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“Civil Dialogue” as Feminist Pedagogy: Engendering Material and Symbolic Movement

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Cover Page Footnote

The author wishes to acknowledge the founders of the Institute for Civil Dialogue: John Genette, Clark Olson, and Jennifer Linde. The author expresses her deepest gratitude to the founders for introducing her to the practice of "Civil Dialogue" at Arizona State University in 2015, which she continues to utilize regularly in the college classroom.

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In the United States, we are socialized to think in Western dualisms (i.e., the light is on or off, the person is male or female, you are either for or against). Dualisms are embedded in our communication patterns, and these patterns characterize discussion of social issues. Consequently, discussion becomes debate, and dominant approaches to inquiry are privileged over experience, with persuasion being the end goal. Fostering agency, cultivating empathetic understanding, and facilitating critical thought are made more difficult—outcomes that are neither productive nor edifying in the college classroom. What is more, everyday people (including students) often remain silent or tentative amid increasing polarity in public opinion and public expression of those opinions, uncertain of how to navigate these ideological divisions.

The question then becomes, where do we go from here? How do we facilitate difficult conversations that evoke movement as part of the collective environment, not as motives of individual rhetors? How might classrooms function as dialogic spaces where the goal is not a moral consensus but maximizing the "cooperation that this project of collective life entails" (Boyd, 2006, p. 870)? I ask these questions as a feminist pedagogue because I believe the classroom can help students cope with the realities of living in a postmodern society when our pedagogy gives rise to a democratic public sphere born of the coffeehouse and political community. Therefore, as we center the ways communication theories and methodologies attend to human movement in the context of feminist pedagogy, identifying tools to facilitate sensemaking around precarious topics in the undergraduate classroom is imperative.

Rationale

One tool that enables us to facilitate sensemaking around precarious topics is the theory and praxis of civility. Testing our ideas in the "free marketplace" is as much an act of self-respect inherent to civility and a process of sensemaking—"how do [we] know what [we] think until [we] see what [we] say?" (a query adapted by Weick et al., 2005, from a line in E. M. Forester's *Aspects of the Novel*). The civil communicator is one who is simultaneously knowledgeable of the past, aware of and attentive to the present, and contemplative about the future. In the same way, the civil listener has the courage to understand and be understood; despite feeling pulled in different directions while synthesizing information, they courageously voice their standpoint amid a state of flux and risk being both challenged and supported. In short, exercises in identification necessarily involve characteristics of the civil communicator and the civil listener

because the civil communicator is first honest to themselves and then to others (Genette et al., 2018). Only once we have sorted out our own feelings are we able to portray our positions candidly and honestly in a public setting.

To that end, I propose the following dialogic practice as a way to engender both material and symbolic movement in discussions of a precarious topic that is especially relevant to university life: gendered violence and consent. The activity is most well suited to undergraduate curricula on gender and communication broadly but is also adaptable to courses on critical methods, health campaigns, and more. At its core, the dialogic practice functions as an exercise in identification and sensemaking in which the objective is to cultivate an understanding of positions rather than motives—the difference between “why do you think that?” and “how did you come to hold that position?”

Learning Objectives

Grounded in principles of invitational rhetoric (Bone et al., 2008) and provocation (Mills, 1988), the activity draws on a structured format for public dialogue known as “Civil Dialogue,” created by John Genette and written about in the Genette et al. (2018) book *Hot Topics, Cool Heads*. In short, a round of Civil Dialogue offers a “statement of provocation” to the audience, who is then invited to respond to that statement by situating themselves along a spectrum of opinion anchored by degrees of agreement, neutrality, and disagreement, and then encouraged to engage in dialogue across positions. Thus, this activity draws on the method of Civil Dialogue as a sort of scaffolding—a way to structure the larger, original discussion of consent relative to university life.

The intention of the activity is encompassed in the following learning objectives:

1. Co-creation of knowledge by diverse voices
2. Development of skills in civil speech and civil listening: civil speech occurs “when a person expresses [their] beliefs and values in a passionate yet responsible and truthful manner,” and civil listening occurs when [a person] attempt[s] to understand a speaker’s ideas, feelings, and experiences by listening to [them] with patience and respect” (Genette et al., 2015, p. 105).

This dialogic practice can be used across divergent contexts to help individuals interact in ways that imbue productive citizen communication.

Explanation

This dialogic activity begins with an acknowledgement that the ways in which consent is framed, taught, and more or less marketed to young adults varies.

Sexual assault has been widely acknowledged as "part of the college experience," with approximately one-in-four women and one-in-15 men attending college experiencing some form of sexual assault, including rape (Cantor et al., 2020).¹ Many sexual assault awareness and prevention campaigns have arisen in response (see: Emery, 2018; Nagle, 2013), made all the more urgent by the fact that administrators have done little to hold perpetrators on their campuses accountable.² For this activity, the class views several of these campaign slogans. Slogans include:

1. "Put Yourself in Her Shoes" (George Washington University)
2. "No Is a Complete Sentence" (University of California)
3. "Consent: Ask for It." (Trojan Condoms)
4. "Got Consent?" (University of Oregon)
5. "I Always Get Consent" (Arizona State University)
6. "Consent Is Sexy" (cross-institutional)

It is the lattermost slogan that has arguably drawn the most "buzz" and stands to provide a poignant opportunity for students to critically analyze an attempt at justice. To enable this activity, the slogan is couched within a statement of provocation. On the dry-erase board or PowerPoint screen at the front of the classroom, the following sentence is displayed:

"CONSENT IS SEXY" IS AN EFFECTIVE CAMPAIGN SLOGAN FOR
COLLEGE STUDENTS.

The class is instructed to "sit with the statement" for a few minutes and, thereby, allow students to privately discern their feelings toward the statement. Next, the instructor (acting as facilitator) turns to five chairs, organized in a semicircle at the front of the room. The chairs represent a spectrum of opinion and are labeled accordingly: *Strongly Agree* → *Agree* (or *Somewhat Agree*) → *Neutral* or *Undecided* → *Disagree* (or *Somewhat Disagree*) → *Strongly Disagree*. Students are invited to respond to the statement by physically occupying one of the chairs to represent that position.³ Once the five positions are filled, the instructor prompts each of the five students to offer a one-minute opening statement explaining why they are occupying that seat. Notwithstanding the

¹ The same report revealed that rates for cisgender women and transgender, nonbinary or genderqueer, and questioning students are approximately the same but four times higher than rates for cisgender men and students declining to state their gender (Cantor et al., 2020, p. 14).

² A recent analysis of 2016 data reported via the Clery Act revealed over 75% of institutions failed to disclose a single reported incident of sexual assault, including rape, fondling, intimate partner violence, and stalking (American Association of University Women, n.d.).

³ Genette et al. (2018) refer to these individuals as the "five core participants" in a round of Civil Dialogue.

immediate relevance that the statement targets college students, the gravity and range of discussion is compelling.

- Students who occupy the *Agree Strongly* and *Agree* (or *Somewhat Agree*) positions feel the slogan “‘Consent Is Sexy’... gets the buzz words out.” The slogan is fun. They feel that for a Gen Z audience, the word “sexy” catches attention in ways that “consent” may not, thanks to the normalization of gendered violence. Students point out that claiming something is “sexy” could also promote discussions that “let [students] come up with ways that consent is a positive thing.”
- Students in the *Neutral* or *Undecided* position wonder, “If the slogan ‘Consent Is Sexy’ works for one person—that is, it causes them to consider the importance of consent and always seek it because they want to be sexy—then it is effective. However, what about those it doesn’t ‘catch?’ Is it enough? And if it’s not enough, is it really effective?”
- Students who take up the *Disagree* (or *Somewhat Disagree*) position often interrogate two words: “sexy” and “effective.” If we say something like, “consent is sexy,” does that mean the inverse is also true? That is, if a college student understands and agrees that “consent is sexy,” are they led to believe that “not giving consent is not sexy,” and so in order to be “sexy,” may feel pressured to give consent?
- Those occupying the *Disagree Strongly* position have pointed out that consent is not sexy; consent is *mandatory*. We should not have to “glam something up” for it to be taken seriously. Perhaps other slogans like “No Is a Complete Sentence” would be more effective.

After opening statements, the instructor prompts the five students in the semicircle to engage in an open, collaborative dialogue for 10 minutes. One student may begin by elaborating on their opening statement or responding to another’s opening statement to compare or contrast their positions. One student may pose a question to another occupying a more distant position to gain clarity. The student occupying the *Neutral* or *Undecided* position may narrate the discomfort in uncertainty, which prompts the four other students to offer suggestions or guidance. Students occupying the *Strongly Agree* and *Strongly Disagree* positions may press each other, while the three students in between make observations about the two “polar opposite” positions and provide some perspective (even pointing out infractions if civil speech or civil listening are not being authentically modeled). When these dialogic exchanges happen, students are “work[ing] to co-create a genuine and civil conversation” (Genette et al., 2018, p. 55). The discussion is also more accessible because the semicircle arrangement of the chairs symbolically resists models of hierarchical debate.

Next, the instructor opens the discussion to the rest of the class for five minutes, so those who observed civil dialogue being modeled become active

participants. Students in the audience may ask questions of those occupying core positions, make connections between contributions, or offer their own thoughts on the statement (e.g., sharing where *they* would have sat).⁴ Finally, the instructor prompts each of the five students in the semicircle to offer a one-minute closing statement (i.e., final thoughts or reflections on how their position shifted) and invites them to re-join their peers in the audience. The instructor then concludes the activity by offering a five-minute summation of the dialogue. Without exception, this activity cultivates one of the most vibrant, discussive class sessions of the entire term.

Debriefing and Assessment

A benefit of this activity is the built-in debrief. During the summation, the instructor identifies key themes from the dialogue and notes areas of material and symbolic movement (i.e., some students' positions are reinforced, others are persuaded, and those who felt neutral or undecided are still exposed to a multiplicity of positions that serve to inform their own identification). In doing so, the debrief acknowledges the beauty in this dialogic practice: each of the five orientations is valuable and may be considered simultaneously "true."

Most importantly, the debrief is an opportunity to engage in theoretical application and advocacy. The instructor guides students to make explicit connections between the statement or the art of the dialogue and the discipline of communication studies or specific theories relevant to the curriculum. For example, how does "'Consent Is Sexy' Is an Effective Campaign Slogan for College Students" help us problematize the *communicative* nature of rape culture and consent in a way that allows us to make better sense of theory and representation? The ensuing discussion helps students cultivate self-efficacy by considering how they might successfully ameliorate the epidemic on their campuses. The instructor may encourage the class to consider how the activity enabled the appearance of specific voices or ideas that may have been obscured or excluded in a different format. The instructor may also prompt students to evaluate whether they were successful in modeling civil speech and civil listening and brainstorm other spaces and places where they might continue practicing such skills (all of which directly address the learning outcomes). From dialogue to debrief, students interact in a communal space that requires *being* through dialogical-dialectical coherence—going beyond learning to think *about* things in a different way (Tracy et al., 2015).

⁴ Genette et al. (2018) refer to these individuals as the "spectator audience." This part of the activity often runs long. After observing their peers represent key positions and engage in dialogue, students in the audience feel empowered to articulate or explore their own positions, which energizes the class.

With respect to discussions of gendered violence, it is worth mentioning that the structure of this activity reinforces the sobering need to demand respect in a space where as much as 25% of the class community may have personal knowledge of such violence. Whereas in large, popcorn-style class discussions of precarious topics, only the most extroverted and, for lack of a better term, “un-triggered” person might raise their hand to speak (and in the process, might perceive social pressure to take a definitive stand “for” or “against”), this activity engenders a more accessible, communal space where narrative is privileged and movement is validated—a space where students are provoked to consider a critical issue but invited to situate themselves along a *spectrum* of opinion without “checking their passion at the door.” The spirit of such a dialogic practice privileges a crystallization of opinion that brings about conscious meaning and allows us to become visible to one another’s humanity. By opening transgressive spaces for resilience and advocacy, we are reconstructing barriers as bridges and reaching across chasms instead of solidifying them.

Finally, the activity provides tremendous benefit to the college classroom in its flexibility. One can easily call upon the spirit and intentions of this activity (i.e., resisting hierarchical forms of debate in favor of visibility and solidarity) outside the formal structure of Civil Dialogue as articulated in Genette et al. (2018). For example, one could utilize principles of invitational rhetoric and teaching-as-provocation to introduce a different topic relevant to the curriculum⁵ and randomly assign groups of students to positions who then create and present a case on the topic’s communicative nuances. Said cases could be used as jumping-off points for broader class discussions, or student groups may be charged with forming a coalition to design a comprehensive campaign. The activity can also be modified in ways that suit an instructor’s pedagogical interests and/or the specific course learning objectives at hand. For example, the dialogic practice could be mimicked in individual writing assignments or online discussion boards where students attempt to articulate a spectrum of positions on a precarious topic or communication problem, note areas of fluidity or crystallization, and offer their impression of what approach(es) might contribute to a more civil and compassionate society.

Conclusion

⁵ For gender and communication curricula, other statements of provocation could involve the evolution of terminology (“We’ve Become Too Politically Correct About Gender”) or interpersonal relationships (“Gender Has Too Much Control in Relationships”). Example statements on other topics are found in Genette et al. (2018). The activity can be repeated in a single term to allow different students the opportunity to participate as one of the “five core participants” or as part of the “spectator audience.”

Regardless of manifestation, it must be noted that this dialogic practice is just that—a practice. It is not a fix, an ultimate solution, or an easy application for precarious pockets of curricula. Indeed, civility itself is precarious; it is not an alibi, nor is it a Band-Aid. Much conflict has arisen about the divergence between the *virtue* of civility and the *display* of civility, as have necessary critiques about who has the privilege to define civility. Yet, in a world of polarizing conflict and deep ideological divisions, a feminist pedagogy compels the classroom to function as a dialogic space that evokes movement as part of the environment, where the goal is maximizing the “cooperation that this project of collective life entails” (Boyd, 2006, p. 870). In doing so, we might glimpse a “new possibility: a way in which “people can disagree frankly and passionately, become clearer in heart and mind about their activism, and, at the same time, contribute to a more civil and compassionate society” (Bone et al., 2008, p. 454). By making the construction and evolution of identification more possible, this activity is presented as one way we might glimpse such a possibility.

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