

EFFECTIVE DISCUSSION FACILITATION: THE FACULTY ROLE IN CREATING INSPIRED CONVERSATIONS

PURPOSE: ESTABLISHING CLEAR GOALS FOR DISCUSSIONS

- ☐ What are the conversational skills and habits that you want students to have by the time your class is over?
- ☐ How exactly do your discussion forums contribute to these larger goals, as well as to the essential objectives of the course?
- ☐ Have your minimum expectations and aspirational hopes for forums been stated in a way that clearly reflects your stated purposes?
- ☐ How clearly would your students be able to articulate the purpose of the forums they participate in?
- ☐ How are your discussion forum grading rubrics tied directly to the stated purposes of the conversations held there?
- ☐ How do you intend to model the pursuit of stated purposes in your discussion forums?

PROMPTS: SCULPTING EFFECTIVE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- ☐ Has every one of your discussion prompts been crafted in such a way as to align with the outcome you hope to see?
- ☐ Do your prompts inspire students to **observe** facts that they might otherwise miss?
- ☐ Do your prompts inspire students to **perceive** meaningful connections between those things that they observe?
- ☐ Do your prompts inspire students to **evaluate** the significance of key concepts and ideas?
- ☐ Do your prompts inspire students to **apply** the material taught to relevant real-world problems?

PREPARING: SETTING THE TABLE FOR GREAT DISCUSSIONS

- ☐ All great conversations must be about something. What **material** or **artifact** have you given to students to discuss, and is it worthy of their time and attention? Specifically, if the discussion was not for a grade, would students be motivated to engage in it?
- ☐ What sort of **context** have you created for students that allows them to understand the conversation's starting point?
- ☐ What sort of **relevance** have you established with respect to the objects of the conversation you intend students to engage in?
- ☐ What **parameters** have you established around the discussion starter that can keep it from "wandering off" into incidental matters?

PRESCRIPTING: ESTABLISHING BASIC RULES FOR YOUR DISCUSSION FORUMS

- ☐ Do you prefer to supply students with discussion forum rules, or do you prefer to construct them democratically?
- ☐ Do your students thrive in discussions regulated by detailed comprehensive rules and schedules or is "loose" better?
- ☐ Do students understand the connections between the discussion forum "norms" and the purposes for the discussions?
- ☐ What incentivizes students to abide by the community norms around discussions?

PRACTICE: FACILITATING ENGAGING DISCUSSIONS

- ☐ Can you assume that students will know everything that they need to know to engage in substantive discussions with one another or will you play a crucial role in modelling what that looks like?
- ☐ What skills involving observation, connecting, perceiving, evaluating, and applying can be seen in your engagements in the forum?
- ☐ How does your own engagement further the stated purpose of the discussion forums in your class?
- ☐ How many different "thinking moves" will your students see you make in the weekly discussions? These may include asking questions, summarizing arguments, identifying assumptions, pointing out cause-and-effect relationships, comparing alternate viewpoints, connecting to life experiences, adding quotes, linking to your own recent research in the subject matter, etc.

EXAMPLES OF THESE FACULTY ROLES IN ACTION

SAMPLE PURPOSES:

- To give students practice discussing controversial ethical questions (Ethics)
- To provide a forum for analyzing literature as a group (Literature).
- To learn to critique and write social policy (Social Justice & Public Policy).
- To share and critique solutions to accounting problems presented via case studies (Accounting)
- To demonstrate the ability to write and critique research-based arguments (Writing & Research)

SAMPLE PROMPTS:

Notice how the alternative prompts below provide context and engage memory, intellect, emotions, and volition. Students in this ethics course might be given several different readings and prompt options in a week.

Machiavelli and "The Prince": Machiavelli is a political philosopher from the 14th Century. In his book, *The Prince*, he provides advice to rulers of Italian city-states on how they should acquire and maintain power. Rather than tell his disciples how to be honest and to fear God as perhaps his predecessors might have done, he argues that political leaders must learn how to pretend to be honest and to fear God. Ultimately, they must look out for their own personal power interests, and he shows them how to do it. His might strike you as a very modern instruction manual that you may be familiar with over 600 years later. After reading it, do you think his moral advice is good advice? Why or why not?

Carol Gilligan and "In a Different Voice": I realize that we do not have enough women philosophers in this class but we have several this week. Carol Gilligan and her "Ethics of Care" is one of them. After reading this book review of her work, "In a Different Voice," is it your opinion that her insights about the way that men and women make moral decisions still true? Or has the last fifty years diminished the dichotomy that she describes?

Nietzsche and "Slave Moralities": Nietzsche is a terribly influential philosopher who left a mark on 20th Century history. He is going to argue in this piece that any philosopher who tells you that you have a moral obligation to use your strengths for the benefit of others and to your own detriment is a "tool of manipulation" by the weak. He says that having a will to power is essential to being alive and it would be wrong to self-suppress self-interest. What do you think? Would you want to have Nietzsche teaching your children his philosophy? Do you ignore his advice to your own peril or are his ideas dangerous?

SAMPLE PRESCRIPTIONS:

Students participating in this conversation should expect to:

- Come prepared to discuss assigned materials.
- Come with thought provoking questions inspired by their preparation.
- Construct a clear thesis where one is asked for and led into that thesis with an attention-grabbing introduction.
- Create a logical outline by which they intend to pursue their thesis argument or answer their thesis question.
- Cite the origins of evidence they intend to borrow from others in the making of their own arguments.
- Give others freedom to learn, to agree, to disagree, to compromise (or not), and to see the world with different eyes.
- Respect the readers by proof-reading and citing what they write before posting.

SAMPLE PRACTICES:

Experienced discussion facilitators demonstrate several important habits and practices. Good facilitators:

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| • affirm excellence in student work | • harmonize conflicting evidence |
| • supply additional material to illustrate ideas or concepts | • challenge traditional viewpoints |
| • link to trusted resources | • imagine possible causes or effects |
| • offer clarifications to ensure understanding | • re-introduce forgotten evidence |
| • summarize opposing arguments | • simplify complex concepts |
| • ask probing questions | • suggest further readings |
| • expose hidden assumptions | • share professional experiences and insights |
| • provide alternative perspectives | • model effective argument |
| • evaluate the strength of arguments | • foster intellectual collaboration |
| • contextualize assigned materials | • model humility and compromise |
| • break down larger arguments into smaller ones | • compel students to make choices |
| • draw connections to previously covered material | • draw out student experiences |

FURTHER CONSIDERING YOUR ROLE AS A FACILITATOR

PURPOSE:

At the grand opening of Disney World, Walt Disney's brother Roy was the CEO of Disney. As Walt had passed away a few years earlier, a bystander commented to Roy, "This place is so incredible! It's just too bad Walt isn't here to see it." Roy replied, "He saw it. That's why it is here." Ultimately, we often get the visions we articulate and incentivize. The same is true with discussion forums. It is essential to think about and articulate their purposes in the context of *your* particular class. Without a clear vision, they will simply become "the box that students use to drop off assignments." An Ethics teacher might make the case (in the syllabus, in the preliminary module, in the forum directions) that the discussion forums serve as "a place to practice having difficult conversations about ethics with people who disagree with one another." Meanwhile a Literature instructor may determine that the discussion forums in her class will serve as "a forum for students to learn how to converse about life through analysis of poetry, plays, and story." Do your students understand the purpose that your forums serve in their growth and development? Have you shared your primary goals for the discussion forums explicitly? Will they be able to recognize or even *feel* when they fall short of contributing to that purpose?

Checklist:

- ☐ I understand the level of conversation that my students are currently prepared to have about the discipline.
- ☐ I understand the level of conversation I want graduates to be capable of having after they leave college.
- ☐ I have a list of conversational skills and habits that I intend to introduce, practice, and assess.
- ☐ I have intentional strategies to encourage buy-in from the students that these goals are worth the investment of their time and energy.

PROMPTS:

It will be almost impossible for a discussion forum to rise above the quality of the prompt that sets the conversation in motion. Setting out on a discussion without a good prompt is like setting out on a trip without a destination. The prompts determine whether the conversation that emerges will be merely *transactional* and *perfunctory* or *transformative* and *compelling*. The more aspects of human personality that are invited to participate by any given prompt, the more engaged those who respond to the prompt will be. Specifically, does the question that you are asking engage the intellect, the memory, and the emotional, social, or spiritual self? Does it encourage students to make meaningful connections to the course materials, their lives or their professional aspirations? Would your students want to discuss your prompt if they were not being graded for doing so?

Checklist:

- ☐ I have carefully considered and revised the prompts to which students will respond.
- ☐ I have chosen prompts that engage students at multiple levels of personal interest.
- ☐ I have provided multiple prompts for students to choose from where appropriate.
- ☐ I have crafted open-ended prompts that encourage more varied, creative and interesting student contributions, rather than closed questions that result in the same answers from every student.

PREPARATION:

A learning community cannot have a stimulating conversation about something that is not interesting. Faculty play an essential role in making sure that the subject of any proposed conversation has been curated from a list of "less interesting options." These subjects can be primary sources, images, art, stories, artifacts, experiments, case studies, speeches, maps, policies, equations, poems, business plans, anatomical structures, philosophical arguments, problems, films, or whatever. Almost anything will serve, but the subjects must be interesting. "You wish to teach this child geography and you provide him with globes, spheres, and maps," the French philosopher, J.J. Rousseau says in his book, *Emile*. "What elaborate preparations! What is the use of all these symbols; why not begin by showing him the real thing so that he may at least know what you are talking about?" Students need that "real thing" to get started. Faculty owe them that.

Checklist:

- ☐ I have filtered and curated the subjects of my discussions to select interesting artifacts that are likely to lead to relevant and engaging debate.
- ☐ I have put students in direct contact with the subject matter and given them access to level-appropriate analysis.
- ☐ I have provided enough context for the subject to be discussed such that the discussion prompts posed make sense to the students who have worked to understand them.

PRESCRIPTIONS:

Most human interactions are governed by written and unwritten codes of conduct that shape the tone of the exchange. One hears different forms of communication in bars than in churches. These are both different than the conversations one expects in therapy or in court. It is important to give students in your discussion forums a sense of what those written or unwritten “rules” are in this academic setting as well. You as an instructor can be helpful in setting up those codes or in helping your students establish those codes. In many ways you will be the one to establish the intimacy thermostat, the allowed or forbidden temperature of debate, the balancing counterpoise of humor and constructive tension. Just as in courts of law, there are precedents that govern “whose turn it is to speak,” “how evidence should and should not be used,” “how questions should be asked and answered,” and “who is allowed to render a verdict.” So too in the world of class discussions. To use the court metaphor, it may be important for faculty to sometimes play the role of the judge and at other times the prosecuting attorney or defense. Sometimes, he or she can play the role of the jury as students deliberate. Ultimately the faculty plays a role as bailiff in maintaining the safety of the space where spirited discussion and debate can take place.

Checklist:

- ☐ I have clearly articulated my expectations for forum engagement such that students understand minimum standards that provide the “basement floor” as well as the ideal hopes that can serve as our aspirational ceiling.
- ☐ I have re-emphasized the codes of conduct in several different formats throughout the class.
- ☐ I have provided students the opportunity to contribute some hard or soft “codes” of their own.
- ☐ I have fairly and conscientiously both modelled and enforced the agreed upon expectations.

PRACTICE:

Just as children learn to communicate by listening to the sounds of their elders speaking (to them and to each other) so also students learn to engage in ever more complex interactions by regularly listening to the sound of those who engage at that level they aspire to. It is not enough to put children in a room with other children and tell them to “practice talking.” Students need to see your level of academic discourse so that they can learn to emulate it and hopefully surpass it. They learn to make observations by listening to you make them. They learn to connect those observations into an alternative hypothesis by watching you do so. They learn to struggle with opposing values by watching you struggle with them. They learn to apply what they are learning by watching you apply what you are learning or have learned. They learn to ask better questions by watching you ask challenging questions. They learn to treat opposing arguments with respect by watching you do so. They learn to clarify, summarize, compare, contrast, propose, reframe, and compromise by seeing you do these things and many more things. Faculty play an indispensable role in academic conversations even when they are strategically silent.

Checklist:

- ☐ I have a plan to engage with the discussion forums in my class(es) several times a week.
- ☐ I have a mentor or a model of engagement from my own educational history that inspires me in the work of engagement.
- ☐ I have strategically considered the benefits of faculty engagement and occasional silence in the conversations that I want my students to engage in and struck a balance between the students’ need to see what is expected and to practice it.
- ☐ I am aware that I play an important role in the class, protecting a safe environment for meaningful dispute.

There are no simple formulas for what makes a memorable learning experience. There will be semesters where you follow all the above suggestions and some of your own and the results will be magical. There will be other semesters where you may wonder if you know anything. Inspiring discussion forums is a dance between the facilitator and the participants. Every class will have its own Dao. In the end, if you bring your love of the subject and your love of students to the table, week after week, you will find that something catches fire. As Ralph Waldo Emerson so eloquently put it, “A good day in life is a day where we meet a mind that startles us.” In effectively facilitated discussion forums, we all have the opportunity to meet many such minds.