock of one becoming a lifelong learner and a productive citizen. Discussion is a strategy that can be designed to promote and inculcate this capacity, yet is often poorly understood and implemented. Consequently, discussion in the college classroom often lapses into a time filler, devoid of intended content or purpose. Effective discussion re-centers the focus from instructor to student and encourages students to take responsibility for their own thinking and speaking. Through careful planning, discussion can be an instructional strategy that enhances comprehension, engages students in meaningful academic discourse, and provides a forum to stimulate and broaden original thought and the exchange of views and ideas.

College instructors often lament the lack of academic rigor in their students, commonly citing immaturity of thought process, inability to work cooperatively with others, and a seeming inability to accept other points of view as worthy as their own. Discussion in the classroom has the potential to help remedy these ills by providing a venue for intellectual exploration and depth of thought far surpassing interchange at the conversational level or happenstance classroom activity.

The instructional practices students have experienced and become accustomed to prior to coming to college may provide a partial explanation for this set of concerns. There simply are not enough hours in the day for K-12 teachers to meet the needs of the various and competing factions making demands upon them. In the fill-in-the-blank, short answer, *regurgitational* environment necessitated by national and state mandated assessments at the basic education level, it is not surprising that students find themselves in an uncomfortable situation when required to contemplate a complex question in order to give a thoughtful, complete, and multi-level response. As an example, in a respected school district recently, students were asked to respond to a prompt on a state assessment test. Taken from the visionary words of Native American Chief Seattle, the prompt read as follows:

Humankind has not woven the web of life. We are but one thread within it. Whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves. All things are bound together. All things connect. (Stiles 2006, pp. A1)

Students were stunned and bewildered that they would be expected to respond to this test item in the allotted hour. School officials enthusiastically concurred, considering this an unfair question to ask of 16- and 17-year old students. Granted, this prompt is not an easy one, but likely would not have been quite as objectionable if students had been prepared over time through the development of thinking skills. The ability to respond effectively to such prompts or questions requires a blend of life experience, basic building blocks of knowledge, and practice in the art and skill of thinking. Educators may have a limited influence on a student's life experience, but can be quite influential with

regard to the latter two components--providing knowledge and opportunities to build thinking skills. *Practicing* critical thinking skills is instrumental in developing what is desired--*critical thinkers*.

Although the aforementioned example is drawn from basic education, it speaks directly to concerns at the college level and serves as a reminder that similar circumstances undoubtedly occur in higher education, too. Students are done a disservice at any educational level if the lion's share of instructional time is focused on lower order activities or presenting professorial ideas as a preferred substitute for student thinking. Students are often quite accepting of their perceived role of pleasing their instructor in saying what they believe the instructor thinks or wants his or her students to think. With awareness of these issues, critical thinking strategies can be utilized to address many of these issues to effect positive change.

WHY DISCUSSION?

Discussion is a traditional model of teaching at the college level. It is an approach that can be used to strengthen content by enhancing and reinforcing comprehension, offering students an opportunity to engage in academic discourse, providing a forum for students to develop and exchange views and ideas in a thoughtful, purposive, not to mention civilized, fashion. The term *discussion* is generally used to describe any one of many types of conversational activities and can vary widely in structure and focus. At its best, it may be described as "teaching by asking questions, ...[and] by helping students to raise their minds up from a state of understanding or appreciating less to a state of understanding or appreciating more" (Alder 1982, p. 29).

Socratic seminar is a formal type of discussion designed to have students investigate ideas, principles, values presented in class or uncovered through readings and other sources. The ultimate goals for students are to develop critical thinking skills and take increasing ownership for their own thoughts and actions through the time-honored learning and communication skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening and thinking (Roberts 1998). This strategy takes its name directly from its famous namesake, Socrates. Socrates believed that determining logical and rational answers was possible through the use of appropriate questions to tap the reservoir of knowledge and understanding that existed in every person. His philosophy has been echoed by numerous theorists, philosophers, and educators such as John Dewey, Robert Hutchins, and Mortimer Adler, all of whom supported the concept of a classical, liberal education--one where the end results are lifelong learners and productive, valuable citizens of the world.

Socratic seminar is what many may refer to as *discussion*, but not just any discussion. An effective discussion is one that is planned and executed using an original text and open ended questions designed to elicit true student voice by engaging them on an emotional level through meaningful, experiential instruction (Tredway 1995). Secondly, yet of equal importance, is to mold that voice beyond the opinion level into those coveted higher order thinking skills described by Bloom (1956). Critical thinking may include, but certainly is not limited to, strengthening elements of logic development, concept attainment, problem analysis and solution generation, recognition or appreciation of ideas not previously considered, or assessing the authenticity of thought, word, or deed.

Using an original text (narrative, music, art, photographs, videos or other choices), instructors craft open-ended questions which require students to examine and voice their own thinking, to respond to others thoughtfully and respectfully, and to practice the traditional communication skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Roberts 1998, 2002). Thinking for oneself, understanding that this life is replete with uncertainties and emergent situations and circumstances, and that one's thoughts or ideas are likely to be subject to revision is the very essence of effective discussion in the college classroom.

FOUNDATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL DISCUSSION

Despite what students may or may not bring to the college classroom, the art and practice of discussion as a viable pedagogical strategy has merit and offers a way for college instructors to further develop critical thinking skills in their students. First and foremost, it is vital to establish the goal or goals of discussion in one's particular setting which may include:

- critical thinking skills as evidenced through speaking, writing, and listening skills;
- democratic social skills in being able to analyze and evaluate topics and attendant points-of-view;
- growth and clarity of one's own thoughts and thought process; and
- the ability to engage in discourse with civility and an open mind.

PRESERVICE TEACHERS: EFFECTIVE DISCUSSION IN ACTION

Using discussion effectively in the classroom is as much about process as it is about product. Students are expected to exhibit critical thinking skills, yet the opportunity to develop these skills is too rarely presented in the classroom setting. Educators often are looking for the “right” answer; students, in response, desperately try to provide this magical response. However, for much of life, there may be no right or wrong response; there are few black and white polarizations--only grey. This is particularly true for students enrolled in teacher education programs.

Discussion can elevate student understanding of a topic and serve as a model for preservice teachers to emulate in their future classrooms. To illustrate the basic tenets and value of Socratic seminar, the author will share her first experience with introducing this teaching strategy into the college classroom. The students portrayed are a class of 24 students, mostly female and Caucasian. These young women are collectively called the “urban cohort,” a self-selected group of students devoting their studies and field experiences to teaching in urban settings. The following section of this paper details and chronicles the initial use of Socratic discussion in one of their teacher preparation classes:

Selection Of Text

Choosing readings and crafting questions (Bain 2004) is paramount to the success of instituting Socratic seminar in the classroom. Formal pedagogy texts are often homogenized, stilted, or over-generalized, particularly for preservice teachers who have minimal experience in the classroom. It is important for these undergraduates to start to see themselves as *real* classroom teachers and to begin to understand the true majesty of the teaching profession, yet open their eyes to the realities and rigors of daily life in the classroom. In this case, the instructor particularly wanted students to be exposed to narratives about urban classrooms from a non-majority point of view. Greg Michie's (2005), *See You When We Get There*, a book describing the urban teaching perspective from the experiences of four urban teachers of color was chosen to serve this purpose.

Deciding What Questions To Ask

Planning ahead, several questions were designed to initiate study of the book for use in the classroom. Specifically:

- *Question 1:* What is this book really about? (Round-robin: Response in a word or two from every student)
- *Question 2:* As it applies to urban education, comment on the extent of your agreement or disagreement with Myles Horton's (Michie, p. xiii) statement, “The people with the problems are the same people with the solutions.”
- *Question 3:* Can teachers close the achievement gap prevalent in many urban schools? Explain your point of view.
- *Question 4:* Should the primary focus of urban education be academic or striving for social justice? Justify your response.

Readying The Students

The instructor announced the activity to students noting that it would be a part of their next class session. The purpose was explained and ground rules were set as follows:

- The assigned reading (Michie, pp. vii-13) must be read before class.
- The class and instructor would be arranged in a circle so that everyone could make visual contact with one another.
- Raised hands would *not* be acknowledged. Doing so would reinforce the position of instructor as leader. Questions would be posed by the instructor to which students would respond to whomever they chose to respond--by name. The instructor's role would further diminish as they looked to each other to maintain and energize the conversation (Adler 1984).
- The instructor's voice would be heard only to clarify or pose a follow-up question, probe a student's response, refocus the discussion, moderate conflict, or to encourage responses from students as needed in the discussion.
- Put downs, sarcasm, or other forms of incivility would not be permitted. Students should consider the content and tone of remarks before verbalizing them.

Students expressed a curiosity at the process and an unexpected enthusiasm that the forthcoming discussion would be "all about them." One student, with apparent reservations, tentatively commented, "Usually when we have a discussion, the professor does most of the talking." To which another said, "Yeah, they say they want to hear what we have to say, but it is usually another chance for them to tell us what they think."

Despite this skepticism, the discussion commenced during the next class session as planned. Taking 40-minutes of class time, the activity was concluded with a brief writing assignment to have students connect their speaking, listening, thinking, and learning: The prompt was: *Is it preferable or even possible to be colorblind in the classroom? Why or why not?* When finished, students were encouraged to verbally share what they had written.

LESSONS LEARNED

This was the first discussion session in a series of discussions on Michie's book. As a first endeavor with Socratic seminar, the instructor asked students to engage in a debriefing, rather a "discussion of the discussion," to help assess and strengthen the process and the product of this learning strategy.

Student comments included:

- "I read the chapter like you asked, but I never got from it what I have now thanks to being able to discuss it like we did."
- "Sara and I haven't agreed on anything EVER--and I still don't agree with her [laughter from the class], but I can now at least see where she is coming from."
- "I know that we had some rough patches in the discussion, but I hope we can do this again--I'd like to try again. I thought I knew what I believed...now I am not so sure."
- "It was hard coming up with my own thoughts. I hated it when you insisted that I justify my comment, I hated it when you made me reconsider what Jeff and Kristen said...and I loved it. Nobody put me down--this wasn't a fight."
- "When my friends and I get into it--verbally, of course [laughter], I am always so busy thinking about what I want to say, I really don't listen. Maybe this stuff is useful in real life, too."
- "I feel a stirring within. I think that I have grown personally by doing this discussion. I see that I don't have to be argumentative to argue my point anymore. I think I may be a little better listener, too."

After engaging in additional planned discussions, it became clear that students had begun to turn a corner in reading material more carefully and purposefully. Soon thereafter, they also began to use *discussion-like* questions in the classroom, and even with one another, in other classroom activities. In addition, their written work took on a more reflective tone with deeper, more clearly articulated responses.

Continued use of Socratic discussion taught the instructor which types of questions generated the most discussion, and which fell flat. Lapses of silence, uncomfortable at first, proved beneficial as it permitted students time to formulate thoughtful responses. Additionally, instructor strategies were developed to encourage reticent students to speak and, conversely, to cultivate economy of speech among more garrulous students. Through this initial attempt to infuse relevant, meaningful discussion in the college classroom, the planned goals of learning were met without sacrificing any course content or objectives; in fact, achieving them was enhanced.

CONCLUSION

Discussion in the classroom provides a badly needed opportunity in the learning process. Many topics in higher education cannot easily be taught through direct instruction. If a goal is to impress upon students the importance of maintaining an open mind and the valuing of diverse points of view, instructors must make room in classroom settings to underscore student voice in this respect. It is only through the personalization of instruction--giving students the opportunity to examine, explore, and wrap their minds around the vagaries of any given topic or question--does learning stick and provide a scaffold (Vygotsky 2006) on which to build additional and future learnings.

As it applies to teacher education and other disciplines as well, modeling the pedagogy of discussion provides a demonstration of a method to develop critical thinking skills at any level of the educational process. As with all instructional strategies, there is a time and place--this being at the discretion and good judgment of the instructor. It provides a forum for students to practice and exercise the skills of civil discourse, democratic process, and intellectual exchange (Brookfield & Preskill 2005). In the spirit of Duckworth (1996), discussion enables students to discover their own thoughts and meaning from the content--and the process. Strengthening the development of thinking skills in college students is necessarily a time-consuming and ongoing process. However, with a potential result of producing students who are capable of being responsible adults in society with the ability to sincerely consider the points of view of others is well worth the effort.

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