"Everybody's Talkin' at Me": Authentic Discussions

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Synopsis:

This session purports to uncover the authentic values of classroom discussions—not just in the college classroom, but in any level of schooling. When we professors state that we "hold discussions" in our classes, do we merely disguise our delivery of our own opinions and agenda? How do we encourage an open discourse?   Participants shall practice "authentic discussion," and reexamine their own roles in discussions that aim to promote critical thinking.

"Everybody's Talkin' At Me": Authentic Discussions

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Workshop—"Cross-disciplinary Areas of Education
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"Everybody's Talkin' At Me": Authentic Discussions

Everybody's talkin' at me
I don't hear a word they're sayin'
Only the echoes of my mind…
—Fred Neil

Abstract

This study purports to investigate the authentic classroom discussions—not just in the college classroom, but in any level of schooling. When instructors state that we "hold discussions" in our classes, do we merely disguise our delivery of our own opinions and agenda? When we move beyond the delivery of information, how do we encourage an open discourse? The author examined his own classroom discussions and invited students to participate in an action-research study, described here, that engages them to explore methods for guiding authentic discussions. The students' comments illustrate four themes: Silence; Equality and Roles; Shared Teaching; and Slow Learning.

Discursus

What constitutes an authentic classroom discussion? When we instructors state that we "hold discussions" in our classes, do we merely disguise our delivery of our own opinions and agenda? How do we encourage an open discourse?

This study attempted to uncover the values of classroom discussions—not just in the college classroom, but in any level of schooling. It grew out of dissatisfaction with my own classroom discussions with graduate students in education. I endeavored to address the following central question:

What is an authentic classroom discussion?

The following subsidiary questions also guided my research:

- What factors are necessary for deep discourse in the classroom?

- What guidance by the course instructor best serves such a discussion?

- In what ways might teachers use authentic discussions in their own classrooms?

This paper examines graduate students' discussions about our classroom readings over the course of two years, and in two separate education programs. It provides some guidelines for instructors and student facilitators to run a whole-class discussion. It closes with some generalizations, suggestions, and questions for future research.

Background

The genesis for this study occurred after a spectacular example of a terrible discussion. I had charged a class with assignments to guide our readings of Kozol's *Letters to a Young Teacher* (2007), and one student eagerly volunteered to lead the first talk. She prepared with an astounding assiduousness, and opened by informing the class about the number of lines on each page of the book—because she would be referencing quotations not only by page number, but by line number. She began with the first page, asked her peers what they thought, and diligently moved along. But after less than ten minutes of this she was the only one speaking. After a half-hour she had "covered" seven pages. Apparently, she believed that her task was to "decode" Kozol and demonstrate her close reading. There was no dialogue.

Perhaps Plato cursed us, with his and his teacher's quest for Truth, by means of the Socratic Dialogue. The *elenchus,* Greek for "cross-examination," in *The Symposium* (1996)*,* for example, proceeds with Socrates' interrogation of Agathon about the true nature of Love. It is also the paradigm Ping-Pong match. Socrates serves, Agathon returns, and Socrates smashes his ball across the table for yet another point. The majority of classroom discussions still take this shape: teacher serves, by asking a question; student responds; teacher refutes or supports this answer or opinion or fact. This familiar take on a classroom "conversation" differs from Socrates' and Plato's because the classroom teacher or college instructor typically pursues a pre-established answer in his allegedly Socratic dialogue. The Platonic and Socratic method of

philosophic discourse optimally creates self-discovery for the discussants. Naturally, the Dialogues often exhibit a kind of "messiness" for the first-time reader who expects Socrates to lead his students straight to a definition of the topic under consideration. Classroom dialogues, on the contrary, typically serve the discussion leader—the teacher's aim—to arrive at a "truth" or fact or datum that has been pre-determined long in advance. In short, we need to think more critically about a teacher or instructor's claim that he runs a classroom discussion as a Socratic dialogue.

I can recall classroom discussions that *felt significant* from high-school days, in a Jesuit institution that expected rigorous thinking and writing. In one junior-year history course, taught by a lay faculty member, Mr. Fitzgerald (not his real name), we sat in a circle in our antique wooden desks—and were permitted to *smoke*. (Truly, this was another world.) Mr. Fitzgerald had assigned us to read a classic by Stephen Ambrose, *Rise to Globalism* (1976), and, for one of the first times in school, we students knew that our experiences of this text mattered to each other. Further, our understandings grew out of our attempts to comprehend each other's opinions. We argued about the pre-eminence of the USA in global conflicts and re-examined our deeply-rooted patriotism. Mr. Fitzgerald served as both interlocutor and referee.

This episode from the 1970s evokes my first discoveries that a conversation with peers and a teacher, about big ideas, can ignite a passion for further discussions, and that you learn more about your own mind when it encounters others'.

Literature

Bakhtin (1996) guides us in our attempts to create meaningful opportunities for students to engage with each other's perspectives. In his discussion of "heteroglossia," he emphasizes the primacy of context over text. That is, the meanings and significance of a reading to students

depend, ultimately, upon a constellation of factors—personal, cultural—that they bring into a classroom. Bakhtin argues against the primacy that many academic experts place upon a "monologic" reading: here, the academic lectures about one meaning in "the text itself." When we open up a text—any reading—to classroom discussion, we may often, with the best intentions, attempt to steer students towards that "one true meaning." Further, in the Bakhtinian "carnival" of the novel, readers and listeners are necessary for the recreation and renewal of text:

> The work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as part of the process of its creation, as well as part of its subsequent life, in a continual renewing of the work through the creative perception of listeners and readers. (p. 254)

Classroom participants cannot understand this without direct experiences in discussions of shared texts. You have to live it.

Teaching methods that emphasize authentic discussion stand in opposition to what Freire (1993) criticizes as "the banking method of instruction …." Here, "[e]ducation thus becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (p. 53). In such classrooms, still often described as "traditional," a teacher may engage students in what he considers a "discussion," whereas he typically leads them to agree that his perspectives on a text, say, constitute its one, true, and unalterable meaning. The tradition of schooling in which the instructor "delivers the goods" in the manner of an ATM, with limited social intercourse and a dialogue that is no more than instructions, perseveres in our institutions of higher learning. Such so-called discussions typically resemble those Socratic Ping-Pong matches, in which the teacher poses a question, one student responds, and then the teacher responds to the student's response—instead of other students engaging in the discourse. As Freire notes, "the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher" (p. 54).

The prospect and dynamics of using our shared readings to form community are not novel pedagogical practice: they have been with us for as long as humans have circled around stories and texts. Further, analytic philosophers suggest that the actual act of reading depends upon the Other. Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953)*,* wonders, "How does one teach anyone to read to himself? How does one know if he can do so? How does he himself know that he is doing what is required of him?" (No. 375). The implication here is that another reader is required to affirm acts of reading. Of course, Wittgenstein approaches reading—and language—from a logician's perspective, and does not primarily concern himself with social intercourse.

When a teacher allows, encourages, and even expects students to respond to each other's comments and interpretations about a text, then they collectively and collaboratively create a realm of deeper meaning-making. This is what Fish (1980) elaborates upon in his "interpretive communities." When conversations are encouraged to remain open-ended—and where students learn to see themselves as co-teachers of a text—the "act of reading becomes an act of self-formation" (p. 142). Here we may witness students discovering themselves in the readings. The dialectic of a strong discussion revolves around the analysis of text with the synthesis of readers' and speakers' opinions, and these, in turn, require further analysis.

Nancie Atwell (1998), one of the gurus of writing workshop, created an enduring image that describes an authentic discussion: the "dining room table":

> It is a literate environment. Around it, people talk in all the ways
> literate people discourse. We don't need assignments, lesson plans,
> lists, teacher's manuals, or handbooks. We need only another literate
> person. (p. 32)

I shared this image with students—held it up as an ideal for their educational endeavors and our interactions in the classroom. (I added that my own experiences at the dining room table

throughout childhood, and especially adolescence, were far from ideal.) With such discourse, within the safe environment of the *collegium*, students could deepen their understandings of not only texts, but of their own perspectives, and of their peers. They become a part of the material under consideration.

Methods

This study works with qualitative data. Further, since it emerged from my own classroom encounters, and difficulties, it is both practitioner- and action-research. In short, the problem that I wished to address in my education courses was that the teachers in these classes were hesitant to engage in discussions that had them speaking to each other about various texts. Instead, a majority of students looked to the instructor for "answers"—my interpretations of the book. I informed them that I wished to collaborate with them on a research project that studied their discussion practices, and that encouraged them to interrogate their own habits also. I distributed and collected informed consent sheets from the students in four courses, over the span of two academic years.

The research instruments included my lesson plans for discussions; observations and field notes during the discussions; a questionnaire [Appendix] that included a Likert-type scale; audio-taped group interviews; and the students' own written reflections and evaluations of discussions.

The participants were between the ages of 23 and 59, with most of them in their late 20s; roughly two-thirds of them were women. All were initially-certified teachers in New York State. A total of 64 students completed the questionnaire, engaged in discussions as a standard course procedure, and of these, 24 sat for small-group interviews.

The scope of my particular study is circumscribed by a number of limitations, including the small sample—all teachers in the New York State capital region. Further, our discussions

revolved around readings in education only, and in only my four courses over two years.

Nevertheless, their comments illustrate a fundamental deficiency that many students, in all age

groups, may suffer in classrooms that purport to hold discussions.

Data

I wanted to investigate students' own perceptions of a "good discussion," and also wished

to reach for certain ideals of a "dialogic" phenomenon. Thus, after I surveyed class participants

about their preferences and goals for discussions, I invited them to help me to facilitate them.

We created a list of goals: to guide an open discourse in which you learn more about a topic; to

listen more than you speak; to open minds to contrary viewpoints and arguments; to practice

critical thinking; to deepen reading experiences.

We posted five "authentic values for class discussions" on our class web page:

- Critical thinking: more questions arise at the end of a session;
- Respect: differences of opinions matter more than agreements;
- Diversity: our individual cultural backgrounds may display themselves in our sharing of opinions;
- Close reading: our readings deepen upon re-readings of the text; and
- Dialogues: we teach each other instead of depend upon the instructor for interpretations.

We then spent two hours, during two separate sessions, to draw up some tips and guidelines for

them to guide a discussion about a reading:

1)   Start with one or two guiding questions that are open-ended and that call for our
opinions—and reveal our biases.
2)   Do not call on people to speak. Encourage them to just speak out and call on one another
to speak next.
3)   You should sit down and take notes on key points you hear.
4)   If a number of people raise their hands anyway (because of force of habit? because of
their own classroom rules? because they are indefatigably polite?), then get up to note their
initials on the whiteboard—create a "speakers list."
5)   Give the class time markers, e.g. "We have about ten minutes left here."
6)   Do not worry if your own original questions are not directly answered.
7)   Do not worry if there are silences: they do not have to be filled. If several (excruciating)
minutes pass with no one talking, go back to your reading and cite something new. And then call

on someone in class (not the person who always says something!) and request her/his opinion about this quotation.

8)   At the end of a half-hour, use your notes to try to give an overview of the class' responses to the reading.

9)   Remember: you are not leading a presentation, you are not the expert here and neither is anyone else.

I added the final note:

10) Your discussion shall be assessed on the degree of sophisticated intellectual discourse.

At the end of the semester's work, I surveyed students again, and interviewed volunteers, who generally described the experiences as "very challenging and worthwhile…really hard thinking…valuable in that you have to learn to look at everyone in the class in new ways."

I clustered comments and evaluations into four themes: Silence; Equality and Roles; Shared Teaching; and Slow Learning.

Silence.

> *"Anyone? Anyone?"*
> *Teacher from* Ferris Bueller's Day Off

Over the years, I suspect, teachers become absolutists: we tend to gravitate towards a universe of *Either/Or.* With regards to classroom dialogues, teachers *either* learn to listen to and watch what is really going on in their classrooms when *no one is talking*, *or* they ensure that someone is *always talking.* As one graduate student, who teaches art to children age 5 to 18, remarked in our interviews, "Somewhere along our ways through school corridors we learn to dread silence in classrooms." Silence becomes, for so many, a hallmark or by-product of a strictly managed classroom; it is necessary for "work time." Noisy classrooms signal disruptions, looseness, poor behaviors. Thus, for some, a lively discussion may appear unstructured or too playful to be a sign of serious learning.   There are always bound to be struggles to *listen hard:*

> *…I think it's okay that not everyone speaks. If you don't have anything constructive to add, then you can listen and try and take something away from the discussion. Not everyone can relate to every topic.*

Several interview subjects noted that silence is quite necessary for them to formulate their opinions:

> *There should be pauses for people to think and process information.*
>
> *…I don't think everyone needs to speak, some prefer to listen and that's fine. Why force talking at this level? It is good to get a larger sampling of opinions, so allow the non-talkers to write.*

When I interviewed these students about the ways they deal with silence in their own classrooms, they stated that they typically reminded the class about the question or topic under consideration by pointing to the board or screen, by repeating quotations, and by re-capitulating opinions already expressed. But they observed that many of the students in their classes typically return to their own notes or books. They think that they "go deeper":

> *If you are leading a discussion it is always good to have more questions than not enough. [It] leaves room for silence even though silence can be strange at times, sometimes that means good thinking is going on. Good thinking leads to powerful conversations.*

Equality and Roles.

In a good, authentic discussion, the participants, I have noticed, revel in the atmosphere of equality.

> *Equal conversation—a give and take. …when a conversation is one-sided it becomes annoying & I tend to become less interested in the conversation. Equality is the key.*

A less successful discussion "puts students in their places." Individuals fall into previously-established roles, such as the Alpha Dog, the Silent One, and the Storyteller.

> *I don't mind when one person has a lot to say, but I don't like feeling like I have to interrupt someone to say something. I also don't really enjoy being called on to say something. I always feel like on the spot and rarely feel comfortable enough to come up with something intelligent to say!*
>
> *When one person dominates, it's no longer a discussion because you're not gaining multiple perspectives. When this occurs the leader should encourage other people to share their thoughts.*

This last comment, of course, points to the instructor's still-critical role as a kind of referee whose responsibility is to the group—to insure that everyone is safe and that the game keeps moving. Several students relish the prospect of divergent viewpoints.

> *Multiple points of view are an essential element. … Of course, having one person be a dominant force in the conversation is not good…*
>
> *Also, if someone is constantly jumping in to answer questions or add comments, others may not get to say what they wanted because the moment passed and the discussion moved into a new direction.*

Sub-themes of confidence about speaking in public, passivity, and timing emerged side-by-side with observations about manners—the conventions of ordinary conversation.

> *In regard to one person dominating a topic, yes, that is obnoxious.*
>
> *There are many strong personalities in this class and it is hard to quiet them so that others can be heard. It seemed the discussion kept coming back to the same people.*
>
> *I think everyone's voice was heard but people make it a bit too personal.*
>
> *A few members were not as gracious as others with making sure others had a chance to talk.*

Overall, the students who sat for interviews noted that *they* were able to create a more democratic environment during discussions: some of the "strong personalities" seemed to sit back and listen more—and open up space for other, more reticent students to speak. Only during the interview did I share my intervention. I met with three of the most vocal students outside of

class, and asked each of them to consider the following protocol: as with a good basketball

team, no one is permitted to shoot until at least five passes have occurred, and I asked each of

them to hold off with their comments until at least five others had spoken first.

Shared Teaching.

This last tactic aims for a Bakhtinian heteroglossia. As one student put it best,

> *People gravitate toward what is comfortable/known. Sometimes we*
> *need a push toward diversity.*

Two of her peers noted, in a similar vein,

> *Multiple points of view are an essential element.*
>
> *A good discussion is ongoing and leads to more information we*
> *never thought it would. It is an exploration and with many minds*
> *working together an ongoing heavy fuelled discussion is always exciting.*

Other students observed that argumentation is a necessary element—and that includes arguments

with your own previously-formed opinions:

> *A good discussion also poses questions of debate, questions that are*
> *highly arguable. I think these questions bring up many interesting and*
> *thought-provoking opinions and even may cause you to question your own*
> *opinions.*
>
> *Good discussions stem from real-life applications of the topics. We want*
> *to broaden our views, but reflect back on what we do individually.*

Finally, I thought that a couple of students' comments said better than anything I had ever read

about "empowerment" in classrooms:

> *These times allow for one to make the information their own.*
>
> *..a real discussion needs to go deeper into the reading & hear others'*
> *opinions at the same time. When you're getting and giving the ability*
> *to look at all sides and find ways to question your beliefs/assumptions so*
> *you have a full understanding of the topic.*

Slow Learning.

> *A leader posing questions should think of them ahead of time and ask themselves, "will this challenge my audience?" ...the leader should encourage communication of thoughts and ideas...I dislike simple yes/no responses or questions. Even though I'm exhausted, I want these conversations to last, to take time. It's hard ...*

This last emerged as especially significant. Students in my four classes often criticized their own students in K – 12 classrooms as impatient and demanding of instant gratification. (Typically, they blame parents for this impatience—and video gaming. Some add, poignantly, that they, too, are gamers.) Here they commented and spoke, in interviews, about their own difficulties with the long time needed to talk about a text with the guidelines we had agreed upon. Many noted that they started out discomfited by ambiguities in our talks—but that they gradually grew comfortable with open-endedness.

> *Sometimes I just wanted you to tell us what to think! What's most important about this reading! I guess I learned how to relax more with the conversations, over time...*

> *The discussions about our readings became more like conversations— real teacher conversations—except that we weren't just bitching and venting.*

Others commented that they learned to listen harder. Several said that listening hard meant that they would often realize that their own opinions were perhaps mistaken. Most significantly, to me, 22 of the 24 students who spoke after class in interviews expressed their opinion that they had probably *never* enjoyed a good or very good discussion in all their years of schooling.

> *What's weird is that when you're in school it takes forever. You can never see it ending. But when you start to teach you see it's the opposite: we're always rushing from one thing to another. Kids have no time to think in school.*

> *We never discussed anything in high school. It was always get to the answer, Answer the questions after the reading. Even in college, I don't remember really staying with a book that we all talked about. It was all lecture.*

Finally, one young woman, who often took a while to "find her voice" in our discussions, said, "We want to open our minds to the thoughts of others. Keeping things to ourselves is selfish." Freire would have been proud of her.

Implications for Future Studies

People stop and stare
I can't see their faces
Only the shadows of their eyes

Of course, I do not fault these students and young teachers for a preoccupation with correct answers: they are products of our national educational culture's mania for standardization and testing. I do suspect that their difficulties in sitting through a whole-class discussion about a reading signal a further erosion of their talents to inspire children to read.

The possible significance of this study lies in another question: What can instructors do to encourage students to engage in readings as a communal activity? I think that my investigations confirmed my suspicion that students—and teachers—increasingly rush to reach conclusions, find solutions, make fixes. Much must be done, or un-taught, to *slow down* certain modes of learning, the learning that comes from sustained discourse with peers, guided by a classroom teacher. Perhaps our global society's glut of information discourages the slower stages of critical thinking: we no longer have the time to ponder ideas.

Further investigations are needed in other subject areas, in other disciplines. I plan to observe teachers in their own classrooms, as they engage their own students in discussions about a variety of content materials. Ideally, a number of these teachers form study groups, or "teaching and learning centers," within their school buildings, as they continue to examine their pedagogy.

A fuller investigation into strong discussions gets at the need to engage the widest possible variety of learners—and their cultural backgrounds. For example, how do instructors approach students whose cultures inculcate silent behaviors in class? What do we say to women students whose roles outside of school are often subservient to men? And what about pre-teen girls who quickly learn to "code-switch" and "dumb-down" in front of their male peers? These are several questions that must be addressed in order to encourage the widest possible diversity of voices in the classroom.

My research has led me to conclude that the vast majority of graduate students I have taught have *never participated* in a class discussion that is either open-ended or conducive to discovery. When these students, who are, for the most part, young teachers themselves, took on the assignment to lead a class discussion about our assigned readings, I witnessed them practice a back-and-forth, closed exchange. They left little breathing space for discursive thinking, for genuine conversation—in short, for the irregular *coursing of a dialogue.* Further, this study suggests that a significant percentage of all undergraduate and graduate students feel intimidated by the prospect of assuming active control of classroom conversations. By directly confronting this phenomenon, of pseudo-discussions in the classroom, such students created and explored more fertile territories of academic conversations.

Perhaps a great classroom discussion is similar to great sex. You emerge from the encounter both excited and exhausted, as if you had traveled to someplace you had never quite been before. There are risks involved. First, we instructors must be mindful of the possibility that discussions about readings intimidate some students; some worry that a "weak reading" reveals itself. Second, even as a class creates an authentic discussion, there is a chance that a participant's feelings may be hurt. Thus, a follow-up reflective paper may be necessary to

strengthen discussion muscles. Finally, we need to be mindful that many students may view

classroom discussions as an already-defunct process. This may be a concomitant by-product of

the not-so-slow death of printed text. Even if we all have faith in the maxim that a book's life

depends upon people talking about it, some may respectfully sing requiem and opt for further

engagements via electronic technology. Perhaps *all* classroom discussions may soon re-locate to

on-line chat rooms on class webpages.

Even so, I suggest that what is necessary is that we teach students to *desire to talk about*

readings—when there is no teacher present. One of the most powerful discussions I have seen

occurred "virtually": I set up two Skype sessions between one of my graduate classes and an

English class on Rikers Island, our nation's largest jail, by means of a laptop and a SmartBoard.

Both groups had read parts of Claude Brown's classic *Manchild in the Promised Land* (1999),

and I had challenged the Teachers College group to consider their own images of New York

City's poorest neighborhoods. With the enthusiastic support of former colleagues on Rikers, we

created two guiding questions for a conversation about the book. There were technical problems,

of course, and an initial discomfort at the two classrooms' shocking disparities, but the biggest

problem was that the two sets of participants did not want to quit talking to each other.

And so, a new question emerges: how do we instructors engage students in authentic

discussions by means of the latest electronic technologies and devices? These latter tools have

accelerated our access to information in an unprecedented way, but often impede, rather than

enhance, a human engagement with ideas. Students may need to re-learn ways to talk to each

other in our classes. The tools for such learning lie all around us; we need to create the safe

space and the *time* for this kind of slow learning.

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Appendix

Questionnaire about our Class Discussions

Directions: Please mark an X in the appropriate column to indicate your degree of agreement with a statement: 4 = "strongly agree"; 3 = "agree"; 2 = "disagree"; and 1 = "strongly disagree."

		4	3	2	1
1.	A good class discussion involves everyone.	◊	◊	◊	◊
2.	I enjoy whole-class discussions.	◊	◊	◊	◊
3.	A whole-class discussion bores me.	◊	◊	◊	◊
4.	These discussions create opportunities for	◊	◊	◊	◊

many people to zone out.

5.   These discussions are opportunities for other   ◊   ◊   ◊   ◊
people to show off their knowledge.

6.   I try to listen more to other people than to
speak my own opinion.   ◊   ◊   ◊   ◊

7.   Education topics are usually dull.   ◊   ◊   ◊   ◊

8.   The only good discussions are about different
teachers' classroom experiences.   ◊   ◊   ◊   ◊

9.   Professors typically lead discussions in a
"Ping-Pong" manner.   ◊   ◊   ◊   ◊

10.   Teachers should have their opinions lead a
discussion, especially about assigned readings.   ◊   ◊   ◊   ◊

Now please write a few words to respond to the following three questions:

1.   What are your favorite topics for discussion in an education course?

2.   When does a class discussion become a waste of time?

3.   What is your typical reaction when you think that a discussion has become a waste of
course time? That is, what do you do, exactly?

If you are willing to participate in a "focus-group" interview about this matter, please print your
name below. Thank you.