


*Chapter Six:  
Creative Grouping*

# DISCUSSION AS A WAY OF TEACHING

Tools and Techniques for  
Democratic Classrooms

Second Edition

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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

helpful for students to hear the wide range of voices that only the entire group can provide.

However, the large scale of whole-group discussions can inhibit the participation of some individuals, allowing the most socially confident or aggressive to dominate. Whole-class discussions are also more likely to perpetuate the inequalities of class, race, and gender that exist in the larger society. Furthermore, whole-group exchanges can be unwieldy, difficult to manage, and occasionally chaotic. Even when the large group is well organized, whole-class discussions can be overdone, leading to tedium and a reluctance to speak up about issues that may involve self-disclosure. So even if discussion gets off to a good start in the large group, it makes sense eventually to divide students into different small group configurations.

### RELAXED BUZZ GROUPS

In relaxed buzz groups, students gather in groups of four or five to discuss issues from a reading assignment. There are no prepared questions to answer, and there is no obligation to return to the large group with a report of any kind. The only requirement is that group members keep their talk focused on issues that emerge from the reading. They may raise questions with each other, highlight difficult or interesting passages, try to draw out the text's thesis, or simply note serious flaws. It is up to the group to decide how to handle the conversation and to do it in a way that is most comfortable for its members. At the end of the group discussion, or "buzz" (we usually allow ten to fifteen minutes for this activity), group members may want to share recurring themes or try to summarize what was said, but there is no expectation that this will happen.

Relaxed buzz groups are good icebreakers. They get people acquainted and build enthusiasm for future conversation. Because there is no need to come up with findings or conclusions, they are relatively unpressured. Consequently, inexperienced discussants find them especially congenial. But even for old hands, relaxed buzz groups can provide a welcome change of pace. By avoiding the pressure induced by having to come up with a probing question or a brilliant insight, we limit the competition that sometimes results when experienced groups try to best one

another. Relaxed buzz also implicitly promotes the idea that discussion can stand on its own, that it doesn't always have to lead to some tangible outcome. The problem with this exercise is related to its strengths. Its looseness can cause discussion to degenerate into chitchat, so that the reading and topic are ignored altogether. Or the lack of structure may lead to aimlessness and a sense that discussion isn't helpful in clarifying issues.

### STRUCTURED BUZZ GROUPS

In structured buzz, students have twenty minutes to answer a few questions about the reading prepared by the instructor. Although they don't have to cover all the questions, they try to finish as many as they can and to record their answers in writing. The group's answers are either submitted to the teacher or reported in some summary form to the reconvened large group.

The advantage of structuring buzz is that it gives the small groups an agenda to cover. They are obliged to focus on the questions and, assuming these are skillfully written, to examine some fairly important issues. A drawback to this activity is that it takes a lot of initiative out of the hands of the students. If the small group feels strongly about something in the reading that isn't covered in the questions, the issue may go unexplored because there isn't the flexibility to pursue unanticipated directions.

One way to deal with this dilemma and also to accommodate different learning styles is to supply groups with prepared questions but give them the option of holding to these fairly closely or ignoring them entirely and exploring a theme of mutual interest to the group. Of course, the problem here is that groups are rarely of one mind. Those who prefer the structure of prepared questions will fight those who abhor any kind of constraint on their freedom and creativity.

### SOME GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR ORGANIZING SMALL GROUPS

You may have noted that we recommend that buzz groups be limited to about five people. This is not an arbitrary number. In his summary of research on group size, Bruffee (1993) advises five as

the ideal number for small group discussion. Anything larger gets increasingly unwieldy; anything smaller results in an unproductive level of subgroup contentiousness.

Determining the size of small groups is easy, however, compared to the question of how to organize them. Those of us who use small groups frequently wonder whether we should assign students to groups or just let them choose with whom they wish to converse. We're not sure what the most common practice is, but we do know that there are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches.

When students select their own groups, they are likely to choose peers with whom they feel comfortable. These will be people they know and trust and with whom they are likely to speak openly and honestly. These are real advantages, especially when exploring highly sensitive or personal issues. In self-selected groups, students don't need to get to know one another and can begin conversing about the topic immediately. Conversely, when students form their own groups, they often choose to be with people who hold similar opinions. This reduces the likelihood that they will have to grapple with differences of ideology and perspective that are such a challenging and important part of good discussion.

When teachers take the opposite approach and assign students to groups, they can bring together people with different views and experiences. They can ensure that groups are mixed by gender, race, and class and that both talkative and quiet students are represented. They can also include students with different learning styles in each group. Of course, teachers can easily make the mistake of bringing together people who don't get along, thereby forestalling the chances for good discussion. Teachers may also be so intent on forming small groups that display diversity that they lose sight of the advantages of occasionally creating groups distinguished by gender, race, native language, or learning style. Bruffee (1993) cites research showing that heterogeneous groups sometimes foster discussion that is more challenging and critical, though he, too, notes that too much heterogeneity can be self-defeating.

In general, we recommend that teachers let their students form their own groups at least some of the time, depending on the topic or the purpose of the activity, and that just as frequently the teacher take the initiative in assigning group membership. Over the course

of a semester, it is good practice to maintain a fairly equal balance between teacher-selected and student-selected groups. In this way students can benefit from the advantages of both while avoiding the disadvantages of relying too heavily on either.

Irrespective of how groups are composed, we cannot emphasize enough the importance of keeping their assignments short and manageable. Bruffee's guidelines (1993) are useful in this regard. He suggests that if there is text to be analyzed, you should limit it to a few pages or even just one paragraph. If you want students to answer questions, don't assign them more than one or two. How the questions are posed is especially important. They should be written in clear, straightforward prose with as little jargon as possible. Use concrete particulars, and try to avoid grandiose abstractions. Students have a difficult enough task responding to the questions; they should not have to wrestle with the meaning of your words. Also, write questions about which you are genuinely puzzled and for which there is no ready-made answer. As we have noted, discussion works best when the questions that are asked provoke many legitimate responses. Finally, show students that you expect them to back up their responses to the questions by referring to concrete examples from the text or their experience. The more specific and precise they can be in their use of these examples, the better.

## STRATEGIES FOR REPORTING TO THE LARGE GROUP

It is standard procedure to have small groups report the substance of their conversations to the large group. How this is done can make the difference between students' feeling that they are just going through their paces and the sense that they are engaged in a powerful exchange of ideas. Typically, teachers approach the task of reporting to the whole class in a number of ways. The most straightforward is to invite each group to summarize the themes explored in response to the question assigned. Although admirably thorough, this can also be drawn out and repetitive. A variation is to call on each small group to share the one or two insights group members found most surprising or illuminating. A different version of this procedure is to ask each small group to address to the

whole class a particularly challenging question that emerged from group discussion. On other occasions, small groups can offer the key themes or concepts that seemed to recur throughout their conversation. These can spark strong reactions from others, stimulating new lines of inquiry.

### NEWSPRINT DIALOGUE

One way to avoid the more ponderous aspects of reporting is to suggest that small groups summarize their conversations on large sheets of newsprint or the chalkboard. Individual members of the class are then free to wander about the room reading all the responses and comparing them to those of their own groups. Here are the instructions we give to our students:

In this activity, you will be working in small groups most of the time. I have prepared some questions for you to consider in these groups, but don't follow them too slavishly. Use them as a jumping-off point for ideas you find especially worth exploring. You will have thirty minutes to discuss these questions in your groups and to write your answers to these on the newsprint provided. You should appoint someone to be recorder, but don't start writing immediately. Take some time to let your responses emerge from the discussion. Covering all the questions is not important, but you should begin to jot some ideas down on the newsprint within fifteen or twenty minutes of starting. When the thirty minutes are up, post your newsprint sheets around the classroom and tour the answers recorded by other groups. Look especially for common themes that stand out on the sheets and for possible contradictions that arise within or between groups' responses. If possible, write your responses to others' comments on the same sheet of newsprint containing the point you're addressing. Finally, note any questions that were raised for you during the discussion on the separate sheets of newsprint specially provided for this. We will bring the activity to a close with a short debriefing in the large group.

Attractions of this activity are that it provides a different approach to reporting by taking people out of groups for a while and letting them act as relatively autonomous free agents. It also reminds people that dialogue can work as a written as well as spoken exchange. On the downside, written exchanges lack the spontaneity and excitement of group talk. And in the limited space and

time allotted, it is frequently difficult for students to provide full explanations of the words and phrases on the newsprint. Still, this is an interesting alternative way to keep the conversation going.

### ROTATING SMALL GROUP STATIONS

Another way to avoid the usual format of reporting through a series of summaries is to place each small group at a station where members have ten minutes to discuss a provocative issue and record their ideas on newsprint or a chalkboard. When time is up, the groups move to new positions in the classroom, where they continue their discussions, treating the comments written on the newsprint or chalkboard by the preceding group at the station as a new voice in the mix. Rotations continue every ten minutes until each group has been at all of the positions and has had a chance to consider all of the other groups' comments. Here are the instructions we give to students for this exercise:

We're going to do another small group activity, but this time you won't be staying in one place for long. Each of you should join a group of about five participants at one of the stations that has been established around the classroom. Together you will have the responsibility of answering some questions by making comments on the newsprint directly in front of your group. You will have ten minutes to do this. When the time is up, move with your group to the next station, where you will continue your conversation by responding to the comments left behind by the group that has just vacated that station. You have ten minutes to record the main points of your discussion at this station. When that time is up, move on to the next station, where you will now have the comments of two other groups to consider.

Again take ten minutes to respond, and move on when the time is up. When every group has occupied each station, leaving remarks behind at all of them, break out of your groups and read all of the newsprint comments. Add questions, comments, or criticisms to these sheets whenever you are inspired to do so. Remember that each station will include comments from all groups, making orderliness a challenge. Write as small and as legibly as you can, please!

In addition to fostering healthy confusion, rotating stations encourages students to examine critically ideas that originate outside their group. The safety and intimacy of small groups is

retained while incorporating the diversity of viewpoints experienced in whole-class discussion. Momentum and excitement tend to grow as groups rotate from one station to another, and participants enjoy a sense of exhilaration and connectedness unusual in small group activities. People feel they have heard and responded to many voices in the classroom in a way that is less threatening than in large group exchanges. On the debit side, the ten-minute period for each rotation is not particularly conducive to deep discussion. But longer periods of fifty to sixty minutes, we have found, are impractical. Using fewer groups with a greater number of members is one option for getting around this, but the larger group size makes it harder for shy, diffident, or introverted members to contribute.

### SNOWBALLING

One way to make a discussion developmental and increasingly inclusive is to use a process called "snowballing" or "pyramiding" (Jacques, 1992). Students begin this activity by responding to questions or issues as individuals. They then create progressively larger conversation groups by doubling the size of these groups every few minutes until the large group has been re-formed. Here are the instructions students follow:

We are going to try something a little different today. It's called "snowballing," and it gives you a chance to think and talk about issues in a variety of configurations. Notice that there are some questions at the bottom of this sheet. Begin this activity by gathering your thoughts on these questions in private reflection. Jot down some of these reflections if you wish. After five minutes of solitary thought, you will begin a dialogue on the questions with one other person. After another five minutes, you and your partner should join another pair to form a group of four. You will continue the discussion for ten minutes and then merge with another foursome to create a group of eight. The discussion proceeds for twenty minutes this time, after which two groups merge again, and the process continues in twenty-minute intervals until the whole class has been brought together at the end of the session. The discussion can end when the class is reunited, or continue for a final twenty minutes (or however much time is available).

On the one hand, this exercise gets a lot of people talking to each other while retaining much of the value of small groups. It

also contributes a festive quality to the class. People mill about excitedly and greet each other warmly as they meet in new configurations. On the other hand, snowballing can sometimes have a frenetic, disjointed feel. But sometimes the regular change of group membership is just the thing needed to shake students up a little.

### COCKTAIL PARTY

A variation on snowballing is the cocktail party. In this exercise, the teacher brings in and serves hors d'oeuvres and nonalcoholic drinks. The ground rules couldn't be simpler. To create the right mood, the teacher serves students from a tray carried around the room, frequently replenishing it with more food and drink. Just as at a party, students munch and drink as they mingle with as many of their peers as they can. The only expectation is that in chatting with different people, students find interesting and engaging ways to explore an issue. Like snowballing, this exercise encourages a festive atmosphere while offering a relaxed setting for conversation. Strange and sometimes wonderful things happen in unique settings such as these. Although we don't promise miracles, we do recommend an occasional activity such as this to cultivate the unexpected and the spontaneous.

### JIGSAW

Still another way to retain the advantages of small groups but to infuse them with more diverse perspectives is to use the cooperative grouping technique called "jigsaw" (Aronson, 1978; Slavin, 1990). Teachers and students begin by generating a short list of topics they would like to study. Each student becomes an "expert" on one of those topics, first individually and then in discussion with other experts. Later these student experts become responsible again, through dialogue, for helping nonexperts to become as knowledgeable as they are. The sequence of steps that one would use in implementing this process is as follows:

1. A class of twenty-five students chooses five topics they would like to know more about (the number of topics chosen should be roughly equal to the square root of the number of students in

- the class—four in a class of sixteen, five in a class of twenty-five, six in a class of thirty-six).
2. Each student selects one topic in which to become an expert (with the teacher checking that the topics are reasonably distributed among the students) and studies that topic to develop the required level of expertise before the class meets.
  3. In class, students who have selected the same topic gather in a small group to raise questions, explore understandings and misunderstandings, and discuss what they have learned.
  4. When students have finished pooling the insights they gained in the course of becoming experts, new small groups are formed that include at least one expert representative for each of the original topics.
  5. Each student expert takes a turn leading the groups in a discussion of his or her particular area of expertise.
  6. These small groups end when all members of the group express satisfaction with their knowledge and understanding of all of the topics covered. The exercise may end there or be extended to having the whole class sum up the discussions on all the topics.

The following is an example of the jigsaw technique as applied to a graduate-level course one of us taught called "Leadership and Biography":

For today's class I am going to hand out six biographies for you to read. Since there are thirty-six students in the class, each bio will be read by six students. You should read your chosen biography carefully so that you are knowledgeable enough about this person's life to be designated an "expert" on this person for the purposes of our discussion. When we return to class, you will meet in a small group with the other people who have chosen the same biography—thus everyone reading about Susan B. Anthony will meet together, everyone reading about Frederick Douglass will form a group, and so on. In these groups you will touch on as many different aspects of the person's life as possible, focusing on key accomplishments, missed opportunities, character flaws, personal history, and unanswered questions.

Once all the members of each group have mastered their chosen subject, we will form a second set of small groups, containing one representative from each of the expert groups. Thus each group will include one person who read about Anthony, one who read about Douglass, and so on. These second discussions

allow each expert to share perspectives from the expert group and to lead the rest of the new group in a discussion of the chosen person's life. These discussions should not come to a conclusion until each expert has had a chance to lead the group in discussion and everyone is reasonably familiar with each life discussed. The activity will end with debriefing as a class.

In this activity, students benefit from having extended discussion with twice the usual number of students. The jigsaw gives even the most reticent students reason to speak up, thereby bolstering their confidence. Both sets of discussions are rich, but in different ways. In the initial expert conversations, everyone is on roughly equal ground. They have a common focus and a lot to share with one another. In the second round of discussions, everyone has a basis for contributing substantively, and everyone is obligated to participate. Each person has a chance to be in the spotlight for part of the discussion. The chief drawback to the jigsaw is that the amount of information to absorb in the second round of discussion can be overwhelming.

## SUSTAINING DISCUSSION BY ASSUMING DIFFERENT ROLES

Sometimes students renew their enthusiasm for discussion when they are invited to assume a variety of roles. Experimenting with different ways of participating broadens their perspectives and stimulates them to engage one another in novel ways. Doing this may put learners in uncomfortable situations. Sometimes they have to deal with their classmates in a more confrontational manner than they would wish. This can be productive, but it can also be unsettling. So it's important that the guidelines for assuming different discussion roles be clear without being constraining and that the activity be justified because of its effectiveness in casting new light on difficult or troubling issues.

## CRITICAL DEBATE

In critical debate, learners are asked to explore an idea or to take a position that they find unfamiliar, unsympathetic, even objectionable. They do this as members of a debate team, rather than

in a full role play. This makes the exercise more palatable to those who, for whatever reason, are so opposed to the view they are being asked to explore that it is difficult for them to participate. Here's how critical debate works:

1. Find a contentious issue on which opinion is divided among participants. Frame the issue as a debate motion.
2. Propose the motion to participants. Ask people to volunteer by a show of hands to work on a team that is preparing arguments to support the motion or one that is preparing arguments to oppose it.
3. Announce that everyone will be assigned to the team opposite the one volunteered for.
4. Conduct the debate. Each team chooses one person to present its arguments. After initial presentations, the teams reconvene to draft rebuttal arguments. A different person presents these.
5. Debrief the debate. Discuss with participants their experience of this exercise. Focus on how it felt to argue against positions you were committed to. What new ways of thinking about the issue were opened up? Did participants come to new understandings? Did they change their positions on this issue at all?
6. Ask participants to write a follow-up reflection paper on the debate. Students should address the following questions:  
 What assumptions about the issue were clarified or confirmed for you by the debate?  
 Which of these assumptions surprised you during the debate? Were you made aware of assumptions that you didn't know you held?  
 How could you check out these new assumptions?  
 What sources of evidence would you consult?  
 What new perspectives on the issue suggested themselves to you?  
 In what ways, if any, were your existing assumptions challenged or changed by the debate?

Critical debate asks students to make the strongest possible case for a position that is diametrically opposed to their own. It's the kind of exercise that may help them strengthen their own argument by anticipating the claims of opponents, or it may cause them

to look at the issue in a new light, bringing about a shift in their point of view. Most important, it is a highly structured and provocative process for reinvigorating discussions that may have lost some of their verve. The biggest disadvantage is that it's not always possible to identify an issue over which there is sufficient contention to split the class roughly in half. Also, this is the kind of exercise that cannot be used unless the trust level is high. Therefore, it should not be tried until the students know each other fairly well and trust the teacher to deal with them fairly. Under the right conditions, though, taking a position that is at least somewhat at odds with one's actual view builds tolerance of other views and gives everyone practice in concisely articulating an argument.

### SPECIFIC TYPES OF CONVERSATIONAL ROLES

As we have noted, a few individuals sometimes dominate discussion, leaving other students bored and disinclined to talk. One way to deal with this problem, and to introduce some variety to the class, is to assign specific conversational roles. These may help certain students speak more often and get other participants to hone their listening skills and restrict their opportunities to talk.

Practice in playing different conversational roles helps students see that expressing a point of view is only one way to contribute to a discussion. It also helps create opportunities for the more tentative students to speak, thereby building their confidence. Because it's unfair always to give talkative students roles that require them to say little, any roles assigned must be alternated so that everyone gets a chance to play most of them. We have found the following designations to be particularly helpful:

*Problem, dilemma, or theme poser.* This participant has the task of introducing the topic of conversation, drawing on personal ideas and experiences as a way of helping others into conversation about the theme.

*Reflective analyst.* This member keeps a record of the conversation's development, giving every twenty minutes or so a summary that focuses on shared concerns, issues the group is skirting, and emerging common themes.



*Scrounger:* The scrounger listens for helpful resources, suggestions, and tips that participants have voiced as they discuss how to work through a problem or situation and keeps a record of these ideas that is read out before the session ends.

*Devil's advocate:* This person listens carefully for any emerging consensus and then formulates and expresses a contrary view. This keeps groupthink in check and helps participants explore a range of alternative interpretations.

*Detective:* The detective listens attentively for unacknowledged, unchecked, and unchallenged biases related to culture, race, class, or gender that emerge in the conversation and brings them to the group's attention.

*Theme spotter:* This participant identifies themes that arise during the discussion that are left unexplored and that might form a focus for the next session.

*Umpire:* This person listens for judgmental comments that may be offensive, insulting, and demeaning and that contradict ground rules for respectful conversation generated by group members.

We maintain that an important benefit of assigning roles for participants is their realizing how varied participation in a discussion can be. Although some students at one time or another may have assumed the roles of theme poser or devil's advocate in a discussion, most of these roles are probably quite unfamiliar to them. Playing them reveals surprising perspectives on the different ways people contribute to group talk.

The greatest challenge in an activity like this is for everyone to stay alert. To perform these roles, students need to pay attention to everything that is said, which, of course, is excellent practice for subsequently participating in lively and productive exchanges. It is also difficult to observe the constraints imposed by many of these roles. But doing this helps students live and learn the dispositions of mindfulness and humility.

#### CRITICAL CONVERSATION PROTOCOL

We have argued that good discussion must contain a critical element. Students must be willing to question assumptions, to subject their views to a continuing round of analysis and critique, to insist

on strong evidence to support claims, and to be as clear as possible. But engaging in critical discussion involves risks. Criticisms intended to be helpful can be perceived as sharp-edged, hostile, and demeaning. When this happens, conversation falters, and quick action is needed to get people talking to each other again.

One way to do this is to provide a structure for critical conversation in which students have the safety of playing one of three clearly defined roles. These roles are (1) the storyteller, the person who becomes the focus of critical conversation by presenting an incident from personal experience or a perspective on an important issue or idea; (2) the detectives, the people who critique that presentation by hunting for unacknowledged or unquestioned assumptions; and (3) the umpire, the person who monitors the conversation to make sure that participants talk to each other in a respectful and nonjudgmental manner. Here is the sequence of steps to follow when using this three-role structure:

1. The storyteller begins by relating her interpretation of an experience or developing an argument that reflects her position on an important issue or idea. She speaks without interruptions of any kind.
2. While the storyteller speaks, the detectives listen very attentively. Their task is to identify the assumptions underlying the storyteller's remarks. What do the storyteller's biases appear to be? What assumptions seem to be conscious and acknowledged? What assumptions seem to be implicit? The detectives also consider alternative interpretations that could be given for the same facts and circumstances.
3. When the storyteller is finished speaking, the detectives may ask descriptive, nonjudgmental questions to get additional information about the storyteller's ideas. This helps them propose alternative interpretations to the storyteller and uncover her unquestioned assumptions. The storyteller gives all the information detectives ask for, provided that it is requested in a nonjudgmental way. The storyteller may also ask detectives why they are asking particular questions. No more than one question at a time may be asked of the storyteller. Detectives should not preface their questions with interrogatory remarks or a tone of disbelief (for example, "Do you seriously mean to say that . . . ?" would be unacceptable).

4. The umpire may intervene at any time to warn the detectives that their tone is judgmental or that they are violating any of the basic dispositions of good discussion.
5. The detectives then report to the storyteller the assumptions they believe are embedded in her interpretations or ideas. These are stated in a descriptive, nonjudgmental way. They are suggested tentatively, with no implication that they are right or wrong (for example, "Could it be that one assumption you were making was that . . ." or "One possible assumption I heard in your story was that . . .").
6. The detectives provide alternative interpretations of the storyteller's views. These could be readings that explain the experience in a different way or perspectives that throw a new light on the ideas expressed. In presenting these different viewpoints, the detectives must provide evidence or arguments substantiating their view. Again, they give these suggestions and opinions in a nonjudgmental, tentative, and descriptive manner (for example, "One different way of explaining what happened might be to see things from the following point of view" or "If you look at things from this perspective, you might conclude that . . .").
7. The storyteller gets a chance to comment on the detectives' alternative interpretations and to ask how they arrived at their positions. The storyteller is never expected to agree with the detectives' views.
8. Participants step out of role to do an audit of what was learned. They discuss the insights they gained from the conversation, the new assumptions and interpretations that have suggested themselves, how they might behave in similar future situations, how their ideas have broadened or modified, and so on. The umpire then sums up how well participants were able to give respectful, nonjudgmental, and descriptive feedback.

This is an elaborate and complex process for keeping a conversation going. It requires that participants, especially the detectives, think critically and creatively, but it calls on everyone to listen to all exchanges with great intensity. If the storyteller's viewpoint or experiences are too limited or unconvictional or if the detectives are ineffective assumption hunters, this process won't get very far.

We usually introduce this exercise as a whole-group role play, with the teacher playing simultaneously the roles of storyteller and umpire. This lets us point out to students when they are asking questions, hunting assumptions, or giving alternative interpretations in a judgmental way. When it works, this three-role protocol helps people think critically by seeing that much of what they claim as truth is built on unchallenged or even false assumptions. It also discloses biases and prejudices that keep people from communicating despite their differences.

### STAND WHERE YOU STAND

"Stand where you stand" came to our attention through Joan Naake (1996), an English professor at Montgomery College in Germantown, Maryland. It is another highly structured activity that encourages students to think critically, argue persuasively, and listen carefully to their opponents' points of view. It gives students practice in developing well-supported arguments, but it also challenges them to listen closely for the strengths of opposing views. A unique benefit is that it gets people to move around the room—literally to experience physically where they stand on a particular issue. Here's how the exercise works:

1. While studying a controversial issue, students read four essays as a homework assignment. Two of these support a particular idea or viewpoint, and two oppose it.
2. When the students gather in class, the teacher shares with them a claim that reflects one side or the other in these essays—for example, "Formal education is a waste of time and resources in nonindustrialized societies."
3. Students individually decide whether they agree or disagree with this claim and spend ten minutes writing down their position and their rationale for it, citing arguments, evidence, and quotes from the essays provided.
4. The teacher displays four large signs around the room, reading STRONGLY AGREE, AGREE, DISAGREE, and STRONGLY DISAGREE.
5. When they have finished writing down their views, students then stand in front of the sign that most closely reflects their position on the claim.

6. Students at each station take turns orally presenting arguments that support and justify the stance they have taken.
7. Students are then invited to move to another sign if the arguments they hear from peers at that sign persuaded them that a different view is more accurate or defensible.
8. Students end the exercise by spending fifteen minutes discussing as a whole group how the activity altered their perspectives on the issue.

This exercise adds spice and variety to classroom discussion. It reinforces the importance of developing and articulating well-substantiated arguments, it motivates discussants to be as persuasive as possible, it encourages everyone to listen carefully to different arguments, and it helps students view each other as potential teachers. However, this exercise may bring about little or no change in the opinions of the participants, which makes it somewhat risky. While it sometimes helps students appreciate how complex most arguments are, it can also have the opposite effect of requiring students to take an artificial stand from four oversimplified possibilities, none of which truly captures their views. Of course, during the debriefing, students often point out the problem of being asked to choose an oversimplified view. This can then lead into a discussion of the difficulties of stating unequivocal positions or making strong arguments when you know the complexities of an issue. Students start to say, for example, that politicians who declare simple positions on issues or propose simple solutions to complex problems must be ignoring information inconvenient for their position or distorting the evidence that does exist.

## INTRODUCING VERVE INTO DISCUSSION

In general, the more diversity a group of students exhibits, the more inadvisable it is to rely heavily on any one instructional method or strategy. Students from some cultures are reluctant to speak up in a large group or to have their words become the focus of everyone else's attention. Others find that their interest wanders when the same procedures are used repeatedly or when there are no visual or kinesthetic modes that allow them to move around the room. Still others are turned off by discussion that is merely an

exercise in cognitive deliberation or critical thinking with no affective or expressive functions. If we want to get people to talk to one another irrespective of their differences, classrooms need to be structured to accommodate many different learning styles and many different modes of expression. Intimate dialogical pairs or triads should be alternated with larger discussion formats. At other times the chance to perform, to emote, even to elicit laughter should be given an important place. Classrooms may be primarily places for learning, but they can become as well places for living in all of its human richness and multiplicity.

This whole book is informed by the ideas that varying the pace of the class and using a multiplicity of methods are important keys to successful discussion. However, teachers must be particularly aware of two extremes when working with diverse groups of students. On the one hand, there is growing evidence that for some groups, "verve" is an especially significant concept, reflecting an important set of behaviors (Hale, 1994; Viadero, 1996). In essence, verve emphasizes movement, emotion, and performance. It indicates that discussion shouldn't be restricted to sitting in a circle and just talking but should embrace activities that encourage movement, intense feeling, and a certain amount of theatricality.

On the other hand, people in some cultures are extremely uncomfortable speaking before a large group and are reluctant to be the subject of their classmates' gaze (Swisher and Deyhle, 1992; Parsley and others, 1993). This doesn't mean, incidentally, that people from these cultures do not like to converse with others; they may in fact get great satisfaction out of discussion (Delpit, 1995). What it does mean, however, is that for these students, whole-class discussions are often not conducive to sharing ideas. Consequently, alternative formats must be found to give them opportunities to find their voice and express their views. This section explores two processes for incorporating verve into discussion.

## DRAMATIZING DISCUSSION

Dramatizing discussion invites students to report their conversations through some sort of theatrical offering. Groups of six or seven students are asked to discuss a particularly provocative reading they have been assigned. An example might be one that uses

narrative or drama to explore racial issues such as Derrick Bell's *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (1985). The students discuss this reading for at least half an hour to identify important ideas and salient themes. Group members then have an additional hour to depict these ideas and themes through some sort of imaginative presentation. This could be a short comedic skit, a mock radio program, a song, a poem, even a short story that is acted out in pantomime. The challenge is to dramatize the themes uncovered in a playful and humorous way while remaining true to their underlying importance or seriousness. For this activity, we recommend six or seven students per small group, a larger number than usual. The rationale is that because this activity is risky and exposes students in unusual ways, larger groups are more likely to contain the exhibitionist core needed to help reluctant performers shed their inhibitions. After each presentation, the class as a whole reconvenes to discuss it.

As with so many of the activities we propose, the advantages and disadvantages of dramatizing discussions are sometimes different sides of the same coin. On the one hand, this exercise allows students to put aside the sedate manners and studied civility of most discussion, revealing their wild, raucous, and unrestrained sides. On the other hand, it may encourage students to do slightly crazy things for the sake of theatricality, yielding no educational benefit. This activity is also a big investment of time, taking a good two and one-half hours, with no guarantee of success. It may skirt the ideas and simply end up giving students license to let off some steam. However, sometimes a lot of good comes from letting off steam. It can create more of a sense of community in the classroom, reveal new sides of discussion participants, and allow the more dramatically inclined to contribute in important new ways.

When it works well, this exercise allows students to understand the material from a new perspective (for example, one that relies entirely on metaphor) that can be very revealing to everyone. Perhaps most important, it gives students who display verve, who love movement and emotion and drama, a chance to experience discussion in a way that is particularly well suited to their learning style. Furthermore, this activity can be a good way to put the spotlight on contentious issues such as race and racism without making participants feel accountable for the roles they assume or the words they use.

## DRAWING DISCUSSION

Certain individuals and cultures (particularly Native American, Aboriginal, and First Nation cultures) tend to prefer interaction that does not rely too heavily on dialogue. They may discourage unnecessary verbal exchange and favor communication that emphasizes silence, emotion, body language, and behavior. The point is not that they do not value talk; it is rather that they appreciate the potency of words being used sparingly (Parsley and others, 1993; Swisher and Deyhle, 1992). In such cultures, actions speak loudly.

Since behavior and body language carry much of the burden of communication in these cultures, an alternative activity might involve kinesthetic and spatial abilities rather than verbal skills. Instead of dramatizing discussion, groups can come together to draw it. Instead of concluding a small group conversation with some sort of report, the group depicts the themes it wants to convey through some sort of visual representation. Here's how the process goes.

1. Groups of six or seven are formed.
2. Students are invited to identify three or four of the most important themes or ideas from a previously assigned reading. They have about thirty minutes to do this.
3. Once the themes or ideas are noted, groups have another hour to put together some sort of visual representation that communicates at least some of these ideas.
4. They are supplied with large sheets of newsprint to draw on and plenty of colored markers, pens, rulers, scissors, and tape to help them create fairly traditional two-dimensional drawings. They also receive magazine photographs, cloth scraps, and other textured materials for creating a mixed-media collage if they so desire.
5. Students are encouraged to be creative and playful while maintaining an underlying seriousness about the ideas they want to communicate. They are told that much of their time will be spent quietly sketching, drawing, and coloring their creation and that much of their interaction will be nonverbal. The teacher stresses that this is desirable because the intent is for people to work in a group where communication doesn't depend on words.

6. When all of the groups have completed their task, each group displays its work somewhere in the room for all to observe at their leisure. Keep discussion to a minimum; let the visual representations do most of the communicating.

Like dramatizing discussion, this activity requires a big investment of time with no guarantee of good results. Still, it has the special attraction of relying on skills that are very different from those that students are accustomed to using in academic classrooms. The exercise puts a premium on the sparing use of words and the productive use of nonverbal communication. It counteracts the freneticism of many discussions and underscores that there are many underused but powerful ways to convey ideas. It also gives more visual and less verbal learners a chance to contribute. As with drama, visual representations can be a way to convey ideas about contentious issues that cannot be communicated through speech.

#### E-MAIL DISCUSSION

A very different kind of process can be used to stimulate out-of-class discussion on topics that students may be reluctant to explore through direct speech. The electronic mail bulletin board procedure called NOTES allows participants to create a common yet private electronic space for sharing information. Students and teachers can raise issues and questions on this bulletin board that they were not able to address in class or that they would like to revisit because new perspectives have suggested themselves in the interim.

E-mail allows time for reflection and is a less anxious experience for many introverted or intimidated students. It also democratizes discussion. In cyberspace, everyone has the same opportunity to participate, no contribution can be made more loudly than any other, and no comment is privileged by the modulation or accent of the speaker's voice. Students who take more time to frame their contributions are not shut out of the dialogue by the speed of conversation. Quieter, more diffident students whose voices are lost in the hurly-burly of live conversation can be heard in an e-mail discussion. And because we have few or no clues as to the ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or sex of the

writer, we are less likely to jump to interpretations of their words that are colored by stereotypes.

E-mail, of course, lacks the immediacy and spontaneity of face-to-face discussion; it can never replace conventional dialogue. But it can enhance and enrich the discussion that occurs in the classroom.

In one approach, the teacher explains to students that for each week that the class meets, they are required to use the e-mail NOTES bulletin board to make some sort of contribution to class discussion. The contribution could be a question that reflects genuine puzzlement or uncertainty about some material covered in class. It could be a paragraph summarizing what students consider the most important issues or ideas covered in the previous week's class. Or it could be a response to a comment made by the teacher or another student.

As the term proceeds, students must play the role of both initiator and respondent. If they tend to initiate questions or comments, they must on at least two occasions respond to other people's comments or questions. If they tend to respond to questions or comments, they must on at least two occasions raise a question or initiate a comment.

#### CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown that grouping students in clever ways can rejuvenate discussion and create settings and arrangements that give even the most hesitant participant a chance to be heard. We have stressed that students sometimes need the structure of assigned roles to help them attend more closely to their peers' contributions and to invite participation. There are no guarantees in discussion, but implementing processes like the ones described in this chapter should greatly improve your chances of keeping the discussion going.