DISCUSSION AS A WAY OF TEACHING

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CONVERSATION – AN EXCHANGE OF THOUGHTS & FEELING WHERE GENIAL COOPERATION PREVAILS

DIALOGUE – INTERSUBJECTIVE UNDERSTANDING : PLACING YOURSELF IN OTHERS' SHOES TO SEE THE WORLD AS THEY SEE IT
MUTUALITY – DEEPENING AND CHANGING UNDERSTANDING BASED ON WHAT WE LEARN FROM OTHERS

DISCUSSION – DISCISPLINED & FOCUSED EXPLORATION OF MUTUAL CONCERNS BUT WITH NO END POINT PREDETERMINED IN ADVANCE

Aims …
To develop critical, informed understanding
To enhance self-critique
To foster appreciation for diverse views
To help people take informed action

WHY DISCUSSIONS FAIL

UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

UNPREPARED STUDENTS

NO GROUND RULES

REWARD SYSTEMS ASKEW

NO TEACHER MODELING

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Discussion Ground Rules

1. Think of the best group discussions you've ever been involved in. What things happened that made these conversations so satisfying? Make a few notes on this by yourself. 5 minutes

2. Think of the worst group discussions you've ever been involved in. What things happened that made these conversations so unsatisfactory? Make a few notes on this by yourself. 5 minutes

3. Take turns in talking about what made discussion groups work so well for you. Listen for common themes shared experiences and features of conversation that you'd like to see present in this group. 10 minutes.

4. Take turns in talking about what made discussion groups work so badly for you. Listen for common themes shared experiences and features of group conversation that you'd like to see avoided in this critical reflection group. 10 minutes.

5. For each of the characterstics of good discussion you agree on, try and suggest three things a group could do to ensure, as much as possible, that these characteristics were present. Be as specific and concrete as you can. For example, if you feel that good conversation is cumulative and connected, with later themes building on and referring back to earlier ones, you could propose a rule whereby every new comment made by a participant is prefaced with an explanation as to how it relates to, or springs from, an earlier comment. 10 minutes.

6. For each of the characterstics of bad discussion you agree on, try and suggest three things a group could do to ensure, as much as possible, that these characteristics were avoided. Be as specific and concrete as you can. For example, if you feel that bad conversation happens when one person's voice dominates you could propose a rule whereby no-one is allowed to follow a comment they have made with another comment until at least three other people have spoken (unless another group member explicitly invites the participant to say something else). 10 minutes.

7. Try and finish this exercise by drafting a charter for discussion that comprises the specific ground rules that you agree on. If less than a two- thirds majority support a particular rule I suggest that you agree to re-examine this rule after no more than four meetings of the group. At that time, the group may decide to drop or affirm the rule, or draft an additional one. 10 minutes.

OTHER TECHNIQUES FOR SETTING GROUND RULES

Another approach to evolving ground rules is to ask participants to focus on the 'golden rule'; that is, ask them how they would like to be spoken to in a discussion and use their responses to frame a code of conduct for how they will speak to others. Again, our role would be to help students move from general declarations such as "I want people to listen carefully to what I'm saying" to specific behaviors (such as suggesting a weekly circular response discussion period in which students take turns to listen carefully, paraphrase and then respond to each others' contributions).

In their work in co-operative learning Johnson, Johnson and Smith propose the T-Chart, a technique that can be adapted well to help students develop ground rules for discussion. The characteristic of discussion that students desire is written on the top of a large piece of newsprint. Imagine that students say they want their discussions to be respectful. Under the heading 'Respectful' the teacher divides the sheet in two, labeling one side 'Sounds Like' and the other side 'Looks Like'. Students and teachers then suggest items that would fall under each column so that after a few minutes a list is available of how students think respectful discussions look and sound.

Finally, you can use videos of discussion vignettes as a useful way to focus students' attention on how they want their discussions to look. Here's the instructions for such an exercise that you might give to students:-

Video Vignettes of Discussion

You're going to see two 5 minute excerpts of different discussions. Please watch for the kinds of comments, contributions and actions that you think are good, and bad, discussion behaviors. Note these down by yourself. Don't discuss your reactions with others at this stage. You might find it helpful to watch the video with the following questions in mind ...

(i) In your view which participants made the best, most helpful or most useful contributions to the discussion ? Why were these contributions so worthwhile ?

(ii) In your view which participants made the worst, least helpful or least useful contributions to the discussion ? Why were these contributions so irrelevant or unproductive ?

(iii) What changes would you introduce to improve either of theses discussions ?

Now, compare your responses with the reactions of others in your group. Look particularly for areas of agreement. Based on these, could you suggest any guidelines that would ensure that helpful discussion behaviors are encouraged ?

When we reconvene we will see if your notes help us decide on the discussion guidelines we want to follow in this course.

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The Circle of Voices

Participants form into a circle of about 5. They are allowed up to three minutes silent time to organize their thoughts. During this time they think about what they want to say on the topic once the circle of voices begins. After this silent period the discussion opens with each person having a period of uninterrupted air time. During the time each person is speaking no one else is allowed to interrupt.

People can take their turns to speak by going round the circle in order or volunteering at random. Although the latter arrangement sounds the most relaxed and informal the opposite is often the case. The order of the circle removes from participants the stress of having to decide whether or not they will try and jump in after another student has finished speaking. Not having to decide this is one less thing to worry about. An important benefit of using the circle of voices at the start of a discussion is that it prevents the development early on of a pecking order of contributors. Introverted, shy members, those whose experience has taught them to mistrust academe, or those who view discussion as another thinly veiled opportunity for teachers to oppress or offend, will often stay silent at the beginning of a course. The longer this silence endures, the harder it is for these individuals to speak out. By way of contrast, in the circle of voices everyone's voice is heard at least once at the start of the session.

After the circle of voices has been completed, and everyone has had the chance to say their piece, then the discussion opens out into a more free flowing format. As this happens a second ground rule comes into effect. Participants are only allowed to talk about another person's ideas that have already been shared in the circle of voices. A person cannot jump into the conversation by expanding on his own ideas, he can only talk about his reactions to what someone else has said. The only exception to this ground rule is if someone else asks him directly to expand on his ideas. This simple ground rule prevents the tendency toward 'grandstanding' that sometimes afflicts a few articulate, confident individuals.

To recap the ground rules:-

Begin by going round the circle with each person contributing & no interruptions allowed

After this, move into open discussion, but remember your contributions can only be about, or refer back to, something one of the other group members said in the opening circle.

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CONVERSATIONAL MOVES

Paste the conversational moves listed below on 3x5 cards and randomly distribute them among participants before a pre-arranged discussion session. Ask participants to practice their move during the discussion that follows. When the discussion is over distribute the entire list of moves so people can see the wide variety of ways that questioning, listening and responding can be practiced. Point out to participants that virtually all the moves listed are designed to strengthen connections among group members. Ask participants to recap how they tried to make the moves they were allocated.

Specific Moves

Ask a question or make a comment that shows you are interested in what another person says

Ask a question or make a comment that encourages another person to elaborate on something they have already said

Make a comment that underscores the link between two people's contributions

Use body language to show interest in what different speakers are saying

Make a specific comment indicating how you found another person's ideas interesting/useful.

Contribute something that builds on, or springs from, what someone else has said. Be explicit about the way you are building on the other person's thoughts

Make a comment that at least partly paraphrases a point someone has already made

Make an summary observation that takes into account several people's contributions & that touches on a recurring theme in the discussion

Ask a cause and effect question - for example, "can you explain why you think it's true that if these things are in place such and such a thing will occur?"

When you think it's appropriate, ask the group for a moment's silence to slow the pace of conversation and give you, and others, time to think

Find a way to express appreciation for the enlightenment you have gained from the discussion. Be specific about what it was that helped you understand something better

Disagree with someone in a respectful and constructive way

Create space for someone who has not yet spoken to contribute to the conversation

CONVERSATIONAL ROLES 5

Problem, Dilemma, or Theme Poser: This participant has the task of introducing the topic of conversation. She draws on her own ideas and experiences as a way of helping others into conversation about the theme.

Reflective Analyst: This member keeps a record of the conversation's development. Every 20 minutes or so, she gives a summary that focuses on shared concerns, issues skirted, and emerging common themes.

Scrounger: The scrounger listens for helpful resources, suggestions, and tips that participants have voiced as they discuss how to work through a problem or situation. She keeps a record of these ideas that is read out before the session ends.

Devil's Advocate: This person listens carefully for any emerging consensus. When she hears this she formulates and expresses a contrary view. This keeps group-think in check and helps participants explore a range of alternative interpretations.

Detective: The detective listens carefully for unacknowledged, unchecked and unchallenged biases that seem to be emerging in the conversation. As she hears these she brings them to the group's attention. She assumes particular responsibility for alerting group members to concerns of race, class and gender. She listens for cultural blindness, gender insensitivity, and comments that ignore variables of power and class.

Theme Spotter: This participant identifies themes that arise during the discussion that are left unexplored and that might form a focus for the next session.

Umpire: This person listens for judgmental comments that sound offensive, insulting and demeaning, and that contradict ground rules for discussion generated by group members.

Textual Focuser: Whenever assertions are made that seem unconnected to the text being discussed, this person asks the speaker to let the group know where the point is made.

Connector: This person does her best to show how participants' contributions are connected to each other.

Summarizer: This person has the responsibility to make summary observations that take into account several people's contributions.

Appreciator: This person makes comments indicating how she found another person's ideas interesting or useful.

Questioner: This person has the task of asking questions to draw out or extend what others have said

Speculator: This person introduces new ideas, new interpretations and possible lines of inquiry into the group e.g. "I wonder what would happen if …?", "I wonder what (major theorist) would say about ….?

Active Listener: This person tries to paraphrase others' contributions to the conversation ("So what I hear you saying is …", "If I understand you correctly you're suggesting that …")

Underscorer: This person emphasizes the relevance, accuracy or resonance of another person's comments and underscores why the comments are so pertinent

The facilitator should make every attempt to model each of these roles early on in a series of group meetings and let learners know that this is what she is doing.

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Hatful of Quotes

One question that invariably arises regarding exercises such as the circle of voices and circular response, concerns whether or not teachers should require all students to participate. Mandating speech seems like an exercise of teacher power that stands in direct contrast to the spirit of democratic conversation. However, I believe that there are occasions when it is justifiable to exercise power in this way. bell hooks (1994, p. 41) describes how she requires students to read out paragraphs from their journals in class so that none feel invisible or silenced. To her this is a responsible exercise of teacher power. Always allowing students the option to pass in discussion circles means that those who are shy and introverted, or uncomfortable because they perceive themselves as members of a minority race, gender or class, end up not contributing. The longer this pattern of non-participation persists, the harder it is to break. So what seems like an empathic, benign action by the leader - allowing students the right to silence - serves to reinforce existing differences in status and power. Those who are used to holding forth will move automatically to speak, while those whose voices are rarely heard, will be silenced.

One way through this dilemma is to make the mandated act of contributing as stress free as possible. This is the purpose of the 'hatful of quotes' exercise. Prior to a discussion of a text the leader types out sentences or passages from the text onto separate slips of paper. In class she puts these into a hat and asks students to draw one of these slips out of a hat. Students are given a few minutes to think about their quote and then asked to read it out and comment on it. The order of contribution is up to the students. Those who feel more fearful about speaking go last and take more time to think about what they want to say. Because the same five or six quotes are used, students who go later will have heard their quote read out and commented on by those who spoke earlier. So even if they have little to say about their own interpretation of the quote, they can affirm, build on, or contradict a comment a peer has already made on that quote. This exercise is a good way to create a safe opportunity for everyone to speak. Those who are diffident get to say something, thus building confidence for subsequent contributions.

bell hooks Teaching to Transgress. New York: Routledge, 1994

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QUOTES TO AFFIRM & CHALLENGE

Begin by choosing a quote to affirm and challenge in your assigned text that you will bring back to your peers for consideration.

Quotes to Affirm

Students form into small groups and each member takes a turn to propose a quote they wish to affirm and the reasons for doing this. The quote does not have to be defended as empirically true. Sometimes a participant will propose a quote because it confirms a point of view she holds. Sometimes she feels the quote states the most important point in the text. At other times the quote is affirmed because it is rhetorically rousing or expressed so lyrically. When everyone in the small group has proposed a quote to affirm the group then chooses one to report back to the larger class.

The two quotes chosen cannot be from the same person. Also, the person whose quote is chosen should NOT be the person who speaks about it to the larger group. If the group is unable to choose a quote then it reports to the larger group on its struggle.

Quotes to Challenge

The 'quote to challenge' activity follows the same procedure only this time students choose a quote that they disagree with, find contradictory, believe to be inaccurate, or consider reprehensible and immoral. Each person proposes their quote to the small group and group members choose one to report back to the larger class.

Again, the two quotes chosen cannot be from the same person. Also, the person whose quote is chosen should NOT be the person who speaks about it to the larger group. . If the group is unable to choose a quote then it reports to the larger group on its struggle.

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Circular Response Discussions

The circular response exercise is a way to democratize discussion participation, to promote continuity and to give people some experience of the effort required in respectful listening. In this process participants sit in a circle so that everyone can see each other, and each person in turn takes up to a minute to talk about an issue / question the group has agreed to discuss.

Speakers are not free, however, to say anything they want. They must incorporate into their remarks some reference to the preceding speaker's message and then use this as a springboard for their own comments. This doesn't have to be an agreement – it can be an expression of dissent from the previous opinion. The important thing is that the previous person's comments are the prompt for whatever is being said in circular response. If the new speaker can find no point of connection to the previous speaker's comments then she can talk about the source of the confusion – a gap in experience or a lack of knowledge about the language or ideas used. The optimal size for this exercise is 6-8 participants. Here's the instructions:

Choose a theme that the group wishes to discuss, form into a circle and ask for a volunteer to start the discussion. This person speaks up to a minute or so about the theme chosen. After the minute is up, the first discussant yields the floor and the person sitting to the discussant's left speaks for a minute or so. The second discussant must show in her contribution how what she is saying springs from, or is in response to, the comments of the first discussant. After a minute or so, the second discussant stops speaking, and the person to her left becomes the third discussant, and thus the discussion moves all the way around the circle. To sum up:

1. no one may be interrupted while speaking;

2. no one may speak out of turn in the circle;

3. each person is allowed only a minute or so to speak;

4. each person, in all comments, must strive to show how his or her remarks spring from, or respond to, the comments of the previous discussant.

After each discussant has had a turn to speak, the floor is opened for general conversation, and the previous ground rules are no longer in force.

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SNOWBALLING

One way to illustrate how discussions can be developmental and increasingly inclusive is to use a process called "snowballing" or "pyramiding".

Students begin this activity by responding to questions or issues as individuals. They then create progressively larger dialogic groups by doubling the size of these every few minutes until by the end of the activity everyone is reconvened in the large group. At each stage as students move from pairs to quartets, quartets to octets they recap the chief point of difference, or the chief question that emerged, in their previous round of conversation.

Here's the instructions students follow:

We are going to try something a little different today. It's called "snowballing" and it gives you a chance to think and talk about issues in a variety of different configurations. Please begin with some private, solitary reflection in which you gather your thoughts about the questions at the bottom of this sheet. Jot down some notes if you wish.

After about 1 minute of solitary thought join with one other person to continue the dialogue. After about five minutes you and your partner should join another pair to form a group of four. As the two pairs merge, each pair should recap the chief difference that emerged, or a question they raised, in their conversation.

The quartets will continue the discussion for another 10 minutes and then they will merge with other quartets to create octets - groups of 8. As the two quartets merge, each quartet recaps the chief difference that emerged, or a question they raised, in their conversation.

The discussion proceeds for 20 minutes this time and continues in 20 minute intervals until the whole class is brought together at the end of the session.

This exercise gets a lot of people talking to one another, while retaining much of the value of small groups. It also contributes a festive quality to the class. People mill about excitedly and greet each other warmly as they meet in new configurations. On the other hand, snowballing can sometimes have a frenetic, disjointed feel.

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NEWSPRINT DIALOGUES

Small groups summarize their conversations on large sheets of newsprint or chalkboards. Individual members of the class are then free to wander about the room reading all the responses & adding comments.

Here's the instructions:

In this activity, you will be working in small groups most of the time. I have prepared some questions for you to consider in these groups, but don't follow them too slavishly. Use them as a jumping off point for ideas you find especially worth exploring. You will have 30 minutes in your groups to discuss these questions and to write your answers to these on the newsprint provided.

You should appoint someone to be recorder but don't start writing immediately. Take some time to let your responses emerge from the discussion. Covering all the questions is not important, but you should begin to jot some ideas down on the newsprint provided within 15 or 20 minutes of starting.

When the 30 minutes is up, post your newsprint sheets around the classroom and tour the answers – ON YOUR OWN - recorded by other groups. Look especially for common themes that stand out on the sheets and for possible contradictions that arise within or between groups' responses. If possible, write your responses to others' comments on the same sheet of newsprint containing the point you're addressing. Finally, note any questions that were raised for you during the discussion on the separate sheets of newsprint specially provided for this. We will bring the activity to a close with a short debriefing in the large group.

Attractions of this activity are that it takes people out of groups for a while and lets them act as relatively autonomous free agents. It also reminds people that dialogue can work as a written as well as spoken exchange. On the other hand, it is frequently difficult in the limited space and time allotted for students to explain fully the meaning of the words and phrases on the newsprint. Still, is an interesting alternative way to keep the conversation going.

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ROTATING STATIONS

Another way to avoid the usual format of reporting back through a series of summaries is to locate each small group at a station where they are given 5 or 10 minutes to discuss a provocative issue and record their ideas on newsprint or a chalkboard. When this time is up the groups move to new positions in the classroom where they continue their discussion. But now the comments written on the newsprint or chalkboard by the preceding group at the station add a new voice to the mix. Rotations continue every 10 minutes until each group has been at all of the positions and has had a chance to consider all of the other groups' comments. Here's the instructions:

We're going to do another small group activity, but this time you won't be staying in one place for long. Each of you should join a group of about five participants at one of the stations that have been established around the classroom. Together you will have the responsibility of answering some questions by making comments on the newsprint directly in front of your group. You will have 10 minutes to do this. When the 10 minutes is up move with your group to a new station where you will continue your conversation by responding to the comments left behind by the group that has just vacated that station. Record the main points of your discussion at this station and then, after another 10 minutes, rotate to the next station, where you now have the comments of two other groups to consider.

Again take 10 minutes to respond, and then move when the 10 minutes are up. When every group has occupied each station, leaving remarks behind at all of them, break out of your groups and read all of the newsprint comments. Add questions, comments, or criticisms to these news sheets wherever you are inspired to do so. Remember that each station will include comments from all groups, making orderliness a challenge. Write as small and as legibly as you can, please!

Rotating stations encourages students to examine critically ideas that originate outside their group. The safety and intimacy of small groups is retained, yet the diversity of viewpoints experienced in whole class discussion is incorporated. Momentum and excitement tend to grow as groups rotate from one station to another. People feel they have heard from, and responded to, many voices in the classroom in a way that is less threatening than in large group exchanges. On the debit side, the 10 minute period for each rotation is not particularly conducive to deep discussion.

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Speech Policy

It may seem strange to suggest that you launch a discussion by advocating silence, but our experience has been that this puts diffident or introverted students at their ease.

Many students from working class backgrounds, female students, or students from underrepresented ethnic groups will approach discussion sessions with a justifiable sense of distrust. Their perception may be that success in academe is correlated with a glib facility to spring confidently into speech at the earliest possible opportunity. What follows is an example of a declaration to students that expresses the teacher's tolerance of silence and also informs students that participation in class discussion is entirely voluntary and should never be used to curry favor with the instructor:

I know that speaking in discussions is a nerve-wracking thing and that your fear of making public fools of yourselves can inhibit you to the point of nonparticipation. I, myself, feel very nervous as a discussion participant and spend a lot of my time carefully rehearsing my contributions so as not to look foolish when I finally speak. So please don't feel that you have to speak in order to gain my approval or to show me that you're a diligent student. It's quite acceptable to say nothing in the session, and there'll be no presumption of failure on your part. I don't equate silence with mental inertia. Obviously, I hope you will want to say something and speak up, but I don't want you to do this just for the sake of appearances. So let's be comfortable with a prolonged period of silence that might, or might not, be broken. When anyone feels like saying something, just speak up.

We believe in the power of this kind of early declaration because we've seen how well it works. Students will often come up to us afterwards and say that by granting them public permission not to say anything we actually emboldened them to speak. By deliberately destroying the link between student speech and teacher approval we reduce the pressure on students to look smart in front of us.

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Mutual Invitation

Developed by Eric Law (1993) mutual invitation is a technique designed to promote egalitarian group talk. The facilitator begins a discussion by sharing her views on the topic at hand. She then invites another member of the group to respond to what she has said, or to contribute whatever is on her mind regarding the topic. After that person has spoken she then chooses the next person to speak, and so on until all have had the chance to be involved. If someone does not want to offer a comment she can pass, but she then has the responsibility to choose who will speak next. No-one is allowed to interrupt the chosen speaker. Once everyone has spoken open discussion ensues & the ground rule doesn't apply.

This process is a way of structuring the opportunity for all to speak, and also of giving the participants the power to choose the direction of participation. One advantage is that in classes where students know each others' interests and areas of expertise better than the teacher does, those students are able to make more skillful choices about who should speak next than a teacher would.

If the process is used a second and third time the facilitator does not start off by sharing her view. However, she does start out choosing who will be the first to speak.

E.H.F. Law *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community*. St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1993 (pp. 79-88).

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CRITICAL CONVERSATION PROTOCOL

PURPOSE OF THE EXERCISE
A critical conversation is a focused conversation in which someone is helped:-

1. To come to an awareness of the assumptions she is operating under – particularly those having to do with power relationships and hegemonic practices & ideas

2. To investigate whether these assumptions are well grounded

3. To look at her practice from different viewpoints

4. To think about the implications of the conversation for the future

ROLES PARTICIPANTS PLAY

In a process of structured critical conversation I suggest that people think of playing one of three possible roles - storyteller, detective or umpire.

The **storyteller** is the person who is willing to make herself the focus of critical conversation by first describing some part of her practice or life experience.

The **detectives** are those in the group who help her come to a more fully informed understanding of the assumptions and actions that frame her practice or experience.

The **umpire** is the group member who has agreed to monitor conversation with a view to pointing out when people are talking to each other in a judgmental way.
All participants in the group play all three of these roles at different times. The idea is that the behaviors associated with each role gradually become habitual.

HOW THE EXERCISE WORKS

1. ***The Storyteller Tells the Tale (10 MINUTES)***

The conversation opens with the person who is the storyteller describing as concretely and specifically as possible an incident from her practice or life that for some reason is lodged in her memory. This incident may be one that is recalled because it was particularly fulfilling or because it was particularly frustrating. Most probably it is an incident that leaves the teller somewhat puzzled by its layers and complexities. The storyteller describes the incident in her own words and without any questions or

interruptions. Her colleagues, who are in the role of detectives, attend to her remarks very carefully. They are listeners with a purpose.

The detectives are trying to identify the explicit and implicit assumptions about practice that they hear in the storyteller's tale. Some of these will be general assumptions about what good practice looks like, some will be about how a good professional should behave, and some will be about how to behave in the specific situation described. The detectives are listening particularly for assumptions that pertain to how the storyteller conceives of power dynamics, or assumptions that are hegemonic (i.e. that seem admirable & useful to the storyteller but that actually work against her best interests & support an inequitable situation).

The detectives are also asked to imagine themselves inside the heads of the other characters in the story and to try to see the events through their eyes. If possible, the detectives make mental or written notes about plausible alternative interpretations of the story that fit the facts as they hear them, but that would come as a surprise to the storyteller.

2. ***The Detectives Ask Questions About the Event (10 MINUTES)***

After the storyteller has finished speaking, the detectives are allowed to break their silence to ask her any questions they have about the events she has just described. The detectives are searching for any information that will help them uncover the assumptions they think the storyteller holds. They are also looking for details not provided in the first telling of the story that will help them re-live the events described through the eyes of the other participants involved, thereby helping them to understand these events from the different participants' perspectives.

One ground rule they must observe is that of requesting information, not giving judgment. Their questions are asked only for the purpose of clarifying the details of what happened. They must refrain from giving their opinions or suggestions, no matter how helpful they feel these might be. Detectives should ask only 1 question at a time. They should **not** give advice on how the storyteller should have acted. Keep laughter to a minimum, you don't know how it's received.

As the storyteller hears the detectives' questions she tries to answer them as fully and honestly as possible. She also has the opportunity to ask the detectives why they asked the particular questions they put to her. The umpire points out to the detectives any examples of judgmental questions that they ask, particularly those in which they imply that they have seen a better way to respond to the situation than the way that's been described. Examples of such questions would be those beginning "Did you really believe that ...?", "Didn't you think to ...?", or "Do you mean to tell us that ...?"

The umpire brings the detectives' attention to the ways in which their tone of voice and body language, as well as their words, risk driving the storyteller into a defensive bunker.

3. ***The Detectives' Report the Assumptions they Hear in the Storyteller's Descriptions (10 MINUTES)***

When the incident has been fully described, and all the detectives' questions have been answered, the conversation moves to the assumption hunting phase. Here the detectives tell the storyteller, on the basis of her story and her response to their questions, what assumptions they think she holds.

This is done as non-judgmentally as possible, as a reporting back exercise. The detectives seek only to state clearly what they think the storyteller's assumptions are, not to judge whether they are right or wrong. They are asked to state these assumptions tentatively, descriptively and non-judgmentally, using phrases like "it seems as if ...", "I wonder if one assumption you might be holding is that ....?", or "Is it possible that you assumed that ...?" They state only one assumption at a time, do **not** give advice, and watch out for laughter.

The umpire intervenes to point out to detectives when she thinks they are reporting assumptions with a judgmental overlay.

4. ***The Detectives Give Alternative Interpretations of the Events Described (10 MINUTES)***

The detectives now give alternative versions of the events that have been described, based on their attempts to re-live the story through the eyes of the other participants involved. These alternative interpretations must be plausible in that they are consistent with the facts as they have been described by the storyteller. When appropriate, detectives should point out how power or hegemony plays itself out in the different interpretations they are giving.

The umpire points out those moments when a psychoanalytic second guessing is taking place. This happens when the detectives start to preface their interpretations with remarks like "you know, what you were really doing", or "what was really going on".

The detectives are to give these interpretations as descriptions, not judgments. They are describing how others involved in the events might have viewed them, not saying whether or not these perceptions are accurate. They should not give any advice here.

As the storyteller hears these alternative interpretations she is asked to let the detectives have the floor so that they can state their case as fully as possible. After they have

described how the situation might look through the eyes of other participants, the storyteller is then allowed to give any additional information that would cast doubt on these interpretations. She is also allowed to ask the detectives to elaborate on any confusing aspects of why they are making the interpretations they are. At no time is she expected to agree with the detectives.

5. ***Participants Do An Experiential Audit (10 MINUTES)***

Finally, the storyteller and detectives state what they have learned, what insights they have realized, and what their reflection means for their future actions. Now the detectives can give whatever advice they wish.

The umpire gives an overall summary of the ability of participants to be respectful listeners and talkers, and also gives her perspective on the story.

At each iteration of this exercise the roles change. As each new story is told each person assumes a different role so that all play each of the roles at least once.

Although this is a heavily structured an artificial exercise, the intent is for these dispositions to become so internalized that the ground rules and structure outlined above become unnecessary.

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The Classroom Critical Incident Questionnaire

Please take about five minutes to respond to each of the questions below about this week's class(es). Don't put your name on the form - your responses are anonymous. When you have finished writing, put one copy of the form on the table by the door and keep the other copy for yourself. At the start of next week's class I will be sharing the group's responses with all of you. Thanks for taking the time to do this. What you write will help me make the class more responsive to your concerns.

At what moment in class this week did you feel most engaged with what was happening ?

At what moment in class this week did you feel most distanced from what was happening?

What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most affirming or helpful ?

What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most puzzling or confusing ?

What about the class this week surprised you the most ? (This could be something about your own reactions to what went on, or something that someone did, or anything else that occurs to you).

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L E A R N I N G A U D I T

WHAT DO YOU KNOW NOW
THAT YOU DIDN'T KNOW THIS
TIME LAST WEEK ?

WHAT CAN YOU DO NOW THAT
YOU COULDN'T DO THIS TIME
LAST WEEK ?

WHAT CAN YOU TEACH SOMEONE
ELSE TO KNOW OR DO NOW
THAT YOU COULDN'T TEACH
THEM THIS TIME LAST WEEK ?

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WHAT WOULD IT TAKE TO ENGAGE ME (AS A SKEPTICAL, RESISTANT, HOSTILE LEARNER) IN DISCUSSION ?

I would be more likely to participate if …

Former resisters testified to its utility

Faculty modeled their own participation

I had the right to silence & silent participation

I knew it was genuinely open & I wasn't being asked to guess the 'correct' interpretation & risk humiliation

The group had developed norms & agreed to respect these

I knew that participation counted towards my grade & that a range of indicators had been specified

COMMON CLAIMS FOR DISCUSSION

It Helps Students Explore a **Diversity of Perspectives** (forces them to hear other views)

It Increases Students **Awareness of, and Tolerance For, Ambiguity or Complexity** (leave with questions)

It Helps Students **Recognize and Investigate Their Assumptions** (students serve as critical mirrors)

It Encourages **Attentive, Respectful Listening** (listening is as important a speaking)

It Develops New **Appreciation for Continuing Differences** (continuing disagreement acceptable)

It Increases **Intellectual Agility** (thinking on one's feet to formulate counter-responses)

It Helps Students Become **Connected to a Topic** (increases students' affective concern)

It Shows **Respect for Students' Voices and Experiences** (opinions are taken seriously)

It Helps Students Learn the **Processes and Habits of Democratic Discourse** - inclusionary, collaborative

It Affirms **Students as Co-creators of Knowledge** (new insights are students' responsibility)

It Develops the Capacity for the **Clear Communication** of Ideas and Meaning (giving examples, analogs, metaphors)

It Develops Habits of **Collaborative Learning** (attending to others, inclusionary emphasis)

It Increases Breadth and Makes Students More **Empathic to others' Views and Feelings**

It Helps Students Develop Skills of **Synthesis and Integration** (linking statements, identifying emerging themes, pointing out similarities)

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CRITICAL DEBATE INSTRUCTIONS

Find a contentious issue on which opinion is divided amongst participants. Frame the issue as a debate motion.

Propose the motion to participants. By a show of hands ask people either to volunteer to work on a team that is preparing arguments to support the motion or to volunteer to work on a team that is preparing arguments to oppose the motion.

Announce that all those who have prepared to work on the team to draft arguments to support the motion will now comprise the team to draft arguments to oppose the motion. Similarly, all those who have prepared to work on the team to draft arguments to oppose the motion will now comprise the team to draft arguments to support the motion.

Conduct the debate. Each team chooses one person to present their arguments. After initial presentations the teams reconvene to draft rebuttal arguments and choose one person to present these.

DEBATE MOTION: " THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO BUILD TRUE DIVERSITY OF FOCUS AND CONTENT IN DISCUSSION IS TO EXPLORE ONLY MARGINALIZED PERSPECTIVES AND TO OUTLAW MAINSTREAM IDEAS"

Preparation of Arguments: 10 minutes

Proposing team A presents its arguments 2 minutes
Proposing team B presents its arguments 2 minutes
Opposing team 1 presents its arguments 2 minutes
Opposing team 2 presents its arguments 2 minutes

Rebuttal statement preparation 5 minutes

Opposing team B presents its rebuttals 2 minutes
Opposing team A presents its rebuttals 2 minutes
Opposing team 2 presents its rebuttals 2 minutes
Opposing team 1 presents its rebuttals 2 minutes

Debrief the debate. Discuss with participants their experience of this exercise. Focus on how it felt to argue against positions you were committed to. What new ways of thinking about the issue were opened up? Did participants come to new understandings? Did they change their positions on this issue at all?

Ask participants to write a follow up reflection paper on the debate. Here's the instructions ...

1. What assumptions about the issue that you hold were clarified / confirmed for you by the debate?

2. Which of your assumptions surprised you during the debate ? In other words, were you made aware of assumptions you hold that you didn't know you had ?

3. How could you check out these new assumptions ? What sources of evidence would you consult ?

4. What new perspectives on the issue suggested themselves to you ?

5. In what ways, if any, were your existing assumptions challenged or changed by the debate ?

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CASE STUDY: "THE DISCUSSION FROM HELL" (in Gary's eyes)

"Discussion, the meat and drink of truly democratic pedagogy". That was the thought in Gary Lofthouse's mind as he headed to the first class of the semester. Gary had been teaching at Newark University for the past 5 years. NU was an inner city university that prided itself on its commitment to adult students that the system had labeled as failures. Although himself a White male, Gary believed his awareness of cultural and racial diversity meant he could work well with students from a variety of backgrounds. His commitment to diversity meant he was a strong advocate of discussion methods since to him these treated adult students as the mature people they really were. Through discussion people could express their voices and participate fully in the learning process.

Gary was teaching a class on "Introduction to Critical Thinking" to graduate students in the Master's in Education program. After learning how his friend David Threlfall had created terrible problems for himself the first night of a similar class at Gotham Community College, Gary was determined to avoid these. Even though Gary's class was with graduate students he did not assume students would know very much about critical thinking, and neither did he expect them to be able to engage in lively discussion without spending several sessions becoming comfortable with each other. His class contained about 26 students, a little large for good whole-class discussion, but not large enough to stop him from attempting this. Most of the students were women, and most of those were White. This was a little disappointing to Gary, but he reflected that at least there was some diversity.

To start the class Gary introduced himself and talked of the role critical thinking had played in his own life. He gave a definition of critical thinking that focused on two learning processes: (1) the uncovering and questioning of one's assumptions, and (2) the ability to view situations and ideas from different perspectives. After 20 minutes or so he then introduced a couple of guests to the class. These were former students of his who had initially been skeptical of the value of critical thinking, but who had subsequently told Gary that learning this skill was one of the most important things that had happened to them at Newark U. Gary asked these students to take no more than 5 minutes each to talk about how they had felt the first night of the "Introduction to Critical Thinking" class and what advice they would like to pass on to the new students. As his guests were speaking Gary was careful to leave the room. He didn't want the new students to feel he had 'prepped' the former students to say only complimentary things about the course.

After 15 minutes Gary returned and wrapped up the first half of the class by taking questions about the course syllabus and assignments. He handed out a sheet of definitions of critical thinking drawn from different books on the topic and asked students

to read this over the break. Their task was to choose the definition they most agreed with and the one they most disagreed with. To give them time for this Gary added 10 minutes on the 10-minute break.

During the break Gary spent his time moving furniture so that the chairs were in a circle. He wanted everyone to be able to see everyone else and to feel that they were in some small way a part of a learning community. However, he knew enough of Michel Foucault's work to realize that just rearranging the chairs would not immediately put everyone at ease. So, as the class reassembled he made a short speech about his commitment to discussion but his awareness that this approach was not for everyone. Consequently, he informed them, he would not assume that those who did not speak were any less diligent or intelligent than those who did. He then asked for reactions to the list of definitions he had handed out.

Immediately John, a White male in his 40's spoke up. "Well it seems to me that the definitions you've given come from quite a few different perspectives and traditions. I can see some good old Logic 101 in there and the classical tradition that represents, though when you think about it classic Greek philosophy actually has some overlap with modern scientific methods, doesn't it? And you know if Socrates had been alive today you can be sure he would have been right there in cyberspace asking all kinds of good questions about what effects the internet is having on our thinking patterns, and the degree to which it encourages or inhibits public discourse. And speaking of discourse that reminds me of Habermas and the way his whole theory of communication is based on the ability to think critically – though he talks more about reason of course – which is not surprising because Habermas looks to American pragmatism with Pierce and Dewey and all, as much as he looks to Marx. Of course when Marx …"

Here Gary cut in. "Thanks John" he said glancing quickly at the nametag he'd asked all students to wear the first night "perhaps we could hear from some other people?"

At this Janet spoke up. Janet was a White woman who was also the oldest student in the class by several years. "Well I remember marching in the South in the civil rights movement and at that time you had to do a hell of a lot of critical thinking if you wanted to survive. I mean we had the State troopers beating us up, the local citizens cursing us out, and very few local supports. I remember my husband Steve arguing with hotel clerks who wouldn't give us a room because we were communists. You know it's funny when I think back to that time I can remember some things so clearly – the smells of the food, which to me, a good New York girl, was so exotic. I mean I never knew what grits were, black-eyed peas, all those kinds of things. But you know the people who were on those marches with us were wonderful human beings. They'd left their jobs, risked their lives, subjected themselves to abuse, violence, hatred, yet they did it cos they knew it was the right thing to do."

Gary listened to this with interest, and respect. Janet had clearly lived a lot of American history. There didn't seem to be too much connection to critical thinking, but at least people were talking. The other students seemed interested too in what Janet was saying.

"Oh those days, those days" she reminisced. "It just seems like nowadays a lot of that old spirit has disappeared. You know we had a lot of hope in those days. Even though we had no money we made good with what we had. That was one of the lessons I learned from my Mom, be thrifty, we were recyclers before that term was invented. We had to be too. We'd recycle clothes, toys, food, we had no money to go and buy TV dinners – course we had no TV either. But I never felt I wanted for anything. I remember …"

"Thanks Janet" said Gary, "let's bring some more people in. Anyone like to say which definition of critical thinking worked best for them?"

John jumped in again. "Well, to me the definition given by Harvey Siegel makes sense. Is he the one who wrote *Educating Reason*? Siegel is such a well-read guy, his breadth of references is truly amazing. I really like the way he integrates philosophies drawn from so many different intellectual traditions – pragmatism, constructivism, I can see Dewey and even Vygotsky in there, there's a dash of Perry's forms of intellectual and ethical development, you know the stage of informed commitment is it? It's a pleasure to read a definition, and a book, by someone who's so well informed"

"That was one of the things I really appreciated about my husband when I first met him" said Janet, "he seemed so erudite. I remember he always used to carry a stack of books around with him. On our first date he told me he tried to learn a new word a day. He's always been one for self-improvement, has Steve, and I guess that was one of the things that first attracted me to him. You know that first date was so romantic. He didn't have much money but he'd booked a table at a really expensive East side restaurant, it must have cost him a week's wages to pay for that evening. Though I remember thinking at the time that he didn't really need to do that, I'd have been just as happy if we'd bought some food at a local deli and taken it into Central Park or something. That's right, I remember because it was a wonderful summer, the kind you live for in New York. You know hot, but not horribly humid, so that the evening air was like wine. Of course the city seemed a safer place in those days, I remember …."

"Can we hear from some other people?" asked Gary. Let's hear from someone who hasn't spoken yet "

There was a pause. Then Carol, a young White women spoke out.
"I disagree with you about the idea that people today are less socially active than they used to be. What about the peace marches against the War in Iraq? Or the demonstrations at conferences sponsored by the World Bank? There might not be as much TV coverage of protest as their used to be – but that's only the more reason to keep at it. Because the media have been bought and sold we've got to get onto the streets to get our story out, because, let's face it, there's no real free speech any more, just people thinking what the media tell them to think. I think it's my job to make a difference"

"You know I get really tired of hearing from you White people about how concerned you all are" said Sonia, a Latina woman in her 30's. "You think you've got a monopoly on social justice, but you have no idea what's really going on in the streets. You should walk in my shoes before you start talking about making a difference."

"Listen, if you want to talk about making a difference you should spend a lot more time thinking of racial tension, not the World Bank." Lorraine, a young African American woman got into the conversation. "We've lived with the legacy of slavery for so long now, it's really been the defining feature of my community. No-one should ever forget what my people have been through, or are going through right now."

"I didn't mean to claim a monopoly on oppression" replied Sonia "but you know, there are different kinds of oppression, Brown as well as Black"

"That's right" agreed Carol "and as a woman I know plenty about oppression too. It's not just skin color that causes oppression. There's real gender oppression here in this country too. You know as a White women I can empathize with the kind of racism you live with everyday."

"You have no idea what you're talking about" replied Lorraine, a catch in her voice. You just play at being oppressed. I know what oppression really is"

"But just because I'm White doesn't mean I can't be an ally with you" pleaded Carol. "I can draw on my own experiences to imagine what you're going through"

"Look, I don't want you in my boat" said Lorraine angrily. "You've got your own boat so you can sail in that – leave me to mine"

Gary could see tears start in Carol's eyes. He jumped quickly in. "Alright I don't think we need to get into hierarchies of oppression. Can we get back to critical thinking? Now I know you all read the definitions I handed out over the break. Who would like to talk about a definition that meant something to them?"

Silence descended. People seemed uncomfortable and their eyes were darting back and forth between Carol's and Lorraine's faces. All except Janet's.

"You know one of the things I loved about the early civil rights movement was the way people – Black and White – were united in a common cause. I remember that Steve, my husband, had as some of his best friends Black – I mean African American – men and women. You know that was a wonderful time. People think the rainbow coalition began with Jessie Jackson in the 80's and 90's, and he was with Dr King when he was assassinated of course, but really the original rainbow coalition was in Mississippi in the 1960's. You know one of the things that …"

"I wonder if we can link some of this to critical thinking" Gary said, somewhat plaintively. "Let's see now, what do you think were the different perspectives of the

people on either side of the civil rights movement in the south? And what do you think some of the assumptions of each side might have been?"

Again, silence. Then John rejoined the conversation. "Well I think that Dr King's assumptions were drawn from theology and from a really eclectic blend of humanism, Marxism, maybe a dash of Gandhi and his practice of non-violence. You know I think that's why Cornel West – one of the most profound intellectuals alive today, and African American too – called Dr King an emblematic organic intellectual. Of course in using that term he was drawing on Gramsci, who you probably know has been rediscovered in Marxist scholarship since the 1970's. In fact Stuart Hall – a Black, I mean British-Caribbean cultural critic has really drawn on Gramsci in the same way West has done. And another who has re-interpreted Gramsci for the modern era is Raymond Williams, the Welsh cultural critic, who is another person that Cornel West frequently cites. Did I tell you that …."

"What do you mean by "African American too"?" asked Lorraine

"Excuse me?" answered John.

"You said "African American too". That Cornel West was brilliant and African American too. What did you mean by that?"

"Well" said John "I was trying to point out that some of the most profound and original critical thinkers today are Black. Right Gary?"

"I think what Lorraine was getting at" began Gary

"I don't need anyone to speak for me" said Lorraine, "I want to know why John was surprised that someone could be smart and Black"

"Look I was just trying to acknowledge the many rich contributions African Americans make to contemporary culture" John pleaded. "I was trying to help you"

"People are always trying to help us, why do you think that is?" a voice cut in sarcastically. It was Robert, an African American man in his 30's. "Do you think we don't know anything? That we need you to get by? Who gives you the right to judge what we need?"

By now Gary was getting alarmed. The last thing he wanted on the first night of a new course was a conversation about the racism some people felt was in the class. They hardly knew one another, how could it have got this far so quickly?

"Well John might not have put it in just the way he wanted to" said Gary. "I think that what he was saying was that White people often think intellectual life is the sole province of Whites and they ignore the vibrant intellectual communities of color that tend to get overlooked. Foucault would call them subjugated knowledges"

"Exactly, that's in his anthology Power/Knowledge" said John, a note of triumph in his voice indicating he felt vindicated "which is still the best anthology of Foucault's work around in my opinion. And speaking of Foucault, did you know …"

You know maybe we need a reflective pause here" said Gary. "Let's just spend a couple of minutes going back and looking at the definitions of critical thinking. Then put a plus sign by the one you most agree with and a minus sign by the one you most disagree with."

The class fell silent and a few people picked up their list of definitions. As they did so, Carol walked out and John came up to have a word with Gary. Gary motioned him to stay in his seat and whispered to John that he'd take questions after class.

By the time the five minutes were up Gary realized that the end of the class was near and that he needed to do the CIQ, a technique he'd picked up at a Teachers College workshop. The CIQ (critical incident questionnaire) was a 5-question class evaluation sheet that all students filled in anonymously once a week. The questions asked when students were most engaged and distanced as learners, what actions were most helpful or puzzling, and what surprised them about the class. Gary explained they were out of time and that he'd like them to fill out the CIQ before leaving the class. He also promised them he would report back to them at the start of next week's class the kinds of things they'd put down on the CIQ.

Gary couldn't help looking at what people had written. Here's a sample of their responses.

16 mentioned what Gary guessed was John: Typical comments were: "Why does this guy feel the need to show off so much?" "Some people are too impressed with themselves" "The gentleman in the blue sweater seemed to think he was running the class"

12 mentioned what Gary guessed was Janet: Typical comments were: "This is a course on critical thinking, not a life history course", "There was too much time telling stories and not enough on academics", "Some people should realize we don't need to know every detail of their life"

10 mentioned what Gary guessed was himself : Typical comments were "I don't see why the professor was supporting John", "I was surprised the professor shut down John so quickly", "The professor needs to keep a tighter rein on things, we got off track too quickly", "I didn't like the way one student was disrespectful to Gary".

3 mentioned race - "We missed a real opportunity here to deal with race, I hope we get another", "Why is it always race, race, race?" and "Why can't we all just get along?" Gary couldn't decide if this was an ironic comment or a genuine lamentation.

Other random comments: “Kind of disappointing, we never got to critical thinking”, “Can we have a lecture on critical thinking please – we need some background”, “There’s got to be a better way to learn about this”

Instructions for the Case Study Analysis.

1. READ THIS CASE STUDY BY YOURSELF (10 Minutes)

2. AFTER YOU HAVE READ THE CASE STUDY PLEASE MAKE SOME NOTES BY YOURSELF ON THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS (10 Minutes)

WHAT IS YOUR INTERPRETATION / READING / EXPLANATION / PERSPECTIVE ON WHAT IS HAPPENING HERE?

WHAT DO YOU THINK GARY SHOULD DO IN THE 2ND CLASS MEETING IF HE IS STILL COMMITTED TO USING DISCUSSION?

IF YOU WERE OBSERVING THIS CLASS THROUGH A ONE WAY MIRROR, WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO GARY ABOUT HOW HE MIGHT RUN THINGS DIFFERENTLY AT THE START OF THE COURSE THE NEXT TIME HE TEACHES IT?

After you have finished writing down your responses, form a group with 4-5 other people. Take each of the 3 questions above and spend about 10-15 minutes sharing your responses to each question. List on a sheet of newsprint the chief responses and ideas that emerge. Where appropriate feel free to build on any insights or suggestions you have picked up during the workshop that might be relevant.

Time for Case Study - Approximately 1 hour

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DISCUSSION INVENTORY

One approach we have found useful is to tell students at the start of a particular class that you will be saving five to ten minutes towards the end of that day's discussion period to give some of your own reflections on the discussion. We view this as keeping a 'Discussion Inventory' that will be unpacked just before students leave. The inventory is essentially a list of the things we want to make sure students are exposed to before they exit the room that day. It is blank at the start of the discussion but fills up as we jot down errors we hear, perspectives that we feel are glossed over or ignored, and important oppositional views that we think are too easily rushed past. A good time to unpack this inventory is immediately prior to inviting anyone in the group to have the last word that day (itself an idea we picked up from Ira Shor (1996)).

In the five-minute inventory time we provide information about perspectives that were missed during the discussion and we offer alternative interpretations that students did not wish to consider. This is also an excellent time for us to draw students' attention to what we consider to be major errors of understanding we have noticed being expressed during the conversation. Sometimes in the middle of a discussion that is going well someone makes a statement that we know shows a complete misunderstanding of a concept, or is clearly factually wrong, but we feel uncomfortable interrupting the flow of talk at that particular time and singling that contributor out as somehow lacking. When that erroneous statement is made we jot down a note on our inventory pad to make sure we address it in the time we've reserved for ourselves towards the end of the class that day. So the discussion inventory allows us to correct mistakes and to tackle repressive tolerance by making sure participants do not leave the room without being exposed to a perspective we feel it is necessary for them to encounter.

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Class Participation

20% of your grade for this class is based on your participation in discussion. Participating in discussion does not necessarily mean talking a lot or showing everyone else that you know or have studied a lot. Good discussion participation involves people trying to build on, and synthesize, comments from others, and on showing appreciation for others' contributions. It also involves inviting others to say more about what they are thinking. Some of the most helpful things you can do are call for a quiet interlude, bring a new resource to the classroom, or post an observation on line. So there are multiple ways quieter learners can participate.

Below are some specific behavioral examples of good participation in discussion:-

Ask a question or make a comment that shows you are interested in what another person says

Ask a question or make a comment that encourages another person to elaborate on something they have already said

Bring in a resource (a reading, web link, video) not covered in the syllabus but adds new information/perspectives to our learning

Make a comment that underscores the link between two people's contributions & make this link explicit in your comment

Use body language (in only a slightly exaggerated way) to show interest in what different speakers are saying

Post a comment on the course chat room that summarizes our conversations so far and/or suggests new directions and questions to be explored in the future

Make a comment (online if this is appropriate) indicating that you found another person's ideas interesting or useful. Be specific as to why this was the case

Contribute something that builds on, or springs from, what someone else has said. Be explicit about the way you are building on the other person's thoughts – this can be done online

Make a comment on your CIQ that prompts us to examine discussion dynamics

When you think it's appropriate, ask the group for a moment's silence to slow the pace of conversation to give you, and others, time to think

Make a comment that at least partly paraphrases a point someone has already made

Make a summary observation that takes into account several people's contributions & that touches on a recurring theme in the discussion (online if you like)

Ask a cause and effect question - for example, "can you explain why you think it's true that if these things are in place such and such a thing will occur?"

Find a way to express appreciation for the enlightenment you have gained from the discussion. Try to be specific about what it was that helped you understand something better. Again this can be done online if this suits you bettter

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A CRITICAL APPROACH TO MEETINGS

Use the CIQ to evaluate each meeting

Begin with AOB

Assumptions Inventories

What's the decision we've just made ?

What's the chief piece of evidence for the decision?

What results is the decision supposed to effect ?

Structured Devil's Advocacy

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Questioning to Keep Discussion Going

One of the best ways to enliven and deepen dialogue is through the skillful use of questioning. Discussion leaders who seem to have a knack for keeping discussion going tend to emphasize their role as questioner and inquirer. They frequently ask questions to get more information from participants, to uncover the sources of participant opinions, and to get clarification on those opinions. They also raise questions to underscore the links between comments and to synthesize or sum up an entire conversation. Questioning is also a practice that embodies respect. It demonstrates that we care enough about others' thoughts to learn more about them through the questions we pose. Furthermore, one of the indicators of a good discussion is the extent to which participants themselves learn to practice the art of questioning. Below are some questions that help to sustain discussion:

Questions that ask for more evidence

How do you know that?
What data is that claim based on?
What does the author say that supports your argument?
Where did you find that view expressed in the text?
What evidence would you give to someone who doubted your interpretation?

Questions that ask for clarification

Can you put that another way?
What's a good example of what you are talking about?
What do you mean by that?
Can you explain the term you just used?
Can you give a different illustration of your point?

Linking or Extension Questions

Is there a connection between what you just said and what was said a moment ago?
How does your comment fit in with Neng's earlier observation?
How does your observation relate to what the group decided last week?
Does your idea challenge or support what we seem to be saying?
How does that contribution add to what has already been said?

Summary and Synthesis Questions

What are one or two particularly important ideas that emerged from this discussion?
What remains unresolved or contentious about this topic?
What do you understand better as a result of today's discussion?
Based on our discussion today, what do we need to talk about next time if we're to understand this issue better?
What key word or concept best captures the gist of our discussion today?

Questioning to Open Up Possibilities

Open-ended questions, especially those beginning with why and how, are more likely to provoke students' thinking and problem-solving abilities and make the fullest use of discussion's potential for expanding intellectual and emotional horizons. Of course, using open questions obliges the facilitator to keep the discussion genuinely unrestricted. It is neither fair nor appropriate to ask an open-ended question and then to expect participants to furnish a pre-determined or preferred response. Open questions tend to look like this:

- How can we think about this another way?
- Why do we continue to use this particular process?
- How might this idea open up new possibilities for us?
- What are the options available to us in solving this problem?
- What are the advantages of seeing parents as educators and colleagues to teachers? What are the disadvantages?
- Why do you think many people devote their lives to education despite the often low pay and poor working conditions?
- Let's completely revamp this program. How might we go about it?

Good open-ended questions can empower people by:

- Stretching people's thinking
- Challenging taken for granted assumptions
- Approaching old problems with renewed creativity and energy
- Helping people to see the flaws in stodgy, entrenched practices
- Reframing issues with new or underused perspectives
- Bolstering confidence
- Encouraging critical reflection
- Deepening understanding
- Building a new collective or shared consciousness

Once you have asked your questions, keep your own participation to a minimum. In other words, learn to listen. Things to listen for include:

- Understanding the words spoken rather than thinking about what to say next
- Understanding the point being made before either approving or criticizing
- Notes of agreement as well as disagreement within the group
- Points that need clarifying or explaining
- Links to other content already presented or other comments already made
- Engagement, interest, and personal connection to the content
- Comments that extend or deepen the conversation
- The speaker's level of confidence and the degree of support she or he may need

QUESTIONING EXERCISE

Form into Groups of Three. Each one of you will be, alternately, questioner, interviewee and observer.

The questioner's task is to find out about the interviewee's passions – the things that most move them to action in their life. Try and ask a questions from each of the categories listed above (evidence, clarification, linking, synthesis, open ended)

The interviewee's task is to respond to the questions posed.

The observer's task is to watch for the different kinds of questions posed in the conversation

SPEND ABOUT 5 MINUTES EACH ITERATION OF THIS EXERCISE, CHANGING ROLES FOR EACH ROUND

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