

Chapter 4: Getting Discussion  
Started

Chapter 5: Keeping Discussion  
Going

# DISCUSSION AS A WAY OF TEACHING


Tools and Techniques for  
Democratic Classrooms

Second Edition

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words that should hang on a sign above your desk concerning how to make it through this class." Feel free to ignore these themes and just write about whatever comes into your head around the theme of survival.

After you have finished your letter, make three photocopies. Bring these to class so that you can give them to colleagues. In class, you will be forming a group with three other people to read what each of you has written. As you do this, you will be looking for common themes and recurring pieces of advice. I will be asking you to appoint someone to report to the whole class the main suggestions and advice that were given.

If one or more of these letters contain passages that urge skeptical students to prepare for discussions and to take them seriously, we try to obtain permission from the students concerned to let us reproduce these comments in the syllabus for the next version of the course.

## CONCLUSION

We've argued in this chapter that even before a word is spoken in discussion, there's an enormous amount that can be done to prepare students for democratic talk. Good discussions don't just happen. They are partly the result of thoughtful planning, consistent modeling by the teacher, and respectful consideration of the experiences of students. In the next chapter we consider how such talk might be initiated once students are gathered together.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# GETTING DISCUSSION STARTED

The first few minutes of any new discussion are often somewhat uncomfortable, particularly if the group members don't know each other very well or if there has been a contentious atmosphere in the previous session. In this chapter we want to focus on ways of opening up conversation that concentrate participants' attention on the theme at hand and that model democratic process at the outset. We do want to stress, however, the importance of the preparatory steps outlined in the preceding chapter. If teachers and students lead into discussions by doing the kinds of things that Chapter Three describes, there's a much better chance that the conversation will flow relatively easily.

But what do you do if you've modeled democratic talk in your lectures, held unscripted discussions with colleagues in front of students, helped students draft their own guidelines for conversation, organized provocative preparatory reading, and clarified your expectations—and still silence descends on the group in the first few minutes?

## MISTAKES TO AVOID AT THE START OF A DISCUSSION

We have noticed, in ourselves and others, five things that teachers sometimes do at the start of discussion sessions that we feel kill the spirit of democratic talk. So here are our five "don'ts" to discussion leaders regarding the opening moments of the class.

**DON'T LECTURE**

Don't start the discussion by giving a minilecture in which you summarize salient points, outline different perspectives, and introduce your own concerns. You have already shown students what you think is important through your introductory lectures, your choice of preparatory reading material, and your previous assignments. Even the most judiciously evenhanded prologue conveys subtle messages about what you want or expect students to say once the discussion starts.

**DON'T BE VAGUE**

Don't always open the discussion by posing vague, general questions like "What do you think?" or "Would anyone like to react?" or "Who wants to start us off?" This opening works only when two conditions are in place: when participants know and trust each other and are used to talking easily and democratically and when they are so immersed in and provoked by the topic or preparatory reading that they are bursting to speak.

**DON'T PLAY FAVORITES**

Don't allow a pecking order of opening contributors to develop. Every teacher knows the one or two students who are so committed to learning (or to impressing the teacher) that they can be relied on to speak up and get the discussion going. Since the two of us are introverts, we have often been grateful for the presence of extroverted, garrulous students in our classes and have sighed with relief when they've saved us from embarrassment by responding to our opening questions. This is misplaced gratitude. After watching this happen two or three times at the start of the discussion, the others in the group lose their desire to participate because they can predict that the usual suspects will speak up. The majority of students can then mentally doze off.

**DON'T FEAR SILENCE**

Don't panic at silence. At the start of a discussion, there may be long periods of silence as people settle into the new intellectual project that the conversation represents. Something we both struggle with

is letting silence exist without panicking. Like many teachers we know, we tend to assume that silence means things aren't going well. This is an erroneous inference. As Palmer (1993) points out, "We need to abandon the notion that 'nothing is happening' when it is silent, to see how much new clarity a silence often brings" (p. 80). A typical conversational dynamic in discussion is for teachers to start the session by asking a provocative question designed to spark some fruitful responses. Sometimes, though, students choose not to say anything, and in panic, teachers start to answer their own question. Do this even once and you let students know they can rely on you to answer the question and do their thinking for them.

**DON'T MISINTERPRET SILENCE**

Don't mistake students' silence for mental inertia or disengagement. Conversation is halting, tentative, and circuitous, filled with hesitations and awkward attempts at reformulating thoughts even as we speak them. In a culture in which talk shows advance the idea that talk consists of a string of inoffensive, humorous, and seamless anecdotes or vicious and theatrical attacks on other people's beliefs or integrity, it is sometimes hard to insist on the value of reflective silence. Silence is the condition the media dread above all else—they even call it "dead air"—but real-life discussion is not a talk show! Effective discussion leaders take steps to ensure that periods of reflective silence became accepted as a normal and necessary element of people's deliberations.

Now that we've covered what not to do at the start of a discussion, let's look at some of the things you *should* do.

**DECLARING A CLASSROOM SPEECH POLICY**

We have noted that students will often look to you to start off a discussion session rather than take the responsibility for doing this themselves. They will assume that their silence will impel you into speech. If this is the case, a good way to get things going is to make an opening statement regarding the value of silence. It may seem strange to suggest that you launch a discussion by advocating silence, but our experience has been that this puts diffident or introverted students at their ease.

Many students from working-class backgrounds, female students, or students from underrepresented ethnic groups will approach discussion sessions with a justifiable sense of distrust. They will feel, sometimes accurately, that success in academe is often correlated with a glib facility to spring confidently into speech at the earliest possible opportunity, thus impressing the teacher. You can do a great deal to destroy this perception at the outset if you acknowledge the power of silence and students' right not to speak. What follows is an example of a declaration to students that not only expresses the teacher's tolerance of silence but also informs students that participation in class discussion is entirely voluntary and should never be used to curry favor with the instructor:

I know that speaking in discussions is a nerve-racking thing and that your fear of making public fools of yourselves can inhibit you to the point of nonparticipation. I, myself, feel very nervous as a discussion participant and waste a lot of my time carefully rehearsing my contributions so as not to look foolish when I finally speak. So please don't feel that you have to speak in order to gain my approval or to show me that you're a diligent student. It's quite acceptable to say nothing in the session, and there'll be no presumption of failure on your part. I don't equate silence with mental inertia. Obviously, I hope you will want to say something and speak up, but I don't want you to do this just for the sake of appearances. So let's be comfortable with a prolonged period of silence that might or might not be broken. When anyone feels like saying something, just speak up.

We believe in the power of this kind of early declaration because we've seen how well it works. Students will often come up to us afterward and say that by granting them public permission not to say anything, we actually emboldened them to speak. By deliberately destroying the link between student speech and teacher approval, we reduce the pressure on students to "look smart" in front of us.

## DEBRIEFING PREPARATORY WORK

In Chapter Three we argued that discussion works best when participants can start off by expressing reactions to preparatory reading, writing, or reflection. Here we want to give some more specific examples of how this might happen.

## FRAME THE DISCUSSION AROUND STUDENT QUESTIONS

We believe that it's best for students when discussion topics are framed as questions. There are two ways such questions can be generated. First, teachers can assign questions themselves and then structure students' prereading around them. The subsequent discussion would then be an analysis of students' responses to the questions. This is the approach taken in the prereading assignment described in Chapter Three. Another approach is to ask students to generate the questions themselves. The first approach is probably more appropriate at the beginning of students' acquaintance with a subject, the second one when students have some familiarity.

With this second approach, we like to assign the task of generating questions as homework. One way to do this is to say to students, "Imagine that the author of the chapter, article, or book you've been assigned to read as preparation for the discussion next week will be visiting the class. What are the top three questions you'd like to ask the author about the work?" Another is to provide some guidelines regarding the kinds of questions they might ask that are less detailed than the questions outlined in the protocol for critical reading presented in Chapter Three. For example, students could be asked to look for questions prompted by omissions, contradictions, ambiguities, unsupported assumptions, or unacknowledged ethical dilemmas they discover in the text.

Whichever of these options they choose, students bring their questions to class, share them in small groups, prioritize them in these groups, and post their favorites on large sheets of newsprint. These questions can also be posted on an electronic bulletin board or listserve before the class meets. We then ask students to wander around the real or virtual classroom looking for common categories of questions they have posted. We also ask them to look for striking differences. Our intention is to ground the discussion in the exploration of these questions so that students feel the conversation originates in their own efforts and interests. Usually three or four clusters of questions emerge that provide provocative starting points for the discussion.

A more intensive approach is to ask students to suggest the most pressing questions that need to be explored regarding a particular idea, area of knowledge, or piece of work. Here students are given no guidance as to what these questions might be. Their

task is to come to class with one or more questions that they feel need to be asked in the course. By prioritizing these questions in small groups or by posting them on newsprint around the room, the individual concerns students have about the course become a public agenda around which discussion can be framed. Sometimes these questions are posed within the boundaries of already established discourse—for example, why a particular view prevails, why certain skills are deemed so crucial, or why a particular author's ideas are so influential. Occasionally, however, students pose questions that challenge the power and authority of teachers and curricular decision makers. They will ask, "Why do we need to study this?" and "Why is it necessary to know or do this before we're licensed to practice in this field?"

E-mail lends itself particularly well to these activities, provided that all class members have an e-mail address. You can then create a class listserv, bulletin board, or chat room that allows students to come to class already having had a chance to look for clusters in the questions posed electronically and to think about their responses. In effect, e-mail allows you to do electronically what was previously accomplished by posting questions on newsprint in class.

#### ASK STUDENTS TO CHOOSE A CONCRETE IMAGE

For students who are visual rather than auditory learners, Frederick (1986) and Van Manis (1990) suggest asking students to choose a specific image that is actually contained in the text or suggested by something they have read. Frederick puts it like this: "Go around the table and ask each student to state one concrete image/scene/event/moment from the text that stands out. No analysis is necessary—just recollections and brief description. As each student reports, the collective images are listed on the board, thus providing a visual record of selected content from the text as a backdrop to the discussion. Usually the recall of concrete scenes prompts further recollections, and a flood of images flows from the students" (p. 142).

#### DEBRIEF THE LAST WEEK'S CIQS

Another approach is to ground the discussion in a debriefing of the critical incident questionnaire responses to the last session. As described in Chapter Three, the CIQ requires that teachers begin

ie. 'At what moment in class were you most engaged ... most distanced ... what was most helpful ... most puzzling?'

the first class each week by summarizing students' anonymous responses to the previous week's class. If you've given a lecture on a topic the week before it's going to be discussed, many of the CIQ responses will refer to the content of the lecture. It's particularly useful to read the responses to the second, fourth, and fifth questions (on most distancing moments, most puzzling actions, and most surprising aspects, respectively). Responses to the "most distancing moment" question tend to identify elements in the topic that are particularly problematic. Responses to the "most puzzling action" question often describe comments that a student or teacher made that another student found contentious. Responses to the "what surprised you most" question tend to bring to the surface ideas and perspectives that students had not considered before. All these responses tend to be somewhat open-ended, and this openness can be used to generate some good conversation.

#### START WITH A SENTENCE COMPLETION EXERCISE

Another way to focus students on the topic at hand and to ensure that what gets talked about is in some way connected to their own concerns is to start the discussion session with a sentence completion exercise. We have found that the brief time we spend on this exercise is very worthwhile in terms of generating some enthusiasm and drawing participants into speech. Here's how it works.

Students are asked to complete whichever of the following sentences seems appropriate:

What most struck me about the text we read to prepare for the discussion today is . . .

The question that I'd most like to ask the author of the text is . . .

The idea I most take issue with in the text is . . .

The most crucial point in last week's lecture was . . .

The part of the lecture (or text) that I felt made the most sense to me was . . .

The part of the lecture (or text) that I felt was the most confusing was . . .

After students have written down their responses, they share them with one another. If the class is large, we put students into groups of four or five and have them read their sentences to one another. If the class is fairly small, this can be done in a whole-class group. As students hear one another's responses, they jot down the ones they would most like to hear more about. After all responses have been read, students begin the discussion by asking other students about the responses they wanted to hear more about.

#### STATE AND RESPOND TO CONTENTIOUS OPENING STATEMENTS

Sometimes a strongly worded statement—spoken or written—is a good way to get a conversation going. It can be taken from the public domain or created by the teacher or a student. The statement should be provocative, even inflammatory. It should challenge assumptions that students take for granted or cling to fiercely. It's important to tell the class not to assume that the person introducing the opinion agrees with its sentiments. The statement is being made only to generate conversation.

We have found that this technique works especially well with statements uttered by authority figures. The credibility students tend to invest in authority figures ensures that the statement cannot be dismissed out of hand as the ravings of a crank. Also, students can often more easily criticize a controversial statement made by an authority than they can one made by a peer. Some students will be reluctant to state a contentious view, no matter how much they are assured that no one assumes they agree with that view. Other students will be unwilling to criticize the words uttered by a peer in front of a teacher, no matter how much that teacher strives to create a safe atmosphere.

Here are a couple of contentious opening statements that one of us has used to stimulate discussion in courses on adult education:

"To talk about a theory of adult learning is empirical and conceptual nonsense. Children learn in ways that are very similar to adults. The only reason a field of study called adult learning exists is because professors of adult education need to justify their own existence."

"Paulo Freire's ideas are nothing more than Marxist agitation dressed up as educational philosophy. Moreover, their context-specific genesis in Latin America means they have absolutely no relevance for Western Europe or North America."

After the statement has been made, the conversation opens with group members trying to understand the reasoning and circumstances that frame the statement. Why would someone hold these views? What in the author's experience led to such ideas? What possible grounds could we advance to support the making of such an argument? For a while students are asked to be devil's advocates, coming up with evidence and rationales that are completely outside their usual frames of reference. This kind of perspective taking is a cognitive warm-up. It serves the same function in discussion as stretching does at the start of an aerobic workout. By examining the grounds for a view that is contrary to their own, students engage in a form of intellectual muscle flexing. Moreover, being forced to take seriously opinions that one strongly disagrees with guarantees that students are drawn into the discussion at an emotional level.

#### GENERATE TRUTH STATEMENTS

One task that Frederick and Van Ments suggest for the start of a discussion is to ask students to generate what they call "truth statements" (Frederick, 1986, p. 144) or "statements worth making" (Van Ments, 1990, p. 38) based on their preparatory reading. Students are split into small groups, and each group is asked to generate three or four statements that group members believe to be true on the basis of their reading. Frederick observes that "I have found this strategy useful in introducing a new topic—slavery, for example—where students may think they already know a great deal but the veracity of their assumptions demands examination. The complexity and ambiguity of knowledge is clearly revealed as students present their truth statements and other students raise questions about or refute them" (p. 144). The point of this exercise is not so much to produce undeniable facts or theories but to generate, and then prioritize, questions and issues around which further discussion and research are undertaken. The exercise helps

participants develop an agenda of items for discussion and suggests directions for future research they need to conduct if they are to be informed discussants.

### FIND ILLUSTRATIVE QUOTES

Frederick (1986) and Van Ments (1990) also advocate asking students to find relevant quotes from a preparatory text as a way of focusing their attention on the topic at hand and of generating conversation. For example, students can be asked to spend the first ten minutes or so reading through the articles or chapters assigned as prereading to find one or two brief quotes that they especially liked or disliked. These might be quotes they found that best illustrate the major thesis of the text or that are the most difficult to understand. Students then read out their chosen quotes as all class members follow the specific page and passage with them.

In addition to generating good conversation, this exercise has the virtue of respecting the text. One of the most frequent complaints from discussion participants regarding prereading is that the subsequent conversation does not draw explicitly enough on the text they have been asked to spend time reading. Asking students to find illustrative quotes underscores your own commitment to a careful reading of the text. Frederick (1986) observes of this exercise, "Lively and illuminating discussion is guaranteed because not all students will find the same quotations to illustrate various instructions, nor, probably, will they all interpret the same passages the same way. It is during this exercise that I have had the most new insights into texts I have read many times previously. And there may be no more exciting (or modeling) experience than for students to witness their teacher discovering a new insight and going through the process of refining a previously held interpretation" (p. 143).

### USE QUOTES TO AFFIRM AND CHALLENGE

A variant on the illustrative quotes exercise that we have used is asking students to choose quotes from a text that they wish to affirm and quotes that they wish to challenge. Students form small groups, and each member takes a turn to propose a quote to

affirm and the reasons for wanting to do so. The quote does not have to be defended as empirically true. Sometimes a participant will propose a quote because it confirms a cherished point of view. Sometimes the person feels that the quote states the most important point in the text. At other times the quote is affirmed because it is rhetorically rousing or expressed so lyrically. When everyone in the small group has proposed a quote to affirm, the group then chooses one to be presented to the entire class.

The choice of which quote to present to the whole class can be done randomly or through deliberation. Using the random approach, the small group members each type out their quote beforehand. At the end of the small group conversation, group members hand all the pieces of paper to one person, who then randomly selects a quote. This quote is read out to the whole class with everyone (not just the student who originally chose the quote) trying to explain what it was about the quote that was so compelling. In contrast to this random approach, the small group can simply report the quote that drew the greatest support.

The "quote to challenge" activity follows the same procedure, only this time students choose a quote that they disagree with, find contradictory, believe to be inaccurate, or consider reprehensible or immoral. Each person proposes a quote to the small group, and group members choose one to present to the class. One thing that has surprised us in this full-class phase is the unexpected advantage of randomly choosing a small group quote. Because group members don't know which quote will be drawn out of the hat, they have to stay alert to hearing comments on all the quotes proposed. When a quote is chosen by consensus in the small group, groups often pick one quote early on and then spend their time rehearsing a presentation on all the reasons why it's terrific or appalling. This ensures an impressive small group report, but it also means that the opportunity for fruitful discussion of the merits of diverse and even contradictory quotes is lost.

### RECALLING A MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE

One of the chief reasons people don't speak up in groups is their sense that the topic of the discussion is removed from their experience, that it has no meaning or relevance to their lives. Their

pre-reading may convince them that the topic is one about which only experts have knowledge and opinions. Or they may feel that they are being asked to talk about a theory or concept that exists only as an abstraction. A useful way to combat this sense of distance is to start a discussion by getting students to talk about a memorable experience in their lives that somehow connects to the topic. Because most students think they are experts on their own experience, starting out with personal stories is often much less intimidating for them than launching straight into a discussion of the strength and weaknesses of a theory.

Starting with students' memorable experiences is much easier to do when the topic deals with familiar issues. Discussions on racism, for example, often begin with personal stories from participants of their experiences of this. If students seem to have no obvious personal connection to the topic (for example, a discussion of international economics), it is often possible to ground the conversation in people's reactions to a story told by a third party in writing or on video (for example, a worker's account of how she lost her job when her employer moved a factory to a country with cheap labor and no unions).

For discussions on topics that seem to have no personal dimensions whatever, people can still be drawn into the conversation by focusing on critical moments in their attempts to understand the topic. They can talk about the moment of greatest frustration or confusion they experienced during their preparatory reading. They can pick out the moment when they felt most connected to the content of a preparatory lecture or the moment when they felt completely and utterly distanced from the material.

If you choose to use this latter approach, it is often a good idea to start the ball rolling by speaking about your own struggles with the topic. When we have opened a session by talking about our difficulties in understanding the same reading we've asked students to grapple with, the effect is often very dramatic. Students are first puzzled and then enormously reassured that their teacher, too, can feel inadequate when reading difficult texts. In their learning journals or critical incident questionnaires, the most engaging moment is often reported to be the time when the teacher admitted to struggling with the same material that the students find difficult.

Because of the ascribed authority associated with titles such as "professor," "lecturer," or "college teacher," students sometimes assume that we have read everything and know everything. By talking about our struggles as learners, we make it possible for students to admit to the same confusions. Getting group members to identify the aspects of a discussion topic that produce the greatest confusion is a good way to get conversation going. If clear clusters of opinion emerge about the most obscure or inaccessible parts of the preassigned reading, the discussion can start with everyone giving personal reactions to the various ideas and passages concerned.

We don't want to leave this section without giving a warning. One of the dangers of getting students to talk about memorable experiences in their lives that connect to the topic is that of spending the whole class time in a storytelling mode. Both of us believe strongly in the power of narrative and use it in our own teaching, but both of us try also to critique the content of our narrative and the narrative method itself. The purpose of a discussion is not to celebrate personal experience in an uncritical way. A discussion that only affirms the experience of each participant is not a critical conversation.

In the early stages of a group's life, a great deal of time can be spent on hearing people's stories and letting them stand on their own with no critical commentary. Out of such storytelling often comes trust. But sooner or later, good teachers will start to encourage students to look at their stories from different perspectives. They will ask other members of the class to give their interpretations of the story or try to get the storyteller to scrutinize the assumptions underlying the framing of the story and the teller's own actions in it.

Events happen to us, but experiences we construct. How we live through events, how we interpret them, how we feel as they are happening to us, and the meanings we ascribe to them are human creations. In telling our stories, it's easy to distort our place in the narrative by presenting ourselves as heroes and by omitting or overlooking significant details. It's tempting to describe our experiences in ways that are self-serving and that reconfirm the accuracy of our prejudices. A critical discussion will open people to the possibility of seeing their stories from different perspectives and understanding their experiences in new ways.



## TELLING TALES FROM THE TRENCHES

One useful way to encourage students in professional courses to reflect critically on their field is to use the "tales from the trenches" exercise. It works well in courses with students who work full time or are involved in some kind of internship or clinical practice. At the start of class, students describe their most vivid recent experiences as neophyte practitioners. There is no order for speaking and no guidance other than the announcement that "now's the time when anyone who wants to can talk about something especially memorable that happened at work since our class last week." Sometimes people talk about strongly felt emotional peaks when a technique "finally came together" or "everything fell into place" and they were able to perform a procedure as they thought it ought to be performed. At other times they speak of the blissful joy they experience as they finally get to work in the roles they've been preparing for over such a long period.

We've found, however, that the more usual tale from the trenches is one of frustration as students recount their dismay at the gap between theory and practice, between the training laboratory and real life. Students describe situations in which the skills learned in the classroom don't seem to fit the context for which they are intended or in which the supposed benefits or results of applying a certain skill just don't occur. Usually these stories are told as if they are idiosyncratic, unique to the particular student and situation involved. Invariably, however, other students jump into the conversation with tales of similar problems. The discussion then evolves into a troubleshooting session with each of the participants submitting interpretations and experiences and describing personal attempts at resolution. Sometimes the discussion of just one tale from the trenches can occupy the greater part of a class. We're pleased when this happens, provided that the tale told is analyzed critically from different perspectives and that the time taken doesn't violate earlier promises made about the use of class time.

One of the best ways to provoke some good student tales from the trenches is for teachers themselves to open the class with a brief tale of their own. We recommend that these generally be tales of frustration and failure. Telling tales of one's triumphs and pleasures as a teacher or practitioner tends to widen the expert-neophyte divide that already exists. But giving a five-minute description of

something you did during the previous few days that caused you to feel stupid or inadequate usually engages people's attention in a dramatic way. Just as it reassures students to hear that you have difficulty with the same ideas or theories they've been struggling with in their prereading, it often exhilarates them to learn that you, too, still make elementary mistakes.

For example, one of us regularly reads out in class some of the bad evaluative comments he's received from participants at courses or workshops he's given. The effect on students is immediate and profound. They say they can't believe that he gets such comments, and they love the fact that he lets them know he's as demoralized as they are when he receives less than perfect reviews of his practice. Some of the best "tales from the trenches" sessions have happened after he's read out to students comments such as these:

"Really there was little that I could appreciate. The speaker's ego and overall approach were so off-putting that any viable content was obviated."

"There should be far less personal illustrations and cutesy anecdotes. The first hour was remarkably dull."

"His personal asides were totally overdone. His attitude was so egotistical. His approach, . . . [his introduction, was] 55 minutes of clever autobiographical prattle that made me question his competence and wonder how he lasted in academia as long as he has."

After students get over their astonishment at our being willing to make such comments public, there is usually a flood of conversation around situations in which students themselves received similar appraisals, the perceived reasons for these, and the demoralization they felt as a result.

## DISCUSSION IN THE ROUND: HEARING ALL VOICES

A common room arrangement for discussion groups is the circle. Many discussion leaders place chairs in a circle as a way of showing students that no one individual is in a favored spot for catching the teacher's eye. The circle is regarded as a physical manifestation of

democracy, a group of peers facing one another as respectful equals. Everyone has the same chance of being seen and heard, and everyone can see everyone else. That the teacher is not placed apart from the rest of the participants sends a clear message regarding the value of students' opinions and experiences. Their voices are front and center, and there is an obvious expectation that they will be active contributors to the session.

Both of us regularly use circles for the reasons just stated. However, we know that things are not quite as simple as we have made them seem. For confident, loquacious students, the circle is liberating. But many others, especially those who have suffered from sexism, racism, or class bias, find the circle an ambiguous and even humiliating experience. The circle strips students of the right to privacy. It denies them the chance to check from a distance before deciding whether or not the teacher is to be trusted. These students interpret the teacher's implicit invitation to speak as pressure to say something, anything, just to be noticed and to gain favor. As Gore (1993) and Usher and Edwards (1994) have pointed out, you don't remove power dynamics from the room merely by changing the seating arrangements, nor do you automatically cause students to relax and trust you. In fact, the circle can be experienced as a mechanism for forced disclosure as much as a chance for people to speak in an authentic voice.

So when we use the circle to kick off a discussion, we like to introduce some procedures to ensure that this arrangement has the effect we want. To help people feel that all voices are valued equally, we use two techniques: the circle of voices and the circular response method.

### THE CIRCLE OF VOICES

The circle of voices is an activity revered in Native American, First Nation, and Aboriginal cultures. It describes the very simple procedure of giving each person an equal chance to contribute to the discussion. As we note in Chapter Five, the circle of voices can be introduced in the middle of discussion to allow those who haven't yet spoken some time designated for their voices alone. When we use it to open a discussion, we do it in the following way.

Four or five students form a circle. They are allowed up to three minutes of silent time to organize their thoughts. During this

time, they think about what they want to say on the topic once the circle of voices begins. Then the discussion opens, with each student having up to three minutes of uninterrupted time. During the three minutes each person is speaking, no one else is allowed to say anything.

Students can take their turns to speak by going around the circle in order or volunteering at random. Although the latter arrangement sounds relaxed and informal, we have found that the opposite is often the case. Moving sequentially around the circle removes the stress of having to decide whether or not to try to jump in after another student has finished speaking. An important benefit of using the circle of voices at the start of a discussion is that it prevents the development early on of a pecking order of contributors. Introverted or shy students, those whose experience has taught them to mistrust academe, or those who view discussion as another thinly veiled opportunity for teachers to oppress or offend will often stay silent at the beginning of a course. The longer this silence endures, the harder it is for these individuals to speak up. By contrast, in the circle of voices, everyone's voice is heard at least once at the start of the session.

After the circle of voices has been completed and everyone has had the chance to speak, the discussion opens out into a more free-flowing format. As this happens, a second ground rule comes into effect. Participants are allowed to talk only about other people's ideas that were expressed in the circle of voices. A student cannot jump into the conversation to expand on his own ideas; he can only talk about his reactions to what someone else has said. The only exception to this rule is if someone else asks him directly to expand on his ideas. We like this simple ground rule because it short-circuits the tendency toward "grandstanding" that sometimes afflicts a few articulate, confident individuals.

### CIRCULAR RESPONSE DISCUSSIONS

As we point out in the next chapter, one of the habits students find most difficult to acquire is the habit of attentive listening. The circular response exercise is a way to democratize participation, promote continuity, and give people some experience of the effort required in respectful listening. We learned of this technique from David Stewart (1987), who in turn learned of it from Eduard

Lindeman (1987). In this process, students sit in a circle so that everyone can see everyone else, and each person in turn takes no more than three minutes to talk about an issue or a question that the group has agreed to discuss.

Speakers are not free, however, to say anything they want. They must make a brief summary of the preceding speaker's message and then use this as a springboard for their own comments. In other words, what each speaker articulates depends on listening well to the preceding speaker as much as on generating new or unspoken ideas. We often tell students they must respect the following six ground rules:

1. No one may be interrupted while speaking.
2. No one may speak out of turn in the circle.
3. Each person is allowed only three minutes to speak.
4. Each person must begin by paraphrasing the comments of the previous discussant.
5. Each person, in all comments, must strive to show how his or her remarks relate to the comments of the previous discussant.
6. After each discussant has had a turn to speak, the floor is opened for general reactions, and the previous ground rules are no longer in force.

Through this exercise, all participants must demonstrate that they heard and understood what the preceding speaker said and that their own ideas are at least partly prompted by someone else's. In circular response, no one can prepare remarks ahead of time because what each person says depends on paying careful attention to the words of the preceding speaker. Everyone is under the same expectation to speak clearly and listen attentively. This activity gives students practice participating in discussions where collective and cumulative understanding is more important than the contribution of any one individual. The downside is that under the ground rules of circular response, there is really no obligation to absorb and review critically what anyone except the previous speaker has said or to keep track of the general direction of the discussion. So although this exercise is a valuable way to enhance listening skills, it has only limited value in fostering conversational continuity.

Circular response can be altered, however, to give at least a few students experience in tracking and summarizing the discussion and in identifying recurring themes. The adaptation is simple. The ground rules remain the same except that two or three students are designated as summarizers before the exercise begins. Their job is to listen carefully to all participant contributions, taking notes where necessary, and to end the exercise with a synthesis of the discussion's highlights. They recount key points and recurring themes, giving everyone involved some sense of the whole.

## ENSURING PARTICIPATION THROUGH THE HATFUL OF QUOTES

One question that invariably arises regarding exercises such as the circle of voices and circular response is whether or not teachers should require all students to participate. Mandating speech seems like an exercise of teacher power that violates the spirit of democratic conversation. However, we believe that there are occasions when it is justifiable to exercise power in this way. In *Teaching to Transgress*, bell hooks (1994) describes how she requires students to read out paragraphs from their journals in class so that no one feels invisible or silenced. To her, this is a responsible exercise of teacher power. We agree. Always allowing students the option to pass in discussion circles means that those who are shy and introverted, or uncomfortable because they perceive themselves as members of a minority race, gender, or class, end up not contributing. The longer this pattern of nonparticipation persists, the harder it is to break. So what seems like an empathic, benign action by the leader—allowing students the right to silence—serves to reinforce existing differences in status and power. Those who are used to holding forth will move automatically to speak, while those whose voices are rarely heard will be silenced.

One way through this dilemma is to make the required act of contributing as stress-free as possible. Such is the purpose of the "hatful of quotes" exercise. Three doctoral students at National Louis University—Connie Huber, Kenneth Smith, and Jane Walsh—demonstrated this idea for us. Prior to a discussion of a text, the leader types out sentences or passages from the text onto separate slips of paper. In class, she puts these into a hat and asks

students to draw one of the slips out of the hat. Students are given a few minutes to think about their quote and then asked to read it out and comment on it. The order of contribution is up to the students. Those who feel more fearful about speaking go last and take more time to think about what they want to say. Because the same five or six quotes are used, students who go later will have heard their quote read out and commented on by those who spoke earlier. So even if they have little to say about their own interpretation of the quote, they can affirm, build on, or contradict a comment a peer has already made on that quote. This exercise is a good way to create a safe opportunity for everyone to speak. Those who are diffident get to say something, thus building confidence for subsequent contributions. They avoid the feelings of shame and anger that come from feeling excluded from the discussion while lacking the confidence to break the prevailing pattern and project their voice into the mix.

## CONCLUSION

The ideas we've presented in this chapter and in Chapter Three should decrease the likelihood that your attempts to start a discussion will be met with silence. But no matter how carefully you plan against this eventuality, it will happen. Remember, silence is not always indicative of hostility, confusion, or apathy. It could just as easily signal students' need to collect their thoughts on a complicated topic before they venture into speech. If, however, conversation refuses to catch fire and is desultory or nonexistent, a wider structural problem is probably manifesting itself. Perhaps the institutional culture and reward systems are working against your commitment to discussion. Perhaps differences of race, class, and gender between yourself and the group or between various group members are generating a silence born of mutual suspicion. Perhaps students' past experiences have taught them that participating in discussion is a waste of time, a chance for a teacher or peer to catch them out, trip them up, and put them down. In such situations, the best course of action is to place the problem before the group and seek reactions and advice, to rethink the dynamics of your pedagogy and how you use discussion, and to ask your colleagues (perhaps by getting them to sit in on a session) for their perceptions of the situation and recommendations on how to remedy it.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# KEEPING DISCUSSION GOING THROUGH QUESTIONING, LISTENING, AND RESPONDING

We emphasize throughout this book that democratic discussion is open and fluid, building on the diverse experiences and interpretations of its participants. Although teachers have some responsibility for guiding the discussion, no one person controls its direction entirely. Consequently, good discussions are unpredictable and surprising. They reveal things about the discussants and the topics under examination that are illuminating and eye-opening. At the same time, however, because democratic discussions have a life of their own, they can falter and even expire quite unexpectedly.

Even when discussion gets off to a good start and seems to have momentum, a variety of circumstances can intervene to bring group talk to a grinding halt. Sometimes the teacher or one or two students assume too dominant a role. Sometimes the question or issue to be discussed just isn't controversial enough. Often the pace seems too slow, or the process for exploring the question lacks variety. In other cases, the students may not be ready to explore a topic in a large group setting or for some reason have lost their enthusiasm for the subject. Although it is frequently difficult to pinpoint the reasons why attention is wandering or commitment to the subject is waning, action needs to be taken to reinvigorate the conversation when these things happen. Part of the secret of dealing with these situations lies in refusing to panic or to berate oneself

for allowing things to get off track. Fortunately, it is often possible to revive discussion and regain the sense of "controlled spontaneity" (Welty, 1989, p. 47) characteristic of good conversation.

This is not to say, however, that we regard discussion as a panacea for turning bored, disinterested, or hostile students into enthusiastic advocates for learning. Neither do we believe that simply talking about problems leads inevitably to students' deciding to take action to address pressing social concerns. As we argued in Chapters One and Two, discussions, in general, tend to increase motivation, promote engagement with difficult material, and give people appreciation for what they can learn from one another and for what can be accomplished as a group. But we want to acknowledge that we have both been responsible for classes where discussion failed miserably, inducing boredom, resentment, and confusion. We have no magic formula to guarantee success, just some ideas that have proved useful to rejuvenate conversations that seem to be stuck.

Sometimes a discussion can be considered successful even if the original intentions of the leader go unrealized. When participants learn that a problem is more complex than they had thought or when their appreciation for existing differences is deepened, these can be counted as significant accomplishments, even though they might be different from the teacher's anticipated outcomes. We can say unequivocally, however, that discussion fails when participants avoid similar dialogical encounters in the future or when they lose interest in the topics under consideration. If part of the point is to keep conversation going, to stimulate people to keep talking in the future, then discussions that inhibit this desire must be regarded as counterproductive and miseducational.

The question remains, what conditions inhibit dialogue and what measures can be taken to overcome them? This chapter and the next will focus on a variety of procedures to keep discussion moving and propose ways to make discussion a process of continuous discovery and mutual enlightenment. Getting students to view problems from a variety of perspectives and helping them frame these problems more critically and creatively helps keep discussion fresh. How teachers maintain the pace of the discussion, how they use questioning and listening to engage students in

probing subject matter, and how they group students for instruction all affect how the discussion proceeds and how motivated the students are to participate in similar discussions in the future.

## QUESTIONING

To reiterate, an important focus of democratic discussion should be on getting as many people as possible deeply engaged in the conversation. Whatever the teacher says and does should facilitate and promote this level of engagement. As a number of commentators have pointed out, at the heart of sustaining an engaging discussion are the skills of questioning, listening, and responding (Christensen, 1991a, 1991b; Jacobson, 1984; Welty, 1989). Of the three, learning to question takes the most practice and skill (Freire, 1993; Bateman, 1990). Although it is certainly true that the kinds of questions one asks to begin a discussion set an important tone, it is equally true that subsequent questions asked by both the teacher and the students can provide a powerful impetus for sustaining discussion. Indeed, as Palmer (1998) has noted, how we ask questions can make the difference between a discussion that goes nowhere and one that turns into a "complex communal dialogue that bounces all around the room" (p. 134).

## TYPES OF QUESTIONS

Once the discussion is moving along, several kinds of questions are particularly helpful in maintaining momentum.

### *Questions That Ask for More Evidence*

These questions are asked when participants state an opinion that seems unconnected to what's already been said or that someone else in the group thinks is erroneous, unsupported, or unjustified. The question should be asked as a simple request for more information, not as a challenge to the speaker's intelligence. Here are some examples:

How do you know that?

What data is that claim based on?

What does the author say that supports your argument?  
 Where did you find that view expressed in the text?  
 What evidence would you give to someone who doubted your interpretation?

#### *Questions That Ask for Clarification*

Clarifying questions give speakers the chance to expand on their ideas so that they are understood by others in the group. They should be an invitation to convey one's meaning in the most complete sense possible. Here are some examples:

Can you put that another way?  
 What's a good example of what you are talking about?  
 What do you mean by that?  
 Can you explain the term you just used?  
 Could you give a different illustration of your point?

#### *Open Questions*

Questions that are open-ended, particularly those beginning with how and why, are more likely to provoke the students' thinking and problem-solving abilities and make the fullest use of discussion's potential for expanding intellectual and emotional horizons. Of course, using open questions obliges the teacher to take such responses seriously and to keep the discussion genuinely unrestricted. It is neither fair nor appropriate to ask an open-ended question and then to hold students accountable for failing to furnish one's preferred response. As Van Ments (1990) says, "The experienced teacher will accept the answer given to an open question and build on it" (p. 78). That is, as we all know, easier said than done.

Here are some examples of open questions:

Sauvage says that when facing moral crises, people who agonize don't act, and people who act don't agonize. What does he mean by this? (Follow-up question: Can you think of an example that is consistent with Sauvage's maxim and another that conflicts with it?)

Racism pervaded American society throughout the twentieth century. What are some signs that things are as bad as ever? What are other signs that racism has abated significantly?

Why do you think many people devote their lives to education despite the often low pay and poor working conditions?

#### *Linking or Extension Questions*

An effective discussion leader tries to create a dialogical community in which new insights emerge from prior contributions of group members. Linking or extension questions actively engage students in building on one another's responses to questions. Here are some examples of such questions:

Is there any connection between what you've just said and what Rajiv was saying a moment ago?

How does your comment fit in with Neng's earlier comment?

How does your observation relate to what the group decided last week?

Does your idea challenge or support what we seem to be saying?

How does that contribution add to what has already been said?

These kinds of questions tend to prompt student-to-student conversation and help students see that discussion is a collaborative enterprise in which the wisdom and experience of each participant contributes something important to the whole. Too often discussion degenerates into a gathering of isolated heads, each saying things that bear no relationship to other comments. The circular response exercise (see Chapter Four), which requires students to ground their comments in the words of the previous speaker, gives students practice in creating discussions that are developmental and cooperative. Skillfully employing linking questions can also help participants practice discussion as "a connected series of spoken ideas" (Leonard, 1991, p. 145).

#### *Hypothetical Questions*

Hypothetical questions ask students to consider how changing the circumstances of a case might alter the outcome. They require students to draw on their knowledge and experience to come up with

plausible scenarios. Because such questions encourage highly creative responses, they can sometimes cause learners to veer off into unfamiliar and seemingly tangential realms. But with a group that is reluctant to take risks or that typically answers in a perfunctory, routinized manner, the hypothetical question can provoke flights of fancy that can take a group to a new level of engagement and understanding.

Here are some examples of hypothetical questions:

How might World War II have turned out if Hitler had not decided to attack the Soviet Union in 1941?

What might have happened to the career of Orson Welles if RKO Studios had not tampered with his second film, *The Magnificent Ambersons*?

In the video we just saw, how might the discussion have been different if the leader had refrained from lecturing the group?

If Shakespeare had intended Iago to be a tragic or more sympathetic figure, how might he have changed the narrative of Othello?

#### *Cause-and-Effect Questions*

Questions that provoke students to explore cause-and-effect linkages are fundamental to developing critical thought. Questions that ask students to consider the relationship between class size and academic achievement or to consider why downtown parking fees double on days when there's a game at the stadium encourage them to investigate conventional wisdom. Asking the class-size question might prompt other questions concerning the discussion method itself, for example:

What is likely to be the effect of raising the average class size from twenty to thirty on the ability of learners to conduct interesting and engaging discussions?

How might halving our class size affect our discussion?

#### *Summary and Synthesis Questions*

Finally, one of the most valuable types of questions that teachers can ask invites students to summarize or synthesize what has been thought and said. These questions call on participants to identify

important ideas and think about them in ways that will aid recall. For instance, the following questions are usually appropriate and illuminating:

What are the one or two most important ideas that emerged from this discussion?

What remains unresolved or contentious about this topic?

What do you understand better as a result of today's discussion?

Based on our discussion today, what do we need to talk about next time if we're to understand this issue better?

What key word or concept best captures our discussion today?

By skillfully mixing all the different kinds of questions outlined in this chapter, teachers can alter the pace and direction of conversation, keeping students alert and engaged. Although good teachers prepare questions beforehand to ensure variety and movement, they also readily change their plans as the actual discussion proceeds, abandoning prepared questions and formulating new ones on the spot.

#### THE CASE AGAINST TEACHER QUESTIONS

James Dillon (1994) begins his discussion about teacher questions with the following unambiguous injunction: "Do not put questions to students during a discussion" (p. 78). He claims that when teachers start asking questions, discussion turns into recitation, which inhibits student deliberation and exchange. Instead, he says, teachers should find other means to stimulate participation and thought. Dillon allows only two exceptions to this: (1) the initiating question posed at the beginning of a discussion to orient the participants and set the boundaries for the conversation and (2) the "self-perplexing question" that the teacher may raise once or twice during the course of a discussion out of "genuine wonderment" (p. 79). As an alternative to asking questions, Dillon urges teachers to develop a broad repertoire of responses to student comments and questions. This repertoire includes statements, silences, and nonverbal signals of encouragement, all of which are designed to keep students talking to each other. (More information about some

of these alternatives to teacher questions will be covered later in this chapter in the section headed "Responding.")

Having referred to Dillon's concerns about teacher questions, which we think have some merit, we hope it is also clear that we think this is an extreme position. There are many occasions—some of which we have already identified—when a question is an appropriate and effective way to keep the conversation going. Furthermore, teachers are curious people; their natural inclination to express puzzlement or to seek clarification or further information should not, in our view, be artificially suppressed.

## LISTENING

It is a platitude (but nonetheless true) that listening continues to be the most undervalued and least understood aspect of discussion. Good teachers are artful listeners who don't just remain quiet when their students are talking. Instead, they strain to hear both the explicit and the underlying meanings of their students' contributions. This involves teachers in trying to understand the speaker's point of view in the terms in which it is expressed and in judging how authoritatively or tentatively that view is being expressed. It also means judging when and how the speaker is willing to entertain challenges to the view advanced. Discussion leaders who listen carefully can weigh how well the students understand the subject and the degree to which their comments relate to and advance the ongoing discussion. Listening well also helps us know when it's important to encourage contributions that neither advance understanding nor enhance continuity but nevertheless add something valuable.

Still, one of the most valuable benefits of good listening is that it increases continuity. When a comment seems unrelated to what has preceded it, the discussion leader will frequently ask for evidence of a connection or help the student clarify the link. But this is not a hard-and-fast rule. Even when a student takes the discussion off on what appears to be a tangent, the departure can become a productive move if it is a logical extension of the preceding exchanges. So discussion leaders need to use their listening and questioning skills to hold students accountable for making connections between their contributions and earlier points and helping the entire group see new links as the discussion grows increasingly complex.

Listening is useless without retention. Although all participants in a discussion have the responsibility to listen and remember at least some of the contributions, teachers have a special responsibility to try to retain virtually everything said. They must develop the ability to recall at appropriate times, and on behalf of the group, earlier comments that illuminate points made later in the discussion, thus ensuring a sense of continuity. If the conversation is experienced as evolving developmentally, this helps forge a more closely knit dialogic community. Listening in this way also obliges teachers to be self-effacing enough to allow their students to be at the center of classroom conversation. Palmer (1998) has written eloquently about this: "Attentive listening is never an easy task—it consumes psychic energy at a rate that tires and surprises me. But it is made easier when I am holding back my own authoritative impulses. When I suspend, for just a while, my inner chatter about what I am going to say next, I open room within myself to receive the external conversation" (p. 135).

Listening takes great effort, but as with many difficult skills, practice helps. Periodically, it makes sense to ask students to do some exercises that sharpen their listening skills and that add variety and a change of pace to democratic discussions. Three exercises we have found useful are described here.

### PAIRED LISTENING

In this exercise, students work in pairs and practice listening to each other with great intensity. Each person takes a turn as speaker and as listener. The speaker takes no more than five minutes to share something personal, but it's the listener who has by far the more difficult role. This person must strain to hear everything the speaker says while actively demonstrating listening and understanding. Body language, head nodding, verbal interjections like "yes" and "uh-huh," paraphrases of the speaker's statements, and even repetitions of the speaker's actual words all show the listener's active involvement. Here are the instructions we give to students for this exercise:

Because listening is such an important part of successful discussion, you are going to engage in an active listening exercise to gain practice in attending closely to another person's message. You will be paired with another person for



about ten minutes. One of you will assume the role of the speaker, and the other will serve as the listener. The speaker will have no more than five minutes to talk about something personal; then we will reverse roles for another five minutes. Although the speaker's words are important, the burden is on the listener to make this exercise successful. The listener doesn't just passively receive the words of the speaker; she must attend carefully to their meaning. This means she uses every resource at her disposal to show that her first priority is witnessing and understanding the speaker's words. Body language, eye contact, head nodding, paraphrasing of the speaker's meaning, and echoing the actual words are all part of the active listening process.

If you are the listener, you may ask questions to get clarification on key points, but please ask them sparingly. This activity can feel a little awkward, especially when you're just parroting another person's words. Echoing is OK, but don't take it to an extreme; try to keep your responses varied. Take this activity seriously, but try to enjoy it as well. Most of all, when it's your turn to be the listener, devote every ounce of your attention to the speaker's message. To listen this closely can be exhilarating and illuminating.

This exercise not only enhances communicative accuracy but also gives students valuable practice in empathizing with others and in simply accepting what is heard without imposing interpretations or making premature judgments. It follows closely the protocol for active listening developed by Gordon (1977) and others. As Palmer (1998) notes, it is sometimes tiring to listen to another person this attentively, but making the effort helps us catch the cues, shades of meaning, and emotions that we miss when not attending so carefully. This exercise is also a simple way to affirm others, to show them that what they say and think matters a great deal. Of course, paired listening is very different from discussion in large groups, where participants must attend to many diverse voices, but it is a useful first step in practicing the kind of respectful listening that supports all good discussion.

## HEARING THE SUBJECT

Palmer (1993, p. 98) reminds us of something that is easy to forget when the focus turns to the value of listening well. "There are really three parties to the conversation," he says, "the teacher, the

students, and the subject itself." Of these three parties, the subject is the most frequently neglected, but it too has a voice that "we must strain to hear . . . beyond all our interpretations." Although interpretive filtering is inevitable, Palmer advises that a text, a lecture, a film, or even a picture needs to be understood, at least initially, on its own terms. The tendency to jump to conclusions that fit personal experience or that address a currently pressing problem should be resisted to allow the relatively unfiltered message of the subject to come through.

One way to learn to listen to the subject is through an exercise similar to paired listening that puts the focus on the subject instead of another person. In this exercise, students "listen" to a text, film, or picture and try to paraphrase and echo as much of what they witness as possible. They try to "hear" the subject even if what they encounter at first seems quite incomprehensible. Here are the instructions:

You have done some active listening exercises that were intended to give you practice in comprehending what others are saying. Now I want you to try an exercise called "hearing the subject." We sometimes read a text or view a film that is quickly dismissed because at first glance it doesn't make much sense. But by giving that text or film another chance, by "listening" more closely to its meanings and forms of expression, we discover surprising and revealing dimensions to it.

Take about thirty minutes to witness one of the following: (1) a short scene from a twentieth-century existentialist play, Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*; (2) a twentieth-century abstract painting, Picasso's *Girl Before the Mirror*; or (3) a brief surrealist film, Buñuel and Dalí's *Un chien andalou*. Don't be overwhelmed by the difficulties of making meaning out of the work you are perceiving; just listen to it as closely as you can. You might want to jot down some parts verbatim, paraphrase others, or recount images, shapes, colors, and textures. Please restrain the impulse to express emotion about the work being examined or to generate your own interpretation. Experience the work in as unmediated a fashion as possible—don't try to make meaning out of it.

When the thirty minutes are up, join two other people who have been experiencing the same work. Share your perspectives on the experience of the work, but do this without any interpretational filters. What are the actual words, images, shapes, textures, and colors that were employed? Generate as

full an account as you can. We will end by asking everyone to return to the large group and converse about this experience of listening to the subject with a high degree of intensity. How did it enhance or detract from your enjoyment? Did it help you make meaning of what you perceived?

The point here is simply to get students to experience texts and other media as directly as possible so that they take the time to listen deeply to what these materials are conveying, just as it has been suggested that students and teachers do with one another. This kind of exercise can teach students to attend sympathetically to even the most confusing or off-putting voices and to derive a certain level of understanding and meaning from them instead of dismissing them out of hand. There is no guarantee, however, that this activity will result in increased understanding. It may instead produce frustration and an increased intolerance for certain kinds of unorthodox or obscure messages. But the result could be an increased appreciation for the amount of effort and attention that must sometimes be devoted to making sense of experiences and ideas that are complex and multifaceted.

#### DESIGNATED LISTENER

As useful as the foregoing exercises are, the most valuable listening practice occurs in discussion itself. We recommend that individual students occasionally be designated official listeners in discussion with the expectation that eventually all students will have the chance to assume this role at least once. As designated listeners, students do not contribute any ideas of their own. But in listening intently, they may ask occasional questions, check for understanding or clarification, or acknowledge comments with a brief word or a simple gesture. Their focus is entirely on the words and body language of the other participants. At the end of the conversation, they are expected to summarize the main ideas expressed and to comment on the participation levels of the various group members.

When assigning designated listeners, we ask students to do the following:

- Listen to understand the words spoken rather than thinking about what to say next.

- Strive to understand the point before either approving or criticizing.
- Take note of points of agreement as well as disagreement within the group.
- Raise questions with participants that help clarify and explain key points.
- Raise questions with participants that extend and deepen the conversation.
- Forget about what others in the group are feeling about the speaker's comments.
- Try to be aware of the speaker's level of confidence and be ready to support him or her.

#### RESPONDING

The first and perhaps most important thing to be said about responding to a comment in discussion is that this is never the sole responsibility of the instructor. One of the best ways for teachers to respond to others' comments or questions is by remaining silent, thereby giving students the opportunity and space to respond to what their peers have to say. Nevertheless, how to respond to what individual students say so as to sustain discussion over the long haul is one of the most elusive and context-dependent skills discussion leaders can learn. By responding with silence, teachers can create an opportunity for collective reflection and give other students a chance to speak. Or they might respond with a question directed at the previous speaker or at the class as a whole. They can paraphrase what has just been said or request further information. They might offer a few words of praise for a brilliant insight. Or perhaps a few gentle words of criticism or clarification are called for because the last comment seemed to show little understanding of the issue at hand. Choosing the most appropriate response to a student's comment depends on a variety of factors, including what you know about the student, your goals for the class, how deeply the group has so far probed the subject matter, what has been said by others, and the pace you want to maintain in the discussion.

Christensen (1991a, 1991b) offers excellent advice about the options available to teachers in responding to student comments.

He suggests that there are two major courses of action: continuing teacher-to-student interaction by taking it upon oneself to query the student further or extending student-to-student interaction by leaving it to the other students to respond to the most recent set of remarks. Our preference is to focus on ways to extend student-to-student interaction, so we will not pursue the options available to the discussion leader who wants to prolong an interchange with a student. However, these options tend to complement what we have already said about teacher questions.

If you make the decision to extend student-to-student interaction, there are a variety of options available. One is to remain silent and to await responses from the other students. Another is to invite a student who you know has a contrasting view to present his or her ideas as a way of stimulating the whole group to confront conflicting perspectives. You might lead into this by saying, "I was talking to Karen during the break, and she had a very different view of how class size affects achievement because her definition of achievement is so different from Leroy's. Karen, would you kindly talk about how your view differs from Leroy's?"

A third option is to ask a question or raise an issue that is directly related to what was just said by a student. For example, if the student has made a claim about the effects of class size on academic achievement, you might ask the whole group, "What assumptions about achievement does this claim make? What if we defined achievement as one's ability to participate in a discussion group? How might class size affect achievement then?"

#### RESPONDING WITHOUT QUESTIONS

Dillon (1994) suggests that leaders can respond to comments in ways that do not involve questioning. One choice is simply to make declarative statements that reflect one's honest opinion. These statements may contrast with what students have said, or they may complement student comments. Discussion leaders can also restate concisely what they have heard for the benefit of the group. On other occasions they may want to ask for clarification about what has been said or to point out how a recent contribution has cleared up some earlier difficulties. Still another response is to restate what

two or more students have said to get these students to examine their disagreements more closely.

Dillon also emphasizes that teachers should create conditions that encourage student questions. Leaders can ask questions that reveal the complexity of issues and praise students when they pose similar questions. They can comment specifically on how particular questions help the group probe the topic more deeply. Another approach is simply to invite all of the students to ask at the end of the session at least one question that the discussion has suggested to them. Still another option is to call on students to identify one question that remains unanswered about a topic to which the group has devoted a fair amount of study time. However this is done, discussion leaders should give a high priority to student questions.

#### AFFIRMATION

Whatever course of action you take, it is a good idea to be as encouraging as possible when responding to student comments. Students take risks when they ask a question, volunteer an answer, introduce an argument, or venture a criticism, particularly if they don't know what to expect of teachers or when they have limited experience as discussants. When teachers find ways to be hospitable and inviting, they lay the groundwork for good discussion later on. How much affirmation teachers should give students is an open question, one that continues to be sharply disputed. One extreme insists on "lavish affirmation" (Vella, 1995) as a response to all comments, regardless of their quality. The other, advocated by the Great Books Foundation (1991), advises discussion leaders to refrain from praise of any kind. Advocates of this view believe that the practice of affirming students leads to dependence on the instructor. In general, we lean toward affirmation, though to affirm every comment, regardless of its content or connection to the rest of the discussion, seems excessive. One way through this contradiction is to thank students routinely for the act of making a contribution but to differentiate those expressions from appreciative comments you make on the quality of a contribution.

Praise should be specific and concrete. Look at some examples of the kinds of affirmative responses we have found ourselves using

in discussion. These responses tend not only to be concrete but also to foster continuity and momentum.

Your comment has made clear for me the dangers of overgeneralizing in this case.

Your contribution strikes me as a synthesis of the points made by Angel and Jade yesterday. It moves us to the next level of analysis.

I was trying to paraphrase what Trang said earlier, but you have helped me see that I omitted his most important point. Thanks for listening so closely.

"Methodological belief" is a good name for what we all have been talking about. I'm glad you found a label that works so well.

#### RESPONDING WITH SILENCE

Another mode of responding is through silence. The tendency to answer students without hesitation is a hard one to unlearn. Silence is frequently viewed as a sign of resistance, poor pacing, or lack of interest. As we asserted in Chapter Four, however, silence can also be a constructive, positive aspect of discussion. Research indicates that students learn more in discussion when the teacher takes five to ten seconds before responding to what students say (Dillon, 1994, p. 90).

We believe that even more time, up to a full minute, can occasionally be used to model unhurried deliberation and to emphasize the importance of reflection. Structuring silence can give participants a chance to take the time needed to think through a new idea, make sense of it, and fit it into an existing mental schema. When teachers at least occasionally resist the frenetic give-and-take that passes for stimulating discussion and slow the pace to allow time for taking stock, they remind their students that group thinking and problem solving should be punctuated by moments of silence as much as by energetic outbursts.

Silence can also be a way of responding that shows respect. Sometimes words cannot express the depth of feeling we experience or the level of appreciation we want to communicate. One of the authors has for years regularly shown a very moving film called *Weapons of the Spirit*, about the residents of a small French village

who risked their own lives by hiding thousands of Jews from the Nazis during World War II. He has learned that when the film ends, silence must be observed as a kind of wordless witnessing of their remarkably selfless actions. The two of us saw the film *Schindler's List* together and could not speak for many minutes after the credits had finished rolling. Sometimes an exchange of ideas is so powerful or poignant that a silent expression of appreciation and respect is the only appropriate response.

#### CONVERSATIONAL MOVES

Throughout this chapter we have emphasized the teacher's responsibility to develop skills of questioning, listening, and responding. But students must become proficient in them too. Even if the teacher consistently displays these skills, there is no guarantee (though it is probably more likely) that students will ask questions of each other or try to build on others' contributions. This exercise asks students to practice these skills in very specific ways. Here's how it works.

Prepare one three-by-five-inch card for each member of the class. On each card, write a "conversational move" from the following list, and distribute the cards randomly among participants before a discussion session. Ask students to practice the move indicated on their card during the ensuing discussion. When the discussion is over, distribute the entire list of moves so that people can see the wide variety of ways in which questioning, listening, and responding can be practiced. Point out to students that virtually all of the moves listed are designed to strengthen connections among group members and to reinforce the notion that discussion is a collaborative process. Note as well that these are just a few suggestions from the wide range of moves that are possible in lively conversation. If there is time, ask participants to recap how they tried to make the conversational moves they were allocated.

Ask a question or make a comment that shows you are interested in what another person has said.

Ask a question or make a comment that encourages someone else to elaborate on something that person has said.

Make a comment that underscores the link between two people's contributions. Make this link explicit in your comment.

Use body language (in a slightly exaggerated way) to show interest in what different speakers are saying.

Make a comment indicating that you found another person's ideas interesting or useful. Be specific as to why this was the case.

Contribute something that builds on or springs from what someone else has said. Be explicit about the way you are building on the other person's thoughts.

Make a comment that at least partly paraphrases a point someone has already made.

Make a summary observation that takes into account several people's contributions and that touches on a recurring theme in the discussion.

Ask a cause-and-effect question—for example, "Can you explain why you think it's true that if these things are in place, such and such a thing will occur?"

At an appropriate moment, ask the group for a minute's silence to slow the pace of conversation and give you and others time to think.

Find a way to express appreciation for the enlightenment you have gained from the discussion. Try to be specific about what it was that helped you understand something better.

Disagree with someone in a respectful and constructive way.

## CONCLUSION

Keeping a discussion going is a complex challenge. It entails leaving plenty of space for students to speak, giving them an opportunity to learn from others, and showing them that what they say has an impact on how their peers think. It involves asking questions that stimulate and provoke students to examine their own and others' experiences and that establish an atmosphere for critical inquiry. Listening to students in an active and affirming manner is another crucial ingredient in sustaining discussion. Teachers who take time to listen carefully to students are more likely to keep discussions going in directions that are satisfying and fruitful for everyone. Furthermore, when teachers respond thoughtfully to students, they create a kind of conversational momentum and continuity that may lend new meaning and purpose to discussion.

## CHAPTER SIX

# KEEPING DISCUSSION GOING THROUGH CREATIVE GROUPING

It should be clear by now that we think teachers can do a lot to keep discussion going. Pacing the discussion to keep it from lagging and varying the format so that it doesn't become stale or perfunctory are two of the most important responsibilities teachers can assume. Changing pace and format helps accommodate the different learning styles of students and allows for the pursuit of a broader range of goals and objectives. Variety also imparts the sense that discussion should be experimental, a never-ending search for different ways to frame issues or analyze difficult problems.

In this chapter we describe a variety of simple strategies that teachers can employ to keep up the pace of discussions, maintain interest in the subject matter, and help participants view the subject and each other from diverse angles and perspectives.

## VARYING GROUP SIZE

Many of the options available to teachers for introducing variety relate to creative grouping. Some teachers prefer to keep discussions chiefly in a whole-class setting, usually with all the students gathered together in a circle or a U shape. There is nothing inherently wrong with whole-group discussions. They can be stimulating and productive, and they bear the distinct advantage of allowing the teacher to monitor the understanding and participation of all learners simultaneously. There are also many times when it is