

Facilitating Civil Discourse in the Classroom

The Problem

In order to engage students in learning, all good teachers want classrooms in which all students feel welcome and valued, and in which the free and fair exchange of ideas is promoted. The difficulty is that, in the process of discussing controversial ideas, conflict ensues and/or is exacerbated when students – as they sometimes do – state their positions in an absolutist, confrontational way. Or when they denigrate or personally attack those who disagree with them. Or when they employ stereotypes or use language that is hurtful or hateful to various groups. Fearing that an argument may “get out of hand” or “go nuclear,” we may be tempted to avoid bringing up controversial issues. Or when the discussion heats up, we may quickly bring it to a close and try to move on.

A related problem is that students make a variety of off-hand, “joking around” remarks and comments before, during, and after class. It is tempting to overlook these remarks and hope that “no one noticed” or “no one will take offense.”

In both of these cases, however, our acts of omission or commission create a chilly climate in the classroom for democratic dialog and inclusion. To overcome this, we must be proactive. We must take leadership in creating learning environment in which dialog flourishes and everyone is respected. We must model crucial behaviors to our students. To do both of these things, we must improve our facilitation skills. Below are some suggestions.

Ground Rules

One of the keys to creating a classroom where civil discourse is possible is establishing ground rules: those you, as the educational leader of the class, create in advance and those you and the students collectively establish. Ground rules established in advance should appear on the syllabus, as part of your contract with students. Here is a sample statement of mutual respect:

Each person in this course has unique prior experiences and a unique viewpoint to share. Though disagreement and even conflict may occur, I expect your cooperation in maintaining an atmosphere of mutual respect. When participating in discussions, it is perfectly acceptable to have strong opinions – in fact I encourage you to do so. I also encourage you to discuss your own personal experience and relate it to that of others. In the process, however, I expect you to respect the basic intelligence and humanity of each participant in the discussion. Conflict is not necessarily a bad thing, as long as there is a commitment to mutual respect. Hateful and demeaning speech will not be tolerated.

In order to create a safe environment for discussing controversial topics, it is also important to establish in advance that the rights of individuals will be protected and that discrimination will not be allowed. Your university undoubtedly has an official anti-discrimination policy, probably in the Student Handbook, which can be reprinted on the syllabus. If your institution has an official statement supporting diversity, include that as well. If not, craft your own and print it on the syllabus.

You will also want to discuss other possible ground rules with your students, for example, how individuals will obtain the floor (raise hands, possess a talking stick) and who will moderate discussion (teacher, student volunteer, rotation among all students). Having this discussion will (1) empower students to take responsibility for what goes on in the classroom; and (2) increase buy-in, making it more likely that they will not only abide by the rules but help to enforce them as well.

Active Listening

Every good teacher wants students to listen in the classroom – to the teacher, and to each other. We can model good listening behavior for our students. The Chinese word *tin* means to hear or listen. The ideogram for this verb conveys important information about active listening.



This character aptly illustrates the complexity and the wholeness of deep listening. When we really listen to someone, we do so with our whole body and our whole being: with our eyes, ears, and heart. The focus is entirely on the other person. At the moment of listening, our own “stuff” doesn’t matter; we demonstrate respect for the other person by giving them our undivided attention. Knowing that they will be respectfully listened to, students are more likely to participate in discussion.

Paraphrasing

In order to make sure that people are heard, you should model and practice paraphrasing. Paraphrasing lets the speaker know that you really heard them. As a listener, you should concentrate on getting the speaker’s message and feeding it back. Don’t worry about formulating a response, judging, evaluating, or adding your own examples – just hear the speaker. To do so, you must **restate** and/or **reflect**.

Restating involves repeating, in your own words, what you heard the other person say.

When done correctly, restating can:

- force you to listen carefully to the speaker.
- allow the other person to know that you are trying to understand them.

- avoid frustration and unnecessary, unproductive conflict by clearing up misunderstandings.
- validate the other person by having someone really listen to them.
- reduce anger and defensiveness in a person by having someone else take their concerns seriously.
- allow the speaker to control their message by affording them an opportunity to edit and clarify it.

Reflecting involves mirroring back to the other person the emotions you hear and feel them expressing.

Done properly, reflecting can:

- create empathy between the speaker and the listener.
- paradoxically, reduce a person's anger and hostility by giving them permission to feel it.
- give a person insight into their own behavior by helping them to clarify their emotions.
- allow a speaker to discuss feelings or an event that they want to share, but find difficult to talk about.
- generate insights into a conflict by focusing on feelings rather than facts. Conflicts are often more about people's feelings than about any particular set of facts.

How to do it

- ✓ Focus on the Speaker. It is helpful to begin your paraphrase with "You...."
- ✓ Restate the core message you heard and also reflect the emotion(s) underlying the statement. Use synonyms as much as possible, and use a choice of words and a tone of voice that reflects some of the feeling you hear from the other person. Be sincere.
- ✓ Be brief. After the speaker says the equivalent of no more than 3-5 sentences, the listener should paraphrase them with 3-12 words. The shorter the better.

Contrary to popular belief, a short paraphrase is not an interruption. People like to know that they are being heard. If your paraphrase is off the mark, the speaker has an opportunity to clarify. Also, students who think out loud will appreciate feedback that allows them to refine their thought.

This technique is particularly effective with angry or deeply emotional speakers. People calm down when they know they are heard and their emotion has registered. One good index of the need to paraphrase more is when people keep repeating themselves or rehashing the same argument. This generally means they don't think that they've been heard. Paraphrasing will reassure them and allow the discussion to move on. Especially with controversial issues, paraphrases are far more effective than questions for allowing the speaker to be heard but not put on the defensive.

Common Pitfalls of Paraphrasing

- Parroting back their exact words. Pure repetition can seem artificial and lead to frustration.

- Beginning your paraphrases with extraneous phrases like “*What I hear you saying is....*” “*So you’re saying that....*” Focus on the core of the message and leave it at that.
- Inserting your own interpretation of what the other person said or what you think they mean. Let them clarify their own meanings.
- Judging or evaluating what the speaker has said. Don’t give the impression that you agree or disagree with what was said, just that you understand it.
- Inserting examples from your own life. It doesn’t create empathy, it creates a distraction.
- Asking questions. Contrary to popular belief, asking questions when you’re just trying to hear someone is often unproductive.

Centered Communication

Civil discourse requires students and teachers to take responsibility for their own positions and statements. This notion flies in the face of much academic discourse, which is often conducted in the third person and in the passive voice. Discussion of controversial issues and the values and beliefs that underlie them requires centered communication in which speakers use “I-statements.” By using “I messages” you are transparent about

- your emotions.
- your needs.
- the impact of another person’s actions on you.
- your views and preferences.
- your intentions/purposes/goals.

Examples:

“I feel _____ when you _____.”

“I get frustrated when you _____ because I _____.”

“What I’m concerned about is _____.”

“What I need here is _____.”

“What I would like to see happen is _____.”

“What I’m trying to do here is _____.”

Centered speaking is most effective when it:

- is rooted in the here-and-now — i.e., it expresses the feelings I’m having right now.
- avoids blaming or accusing the other.
- talks about specific events and behaviors, not “general problems.”
- is honest.
- commands, not demands, respect for my feelings.
- takes responsibility for my own feelings.
- recognizes that I can only change me, not you.

Techniques of Centered Communication

Agreement Stating

Purpose: to offer moral support and/or common ground as a foundation to continue dialogue.

Definition: a statement of what you agree with, perhaps as a preface to expressing your own opinion.

Process: Use the following stems:

“I agree....”

“Yes, I can see that....”

“To me, there’s no doubt that....”

“You’re right....”

“You’ve got a good point when you say that....”

“I can go along with you when you say...”

Preference Stating

Purpose: to be open and vulnerable and to signal willingness to share choices.

Definition: a statement expressing clearly your wishes and desires

Process: Use the following stems:

“I prefer....”

“I would rather....”

“I would like....”

“It may not be possible, but I would like....”

“It would be helpful to me if....”

Purpose Stating

Purpose: to make your intentions clear to others.

Definition: a statement clearly expressing your intentions.

Process: Use the following stems:

“My purpose is....”

“I’m hoping to....”

“What I’m trying to do here is....”

“My intention is to....”

Posture of Puzzlement

Purpose: to respectfully express confusion about another’s behavior.

Definition: a statement expressing confusion and inviting clarification

Process: Use the following stems:

“I’m puzzled by what you mean by that.”

“I’m having trouble understanding your purpose in saying that.”

Reframing

Reframing allows discussion to move forward without blaming or denigrating individual students. Sometimes students express offensive stereotypes or use harmful language out of ignorance. They do not seem to intend to offend, but apparently inadvertently do so in the process of making their point. When paraphrasing in these situations, engage in procedural reframing by “laundering” the student’s language to remove offensive, hostile, aggressive, or harmful stereotypes while retaining the core meaning of what you hear them trying to say.

In other cases, substantive reframing may be called for. One way to do this is through Posture of Puzzlement.

“I’m wondering if all illegal immigrants have those characteristics.”

“I’m puzzled about your use of that word, since Tyree has already said she is offended by it.”

“Help me understand. Are you saying that *all* women act like this?”

Expressing puzzlement allows the speaker to realize the stereotype without getting defensive or feeling like they have been charged with a politically-incorrect crime, while still being held accountable for what was said.

Another kind of substantive reframing involves problematizing the view expressed without making it a failure of the individual student.

“I have heard a number of people express that view. Class, why do you think people hold such views? What leads them to do so? What are the views that disagree? Why do people hold these ideas?”

Reframing can also involve having students listen carefully to different points of view and paraphrase them. (Ideally they can do this because you have already modeled the process of paraphrasing. In any case, coach them through it.) You can have the students do this in dyads, or line them up in a “human continuum” from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. Or divide the room into quadrants (Strongly Agree, Agree, Strongly Disagree, Disagree) and have the students “vote with their feet.” Then have students explain their rationale while you paraphrase them or they paraphrase each other. As a motivation for active listening, you can ask them to restate, verbally or in writing, the position with which they most disagreed.

These techniques broaden the discussion and make a potential disaster into a positive “teaching moment.”

References

Material in this handout is drawn from the following sources:

Ashton, Patrick J. 2006. *Transformative Conflict Resolution and Mediation: A Sociological Approach, 10th Ed.* Fort Wayne, Indiana: Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne.

Ashton, Patrick J. and Clausen, Jeanette. 2006. “Faculty Development for Facilitating Civil Discourse,” in James L. Perry and Steven G. Jones, eds., *Quick Hits for Educating Citizens*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Daté, Barbara. 1996. *Microcommunication Skills: The Foreign Language of Caring – for Oneself, with Loved Ones, and Coworkers*. Winnipeg: Menno Simons College/The University of Winnipeg.

Warren, Lee. 2006. “Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom.” Harvard: Derek Bok Center. Available at: <http://bokcenter.harvard.edu/docs/hotmoments.html> Accessed 11 February 2006.