

Notes from “Talking About Teaching” session:
Promoting Real Dialogue in the Classroom
March 8, 2010

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

Discussants: Rachel Conrad, Susan Tracy, Jim Wald, Laura Wenk.

Charlene opened with remarks about the importance of creating a situation in the classroom where students understand one another and can express ideas about topics that are the hardest to talk about. As she interviewed faculty members who worked with Ximena Zuniga in the “Dialogue” project, she was impressed by the sophistication and passion they expressed around this area, and hopes to extend the work further so that new faculty can be mentored by trained faculty.

Laura Wenk gave an overview of the project which began in the fall of 2009. The original idea was to help support students around difficult issues, such as race and class. Typically in the classroom, the instructor initiates the conversation with a question, and students respond and there is no true dialogue. With training, it becomes possible to tease apart the three different structures of discussion, debate, and dialogue. Being able to recognize these forms is necessary to begin to move towards dialogue, but that in itself is not sufficient. Two books, used in the training with Ximena Zuniga, were extremely helpful in learning how to approach the practice. They were: *McKeachie’s Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*, and *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*, by Brookfield and Preskill.

Rachel Conrad continued, saying that rather than feeling sophistication and passion around the topic of dialogue, she had felt desperation and fatigue! Rachel found the materials provided by Zuniga very interesting, particularly around the issue of where thinking can get in the way of dialogue. What is the goal? Is there a clear outcome? vs. “something else.” How do we build open-ended structures. Zuniga spoke often of role, task, and structure – setting up a situation where things could unfold.

Laura picked up on this, speaking of a “fishbowl” exercise which she uses in class, around modeling. Small groups were formed. The discussion groups worked on an idea in their groups, brought it back in, and had come to an agreement within the group. The dialogue groups kept listening to one another, with more emphasis on hearing what the others in the group were saying. The two sets of groups, discussion and dialogue, behaved very differently, and this was dependent on how they saw their job or role. Allowing for diversity of opinion is very important in complex issues. Why would you come up with one answer?

Rachel gave an example of an incident that had happened in her class recently. This illustrated the importance of fostering respectful disagreement vs. shutting people down. In a small upper level seminar on poetry and childhood, which was already set up, students shared their own writing. Students were learning not to jump to their own defense, but remain in a respectful climate and take in the critical remarks of others. The word “indian” was used by a writer in reference to experiences that happened long ago. Students in the class would not refer to this mention, and avoided it. Referring to the word as “cultural other”, a discussion was sparked. Some students said the word was problematic, one defended the word as a classic element of childhood. One said it was classic and racist. So the question was raised – how can we refer to the games of childhood in a respectful way. People were willing to have a dialogue about this – and not hide their opinions. Rachel saw this as different and closer to the terrain of dialogue that she had been trained in.

Laura Wenk experienced a situation in her class which posed a dilemma. One student often commented in the guise of devil’s advocate and his remarks seemed insensitive to the feelings of others – especially to students of color. That student was spoken by the faculty (Laura and Jim). Faculty are in a challenging position sometimes, as they may notice that an issue is occurring and may want to bring this to the awareness of the class more deliberately, but can’t really shut people off (usually). Jim Wald mentioned a similar situation in his class when they were discussing Plymouth colony, and students spoke about why native Americans might be upset at how that settlement has been represented, and various perspectives were offered by students. This was a useful exercise for all.

Marty Ehrlich said that groups feel the need to have consensus – and say “here’s what we have come up with.” Some students are uncomfortable declaring Joe said this or that etc. But it is useful for faculty to do that, to clarify positions, and since they are outside the issue, it is not hard to do.

Susan Tracy spoke about her training in dialogue and how it had impacted that two classes she taught. One was on Controversies in U.S. Social Revolution through the 1930s, and covered the issues of slavery, class conflict, gender, and genocide of native Americans. She used some techniques from the dialogue training, broke the class up into small groups, and small debates were taken – pro and anti slavery. She asked the class to consider what those long ago would have had to say to avoid the Civil War. This allowed students to talk about race outside of themselves – and say, e.g. this is how they were being racist.

Faculty do not have much training in how to deal with people’s feelings around these topics. It’s very useful for them to speak with colleagues. Susan’s class watched a movie on Wounded Knee, and then came in to class the next day – able to discuss their feelings around this powerful film, and this led to a discussion on foreign policy. In the Brookfield book, Susan particularly benefitted from the section on *Lectures to Model Democratic Talk*, which describes how to break out of the lecture mode, and promote a democratic exchange. In her class, made up of first

semester students and Division II finishers, she was very aware that the first semester students felt excluded in discussion.

Rachel found it useful in class to set up small groups and allowing room for students to grow and think. It's particularly important to hear other points of view. In a class on Rethinking Childhood, children around four years old were allowed to explore, and a mirroring project was undertaken. Students were planning on having the children to create a collage as a group effort. When the children were brought together at the collage table, they quickly asserted that they wanted to do their own, and did not want to collaborate. The reaction on the part of the students was...we failed! We were not successful in achieving our goal. The reality was – these children felt empowered with their new skills and wanted to assert their own ideas. So, the students learned from the children, and saw how sometimes the flow just happens. In the past, Rachel said she was very concerned with being sure of the outcome. Now she realized that part of the learning was about being open to whatever developed, and not trying to control the situation. Her students learned from the four year olds.

Jim Wald spoke about his experience in class using the dialogue approach. There often arises a shared understanding when dialogue is encouraged. Around the issue of anti-Semitism, the conversation can be easy and also hard. Jim believes it is very important early on in the course to establish a good atmosphere. He likes to begin working from The Middle Ages – in the distant past, when everyone was “in the dark” and nobody had human rights! He begins with a reading, assuming everyone is ignorant about this era, and this begins to establish trust. Then small groups are created, and students are mixed up in new ones. Good rapport is established. Students learn that different cultures work in different ways. Jim works using slides sometimes. He explains “I started with images of obvious or possible anti-black racism in the US, and after getting students to articulate their classification choices here, moved on to actual or possible anti-Semitic images, asking them to apply the same process. “

He and the class question – why is apartheid controversial? What are the assumptions around this. Jim shared this example: “Some student activists today call Israel an apartheid state. The task for a class discussion would be to begin by exploring why the issue is so controversial. In order to consider whether the charge is anti-Semitic, we would begin by exploring feelings, i.e. why might some people find the analogy offensive rather than instructive?”

Sue Darlington spoke about what makes a group of students open up. It begins with understanding where you are from, and then acknowledging other students' perspectives, and listening. Often students are competing to send more sophisticated and enlightened statements. The reality is each has to “own herself” and her own sensitivities. It could be said that we need to unlearn racism, and understand better than we did before. This brings attention to power, and how power informs things. What is at the heart of the debate?

Laura Wenk used to allow for differences of opinion and learning styles in students. Now she deals with sensitive topics, allowing complex discussion and pushing students in her urban science teaching class to declare their positions more openly.

Viveca Greene spoke about differences in dialogue where there is diversity vs. having no diversity among students. If there is true dialogue, often this is because the groups are balanced. In the classroom, this does not happen as you can't control the numbers or composition of the class. You cannot control the weighting of this effect, but you can acknowledge the situation. Two students of color in her class were uncomfortable. Their situation was named, and this opened up space in the class. The differences and commonalities of the students in the classroom is a powerful dynamic.

Laura added that you can't question someone's experience. We "can't debate identity." Students need to have a safe place from which to write or speak. They can say: "here is what I observed." They write intellectual biographies at the beginning of a course, and maybe should rewrite these at the end of the semester when they have more insight.

Charlene concluded saying that these four faculty members obviously got a lot out of the dialogue workshops which they were carrying into the classroom now. Perhaps the dialogue training could continue into the summer, or at new faculty orientation, faculty could be paired up so that new faculty could work with faculty already trained in the dialogue techniques and keep the process growing.