

ORLD 4850.001

Discussion as a Way of Teaching

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One Credit Assignment

Reflections on "The Discussion from Hell (in Gary's Eyes)"

by

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Introduction

"The Discussion from Hell (in Gary's Eyes)" is a case study of a particular classroom activity that involved one Prof. Gary and his Masters in Education students at Newark University. Being an advocate for discussion methods of teaching based on his belief that discussion is the "meat and drink of truly democratic pedagogy," Prof. Gary decided to introduce discussion in his "Introduction to Critical Thinking" class at the very first meeting of the class of 26 students. Unfortunately, the activity turned out to be a "discussion from hell" even though Gary had done all what he deemed necessary to ensure a successful and fruitful discussion.

Right from the very beginning, the discussion lost focus of the topic in question (i.e. definition of critical thinking), and strayed into personal ego-boosting eulogies by a few students, and ultimately to the contentious issue of racism, resulting in the inflammation of passions and subsequent verbal tirades among a section of the students. In the end, not only was the entire exercise wasteful, it had also created a lot of tension as well as a feeling of disappointment among most of the students, and to Gary, it was a discussion from hell.

At our "Discussion as a Way of Teaching" class at Teachers College, we read and discussed this 6-page "Discussion from Hell" case study in an effort to understand what took place, and what Prof. Gary has to do during the next meeting of the class to get the students to experience a more rewarding discussion. In analyzing the case study, we also brainstormed on what issues need to be considered and what interventions should be put in place the next time Gary introduces discussion during the first session of a class. This brief write-up describes the processes and outcomes of our six-person group discussion on this case study. Members of the group included Carol, Eunmi, Jisun, Robert, Stephen and Sung.

Our Group's Interpretation of What was Happening in Gary's Class

The group began the discussion by allowing each individual to elaborate on his or her perspective of what was happening in Prof. Gary's class in the case study. Following this, we had a brief open discussion, and after the last person in the group had made a presentation, we had listed the following points.

- In an effort to make the discussion open and without any restrictions or strings, Gary did not lay down any rules. He simply established the agenda and then invited everybody and anybody to contribute. This naturally gave the extroverts the opportunity to dominate and reestablish the agenda of the discussion.
- John, the very first person to speak, was more interested in exhibiting his "verbal acrobatics" than addressing the issue at stake. In so doing, not only did he digress from the topic, he mentioned certain words that set the tone for the second speaker, Janet, as she was reminded of her earlier life experiences.
- Subsequent speakers appeared to be ill prepared for discussing the topic, and so were more interested in analyzing and reacting to the mundane issues raised by the previous speakers than addressing the topic and requirements of the discussion.
- Gary was torn between his respect for the speakers - hence allowing them to continue the nonsensical speeches - and the need to focus the discussion on the topic, in which case he needed to be interrupting and redirecting them or asking them to give others the opportunity to speak. Gary had a great difficulty in handling this situation.
- Once issues of racism and oppression cropped up, tempers began to rise and the discussion quickly degenerated into a confrontation with battle lines being drawn along racial lines. This even placed Gary in a much more uncomfortable position, as his interventions, though meant to be impartial, appeared to be interpreted differently by either faction.

What we Thought Gary Should do in the Second Class Meeting

Considering the fact that Gary administered a Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ) to the students and got feedback on their impressions of the first session, and also on the fact that Gary is still committed to using discussion in the class, our group arrived at the following suggestions as to what Gary should do before and during the next session of the class.

- Before starting the discussion session, Gary needs to review the CIQ with the students - pointing out the issues that were of major concern to the students, and indicating how he intends to address these issues during the coming discussion session.
- It is possible that most of the students had never been involved in the discussion mode of teaching/learning, and so Gary should spend a few minutes modeling a discussion session possibly with some of the alumni whom he invited to the class.
- A group of 26 is certainly too big for an effective interaction. Gary should therefore break the class up into subgroups of fours and fives and arrange for members of each group to sit in the form of a circle. Each group will discuss the issue, come to a common position and later present this to the rest of the class.
- To ensure a democratic discussion where everyone will be offered a chance to speak without no particular person(s) dominating the proceedings, Gary should lay down the following ground rules for the discussion:
 - i. Circle of voices: At the beginning of the sub-group discussion, each person will be given one minute to state his/her position about the topic without being interrupted. Once the first person is done, the next person to the right of the first speaker takes over, and the process is repeated until everyone is covered.
 - ii. Circular Response Discussions: After each person has had his/her turn in the circle of voices stage, the discussion should then move to the circular response phase where, still in a

circular one-person-at-a-time fashion, each speaker is expected to incorporate a previous speaker's comments into his/her delivery. This should encourage active listening on the part of each participant.

- iii. The Three Person Rule: After going through the circular response phase, the discussion should then be opened up for free-for-all speaking, but with the three person rule in operation i.e. after making a remark, a particular person can speak again only after at least three other people have spoken.
- iv. Newsprint Dialogues: At the end of the group interactions, each group then summarizes their conversation on large sheets of paper which will then be displayed on the walls of the classroom for all to look at and possibly comment on.

How Gary Should Run Things Differently at the Start of the Course Next Time

We finally deliberated on what we thought Prof. Gary should do at the start of the course next time, and arrived at the following recommendations:

- Gary need not introduce discussion during the very first day in class. A full lecture, and possibly input from the alumni of the course should sufficiently prepare the students for discussion during the next class session
- The Professor should get to know his students a bit more, especially pertaining to their experiences with previous discussion sessions, if any. He should ask the students, one after the other, about how they perceive discussion as a mode of learning. The feedback will serve as valuable input into the design of the discussion activities during the next class session.
- Preferably, the first class lesson should be devoted to an orientation about discussion methods of teaching, group dynamics, discussion modeling etc.

- Before starting any discussion activity, Gary should spell out some basic ground rules and make sure all students clearly understand them.
- If Gary wishes to have the entire class hold the discussion as a group, then he should initiate and take control of proceedings. Thus, rather than just stating that anyone can speak, he should randomly pick students and ask them to contribute, but making sure that they abide by the laid down rules.

Conclusion

"The Discussion from Hell" is a vital lesson not only for Prof. Gary, but also for all other instructors who wish to incorporate discussions into their teaching and learning activities. We have to make sure we are in control of activities from start to finish, making sure that rules are in place and that they are followed, though not necessarily very strictly to the letter. Gary obviously did his best to ensure that the students got a positive discussion experience, but some of the students appeared to have a different purpose of coming to the classroom, and this is what all instructors must take into consideration. It should however be noted that the discussion could have turned out perfectly well as Gary had planned if the students (especially the first two speakers) had stayed focused on the subject matter. This would have compelled subsequent speakers to remain in focus, and Gary's interventions will not have been for crisis management, but purposely to further enrich the discussions. Overall however, we saw the discussion to be a rich learning experience for both Gary and his students, and we concluded by recommending that trainers and instructors who hope to use discussion methods in their activities should first read this "Discussion from Hell" case study.