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ACTIVITY AND ASSIGNMENT - Deliberative Dialogue

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ACTIVITY AND ASSIGNMENT

Deliberative Dialogue

TOPIC

Deliberative Dialogue

ACTIVITY TYPES

Reading comprehension, in-class discussion, textual analysis, collaborative learning, reflection

DURATION

Initial set-up: 1–3 classes

Reflection: semester-long

Texts

- Schoem, David et al. 2001. “Intergroup Dialogue: Democracy at Work in Theory and Practice.” In *Intergroup Dialogue: Deliberative Democracy in School, College, Community, and Workplace*, edited by David Schoem and Sylvia Hurtado, 1–21. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Longo, Nicholas and Timothy Shaffer, eds. 2023. “Discussing Democracy: Learning to Talk Together.” In *Creating Space for Democracy: A Primer on Dialogue and Deliberation in Higher Education*, 1–12. London: Routledge.
- Ellinor, Linda and Glenna Gerard. 1998. “What is Dialogue?” In *Dialogue: Rediscover the Transforming Power of Conversation*, 19–27. New York: Wiley.

Overview

This semester-long assignment is designed as a way to incorporate democratic principles directly into the structure of the liberal arts classroom. To this end, it focuses on dialogue as a key feature of democracy and asks students to examine how this specific method of communication can help to productively navigate the differences and conflicts that are at the heart of a vibrant democratic society.

At the start of the semester, students complete several readings that theorize democratic modes of discussion and reflection. From this shared foundation, students explore how the concept of dialogue relates to democracy and use this knowledge to develop a set of guidelines and expectations regarding class discussion. For the rest of the semester, subsequent classroom discussions, both large and small group, are conducted according to these guidelines, with periodic opportunities to revise and fine-tune them. Students are also required to complete frequent postclass reflections on these dialogues (once a week), which encourage students to further consider both the content of the class and the processes by which its material is engaged, as well as provide a means for them to take more direct ownership of the classroom and their learning.

Goals

Through this assignment students will:

- Develop a richer and more complex understanding of what democracy means, how it works, and what it requires.
- Practice a (potentially different) mode of communication that better reflects the principles and needs of democracy.
- Embed these values in their learning and their interactions with their classmates and instructor.
- Reflect upon their needs and their responsibilities as members of the class and as members of a democratic society.
- Learn to assert their needs and respect and respond to the (potentially conflicting) needs of their classmates.
- Practice collaboration, consensus-building, problem-solving, and conflict resolution.

Step I: Deliberative Dialogue and Democracy

TEXTS

- Schoem, David et. al. "Intergroup Dialogue: Democracy at Work in Theory and Practice."
- Longo, Nicholas and Timothy Shaffer. "Discussing Democracy: Learning to Talk Together."
- Ellinor, Linda and Glenna Gerard. "What is Dialogue?"

COMPREHENSION AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- 1a. **Comprehension:** How do Longo and Shaffer describe the current state of dialogue in American colleges and universities? What are the problems that these institutions face? How do they understand the relationship between higher education and democracy?
- 1b. **Reflection:** What has your experience of higher education been like so far? What do you feel like your college experience has focused on so far (training for a specific job, developing transferable job skills, learning life skills, thinking critically, behaving ethically, addressing social problems, etc.)? What do you think the role of higher education should be in a democratic society?
- 2a. **Comprehension:** How do the theorists that you've read define dialogue? What makes it distinct from other forms of conversation (debate, discussion, etc.)?
- 2b. **Reflection:** Which features of dialogue do you think are the most valuable and why? Which do you think are the most challenging to realize and why? Have you had the opportunity to engage in dialogue as these authors define it? What was your experience like?
- 3a. **Comprehension:** How do David Schoem and his coauthors understand democracy? What do they see as the relationship between dialogue and democracy? How does this compare with what Longo and Shaffer think about the relationship between dialogue and democracy?
- 3b. **Reflection:** How do these ideas about democracy compare with how you understand the concept? Are you persuaded by their arguments about the democratic potential of dialogue? Why/Why not?

Step II: Guidelines for Discussion

PART ONE: WHAT MAKES A GOOD CLASS CONVERSATION?

Ask students to freewrite on the following questions to generate ideas for how class conversation should be organized.

- How do you define a “productive” class conversation? What do you think the goals of class conversations should be?
- How do you define class participation? What do “active” and “engaged” mean to you?
- What do you need to do so that you feel comfortable participating in class?
- What do your classmates need to do for you to feel comfortable participating in class?
- What do you need to do so that your classmates feel comfortable participating in class?
- What do you think your instructor should do to best facilitate conversation?
- What makes class conversation feel difficult, unpleasant, or unproductive?
- What expectations do you have for your classmates and your instructor?
- What principles of deliberative dialogue would you most like to see the class adopt?
- What processes/structures do you find useful for organizing class discussion (raising hands, assigning different roles, sitting in a circle, keeping the same small group, etc.)?

PART TWO: CREATING EXPECTATIONS

Instructors should use this free-write to help students collectively develop a series of guidelines for class dialogue.

Based on your freewrite, what shared expectations for dialogue do we have as a class? What goals, ground rules, guidelines, processes and/or roles do we wish to establish to facilitate our conversations this semester?

These guidelines should consider:

- Goals for class discussion.
- Expectations for students when preparing for dialogue.
- Expectations for how students will interact with each other during dialogue.
- Expectations for the instructor and their role during dialogue.
- Expectations for how conflict will be addressed.
- How the dialogue will run (developing questions; managing the flow of conversation; taking notes; identifying moments of conflict/transformation/consensus, etc.; creating summary and/or synthesis documents, etc.).
- How the classroom space will be organized.

Step III: Deliberative Dialogue Weekly Reflection Assignment

The last part of this assignment is a weekly reflection that asks students to more deeply consider the material discussed and their experience of the conversation about it, as well as the connections between their learning and the process of deliberative dialogue.

Thinking back through this week's readings, our class conversations, and our class expectations for deliberative dialogue, please reflect upon the following questions. As you explore these moments, think about your reading experiences and your reactions to the texts, as well as your experiences in the classroom and your reactions to class discussion and the ideas and opinions of your classmates.

1. What role did you play/how did you contribute to class dialogue this week? If you feel you didn't contribute, what held you back?
2. Was there a time this week when you had to suspend your initial judgments or first opinions? What other points of view were you able to hear when you did this?
3. Was there a time this week that made you aware of some of your basic assumptions or pushed you to question something that you previously thought was true or right?
4. What new information, ideas, or points of view did you learn about this week? What ideas or opinions are you still struggling with?
5. How do you think the class did overall in upholding the shared expectations for dialogue that we established as a class? What could be improved? Are there any expectations that you would like to add, revise, or reconsider?
6. How would you like to challenge yourself next week?