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Encouraging Classroom Discussion

Classroom discussion has the potential to enhance the learning environment and encourages students to become active participants in the educational process. Student participation in classroom discussion has been shown to significantly improve the student learning experience. Research suggests that classroom discussion is an effective method for encouraging student classroom participation and for motivating student learning beyond the classroom. Participation in classroom discussion encourages students to become active collaborators in the learning process, while at the same time providing instructors with a practical method of assessing student learning. Classroom discussion is an effective tool for developing higher-level cognitive skills like critical thinking. Despite the potential discussion holds for student learning, many in academia lament the lack of participation in the classroom. The lack of student participation in classroom discussion is not a recent problem; it is one that has frustrated instructors for decades. Instructors report that some of the more current methods for encouraging classroom discussion can be exasperating and at times non-productive. This two-year study of 510 college and university students provides insight into the reasons why some students do not participate in classroom discussion. This study, which also elicited input from sixteen college and university professors and two high school teachers, offers some suggestions for creating and encouraging an environment conducive to student participation in the classroom.

1 Introduction

Classroom discussion has the potential to enhance the learning environment by encouraging students to become active participants in the educational process (Dale 2011; Svinicki and McKeachie 2010; Howard, Short and Clark 1996). Svinicki and McKeachie suggest that classroom discussion is an effective method for encouraging student participation and for motivating student learning beyond the classroom. King (1994:174) asserts that students "learn more rapidly and retain knowledge longer when they take an active role in the learning process." Goldsmid and Wilson (1980) encourage students to become active collaborators in the learning process, while at the same time providing instructors with a practical method of assessing student learning. King (1994:174) argues that classroom discussion is "superior to lectures in developing higher-level cognitive skills (e.g., critical thinking) and in changing students' attitudes about course topics" (see also Taylor 1992; McKeachie 1978).

Despite the potential classroom discussion holds for student learning, many in academia lament the lack of

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student participation in the classroom (Hollander 2002; Eble and McKeachie 1985). The lack of student participation in the classroom is not a recent problem; it has frustrated instructors for decades (Gimenez 1989). Even some of the more current methods for encouraging classroom discussion (e.g. multi-media) can be exasperating and at times non-productive (Magnuson-Martinson 1995).

I have been teaching sociology for over twenty years and I have noticed that my upper division students—most of whom are social science majors—are generally engaged in classroom discussion when compared to my first-year students. One might assume that the diverse and often controversial subject matter that sociologists are concerned with would engender some strong opinions that students would be only too eager to share. Yet, over the years, I have repeatedly heard my fellow colleagues complain about the lack of student participation in classroom discussion.

Four years ago, I was approached by two graduate students who were in their first semester of teaching introduction to sociology. They were frustrated by the lack of student participation in the classroom discussion and came to me seeking advice. After offering a few suggestions, I decided explore the reasons why so many first-year students are reluctant to participate in classroom discussion. For this study, I surveyed 645 college and university students over a three-year period. I also discussed this problem with eighteen college and university sociology and psychology instructors. The single research question for both groups was: "Why do you think some students are reluctant to participate in classroom discussion?" In the process of gathering data,

several of my colleagues offered techniques they use to increase student engagement, which I will share in this article. While most of the methods are not new or novel (I suspect many instructors are already using a variety of them), it is my desire that some of these techniques will be useful to those who are experiencing problems. I hope this article helps some instructors to recognize the impediments to student participation in their classroom and perhaps assist them in creating a welcoming environment that encourages student participation.

2 The Importance of Classroom Discussion

Some educators question the value of classroom discussion (Kelly 2007); others recognize strong student resistance to the concept despite the instructor's best efforts (McFarland 2004; Yon 2003). However, student engagement in the classroom has been identified as a significant factor in determining student achievement (Kelly 2008). Beyond test scores and grade point averages, classroom discussion provides an opportunity for personal enrichment. Many of our students may have had only limited social interaction with diverse groups prior to entering college (Lopez 2007). The classroom, then, is an excellent setting for students and instructors alike to learn more about the diverse backgrounds and experiences of our students, as they also learn to appreciate and welcome diversity. For our students who may someday find themselves in positions of business ownership or management, learning to appreciate diversity in the classroom has the potential to translate into success in private industry (Herring 2009). According to Herring, both gender and racial diversity are associated with increased sales revenue, and greater relative profits.

As social scientists, we are likely familiar with the contact hypothesis (Allport 1954), which posits that through interpersonal social interaction diverse groups may come to dispel some of their preconceived prejudices (Beitin 2008). Further research also indicates that intergroup conflict may be reduced through positive social interaction (see Forsythe 2009). Diversity also has the potential to enhance a student's social network thereby increasing their access to relationships, including exogamous romantic interethnic relationships (Clark-Ibáñez and Felmlee 2004.) Classroom discussion also helps students to see beyond their own preconceived notions on a host of social issues, thereby improving their critical thinking skills and opening them up to new ideas (Takanori 2003).

Participating in classroom discussion can make the course more interesting for our students (Eglitis 2010; Parrini 2005; Unnithan 1994). Classroom discussion is an excellent opportunity for instructors to learn something new and interesting as well (Bernstein-Yamashiro and Noam 2013). Students, particularly those who are a little older than our average students, possess a rich history that includes some wonderfully unique experiences (Howard, Short and Clark 1996). I have learned much from my younger students regarding the latest in urban slang, fashion, and technology. Sharing these experiences helps to break down some of the barriers of communication between students and faculty.

Encouraging classroom discussion provides educators with alternatives to traditional lecturing as the primary method for conveying course materials. Prolonged lecturing can tend to bore many students, thus reducing the effectiveness of instruction (Augustinien 2004, Brown 1999). One of the main responses I solicited from students was that they were often bored by the instructor's regular insistence on long lectures. By encouraging classroom discussion students become active participants in the learning process (Howard et al. 1996). When students become an integral part of the class a secondary result is usually better attendance (Dale 2011; Forsythe 2009).

3 A Growing Problem

While encouraging classroom discussion has always been a challenge for educators (Alpert 1991), I have heard a steady increase in complaints from my colleagues in recent years. In my conversations with other educators, they cited three sources as potential contributors to this problem: social media, classroom overcrowding; and homeschooling. The increase in social media may be responsible for reducing the number of opportunities for students to engage in meaningful face-to-face conversations, thus increasing the tendency for social isolation (Hampton, Sessions & Her 2011). In the process, they may fail to develop fundamental social interaction skills that lead to bonding with their fellow social actors (Conein 2011).

Some have suggested that the problem may be rooted in the steady increase in classroom overcrowding (McCain, Cox, Paulis, Luke and Abadzi 1985). Because of large class sizes, students may become apathetic or feel lost in the crowd and therefore reluctant to participate in classroom discussion (Unnithan 1994). Others posit that the problem may be related to the quality of classroom teaching and learning (Pedder 2006). Weiner (2003) suggests that the deficit paradigm—the result of the student's negative social environment outside of the classroom—coupled with increasing class sizes, forces teachers to struggle just to maintain orderly classrooms where students come in, sit quietly at their desks and take notes (Schneider 1998).

Several instructors I spoke with suggested that the lack of student participation may be traced to the increasing number of college students who were previously homeschooled. Their argument being that these students are not accustomed to large classrooms. They couple this with the fact that in most cases, homeschooled students are being taught by a well-meaning, but relatively unskilled parent, who lacks the experience of a seasoned professional. When being taught by a parent, students may be reluctant to engage in a discussion with someone who is an authority figure from whom they cannot escape after class is over. While it is true that the number of children being homeschooled

has increased significantly in the last twenty years (Isenberg 2007), I was unable to find any research that supported this suggestion. In contrast, the literature tends to suggest that homeschooled students may actually adjust and succeed quite well in the college environment, even surpassing the non-homeschooled students (Drenovsky and Cohen 2012).

4 Methods and Data

Using convenience sampling (Marshall 1996), I gathered data from August 2011 to May 2014 by asking my introduction to sociology students (n=591) and upper-division students (n=54) one question: "Why do you think some students are reluctant to participate in classroom discussion?" I asked the same question to eighteen experienced college (n=10), and university (n=8) social science instructors. Eight of these respondents have actually taught for more than twenty years. Respondents were encouraged to list as many reasons as they thought appropriate. As a result, some responses were recorded in more than one category.

The data was coded and analyzed using grounded theory (Charmaz 2008, 2006, 2000; see also Glaser and Strauss 1967) and sensitizing concepts (Bowen 2006; Blumer 1969, 1954). While open-ended question are subject to a variety of interpretations based on the context of the response (see LaRossa, Jaret, Gadgil and Wynn 2000),I believe it is possible for me to make reasonable and valid assumptions about the meaning(s) of the responses and to create appropriate categories based on my interpretation of those responses (Fontana and Frey 2000; Ryan and Bernard 2000; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Typologies were constructed from key words or phrases expressed as by the respondents as noted in italics. In many cases the actual category was used by the respondent.

My analysis of the students' responses yielded three general categories: *disengaged instructor, intimidation*, and *lack of preparation* by instructor. A disengaged instructor is one whom students feel is boring, lacks passion, or does not care about either the subject matter or whether students learn anything from the course instruction. As one upper-division sociology student remarked:

Half of my professors act like they are just there to talk about themselves. *They don't care about me as a student or if I am learning anything*. It is not uncommon to see students fall asleep in many of my classes while the professor drones on about something.

Intimidation includes those students who feel intimidated in the classroom, either by the instructor or by other students, as these two sociology majors indicate:

I think many students do not speak up in class partly due to *fear of being wrong* and partly because they are

not prepared to have a dialogue with *an authority figure who presumably knows more than they do*.

There are a lot of instructors out there that aren't open to a real discussion. If you are not in agreement with them you open yourself up to ridicule and perhaps a lowered grade.

The category for *lack of preparation* captures those responses where students reported that the instructor was ill-prepared to teach the class. Here is what one upper-division student said:

Many of my instructors are actually graduate students. *Some of them don't even have any notes or PowerPoint slides*. They just read from the book or jump around so often in their lectures that I don't know what they are talking about. Then they get angry when they ask the class to discuss the material and no one speaks up.

Fifty-three percent of student respondents said they feel intimidated in the classroom, either by the instructor or by other students (n=342). In these cases, the instructor has not created a welcoming environment for students to participate in the discussion. Approximately thirty-three percent of student respondents said that the instructor was disengaged (n=213). Thirteen percent of students responded that the instructor was either not properly prepared to teach the class (n=84). One percent (n=6) said that the instructor never offered an opportunity to participate in the classroom discussion. "She would just come in and start talking," one student replied. "If you raised your hand, she would just ignore you and keep on talking."

The instructors' responses were synthesized into three categories: *student apathy*, *intimidation*, *lack of preparation* by student. Approximately forty percent (n=7) of instructors cited student apathy as this instructor noted:

Ambivalence, lack of engagement, *apathy*, disaffection, growing up realizing they could pass classes in school without talking much, disregard for what the professor thinks of them. It also has to do with the declining respect for the profession.

While this response was coded as "apathy" other responses were not coded into a single category. Because respondents were permitted to provide numerous answers, some responses were marked in two or more categories. For example, this response was recorded in all three categories: apathy, intimidation, and lack of preparation.

Fear of saying something dumb or incorrect (*intimidation*). Not paying attention in the first place/don't care (*apathy*). Don't want to give other

students the impression they are a know-it-all (*intimidation*). Can't read and don't understand what we are talking about (*lack of preparation*).

Instructors cited intimidation as the top reason for the lack of student participation (n=12). While two anthropology professors acknowledged that students were most likely intimidated by the instructor, the rest of this group cited intimidation from their fellow students. Only four instructors felt that students failed to participate in the classroom because the student was unprepared, despite many of them offering the opinion that most students were normally unprepared for the day's instruction.

6 Discussion

I found a general reluctance by both groups to take ownership of the problem. Each group tended to blame the other. When I informed instructors that a third of the student respondents said they were bored in the classroom, most reacted with surprise or disdain. One social psychology professor stated: "Hey, I am not here to entertain students. I am here to teach them. I had to put up with some pretty boring instructors when I was in college; it is just part of the college experience." However, another longtime sociology professor likened classroom teaching to stand up comedy. "You have to entertain your students by injecting humor into your lectures," he said. "Get to know your students so you know what things they are interested in and what pushes their buttons." When I pressed students to elaborate on why they found some instructors to be boring, most replied that the instructor lacked passion for the subject or seemed disengaged. Many remarked that the instructors' lectures would drone causing students to lose interest in the subject. Others said that some instructors just don't seem to care whether they pass or fail, or whether students were even learning anything.

More than half of the student respondents reported that they often feel intimidated in the classroom. Many said that there is always at least one student in class who dumps on everyone else's opinions. Others cited the unfortunate experience of having an instructor who force-fed them his or her opinion on social issues and then made students feel stupid for disagreeing with them. A few students complained about the class "know-it-all;" who has his or her hand raised at every occasion, thus reducing the opportunity for other students to participate in the classroom. This psychology major's response was fairly typical of those voiced by other students:

Many students don't talk because they feel uncomfortable talking in a public setting. They don't want to come across as "stupid" or say the wrong thing and offend the instructor or another student.

Thirteen-percent of student respondents reported that the instructor did not appear to be prepared to teach the course. Students stated that some instructors fumble through their notes or jump around between topics so often that they found it difficult to follow the instruction. One student stated: "I had this professor last semester—a graduate student—he would just open the book and start reading from the chapter. He would flip back and forth through the pages without making any sense." Another student replied that she had an introduction to psychology instructor who "would spend the entire class period telling stories about her life and never seemed prepared to teach the class. The bad part was that we all failed her exams because we never knew what to expect."

One surprising response came from two white students, a brother and sister, who stated that they were homeschooled until entering a local high school where they were in the racial minority. They feared participating in classroom discussions involving racial issues because they had several bad experiences as a result of voicing opinions that were contrary to what a black or Hispanic student had said. Now they find themselves in a social science class where topics of race or social class are in the forefront, they carry with them the same fear and trepidation instilled in them from their abusive high school experiences (see Hyde and Ruth 2002).

While intimidation ranked high with instructors, forty percent reported that students are apathetic about their education. As the quote below reflects, some instructors lamented that students are not really interested in getting an education.

They are only there to mark off another box on their required list of courses so they can graduate. *They don't really care about the subject matter;* they just want to pass the course and move on.

Among those instructors who cited intimidation, several suggested that status differentiation may play a role in determining whether or not a student feels comfortable in participating in the classroom discussion, as this psychology instructor notes.

Power/status dynamics between student and peers, and student and teacher are significant. A student with higher status/higher level of acceptance among peers, may be more confident to contribute if contributing is a value in the school culture.

My data suggests that much of the problem with classroom discussion may be the fact that instructors have not created a welcoming environment for student participation. Students are feeling intimidated in the classroom, either by the instructor or their fellow students. Some instructors have failed to recognize the importance of student involvement in the course, while others are frustrated by their attempts to engage students in the classroom discussion.

7 Creating a Welcoming Environment

The study data indicates that if we are to encourage classroom discussion, we must communicate to our students that participation in a social science classroom is an expectation and not an exception. We must create an environment for them to feel safe in expressing their views. We also have to find ways to keep our students interested and engaged in what we are teaching them (Brown 1999; Singleton 1989). If we are not passionate and enthusiastic about what we are teaching our students, how can we expect them to be? Course materials should be introduced in a manner that is both current and relevant to their lives (Rafalovich 2006; Sobieraj and Laube 2001). Students learn best when they can relate a particular concept or idea to their own experiences (McCabe 2013). The following are a few suggestions from me and my colleagues that have proven effective in increasing student participation in the classroom, particularly among first-year students in our social science courses.

One technique is to prepare a discussion question in advance of a lecture. At the appropriate time, present the question to the class and allow them two minutes to discuss the question among themselves. Follow this up by asking students to share their comments regarding the discussion question. For example, in a discussion of race and ethnicity, I like to ask my sociology students to identify the stereotypes commonly associated with their racial or ethnic group. This exercise is an opportunity for minority students to express their frustrations concerning stereotypes and provides a forum for dispelling them as hurtful and false.

Several instructors reported that they show students a funny video clip from one of the many online video sites that relate to the topic of the day. I show students in my social science research methods course a humorous video on breaching. Aside from providing a few minutes of comic relief, the video has spawned numerous breaching exercises for my students to practice on campus. After which, we regroup and spend the remainder of the time discussing their experiences. Another technique is to relate a particular concept to a current event. One of the major advantages social science instructors possess over other instructors is that we are directly involved in current issues of social significance. Recently I spoke to my first-year sociology students about social inequality and how it connects to conflict theory. I related it to the failure of Congress to pass legislation that would lower the interest rates for student loans. I implied that members of Congress are generally wealthy and their children don't need student loans. By making a college education more difficult or unattainable for the lower socioeconomic classes, members of Congress assure themselves that their children will not have to compete with them for the best colleges and jobs, thereby reinforcing social inequality.

A longtime sociology professor told me he likes to play the devil's advocate with his students. He said, "When I am discussing the culture of poverty thesis versus white privilege, I like to play the video of Bill Cosby talking about how blacks are responsible for their own problems and need to quit blaming whites." He said that this video never fails to get students excited and it provides an opportunity to introduce a host of concepts related to racial and ethnic relations.

The second issue to address is that of classroom intimidation. My research suggests that a large percentage of first-year students do not participate in classroom discussion for a host of reasons: classroom bullies, overly-opinionated instructors, or the fear of being politically incorrect. It is important for instructors to stress upon their students proper classroom etiquette (Emerick 1994; Singleton 1989). I tell students that classroom discussion is not an opportunity to: 1) upstage the instructor; 2) dominate the conversation; 3) denigrate another student's opinion; or 4) for an instructor to embarrass a student.

As social science instructors, controversial topics are an everyday part of our curriculum. We should respect students who may disagree with our personal or political opinions. Regardless of our education and experience, we should never force our personal or political opinions on our students. It is normal for many first-year students to feel a little intimidated by the instructor. When I call attendance on that first day, I ask them to tell the class something interesting about themselves. To get the ball rolling, I tell them that I was once on the old television show *The Newlywed Game*. And in fact, I liked that particular wife so much, that I married her twice. This usually gets a chuckle from the class and it has the effect of humanizing me in their eyes. By being self-effacing, we can lower the pedestal to the point where students feel comfortable expressing their opinions in our presence. Humor in the classroom can be an effective tool for advancing knowledge and increasing student participation (Wunder 1990; Hynes 1989; Korobkin 1988).

The onus for improving student participation, however, does not fall entirely on the instructor. Students have a responsibility to come to class prepared to discuss the course material. One method for ensuring that students have completed the required reading is to have them prepare a one-page summary of the readings for that day. This assignment will prepare them to participate confidently in the classroom discussion.

Another technique I use is to require students to prepare a five minute presentation on the subject of the day, which includes a discussion question. Over the years, former students have told me that this particular exercise helped them overcome their shyness.

8 Conclusion

Encouraging classroom discussion is a positive learning tool for those of us engaged in teaching the social sciences, but it only works when we create a welcoming environment for student participation. If we can help students develop this important skill, it will serve them well throughout their college and professional careers. By engaging in classroom discussion, students and

instructors alike will learn much more than just the course materials. They will also find ways to make those materials and the courses more interesting and more relevant in their everyday social lives.

The college classroom should be a welcoming environment for students to express their opinions and to share their life experiences. Encourage your students to become active participants in the learning process. Assure your students that they are in a safe place to discuss their views on a variety of potentially controversial topics. Discourage dictatorial, dogmatic, or threatening behavior, including that of our own doing. Teach students proper classroom etiquette enforce those rules when it becomes necessary. Remind students that classroom discussion is not only an expectation, it is a requirement. Make it clear that their grade is dependent on their participation. Be specific as too how much class participation is worth in your class. Put it on the syllabus and reinforce this regularly. Develop and implement methods that will assure students are coming to class prepared to discuss the relevant subject matter of the day.

I hope this modest study proves helpful to those of you who may be struggling to get your students to participate in the classroom. If I have overlooked something that has worked well for you in the past, please feel free to pass it along.

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