EVERYBODY TALKS:
DISCUSSION STRATEGIES IN THE CLASSROOM

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The year is 800 CE. A group of early Muslims meets in one part of the room. Their task is at once simple and complex. They must convince a group of pagans to convert to Islam. At the opposite side of the room, a group of early Christians is also meeting, hoping to convert the same group of pagans to Christianity. In the center sit the pagans themselves, who have decided firmly that they will abandon their worship of natural deities in favor of one of the great religions of the book. They huddle together, predicting the arguments of their proselytizers and planning challenging questions. After ten minutes or so of planning strategy, the three groups are split into groups of only three individuals. Each smaller group includes one Muslim, one Christian, and one Pagan. They go to work. Christian and Muslim argue and cajole, trying to convert the pagan in the group. The pagan listens to them argue, breaking in to note errors and ask questions. Five minutes before the debate is to end, the instructor interrupts this wonderful cacophony of voices to force the pagans to indicate which way they are leaning. Some are decided, others doubtful. Seeing which way their pagans are leaning, Muslims and Christians wail at potential losses of souls or smile in triumph at their potential victory. Given five more minutes, the losers try desperately to bring their wayward sheep back to the fold. Finally, the instructor calls a halt. The former pagans must now stand in the front of the room, dividing into two groups. Those who have converted to Christianity stand on one side beneath a large cross drawn on the board while those who have become Muslims stand on the other side beneath a crescent moon, and one by one, they explain why they have converted. They are bound by the rules of the discussion to choose a new faith based *only* on the arguments they have heard and *not* on any pre-existing beliefs they might have had. The instructor especially challenges the "new" Christians to defend themselves against the charge of prior bias. Some sheepishly admit it, others do not, and a discussion ensues across the whole class about which arguments were valid and which were not. The class having ended, students leave the room, some of them still muttering that if they'd only had *three* more minutes, they would have won!

What has taken place is simply a very active form of debate. Many teachers have used debates for years in classes, structuring them in a variety of ways to engender the kind of thinking about historical issues for which we all strive. Yet a simple debate suffers generally from one weakness. It seldom involves all students actively. This is one of the chief complaints that we often hear from colleagues in many schools at many levels about whether or not to use discussions in classes. A key question for us all is how to involve *more* students in discussion and keep a few stars from dominating it. The "two-on-one game" outlined above is one of several strategies I use for involving virtually *all* students in a discussion.

The use of some type of active discussion seems hardly to need much in the way of defense. Simply put, if a question is worth asking to students in class, it is presumably worth discussing. If it is worth discussing, it is worth having students discuss it with each other. If one is to keep a few students from dominating a discussion, then one must break them into smaller groups, since quieter students *will* hide if they *can* hide, and hiding is always easier in a whole-class discussion format than it is in smaller groups. While it may be true that students gain something from passively observing an exchange of ideas between or among their more extroverted colleagues, students who take an active part in that exchange are far more likely to have thought about the issue and internalized it. Since speaking with confidence in groups is a skill that educated people ought to have, and since discussion can deepen student understanding of historical issues and problems, it seems only a matter of finding a discussion format that will work.

The Two-on-One Discussion

It is useful to begin with the two-on-one discussion format outlined above. For this method to succeed certain preconditions must be met. First, of course, students must have some basis for making their arguments. Prior to this particular discussion, for example, I have already lectured on early Christianity and early Islam. To reinforce and supplement that information, students have read brief selections on reserve in the library on both religions and must bring to class with them one-page abstracts of each reading in which they summarize each piece in their own words. To make sure they understand that discussion is an important component of the course, 20% of the course grade is assigned to it, and they receive a grade for each individual discussion: an "F" if they do not come (since it is difficult to take part in discussion when one is not there), an "F" if they come without the writing assignment proving they read the material (since it is difficult to take part in discussion if one is ignorant of the material), a "C" if they come and say absolutely nothing, and an "A" if they come and take part actively in the discussion. One "F" is forgiven at the end of the term to account for excused absences and extra credit accrues to those who do not miss one. In a format like the two-on-one, where almost everyone talks, most get "A's." "C's" are rare, and are offered as an option at the beginning of the term only to assure usually quiet students not accustomed to an active discussion format that they will get *some* credit if, as usual, they do the work but take no part in discussion. One of the great advantages of the two-on-one and the other methods I use is that it is very difficult for students *not* to take an active part in discussion.

The two-on-one begins immediately upon arrival, when students are divided into the three groups. This division can be made randomly. That is, one can simply count them off by threes and place ones, twos, and threes in various parts of the room, assigning a role to each group. Where the class is not divisible by three, obviously one

or more groups will be larger. In that case, when the time comes to split them into their smaller "argument" groups, one can have a group of four where there are two neutrals to be converted rather than one, or a group of five where there are two partisans from each partisan group trying to convert one stubborn neutral. Clever instructors will quickly begin to figure out how to organize certain students into certain groups depending on the issue to be discussed and the difficulty of a particular position. In the case of the Christian/Muslim/Pagan game, I often try to place some of the better arguers in the Muslim group, since student biases tend to discriminate against that group. I try to be subtle about this, however, since I do not want students to think I am picking "favorites." When the time comes to divide them into the groups of three, one can once again simply number them off. Let us assume there are 45 students in the room. Fifteen gather in each of the three groups. Since fifteen is rather large, I may split each into two sub-groups. Thus, there will be two sets of Christians, rather than one, who will discuss among themselves for a while, then come together into a single group to share strategies. Once we are ready for the "split," I might simply number each group off, 1 to 15. There are "1's" from each of the three groups, "2's," "3's" and so on, and the fifteen little groups of three are simply assigned to desk clusters at various parts of the room. In a smaller class, an instructor might know students well enough to personalize the smaller groups in challenging ways, placing students together so as to harness their personalities in the discussion. Once the debate begins, students generally get into it quickly. The two-on-one game has the great advantage of harnessing the natural competitiveness of students.

This particular method does have its weaknesses. In the conversion game already outlined, students sometimes get things wrong. Usually, but not always, their opponent will spot the mistake and take them to task for it. It is important for the instructor to circulate around the room listening to the arguments, so that she or he can later bring up a point of interest or error. Of course, the instructor should resist the temptation to point out errors immediately, since that can unfairly disadvantage one of the participants. Errors come in many forms. In this particular game, students sometimes insist on "selling sins." Muslims try to convert pagan males by promising the delights of polygamy, while Christians tempt them with wine. I usually make it explicit prior to the exercise that they are not to do that. If they do, then we can return to it and discuss it in the debriefing that ends the discussion. It is always important to have a few minutes at the end to bring up errors or points of interest that one heard while circulating around the room.

The two-on-one can work in any class on any issue over which one can formulate two opposing points of view, that is, on any issue where a debate would be useful. I have used it in many different college classes at both the lower and upper division. In one class, I create an imaginary country whose noble landowners have decided to choose a type of government. Students read selections from John Locke and Jacques Bossuet arguing respectively for a representative parliament or an absolute

monarchy. Partisans of Locke battle partisans of Bossuet in trying to convince the nobles to choose their particular form of government. More recently, I organized a two-on-one in a Russian history course over the issue of whether to emancipate the serfs. One could easily use this method in an American history course to debate issues as wide-ranging as the split between North and South over slavery, the question of American neutrality in the 1930s, or contemporary debates over the Vietnam War.

Students both love and hate the format. They love it because they know they will have a good time, but they dread it because they know they will have to work hard, and because they know that some of them will lose. In other words, to the extent they do not like it, they do not like it for all the right reasons. One student wrote on a recent course evaluation, "By arguing a side, I understand the material better." Objective achieved!

The Group Consensus Discussion

The most obvious weakness of the two-on-one is that it only works well when there are two opposing points of view. In historical issues and problems, of course, such a dichotomous approach is not always useful. Some issues demand a different and far simpler approach. Let us suppose that students have read the United States Constitution. The instructor has several discussable questions on the document. The old method would be to stand in front of the class and ask away, hoping for a response from some brave student prepared to risk embarrassment on an answer that might be perceived as weak. With luck, a few students might respond, and there might even be some exchange of ideas. Most students in a larger class would, however, hide in the cowardice of silence. Here, we return to the argument that a question worth asking is worth discussing, and that begging or forcing a response (the old Socratic method) either will not involve many students or will not elicit a very meaningful response.

Instead of simply asking the question, write it on the board. Have students take out a sheet of paper and spend five minutes jotting down an answer to the question (or questions). Then, form them into groups, preferably no larger than five, have them share their answers and together come up with what they consider to be, say, three of the best answers to each question. Once they are done, groups can report their deliberations in many ways. I have found two methods that work well. One member of each group can walk up to a chalk board and write the group's answers on the board, or the instructor can play secretary, writing down answers from each group on the board while asking for clarifications. In either case, the instructor then takes an active role, noting similarities and differences among answers, asking groups to comment, alter, argue, or clarify. An exchange ensues that is generally far livelier and better informed than it would have been had there been no group work.

Students report that they like this method very much. They all take part, but they also have the security of knowing that there is a group to help them defend their

positions. As one student wrote in another recent course evaluation, "Even though I am a shy person, it made me talk to people I never knew before. It was helpful in a social way and a learning way." Of course, occasionally, individual students refuse to reach a consensus with others in the group. But assuming one has maintained a friendly atmosphere in the classroom, that can add to rather than detract from the discussion.

It is often useful in this type of discussion to require groups to rank their responses in some fashion and to defend their ranking. In one class, my students read Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich.* For the discussion, they must bring with them a position paper, in which they define and rank five separate sources of authority in that book from most to least important. Readers of this article who are familiar with the book know that it concerns a day in the life of a prisoner in one of Stalin's gulags where authority was defined in many ways. For the discussion, I divide students into groups where they must reach a consensus in their ranking of authorities, but I caution them not to confuse authorities with *tools* of authority. This leads to all kinds of interesting discussions. Is food an authority in a gulag? Or is it a tool manipulated by others? What about the cold? Is the squad leader more important as an authority than the camp commander? Forcing them to perform some kind of ranking has the benefit (like all discussions) of making them into historians, since they must make arguments based on evidence. The resulting discussion is always active, and time always seems to run out before we are ready to stop. While a prepared position paper is extremely useful for making this discussion work, it would still be possible to run it "off the cuff" as it were by using the activity outlined above where students take five minutes to jot down some thoughts before breaking into groups. The key is to make sure that students have done some thinking about a question *before* they enter a group so that the group interaction will enhance rather than detract from individual efforts. Will some students still dominate the group? Sometimes they will, but an instructor who attempts this method might be surprised to discover that the same students do not always dominate groups, especially when the groups contain different individuals from discussion to discussion.

The Cascading Answers Discussion

The concept of ranking can be expanded into yet another discussion strategy that I call "cascading answers." This is an effective method for involving many students in answering several questions about a given text. In my survey course, I assign Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*. Since it is the shortest and simplest of Dickens's great social novels, I find that it makes a wonderful text to supplement a unit on the Industrial Revolution. At least one week prior to the discussion, I assign characters from the novel to individual students, who must then write a brief paper for the discussion in which they compose a biography of their character and analyze both the character's relations with other characters in the book and the reason why they think

Dickens put that character in the book. The paper ensures they have read and thought about the book. On discussion day, I divide them into groups, usually randomly. I make sure that the total number of groups is divisible by three. One could, for example, create six groups of five students each in a class of thirty, or nine groups of five in a class of forty-five. Before class, I prepare three different sheets of discussable questions about the book. Each of the three sheets has three questions, making nine questions in all (see Appendix for an example of such a sheet on *Hard Times*). Beneath each of the three questions, there is sufficient space for four separate answers to each question (numbered 1 through 4). I number the three sheets (question sheet 1, 2, and 3) and make as many copies of the sheets as I need, thus two copies of each if there are six groups, three if there are nine, and so forth.

I arrange the student groups in a grand circle so that, when each group has come up with the best answer it can to each question on a sheet, it can hand that sheet off to the next group which must then come up with an equally good, but different, answer to the same questions. For three rounds, groups see a different question sheet each time, but on the fourth round (since there are only three different sheets of questions), the same questions they had the first time come back to them. That means that often, having already answered those questions once, they must now come up with yet another answer to each, and one that is different from those of two other groups. One round generally takes about five minutes, although each subsequent round requires a little more time than the previous one. Some groups will be quicker than others, so it is important that the instructor enforce time deadlines and circulate, checking on the progress of groups and urging them to accomplish their task. Once four answers have been given, I often have the sheets passed one more time, instructing the *fifth* group to study the four answers to each question on that sheet and to circle the one they think is the best answer. I then collect all the sheets and go over them with students who not only are often miffed that *their* answer was not chosen as the best one, but are also anxious to argue the issue.

This method has the benefit of allowing a host of questions to be answered, of helping students to see that there is often more than one good answer to a question, of focusing intense attention on a text, and of encouraging a spirit of interchange of ideas and collaboration. The obvious potential weakness lies in the questions themselves. An instructor must think carefully about those questions. Questions cannot, for example, have simple or dichotomous answers. If one is running this kind of discussion in a class with ample time, as in a 75-minute class, one might have time at the end to have various student groups come up with their own questions. Indeed, having groups generate questions rather than answers can be a clever and useful discussion method.

The Role-Play Simulation

There is one more discussion format I have employed that meets the essential goal of my argument that all students rather than a few should participate actively in all discussions. Role-play simulations can involve all students. More than any other method discussed here, however, they suffer some risks. I will detail three. First, to be carried out successfully, simulations must be given ample class time. I never devote less than three fifty-minute class periods to a simulation, and I seldom take the time to run more than one simulation in a term. Since the time devoted to them is substantial, the topic with which they deal should be an especially important one for the course, one where a deeper student understanding is deemed especially useful in fulfilling course objectives. Second, simulations must be planned carefully and plotted so that students assuming roles have a fair idea both of who their character is and what she or he represents. Third and finally, all roles in the simulation must be available to students of either gender, even if the character itself would certainly have been one or the other. When the class debriefs the simulation at the end, the instructor can point to that gender issue and use it as a teaching tool.

I have run at least seven different simulations in a variety of classes. In one for a course on modern German history, the simulation uses a fictional German city called Rastenheim (inspired by the fictional town in William Sheridan Allen's brilliant book, *The Nazi Seizure of Power*) and simulates the watershed election of 1932 when the Nazis won a plurality of votes for the Reichstag and Hitler was nearly elected president of the Republic. There are generally two types of roles in this simulation as there are in most of those that I run. The first type of role consists of those characters who seek action; the second consists of those who can carry that action through. In this case, those who seek action are representatives of various political parties–Nazis, Communists, and moderate Socialists. Those who can act include a variety of faction leaders–a farm leader, a student leader, union leaders, industrialists, and merchants. Those in the second group have resources such as assigned amounts of money, available groups of thugs for street action, and voting blocks they control. Two of the faction leaders have shady pasts which are made known to various actors in the simulation at crucial points.

I distribute a simulation handout several days before it is to begin, and there are required readings upon which students write abstracts to be rendered each day of the simulation. It is vital to keep a simulation grounded in the literature of the period being simulated. Students are encouraged to choose their own roles in the simulation. Inevitably, there is some competition, but it is important that roles are chosen *before* the first day of the simulation so that students have some time to think about their roles and plot some private strategies.

Required activities for each day of the simulation serve to focus student activities and to move the simulation forward at a measured pace. Of course, improvisation is

always possible, if sometimes hazardous. The last time we "played" the 1932 German election, I improvised by suddenly promising a substantial block of votes to the group that came up with the largest number of good election posters. I arrived the following day to find the classroom plastered from one end to the other with a bewildering array of hammers, sickles, and swastikas, some of them frighteningly realistic! Fearful that colleagues and students who had no idea what we were doing might venture by and see such a sight through the window of the classroom door, I quickly papered it over, and made sure that all the posters were well and truly disposed of once the simulation was ended. (Well, all right, I did keep some of the *better* posters!)

Students who took the German history class from me three terms ago still talk fondly of that simulation, and many regard it as the best learning experience they have *ever* had. Thus, simulations are truly wonderful when they work. Alas, they do not always work that well. Last term, in a course on Latin American history, I attempted running a simulation on the independence of New Spain (Mexico) in a class of thirteen students. The simulation itself was soundly structured, but I began to realize that it was not working as well as I had hoped in such a small class. There just were not enough students for the complex role-play interactions of that simulation to maintain interest and a high level of student activity. Yet, even in a simulation that did not work as well as I had hoped, students learned a great deal. In addition, they had valuable suggestions when we took the usual twenty minutes or so at the end of the simulation and discussed it together. What had they learned? What could we do better? Most important of all, what was realistic and unrealistic about what we did? This debriefing is very important. Not only does it enable the instructor to return to points of interest or error in the simulation, but it also allows participants to make valuable suggestions about how the simulation can be made better the next time it is run.

The threads running through all of these strategies are consistent: All students should take part. The instructor should not talk much save to act as a catalyst. Discussions must be informed by reading and by some writing about that reading. The best way to involve the most students is to divide them into groups and give those groups something specific to do and a specific time period in which to do it. Some degree of competition among groups is helpful and constructive. None of these methods is without weaknesses, and none of them will work perfectly every time. Some students still might hide, though not easily, and they will generally enjoy discussions in which they all take part. They will enjoy history while they learn about it. And we will enjoy it with them.

Appendix

Cascading Answers Questions on Dickens's *Hard Times*

What is the purpose of education in this society and whom does it benefit?

1.

2.

3.

4.

What is the most important problem with society in Dickens's time, according to this novel?

1.

2.

3.

4.

How would Dickens propose to solve that most important problem?

1.

2.

3.

4.