

"Building Dialogue in Feminist Classrooms, Part 2: Student-Generated Discussion Points"

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Building Dialogue in Feminist Classrooms, Part 2: Student-Generated Discussion Points

Introduction and Rationale

In Part 2 of these linked activities, I turn to dialogue and the use of student-generated discussion points to further build community in the feminist classroom.¹ Once students have mastered a common vocabulary, I argue, this informal discussion points exercise offers rich opportunities for students to practice those terms and concepts, engage in productive dialogue and active listening with their instructor and peers, interpret and analyze the course materials, and build problem-solving skills by navigating moments of conflict.

By dialogue, I mean both dialogue about the course material itself and dialogue that offers a space for students to share their own perspectives and experiences if they wish to and feel comfortable doing so, when those perspectives and experiences help deepen both individual and collective investment in the material. hooks (1994) writes, “That moment of collective participation and dialogue means that students and professor respect-and here I invoke the root meaning of the word, “to look at”-each other, engage in acts of recognition with one another, and do not just talk to the professor” (p. 186). In my attempts to foster this atmosphere of collective dialogue in the classroom early in my teaching career, I encountered some initial challenges in getting students to engage in real and meaningful discussion with each other rather than just “talk[ing] to the professor.” As Smele, Siew-Sarju, Chou, Breton, and Bernhardt (2017) note, the neoliberal turn in higher education has added greatly to these challenges by creating a passive, consumer-based model of education that centers student satisfaction and uncritical, simplistic celebrations of difference.

To meet these challenges, I created a discussion points homework exercise in two upper-level, writing-intensive courses on women’s writing and began using it in the first week of class. I have since used this exercise in introductory and core classes as well and have found that it translates effectively to any classroom setting where reading and oral participation are central to the goals of the course. This is a collective agenda-setting exercise that invites students to actively shape discussion rather than passively consume it, respects students’ choices about how to participate and what to share, and encourages equity both by engaging with a range of viewpoints and perspectives and by honoring each student’s individual

¹ For ease of reading, the authors have chosen to use “I” in this piece. However, the authors collaborated on these two linked Original Teaching Activities and the order of the authors’ names is alphabetical, not hierarchical.

contribution, when that contribution is well-informed and supports an inclusive classroom dynamic.

Learning Objectives

- Interpret and analyze literature in oral formats (presentations, class discussion)
- Respond to others' feedback and interpretations
- Practice active listening

Explanation

This discussion points exercise is a daily, informal assignment that I put on the syllabus and explain and model for the students on the first day of class. The assignment invites students to generate an agenda for each class session. I keep the instructions for this assignment relatively open-ended:

Participation:

In addition to carefully reading and annotating our readings, please come to class every day with 1-2 discussion points you'd like to raise about the material. These shouldn't require any outside research, rather, let your own interests guide you as you read. I'll begin each class by inviting students at random to report on what they found interesting, unusual, or provocative in the reading for that day, and to direct us to specific passages or quotes from the reading. You should also be prepared to respond to my remarks and to those of your classmates' remarks. We'll also make a discussion rubric together in the first week of class to collectively establish what we want to get out of our discussions, and I'll be asking you to periodically evaluate your own participation with this rubric.

I explain that I will begin each class period by inviting students to share their discussion points. Students sometimes ask if they can volunteer personal experiences or anecdotes along with points about the reading; I always respond that they are very welcome to do so, but that this is not a requirement.

At the start of each class session, I then record those points on the board, identifying shared themes and patterns, and I ask the rest of the class what they would like to add to the agenda, either extending what was already on the board or taking the agenda in a different direction. Often, I add a point or two of my own that emerges from the students' remarks or to introduce points or perspectives that have not yet been raised. Once we establish the broad framework for the class at the beginning, we then work through those points in greater detail in class discussion, using them as transitions and bridges from one topic to the next. I always refer back to students' specific names and points to signal turns in our

discussion and conclude class by offering some synthetic remarks that both recap what we've accomplished that day and anticipate the next day's reading.

Debriefing

Right away, in the first weeks of class, I observed that this exercise led to positive results in terms of student engagement, participation, and preparedness. Having this exercise at the beginning of class meant that students started talking early and energetically about the reading, and soon began identifying points of similarity and conflict with each other's remarks on their own, with minimal prompting from me. This also had a positive impact on the discussion and resolution of conflicts in the classroom. I found that I was able to anticipate and call attention to points of difference as they arose, and because all students were encouraged to take part, this opened out onto a more dynamic back-and-forth between multiple students. The collective nature of this exercise also helped prevent against any one student monopolizing the discussion and allowed me to highlight and underscore student comments that were especially thought-provoking and generative.

In order to dispel the possible misconception that all points are equally valid, however ill-informed, or worse, bigoted, it is important to scaffold this activity with clear guidelines for discussion in the first weeks of class. Following Mitchell (2018), I include a "Class Covenant" on the syllabus that states that the classroom will be free of hate speech, that each student is responsible for creating an environment of respect, and that "Inflammatory remarks will not go unchecked and will not be tolerated" (para. 6). As discussed in Part One, the use of feminist vocabulary lists can also work towards this atmosphere of respect by giving students access to equitable terms and concepts to use in class discussion. I also employ Bernhardt's (2017) practice of "calling out while drawing in," or "cautiously and respectfully reframing the 'call-out' as an opportunity for shared learning," if a student makes a comment that reinforces oppressive structures (p. 698). Such a response might involve, for instance, asking the student outright how they might benefit from oppressive systems, inviting students to engage in intersectional analysis, and/or asking who or what might be left out or marginalized in the student's statement. These approaches work to create "a classroom community wherein students are allowed to make mistakes yet where oppressive contributions are always addressed and countered" (pp. 698-699).

It is also necessary to employ some flexibility with this activity, and to make clear to students that there are multiple ways to contribute. As hooks (2010) writes, engaged pedagogy does not assume that "all voices should be heard all the time or that all voices should occupy the same amount of time" (p. 21). It is equally important to respect the fact that not all students may feel comfortable contributing

in neoliberal spaces, and that students may be struggling, further, with a range of events, such as recent trauma, the global pandemic, or job loss. For these reasons, I do not make active vocal participation or the sharing of personal experiences mandatory; I always stress that these are voluntary activities. Following hooks (2010), I invite students, in the opening weeks of class, to “honor all capabilities, not solely the ability to speak,” emphasizing that students who “excel in active listening also contribute much to the formation of community,” as do students who speak rarely but have excellent points to share in writing activities, for example (pp. 21-22). I also combine this exercise with other activities that invite students to reflect on the reading without the expectation of a verbal contribution. As Breton (2017) writes, unreviewed, ungraded journal-writing, which the instructor does not take up, read, or evaluate, can provide opportunities for students to reflect on the material in a “quiet, individual space” (p. 698).

I have found that this discussion points strategy helps dispel some students’ possible expectation that a “native informant” would be responsible for contributing talking points about certain facets of identity or experience. hooks (1994) describes the role of “native informant” in predominantly white classroom settings, “Often...one lone person of color in the classroom...is objectified by others and forced to assume the role of ‘native informant.’ For example, a novel is read by a Korean American author. White students turn to the one student from a Korean background to explain what they do not understand” (p. 43). hooks recommends that professors can challenge this dynamic by explaining that experience does not constitute expertise, and also by introducing the problematic concept of the “native informant” and discussing it with students. I would add this discussion point strategy as another way of combating this dynamic among students. Each student had the freedom to discuss any aspect of the text that interested them, and to include personal experience if they wished to and felt comfortable doing so. However, by signaling that discussions about race, culture, sexuality, gender, and other topics were a shared responsibility for us all, the discussion points strategy helped us steer away from students’ potential expectation that any one student or group of students would be seen as solely responsible for explaining a topic to others.

This flexible approach opened up interesting moments of shared experience and community-building during a discussion of Mary Seacole’s autobiography and travel narrative, *Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands* (1857/2005). In this first-person account, Seacole, a hotelier and doctress of Jamaican and Scottish ancestry, recounts her adventures traveling to Crimea to nurse injured British soldiers during the Crimean War. During our discussion of one passage in which Seacole describes a brief meeting with the white English nurse Florence Nightingale, several students volunteered that they had been taught about Nightingale in school but were not aware of Seacole’s pioneering use of

traditional herbal remedies in her doctress work. Other students in the course agreed, and soon entered into a lively discussion of some texts, debates, and discourses they wished they had encountered earlier in their education. Some students shared their experiences during misogynistic or squeamish sex ed units, while others discussed the absence of many Black women and LGBTQ+ authors from their high school curricula. Students who frequently disagreed with each other found some commonality in this discussion, while the variety of the concerns raised also ensured that we paid attention to key differences in our experiences and in the schools we had attended.

Our attention to those differences invited us to engage in critical reflexivity, a process that involves, in Ryan and Walsh's (2018) words, assessing the "significance of environment, power, and context as well as subjectivity in the delineation and construction of knowledge" (p. 1). For example, the students discussed how their curricula varied from district to district and identified the different sources of influence over those curricula, including parents, school boards, and local and state politicians. They also discussed disparities in funding from district to district, and how those disparities were rooted in systemic racism and classism. The discussion points exercise helped us engage another aspect of critical reflexivity by asking us to "critique ourselves, to see if our own actions perpetuate the very cycle from which we hope to escape" (Door, 2014, p. 89). We discussed how many students in the class planned to become educators themselves, or to go into professions like editing and publishing, and brainstormed how they might dismantle these barriers in their future roles. To conclude that day's session, I brought the discussion back to Seacole by asking students to reflect on where they would include Seacole on a secondary curriculum today, and how her autobiography productively complicates the categories often used to organized literary study, including the theme of our own course, *Women and Empire*.

Five students from this class then extended the discussion outside of our classroom by voluntarily forming a panel, "What We Should Be Learning In Schools, But Aren't," for our annual undergraduate research symposium. Before an audience consisting of members of our university community and members of the greater Pittsburgh community, one student read an open letter to the abstinence-only sex educator Pam Stenzel, another presented an animated video she'd made on different schools of critical theory, and three other students composed creative nonfiction and poetry about the educational gaps they had perceived in their own education and those of their family members. Their interests ranged from oversights in sex education, the need for greater inclusiveness of texts and themes treating LGBTQ+ identities in school curricula, the need for a greater rapport between the university as an institution and its surrounding communities, and the stigma faced by those who choose not to attend college or who are prevented from doing so by systemic barriers. What all of these presentations had in common was a shared

recognition of the way underlying and uneven relationships of power shape curricula. That this shared interest initially arose from an in-class discussion of Mary Seacole's autobiography showed me that the discussion points exercise had provided space for students not only to build dialogue among themselves and to share their individual experiences, but also to transition to thinking about, and beginning to reckon with, the broader systemic issues that informed those experiences.

Assessment

Since I began this exercise, my students' reflection papers have credited the discussion points strategy with fostering student participation, creating a positive classroom atmosphere, and inviting students to reflect on different perspectives expressed in class. "I really like the ability to steer the discussion to points that the students focus on," one student wrote on her mid-term evaluation. "It makes it more interesting and interactive." On their final reflections, students frequently note that they learned the most from students in the class whose points they disagreed with initially, and that they appreciate the opportunity to present and revise their remarks. These discussion dynamics also had positive effects on student writing, as students demonstrated greater fluency in acknowledging and addressing counter-arguments and engaging with perspectives from secondary sources.

Because the discussion points activity does tend to reward students who are already comfortable with public speaking and verbal expression, I supplement this standing assignment with other forms of assessment that engage different learning styles. These include informal and formal writing assignments, including periodic, ungraded in-class writing, and an instructor-student conference. I have also modified this activity by inviting students to contribute discussion points anonymously, via a Google Doc, before class, or by asking students to generate discussion points in small groups before a large group discussion. This activity can be adapted for classes where not all students have completed the assigned reading: instructors can identify and introduce a short excerpt to focus on at the beginning of class and then proceed with the discussion points exercise. In addition to the university student survey, I also conduct anonymous introductory, midterm, and final course evaluations that are specific to each particular course. I also allow students multiple "skip" days in the term, so that students understand that a choice not to engage on some days will not be penalized, as long as they are making some effort towards regular and thoughtful contribution.

When used in conjunction with other assignments that assess student learning, regular, student-generated discussion points can enliven class discussion and productively dismantle classroom dynamics in which students talk primarily to the instructor. Having students bring discussion points is an effective and simple

way to boost student engagement, air and explore points of conflict and difference, and build community among students.

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