

Notes from “Talking About Teaching” session:
Dialogue in the Classroom
September 30, 2009

Note: The comments here are meant to capture key points of discussion and presentation plus the general tenor of the exchange.

Discussants: Sue Darlington, Kristen Luschen, Jana Silver

Charlene D’Avanzo introduced the group of Mentors from the “Dialogue in the Classroom” project, explaining that they had been trained in “intergroup dialogue” techniques by Ximena Zuniga from UMass, and had been implementing these techniques in their classes. Now these faculty are mentoring a new group, and it is hoped that this will cause a snowball effect and carry through to others.

What led you to this opportunity to learn about “Dialogue”?

Sue Darlington opened the panel. She talked about application of the Intergroup Dialogue project to classroom teaching and specifically the challenge of how to encourage students to enter into a dialogue with others around the issues of class, gender, race, ethnicity, and religion (among others Many key lessons were learned. She became aware of silences – and what these might indicate. A key goal was helping to create a more democratic classroom, where more points of view could be heard.

Jana Silver joined the dialogue project because of the multi-cultural aspect of art education. She wanted to take the learning to another level, and wanted to feel more comfortable around student-centered learning rather than teacher-centered.

Kristen Luschen had been skeptical initially about the “touchy-feely” nature of the dialogue process, and wondered where the content would go. She did not believe she knew enough to take on this new approach. She had been aware of the racial climate at work, and was working with a task force on diversity. When Sylvia Hurtado spoke in an Intergroup Dialogue session, Kristen was very influenced. Sylvia made the connections about how dialogue affects learning and thinking, and remarked on how recruitment and retention of students of color was dependent on their acceptance in the classroom.

Students must be engaged so that they talk “across boundaries.” They need to develop critical thinking. They don’t love classes where nothing is building – they need the tools to grow.

What did you learn?

Jana explained that she began to think about the risks involved in teaching, and realized that she needed to shake things up! How should she go about that? She introduced an exercise in which students were assigned different roles – and was ‘blown away’ by the success of this role-playing. She tried another exercise using

newsprint, asking students to share publically whatever they wanted to, writing on the paper.

Jana interwove questions about art education between the other questions and this also worked well. In an exercise about the “culture of silence” a student wrote “I need a safe place where I can really talk about this.” The class lasted for two and a half hours and brought the students together.

Sue also told of having to tell the class that the time was up because students were so engaged in the exercise. She found it important to ask – what is the quality of the talk? Who is not talking, and why? How can we create a safe space in the classroom? Creating dialogue fosters learning and critical thinking. There is no one true answer, but many answers. We also need to honor the silence when it occurs.

Kristen spoke of taking risks. This requires a different approach to teaching. For instance, students need to be shown how to take different perspectives and be more explicit in these roles. Many approaches can be used in class – writing, and exercises – to help students take on different perspectives. How do we come to understand points of view? Co-teaching with Jaime Davila, Kristen learned about the emotional/gut reaction vs. the analytical one. Writing assignments are tied into this, and this builds community. With community, students can feel safe and share prior experiences. Faculty can ask students what climate do we need to build?

The workshop attendees were then asked to pair up and discuss the question: “what attempts and challenges did you encounter from structuring discussion with different identity groups.” When they had discussed the question, the faculty then joined another pair, and the four discussed themes that had come up.

Group One suggested faculty insist right off the bat that students try to meet others “where they are”. Also, when people do not observe the ground rules, they must be called out. But it is more important to help students feel empowered to assert their own desires - instead of being called out. It is important to learn to live with ambiguity. In queer culture, people speak from very different experiences. Sometimes others do not understand the language of the culture. The academic and the personal can clash.

Group Two spoke about the tension between getting content as well as process in the classroom. The challenge of small group work is in letting go and allowing the students to decide. As Ximena said, it is important to clearly define “Roles, Task and Structure”.. And as faculty, we don’t need to be at the center of things.

Group Three talked about issues specific to the disciplines, such as economics “wrapped” in culture. How to revalue economics? Students should be encouraged to engage each other – remove self from the center. Women’s stories are often useful. It’s important to engage the different cultures (ethnic, racial, class differences). The ground rules are to respectfully disagree. Bring everyone on board by being clear about phrases and terminology, as not everyone may understand the lingo.

Nell spoke about cultural styles. What do we need to know about how you communicate? Notice who talks too much, and who is shy.

Faculty model behavior for the students in their own responses. Don't let things slide. After a significant discussion, at the next class – return to the “crime scene”. At the close of class, check in for one minute about what transpired.

Have students been at the forefront of the class? Help people think about the process, and be more mindful of the process. We have the tools to engage students.