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Discussion as a Way of Teaching

**Tools and Techniques for
Democratic Classrooms**

Stephen D. Brookfield

Stephen Preskill



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Chapter Ten

Keeping Teachers' Voices in Balance

In this chapter we turn our attention to the roles, responsibilities, and actions of the discussion leader. If students are going to feel that discussion invites them to develop and express their ideas in an unpressured way, the discussion leader must find a way to reach that is neither too dominant nor too reserved. Although discussion leaders sometimes interject new material or introduce leading viewpoints from current scholarship, this should be done as sparingly, dialogically, and concisely as possible. As we stress in Chapter Three, lectures can be delivered in a way that discourages students from merely echoing the views of the teacher. Teachers should share their knowledge and understanding in discussion only to help students gain a personal and critical perspective on what is learned, not to show off in front of them.

At the same time, the leader should not be so reticent that the students lack any basis for understanding new ideas or are constantly attempting to second-guess the leader's outlook and beliefs. Democratically inclined teachers are frequently silent in discussion, curbing the compulsion to say all they would like to say in the interests of promoting engagement and participation. Still, they do have a responsibility to teach—to guide the process of conversation, to invite student involvement, to express a point of view, to foster critical commentary, and to model the dispositions of democratic discussion. Whether actually speaking or not, discussion leaders must remain alert and active, constantly on the lookout for ways to encourage students to contribute and to help them make

comments that respond to their classmates' observations. No matter how sensitive or careful we are as teachers, however, the problems of speaking too much or too little, too forcefully or too tentatively, are always there.

Before going any further, though, we wish to issue one strong caveat. We believe that achieving the perfect balance of teacher talk to student talk is impossible. We can never reach a point of exact equilibrium where everyone feels that all participants are speaking for just the right amount of time. However, we do think it is possible to gauge how close or far we are from this ideal position. Our voices can definitely be out of balance. This chapter will examine some of the assumptions and practices that help teachers keep their voice closer to the balanced ideal.

When Teachers Say Too Much

One of the authors of this book is known for being an especially passionate teacher. His eagerness to share his knowledge and to stimulate lively exchanges of ideas is evidenced in his loud and enthusiastic voice and excited, even zealous reactions to his students' contributions. Many of his students profess to enjoy this sort of teaching, favorably citing in course evaluations his enthusiasm and obvious love of the subject matter. In recent years, however, it has come to his attention (primarily through CIOs) that although this kind of teaching is appreciated by some students, it tends to discourage the participation of others. They are intimidated by his loud, brash manner and are inhibited by an enthusiasm that strikes them as forced or artificial. They also find it difficult to contribute their views because the discussion moves too quickly or because the teacher seems intent on filling up all the available talking space by reacting to virtually every student comment.

This example goes right to the heart of the problem of when discussion leaders' voices are out of balance. In many cases, teachers dominate quite unintentionally and with the approval and collusion of students. They receive praise from many students for exercising a high degree of control over what and how the students learn. This kind of control emerges instinctively and naturally, without much reflection or scrutiny. Teachers teach the way they were taught, and often their most fondly recalled classrooms were

dominated by charismatic and passionate teachers. Such teachers offer high entertainment value and expect their students to emulate them. They are less focused on helping students develop their own understanding of the subject matter and are rarely willing to share the spotlight with others in the classroom.

In what ways does too much commentary on the part of teachers limit learners' participation? Under what circumstances does too much enthusiasm actually constrain some students? And how can the instructor's passion and knowledge be used as a bridge to student participation and engagement, rather than as a barrier to involvement?

There is no simple resolution to these questions. It is undeniable that teachers possess knowledge, expertise, and experience that the students frequently lack. To this extent, we have power. As hooks (1994) points out, power itself is not by definition negative, coercive, or abusive—it depends on how it is exercised. In students' eyes, teachers have attained their position by virtue of their erudition and scholarship in a particular field. To pretend otherwise is seen by students as false humility, naïveté, or an abdication of one's professional responsibilities. But a teacher's knowledge and power can be used in a variety of ways. Certainly, it can distance the teacher from students and underscore the teacher's superiority. Sometimes, however, it can be used to enlighten students and arouse their interest in the subject matter. At other times it can be a springboard to a more collaborative and student-centered learning process. We believe that the teacher's authority must be viewed as a means to promote student growth. It can be employed most constructively to inspire students, to help them find their own voices, to model a commitment to critical conversation, and to honor the individual and collective knowledge that students invariably hold.

We also believe that enthusiasm is generally desirable as long as occasionally it's balanced with periods of calm restraint. Teachers who are unrelentingly ebullient about everything that transpires in the classroom come across as affected and indiscriminating. To more introverted students, this constant display of enthusiasm is insincere and exhausting. Since they can never match this Robin Williams-like level of improvisational energy when they come to speak, and since it requires a degree of strength and confidence

to interrupt a teacher who is bouncing off the walls with enthusiasm, students slip easily into the role of passive audience. Struggling to find a balanced voice involves teachers in researching when this kind of high enthusiasm is appropriate and desirable and when silence or a subdued tone is more suitable. Furthermore, being responsive to the diverse personalities and learning styles that are encountered in classrooms requires teachers to vary their ways of communicating.

One reason we commit ourselves to democratic discussion is because we think it helps students find their own voices and develop their own understanding of the subject matter. One of the first steps teachers can take in the pursuit of balance is to recognize student knowledge and experience. By drawing on the collective wisdom found in all classrooms, everyone benefits. Students learn more, develop appreciation for how widely knowledge is distributed, and come to understand that learning is a social process. Although education may take many forms, we believe that the most meaningful and memorable learning occurs when people have a shared, communal experience, guided by teachers who are at least as interested in getting to know their students as they are in helping them master the subject matter.

Why Do Teachers Talk Too Much?

Why do some teachers feel compelled to speak so much in discussion? Let's look more closely at the unwitting tendency of some teachers to dominate the discussion. We think there are five reasons why this happens.

Teachers Misunderstand the Nature of Knowledge

Teachers are socialized to believe that they have acquired valuable information and understandings that must be passed on to students through lectures, articles, books, and other means. Didactic transmission to students is frequently the only teaching method they employ. Of course, good lecturers and authors can be highly engaging and interactive, and what they do remains an indispensable part of teaching. However, it is our contention that in everyday life, knowledge is not so much given and received as constructed

by people individually and collectively (Brufee, 1993; Stanton, 1996; Tarule, 1996; Maher and Tetreault, 1994). Even the most familiar material is renewed through questioning, criticism, discussion, and deliberation. In fact, education is not so much an accumulation of knowledge by students as it is a "process of acculturation into an interpretive community" (Darmrosch, 1995, p. 135). It entails students becoming familiar with the language and procedures of various disciplinary communities and the development of the critical skills needed to define the boundaries and limitations of those communities.

But education also involves illuminating these disciplinary discourses by connecting them to the everyday experience of people from diverse communities. This means specifically that we don't really understand a topic until we have had the opportunity to see how our own experiences—our personal troubles, C. Wright Mills (1956) called them—intersect with what are perceived to be the wider society's public problems. Although we shouldn't allow our personal experiences to define our understanding of the issue or topic, neither should we allow received research or theory to determine our approach to the subject matter. Knowledge is not something that is held by individuals regardless of context and relationships. It is shaped and altered by the different environments in which it is constructed. Far from being acquired by autonomous agents, it is made cooperatively and held in common (Davis and Sumara, 1997).

Since learning conceived this way is largely a social process, pedagogues that take the social nature of learning seriously tend to be more successful. Students report that when they have opportunities to discuss, critique, and relate the material to their own lives, it becomes more meaningful and memorable, more connected to their understanding of the world. They also tell us that when learning is social and discussion is widely used, their educational experiences tend to be more satisfying and regarded as things they would enjoy reexperiencing in the future (McKeachie, 1978; Brufee, 1993).

Teachers Are Unclear About the Purposes of Education

An important purpose of higher education is to help students see the link between their current experiences and understandings

and the ideas they encounter in college. They can make this connection only if time is set aside for them to articulate who they are and what they believe and to have these identities and beliefs count for something. The implication of all this is clear: teachers need to take time to reflect on the purposes of education and on the degree of consistency between their avowed purposes and their actual practices. Many teachers, even those using largely didactic methods, say that students should acquire a new appreciation for the subject matter as well as an increased ability to write, speak, and think clearly and critically about this material. Yet classrooms that are teacher-centered are unlikely to allow students to wrestle with new understandings.

Deborah Meier has said that a good education and a good life can be conceived similarly (Wiseman, 1995). Both entail the desire and ability to participate in an increasingly more complex and engaging conversation. If this is so, then giving students the opportunity to sharpen their conversational and deliberative skills is one of the most important things we can do. This means that teachers must frequently step aside to allow students to construct their own knowledge and understanding. They must reflect continuously on the educational outcomes they seek, ensuring that their practices are consistent with their deepest hopes for their students.

Teachers Succumb to the Expectations of Others

Sometimes instructors dominate classroom interactions because they think they're supposed to—it's what the institution expects, it's what their colleagues do, and it's what the students demand. After all, if a student has signed up for the class because of the instructor's expertise (so the student's argument goes), that instructor should make every effort to display that expertise and have learners emulate and acquire it. Teachers are socialized early in their careers to believe that they must take responsibility for maintaining the pace of the class, for keeping up student interest, and for enlivening things when the proceedings become too dull. In this conception of teaching, everything revolves around the teacher. If learning doesn't occur, it's the teacher's fault. If it does occur, the teacher also gets the credit. This is the myth that "everything depends on the teacher" (Britzman, 1991).

This myth is so widely held that it will probably never be entirely overturned. Even teachers who have a less authoritarian view of the instructor's role are frequently conditioned by the "collective patterns of expectation and behavior" of their students (Davis and Sumara, 1997, p. 114). When teachers attempt to set a new standard for learning and teaching, the expectations held by colleagues and students inevitably constrain their freedom of action. Our actions are not wholly determined by these expectations, but they often constitute a formidable barrier to changing norms and expectations for classroom interactions.

Our view is that teachers who dominate the class by filling every vacant conversational space with the sound of their voice prevent students from learning. A skillful teacher uses both voice and knowledge to enhance students' participation and understanding. Concealed this way, skillfulness means working tirelessly to get students talking to one another. There is nothing passive about this role. It requires teachers to be active listeners and participants, constantly on the lookout for new connections, new understandings, and new constructions of the familiar and the obscure.

Both of us are occasionally criticized by students for not speaking up more in class. They tell us, "You have so much to share, and yet you contributed so little. I'm all for student participation, but you know more than me. I think you cheat me by not interjecting more of your ideas." Although we are probably guilty of being too absent from some discussions, we think this criticism also indicates that we have done a poor job of communicating the facilitative role we are attempting to play.

We do not see ourselves as the class's repository of knowledge. Our responsibility is to model the dispositions of critical discussion while assisting the class in collaboratively exploring the material to be learned. We want students to speak and think with as much clarity and rigor as possible and to accomplish this in a setting that is collaborative and deliberative. How much we actually contribute to the discussion as individuals is not the issue. Our voices are not, by definition, the most important. They are but two of many that are heard in the complex mix of contributions that constitute the discussion. Until teachers, students, and other community members understand the need to blur the distinction between teaching and learning, viewing them as part of a continuous whole, it will be difficult to challenge the dominance of the teacher's voice.

Teachers Underestimate Students

Teachers sometimes underestimate their students, assuming that students are poorly prepared, unaccustomed to thinking critically, and unable to learn difficult material. Teachers who assume these things at the outset of a course usually conclude that the greatest service they can render their students is to lead them by the hand, telling them point by point what they need to learn. This leads directly to didacticism or to discussions that are carefully directed and controlled by the teacher.

These assumptions about students can be badly misguided. First, students may know a lot more than they're given credit for. Adult learners in particular have a vast storehouse of experience and a reservoir of practical wisdom that can add immeasurably to any class. The point is that teachers must leave plenty of room for students to show what they know. Second, even when students are poorly prepared or seem to lack knowledge, what they need more than anything else are opportunities to hone their skills of speaking, listening, writing, and thinking. They will miss these opportunities if the instructor attempts to do too much of the speaking and thinking for them. Furthermore, as we noted in Chapter One, when people come together to explore complex issues, they often reveal a depth of knowledge and a collective wisdom that greatly exceeds what they might have appeared to be capable of as individuals.

What we're really advocating here is that teachers adopt the kind of methodological belief, in this instance about students' capabilities, that we described in Chapter Seven. As we approach a new course, let's assume that students do know, and can do, a great deal. And let's ask ourselves what it means for our teaching if we credit students with ability and skill.

Teachers Overestimate the Value of Their Own Contributions

This is a tricky one. By asserting this, we may be undermining the value of the very book you hold in your hands. So be it. Teachers have accumulated a lot of knowledge. Some of it is useful to people, and a lot of it isn't. Our contention is that no matter how much teachers know, only a small part of it can be usefully and effectively conveyed to students. Teachers should confine themselves to a reasonable quota of lecturing minutes per class, preferably at

the beginning or the conclusion of a class. These brief lectures should be prepared thoughtfully to make the most of this time and to capitalize on the students' undivided attention. If the rest of the class is devoted to discussion, teachers must select their conversational openings with care. When to respond to a student's comments, when to ask a question, when to move the discussion in a new direction, when to alter the discussion format from large to small groups—these are difficult decisions that should be made thoughtfully and sensitively.

In general, reticence on the part of the discussion leader is a virtue. The leader's contribution can interrupt the momentum of a stimulating exchange or get in the way of a student who is speaking up for the first time. It can also effectively steal the spotlight away from a student who has worked through some difficult ideas. If the teacher is an active but relatively nonverbal participant, the discussion can become focused on the ideas of the students and their struggle to make meaning. This goal is almost certainly more valuable than whatever the teacher might want to say. It takes work to know when to maintain silence, and sometimes it's necessary to intervene. But if the focus of instruction is really on the students' efforts to learn and understand, deference to their ideas and opinions, by staying silent, is one of the discussion leader's greatest strengths.

When Teachers Say Too Little

In general, saying too little is a much less common problem among teachers than saying too much. Teachers' professional socialization and students' expectations make it far more likely that teachers will dominate classroom discussions. But sometimes there is a tendency among teachers striving to encourage greater participation among students to become overly passive. Teachers who are excessively reserved can cause students to feel that they are losing their intellectual bearings. This badly undermines the inclination to learn and leads students to become obsessed with second-guessing the instructor's beliefs. This can be discouraged by teachers' being forthright about their intellectual positions and ideological stances. But there is one major proviso to this. When sharing our ideas with students, we must model a rigorous critical scrutiny. Students must

see us consistently applying the same standards of critical analysis to our own ideas as we expect them to apply to theirs.

Why Do Some Teachers Say Too Little?

As in the case of teachers who dominate discussions, teachers who are overly reticent share some mistaken understandings about the conditions that promote learning.

Teachers Assume They Belong on the Sidelines

With a certain level of ambivalence, we have stated that when in doubt, teachers should keep silent. However, we have also argued just as strongly that this does not imply passivity. Teachers must be active listeners, carefully tracking what students say so they can intervene when necessary to keep the discussion moving. This intervention may be a simple one-word prompt or nonverbal gesture. It may call for a question or a supportive comment. Or it may mean doing nothing more than continuing to be an alert member of the group. However, if the criteria for judging whether or not good conversation is occurring include the amount of participation on the part of students, their willingness to be constructively critical, or their ability to make claims that are supported by evidence, teachers will have to model these behaviors. Students need to see teachers taking responsibility for getting participants talking and thinking, collaborating and critiquing.

Benjamin Barber (1993) writes about three forms of leadership—founding, moral, and enabling—that have relevance for teaching through discussion. Although enabling leadership is closest to the sort of teaching we have advocated (and the kind Barber most strongly endorses for a democracy), we believe that founding and moral leadership must sometimes precede more participatory approaches. Founding leaders establish a structure or introduce a process that makes broad participation possible, but in doing so they initially play a quite active role. They do this to help others become able and willing to contribute. Moral leaders model behaviors conducive to democratic participation and enact what they later ask their students to do. Moral leaders also inspire people to get involved and to develop such a strong commitment to participation,

cooperative deliberation, and mutual respect that they eventually cannot imagine participating in a class that is structured in any other way. So although an important goal of discussion is to promote student participation and group problem solving, the means to that end may at different points require instructors to take strong pedagogical leads.

Teachers Fail to Model Expectations for Students

We have said it repeatedly, but we will say it again: whatever students are asked to do must first be modeled and demonstrated by the teacher. This responsibility requires teachers intermittently to dominate the proceedings. When students are called on to share their stories, critique their own work, or summarize what has been said so far, these skills must have been demonstrated—often repeatedly—by the teacher. Doing this establishes credibility with the students and lets them see what a reasonably good performance looks like. If we expect students to do something capably, we should be able to model it capably. We know that students learn from us, but we also hope that in emulating us, the quality of their work will surpass our own.

Teachers Are Unclear About the Purposes of Education

Embedded in the two points just discussed are claims about the proper purposes of education. As important as it to get students talking, especially to one another, just doing this is not the end of the story. We believe that discussion groups are crucibles for the democratic process. They help students learn to think through problems collaboratively, to work with others so that the group's interests transcend those of any one person, and to encourage their peers to grow as members of a deliberative community.

Unless teachers are clear about these purposes, they may be inclined to remove themselves prematurely from the discussion, particularly if student participation is high. Although it is desirable for teachers' voices to be less and less present in discussions as the semester progresses, they must look for signs that the discussions are truly productive before absenting themselves too much. These signs include a willingness on the part of students to critique their

own and others' ideas; a tendency to use both personal experience and scholarly authorities to support their claims; a habit of posing questions to their peers for clarification and elaboration, rather than waiting impatiently to add another comment; and an inclination to use discussion to show appreciation to others and to affirm the willingness to participate.

Teachers Underestimate the Value of Their Own Ideas

As radical educators have acknowledged (Gore, 1993; Shor and Freire, 1987), there is nothing inherently wrong with lecturing. Teachers have scholarly knowledge that is useful to students, and there should be a way, either through occasional short lectures or in the course of interactions with students, to share this knowledge concisely. Teachers experienced in democratic theory and the democratic process can be very effective in using this knowledge (for example, by asking provocative questions at key moments) to create the conditions for highly participatory discussion.

Finally, we know that one of the reasons people go into teaching is because they can't wait to communicate what they've learned. They take great pleasure in sharing important ideas or telling a story that has meant a great deal to them. Although it's very easy for teachers to overdo this and to satisfy their performative impulses by turning their students into captive audiences, there should be a place in even the most democratic and open of classrooms for teachers to share their knowledge. However, this expression of knowledge should always serve to foster student participation, group deliberation, and communal learning.

The Right Balance: Neither Dominance nor Absence

Here are some suggestions for achieving the right balance in your use of discussion.

Avoid Impromptu Lectures

Many—perhaps even most—teachers in discussion-oriented classrooms think nothing of interrupting conversation to launch into a ten- or fifteen-minute oration on a topic that emerges from the

group's exchange. This impulse to deliver impromptu monologues should be avoided at all costs. Because they are extemporaneous, they tend to be bad lectures. It takes a great deal of skill to lecture dialogically in the manner described by Shor (1992). You must be well versed in the subject of the discussion, have listened very carefully to what students have said, and be able to draft an outline of your comments in your head while still facilitating the discussion.

Impromptu lectures also interrupt the flow of the conversation, inhibiting some students and intimidating others. If you want to address a point that arises in discussion, control the impulse to respond at length and instead make a note to yourself that you will deal with it later. Keep a notebook with you in which to jot down your reactions to the discussion so that you can organize your thoughts for a presentation of these reactions at a more appropriate time. Incidentally, in calling on teachers to avoid impromptu lectures, we want to repeat that we are not saying they should refrain entirely from participation. Intervention is sometimes necessary to move the discussion going, but it should be done as succinctly as possible.

Use Critical Incident Questionnaires

As we have shown throughout the book, the CIQ is a useful way to get information about classroom processes. If students think the leader is dominating discussion or staying too removed, they will say so in the CIQ. Since the CIQ is anonymous, it is the likeliest source of frank information about your dominance or reticence. But even in the CIQ students are sometimes reluctant to be critical of their instructor. The fact that the CIQs say nothing about your voice being out of balance doesn't rule out the possibility that this is a problem.

Videotape Your Teaching

Having their practice videotaped feels artificial to some teachers, who freeze as soon as the VCR record button is pressed. If you can't stand to look at a video recording of yourself, an audio recording will probably do just as well. The point is to be able to see or hear for yourself how much you control the course of dis-

ussion or how much you remove yourself from the exchange of ideas. Look for the relative percentages of student-to-student talk and teacher-to-student talk. Watch out for times when you interrupt or stall conversational momentum. Are there moments when your reluctance to intervene actually prevents students from keeping the discussion going or from making sense of difficult concepts? When does your silence strengthen the interchange, and when does it get in the way of constructive engagement?

Keep Track of Who Participates

Another tactic that may work when you fear you are dominating is to maintain a written record of who speaks. This keeps you so busy that you are less prone to excessive participation. It also alerts you to how many students speak between your own comments. If you like to intervene, try making one comment of your own for every four or five that students make. Of course, how much you participate depends not just on the number of students who get involved but also on the thoughtfulness and continuity of their collective deliberations. Interestingly, one of the residual benefits of this strategy is that you end up with a permanent record of the class's discussion, which you can analyze to improve subsequent discussions.

If you don't like the idea of keeping this written record yourself, you may want to ask one or two students to do it for you. This actually presents a number of advantages. First, it frees you of the responsibility to maintain this record. After all, monitoring and facilitating discussion is very hard work even when you don't say anything. Being able to give your full attention to the course of the conversation and to attend carefully to the substance of what individuals say is a real plus. Second, students who assume this responsibility (which should be rotated) are sensitized to the conversational dynamics of the classroom. It helps them see who is dominating and who is silent and how the teacher's participation affects these variables. Third, putting students in the interesting position of enlightening you about your tendency to be too controlling or laid back shows how much you respect and depend on their judgment.

Still another variation on this strategy is to ask a colleague to observe a class and check for participation patterns. Of course, this

should be someone you trust, as you may well have to face data that are painful to confront. Observers should be familiar with the tensions of keeping the teacher's voice in balance. The best observers are probably individuals struggling with this in their own practice. The advantage of this method is that when complete outsiders keep a record of the participation patterns in the class, they are unlikely to be biased by particular personalities or preexisting class dynamics.

Written Minutes of the Class

With the help of the record created in the preceding suggestion, minutes of each class can be generated. Students can take turns writing up and photocopying these minutes for the rest of the group. If the minutes are distributed on a regular basis, they can contribute to the group's sense of continuity. Notes from previous discussions become the basis for new conversations. Minutes can be used as a substitute for in-class summaries, since they eliminate the need to spend class time recalling previously covered material. If teachers keep the minutes, they can add written responses to student questions or elaborate on some of the topics raised in the discussion. Although teachers may still want to give brief lectures, minutes provide a space for them to write what they were going to say, leaving more time for the students to grapple directly with the readings or the ideas explored in the minutes.

Call Periodic Time-Outs

As mentioned in Chapter Nine, it is often a good idea to take a break from general discussion to give students a chance to reflect silently on what has been said. A reflective interlude allows students and teachers to note problems or contradictions, to consider unarticulated points of view, and to identify new directions for conversation. Students take a few minutes to jot down their thoughts about these matters, and when everyone is ready, the teacher reopens the discussion by inviting people (especially those who have not yet participated) to read some of what they've written. This slows down the often breakneck pace that heated discussion can activate. It gives students time to think about the ideas that have been exchanged, and it reminds teachers to curtail their partici-

partion for the sake of the least aggressive members of the group. It is a helpful check on discussions that are limited to only one or two perspectives and that are dominated by only a few people, particularly if one of those people is the discussion leader.

Use Small Group Exercises

Of course, the surest way to prevent teacher dominance is to remove the teacher from the discussion altogether. This is most effectively done by dividing the class up into the kinds of small groups we discussed in Chapter Six and by giving group members two responsibilities: to stimulate as much participation as possible and to hold each other accountable for mutual comprehension of the topic. What this does not do, however, is address the issue of teachers who are perceived to be too reserved. One way to handle this is to encourage the teacher to migrate from group to group, spending at least a few minutes with each one.

Three Scenarios of Balance and Imbalance

What follows are three short discussion scenarios that focus on how the leader's role affects the course of events. They show a teacher who exerts too much control over the discussion, a teacher who is too aloof, and a teacher who comes close to striking roughly the right balance.

Scenario 1: Too Much Teacher Control

Teacher: The assignment for the day was to read the conclusion of teacher Mike Rose's remarkable autobiography, *Lies on the Boundary* (1990). Rose not only concludes his story with some very concrete examples of how to cross cultural and class boundaries but shows us as well the implications of these examples for shaping educational policy. One of the strengths of the book is Rose's ability to move back and forth between the worlds of classroom practice and national policymaking. What do you think of the way Rose handles this

Student 1: I guess I didn't notice what you're talking about, but I was really impressed with what he says on page 222 about being hopeful and assuming that good teaching can make a big difference for students.

Teacher: Yes, that's important, but almost the whole chapter that includes the quote you cite shows Rose going back and forth between practice and policy. Let me show you what I mean. (*Reads about a page of material*) Isn't that impressive? One of the things that makes this book great is that the implications for reform emerge from the particulars of everyday teaching. Anybody want to comment on that?

Student 2: I think Rose is a great teacher, but does he really think that every student can learn? Where did he get that faith in everybody?

Student 3: I have the same question, and I'm also disturbed by the fact that this is a story, that it necessarily has a plot. Doesn't the need to have a plot affect the incidents Rose relates and how they get resolved? How much does this really help us understand the messy world of day-in, day-out teaching?

Teacher: I think you are all missing the point. This is a great story about one person's successes and failures in teaching. It has a plot, sure, but that plot can still be translated into proposals for reform. I mean, what do you think Rose's reform proposals would look like?

Student 4: I don't know about school reform, but could we talk about the episode when Rose helps that student make sense of the standardized test she took? With just a little help, she's able to figure most of it out. How often do you think that happens with our students who regularly do poorly on achievement tests?

Teacher: Let's take a look at that a little later. I still want to know what you think Rose can teach us about school reform. (*Long silence*)

The teacher in this excerpt is much too dominant and controlling. He insists on sticking to his own agenda despite his students' resistance. Moreover, he ignores the excellent questions his

students raise, each of which could have led to a productive exchange. The teacher clearly likes the book and wants his students to like it too. He is also intent on exploring the "big" issues of policy and reform. His students are much more interested in discussing and questioning its specifics. The potential for enlightening discussion is enormous here; students are taking a lot of initiative, and there is a great deal of participation. Unfortunately, the teacher is just too self-absorbed to see it.

Scenario 2: Too Little Teacher Participation

Teacher: What do you think of the last section of Rose's *Lines on the Boundary*?

Student 1: I liked it, especially what he says on page 222 about remaining hopeful and using good teaching practices to help even the most poorly prepared students.

Student 2: I'm not sure why he's so hopeful. Where does that faith come from? I've been in lots of situations where even the best and most dedicated teachers couldn't help their most difficult students.

Student 3: I have too. Also, even though I liked the way Rose tells his story, I'm not sure there's much to learn from it. Stories are not like day-to-day teaching. There's no plot or climax in real-life teaching. Just plugging away and trying to make the best of it.

Student 4: But aren't some of the incidents revealing? What about the example of the student who at first does poorly on the achievement test and then does much better with a little coaching from Rose?

Student 5: I think Rose knows about underachieving students because he was there once himself.

Student 6: But he also became a scholarship student. I don't think he does know what it's like to struggle with poor preparation, limited skills, and especially racial discrimination.

Student 7: Does he still teach writing to students at UCLA, or is he doing something else now?

Teacher: He still teaches writing, but he also has an appointment in the School of Education.

This scenario seems, superficially, an improvement. Seven rather than four students have spoken, so the level of participation is higher. However, although there is enormous potential for discussion in the issues students raise, there is almost no continuity, no attempt to build on individual comments. Instead, the teacher responds to only one question—the one that is the least interesting and least likely to go anywhere. If the teacher had intervened just once or twice, each of the issues raised by students could have been considered and developed much more fully.

For instance, the teacher could have asked the first two students, who appear to disagree, to talk to each other about the citation from page 222. Questions she could have posed are “Does page 222 give any clues to the source of Rose’s hope and faith?” and “Where else would we look in the text to support one view or the other?” The whole issue of plot and story also seems rich. The teacher could ask, “In what ways do stories help us understand everyday experiences and practices?” and “In what ways are stories a flawed source?” The point here is not for the teacher to give her own views but for her to ask a question or raise an issue that gets students talking to one another. One final comment: although this discussion is flawed, it is significantly better than the first one in which the teacher dictated the issues to be covered.

Scenario 3: A Better Balance

Teacher: The assignment for today was to read the conclusion of teacher Mike Rose’s autobiography, *Lives on the Boundary* (1990). Rose not only concludes his story with some concrete examples of how to cross cultural and class boundaries but also shows us some of the implications of these examples for shaping educational policy. Could you comment on some of these examples and their value for promoting educational reform?

Student 1: The quote on page 222 was especially important. We must assume that students have potential and ability and then act accordingly. That should be the basis for all educational change.

Student 2: Maybe, but what makes him so hopeful? Where does that faith come from? I’ve seen lots of situations where even the best and most dedicated teachers couldn’t help their most difficult students.

Student 3: I have too. Although I like the way Rose tells his story, I’m not sure there’s much to be learned from it. Stories are not like day-to-day teaching. There’s no plot or climax in real-life teaching. Just plugging away and trying to make the best of it.

Student 4: But aren’t some of the examples revealing? What about the student who at first does poorly on the achievement test and then greatly improves with a little coaching from Rose?

Student 5: I think Rose knows about underachieving students because he was there himself.

Student 6: But he also became a scholarship student at UCLA. He may have lost touch with those roots. I don’t think he knows what it’s like to struggle with poor preparation, limited skills, and especially racial discrimination.

Teacher: I wonder if we could pause here for a moment and try to bring these interesting and diverse observations together. A number of you characterize Rose as sensitive to the needs of the poorly prepared students. Others question whether the way he tells his story or his position of privilege puts him in a position to understand the most marginalized students. Is there reason to think that both claims are at least partly true?

Student 7: Is he still teaching writing to students at UCLA, or is he doing something else now?

Teacher: He’s still teaching writing, but now he has an appointment in the School of Education. But I want to get back to the other point. Can Rose teach us some valuable things about educational reform, or is his stance too idealistic, too removed from the realities of real classrooms?

Student 5: I still think his background as a student who was mistakenly put in the vocational track gives him a

valuable perspective on injustice and on the failure to realize the promise of educational opportunity.

Student 6: You know, I forgot about that incident. It probably still has an important impact on his thinking and practice.

Student 3: I just don't trust the story format. He makes it all come out so neatly in the end.

Student 1: Does he? I think he's quite realistic about how much can be accomplished with students who have been neglected and oppressed. All those years of bad education are a great burden, but progress can be made, especially when we retain hope.

Student 3: But his determination to create a narrative of hope frees him of the obligation to recount all the failures, all the partial successes.

Student 2: And why be so hopeful? What's the reason for keeping the faith?

Teacher: I think there may be at least two reasons for doing so, both of which are in Rose.

Student 5: May I?

Teacher: Please, go ahead.

Student 5: Rose is hopeful because there is no other choice. Despair is not a good basis for change.

Student 2: What about revolution?

Student 5: Perhaps, but while we wait for the revolution, Rose shows that if you're patient and try hard to cross boundaries, if you keep looking for ability where others have only seen deficiency, great strides can be made.

Teacher: Rose is like Dewey in a way. He can't imagine being anything but faithful, but it is not a blind faith. It emerges from experience.

Student 2: Well, could we talk about some of those experiences specifically? What are the concrete bases for his educational faith?

Teacher: Let's do that.

Perhaps the thing that most clearly distinguishes this scenario from the others is that here the discussion builds. At first students aren't really conversing, but with a little prompting from the

leader, they begin talking and responding to each other. There is clear disagreement, which is tolerated and even encouraged, but with assistance from the teacher, there is also some basis for agreement. The teacher makes seven brief comments in this dialogue, but all but two (first and second to last) are intended to foster increased interaction and continuity. The scenario ends with the promise of much more discussion based on close attention to the text. This probably wouldn't have happened without the teacher's contributions.

Of course, this scenario may come across as a bit too idealistic; good discussions don't materialize as effortlessly as this one seems to. But it is surprising what a difference a few well-placed questions and comments can make. This scenario shows that teachers don't have to intervene constantly or absent themselves entirely to make discussion work.

Conclusion

Balance is one of the keys to good discussion. When one or two people dominate the exchange of ideas, the benefits for the whole group are greatly diminished. Similarly, when groups identifiable by gender, race, class, or ideology completely withdraw from the discussion, the range of ideas being explored is greatly reduced. Of course, perfect balance is impossible, but attention to who's speaking and who isn't is one of the crucial elements in making discussion work. The teacher's first concern, however, should center on her own patterns of participation and how these are contributing to or detracting from the efforts of students to deliberate together. Here is a checklist of questions to keep in mind as you continue the struggle to keep your voice in balance.

Is my participation preventing students who want to speak from making a contribution? Have I interrupted students in mid-sentence?

Have I made more comments than all of the other students combined? Do I respond to every student who speaks? Do students pause before responding to each other because they expect me to make a comment after every student speaks?

Am I sticking to my preset agenda for discussion despite alternative suggestions and even resistance from my students?

Are my teaching practices in discussion in contradiction with my goals for the class?

Am I discouraging student participation because I think the students lack knowledge or experience?

Is the discussion faltering because of my own lack of participation?

Does the discussion lack focus because I have contributed so little?

Have I neglected to interject any comments that help students see how their ideas are related?

In general, what am I doing to build continuity and a sense of collaborative engagement?

What am I doing to assess and evaluate the degree to which my voice is in balance in discussion?

Chapter Eleven

Evaluating Discussion

As a way of bringing our book to a close, we want to say a few words regarding the evaluation of discussions. Our commentary will be brief, however, because we don't believe there really are any standardized protocols or universal measures we can apply to assessing a discussion leader's competence or the value of students' contributions. If our advice has a central theme, it is that any evaluative approaches or judgments must be grounded in students' subjectivity. We are aware of the flaws associated with self-reporting, but we believe that discussion is such an elusive and idiosyncratically experienced phenomenon that no other method is likely to yield much meaningful information. Furthermore, when students regularly document their perceptions of the contributions they are making to the ongoing exchange of ideas, they can learn an enormous amount about the conditions and behaviors that make discussion successful. So the evaluative processes that we suggest (like all good educational evaluation) emphasize learning as much as assessment.

Because most higher educational institutions mandate annual assessments of faculty's pedagogic proficiency, we know that lecturers and professors regularly have to demonstrate that they are effective teachers. If they use discussion, this will involve them in documenting their own capabilities as discussion leaders as well as their students' learning. But doing this is problematic. Discussion is an infinitely varied and multifaceted reality experienced by students in multiple ways. We wish we could say that an instrument were available that could record accurately your own proficiency