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CHAPTER TWO

Innovative Discussion-Based Pedagogy

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Psychologists have identified a series of specific kinds of learning experiences that confer broad and lasting educational benefits, contributing to overall professional success regardless of field. These benefits include developing creativity, problem-solving, cognitive complexity, and flexibility (Maddux et al.); working well in diverse or dispersed groups; negotiating interpersonal problems (Tadmor et al.); tolerating ambiguity; pursuing cultural engagement; appreciating diversity; and being open to experience (Shadowen et al.). This research is important because it provides evidence for the long-term impact of certain experiences on ways of thinking rather than their short-term ability to help students pass exams. The research argues powerfully for the kinds of deep and transformative learning that college is supposed to provide but for which there has been little convincing evidence.

Much of the research mentioned was developed while studying the impact of study abroad experiences; however, some evidence suggests that the findings may be applicable to non-study abroad

contexts, which is the focus of this essay. The literature argues that by destabilizing existing norms and comparing multiple cultures, students can achieve integration of new and old ways of looking at the world. This ability to integrate leads to enhanced creativity, tolerance of ambiguity, improved ability to solve complex problems, and successful negotiation of interpersonal problems.

Likewise, some of the literature on innovative discussion-based pedagogy shines a similar spotlight on destabilization of norms followed by open-minded discussion and thoughtful reflection. Using such background research, this essay examines the importance of destabilizing normal discussion-based teaching strategies in an honors course designed to broaden students' understanding of diversity issues. The strategies are a means of creating the disequilibrium that is often mentioned in experiential and study abroad learning methodologies as a way of deepening and extending student learning. The essay first offers a glimpse into key studies of the role of discussion in promoting transformative learning. Next, it provides a close-up look at how productive discussion is managed by the instructor and undergraduate facilitators to enhance students' appreciation for the complexities involved in problems of immigration and diversity, the primary course content. Results from brief scholarship-of-teaching-and-learning (SoTL) surveys reveal the impact that an emphasis on the process of designing, implementing, and assessing destabilized discussion-based practices can have on learning. Closing the essay is a case for the importance of stressing process-oriented methods, not just content delivery, in setting up productive teacher-led or student-led discussions. The conclusion also includes a return to several additional, subtle details in discussion-based pedagogy that underlie the success of the honors first-year course and that offer some practical, adaptable suggestions for use in honors and other classrooms.

KEY STUDIES OF DISCUSSION-BASED PEDAGOGIES

The idea that students learn better through destabilizing, active experience than through passively listening to a lecture is central to the literature on discussion-based classes. "Good teaching," Donald

L. Finkel argues in his powerful book *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut*, "is the creating of those circumstances that lead to significant learning in others" (8). He contrasts that with the traditional and unexamined "Telling," by which he means both straight lecture and "discussion" designed to lead students to a preordained conclusion or, in other words, a somewhat more active form of "Telling" (2). He also argues that reading and class discussion can be turned into experiential activities. To produce this transformation, faculty can frame their courses in terms of unanswered questions or unsolved problems that will be explored together so that a sense of a partnership develops between teacher and students in the pursuit of answers that have not yet been determined. Students are thus invited into the process of academic inquiry, an experience that is often new to them. The shift in student role from recipient of knowledge to partner in inquiry, therefore, may be destabilizing, as may be the shift in professor's role from an authority professing to that of a fellow-inquirer (albeit the most experienced in the room), which also conveys respect for the contributions of the students. The shift from knowledge to questions and product to process also creates disequilibrium as the ideas of uncertainty, ambiguity, and relativity are highlighted. Disequilibrium is paired with thoughtful reflection among students and faculty, encouraging growth in both *what* students think and *the way* students think. Finkel's model immerses students in the process of inquiry, destabilizing the existing norms of education, and then brings them along a guided, reflective journey with a professor who, rather than telling them the answer, works with them to find answers to questions about which they are inspired to care. Finkel's method is an immersive, experiential, and reflective method of teaching.

Other proponents of discussion-based classroom pedagogy similarly advocate a very different classroom culture than most students have known. In *Discussion as a Way of Teaching*, Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Presskill propose a model with an overtly political stance, arguing that "discussion is a way of talking that emphasizes the inclusion of the widest variety of perspectives and a self-critical willingness to change what we believe if convinced by the arguments of others" (XVII). They argue that it is crucial to

undermine or subvert existing power dynamics in the classroom in order to encourage democratic (inclusive) dialogue and sharing of power among students of all genders, races, and socio-economic classes, dismantling the power differential among members of those groups. They focus chapters on discussion in culturally diverse classrooms and across gender differences and on keeping both students' and teachers' voices in balance. They create disequilibrium by shifting power away from faculty voices and by respecting and drawing out as many points of view as possible. They then reflect thoroughly and deeply on those voices. They focus on process by providing taxonomies of questions faculty can ask to provoke disequilibrium and reflection.

Scott P. Simkins and Mark H. Maier argue in *Just in Time Teaching* that we need to use research on how students learn to rethink teaching. Similar to the authors of study abroad literature, they focus on integration: connecting new learning to previous knowledge and asking students to grapple with new ideas and integrate them rather than just use them or regurgitate them. Their method also emphasizes process over product, giving students skills to improve thinking processes and giving faculty information about gaps in student knowledge. One example of their method of "Just in Time Teaching" (JiTT) requires students to submit answers to particular kinds of questions just before class so that faculty can adjust their lectures to address gaps in knowledge and use student examples to clarify or affirm areas of understanding, particularly in the sciences. This method is less immersive than the previous two, but it does reveal examples of student confusion so that faculty can address them. The strategy also offers some evidence that the focus on process has an impact on student performance, at least in the short run.

All three scholarly sources emphasize a movement away from a stand-and-deliver type of continuous lecture and toward activities in class that immerse students in a topic and push them to integrate new and old knowledge, learning deeply rather than memorizing information only for a test. All three also expect faculty to attend to process both in terms of their own instructional decisions and by being deliberate and explicit in articulating to students the steps in

the process of critically thoughtful discussion. But how does such process-oriented, discussion-based pedagogy work in practice, in a classroom?

A CLOSE-UP LOOK AT A DISCUSSION-BASED FIRST-YEAR HONORS COLLOQUIUM

One of the advantages of teaching in honors is the small class of motivated students who make it easy to turn every class into a teaching lab. My experience takes this one better: I teach a class on pedagogy to undergraduates who are my teaching assistants (called "facilitators") for a semester. We meet weekly to discuss discussion so that they can run the small group sections of the Honors First-Year Colloquium class. They are responsible, in pairs, for leading a 90-minute weekly discussion section with 15–20 first-year students. This is the ultimate lab: a group of super-motivated students, all of whom "get it" and are as eager as I am for each class to go well because they have to teach the material on their own the following week. In addition to organizing the material they need to cover, we spend much time talking about discussion. Why it is important, what makes a good discussion, how to draw out shy students, whether a circle or small groups work better, how to handle the over-enthusiastic talkers, what to do when emotions are triggered—we talk about it all. The dominant perspective in that classroom is the student perspective, not the faculty perspective, and we are certainly all engaged together in an inquiry about pedagogy.

Many faculty work with graduate students who teach discussion sections of large lectures, and so may find some of what I describe familiar, but several important differences exist. The first is that my facilitators are not graduate students but sophomores, some juniors, and a few seniors. The second is that the course we are teaching together is not a content class focused on relaying the basics of a field of study but a skills class focused on critical thinking, empathy, and professional skills such as working effectively in groups and managing complex projects. The overall goal is to empower first-year students to think well, think collaboratively, and communicate that thinking clearly. My facilitators are

not reinforcing content heard in lecture the way many graduate student teaching assistants are, but they are instead deliberately helping students to practice communication, collaboration, and reflection skills necessary in civil discourse. Therefore, my job is to "teach through" the facilitators as partner rather than didactic expert. I have no choice but to "teach with my mouth shut" because relying on "telling" while "teaching through" would turn the whole proposition into a game of telephone: the likelihood that the facilitators will pass on the information unchanged is virtually zero. The facilitators are enthusiastic, but they are not masters of course content material, and neither can they reliably interpret the material themselves. They are not experienced at leading discussion, nor do they have the authority to demand that students read, pay attention, and take discussion seriously. My job is to help them create discussions so compelling that they do not need authority of age or expertise with the material, making their inexperience irrelevant. This involves an intense and unrelenting focus on Finkel's "creating . . . circumstances that lead to significant learning in others" (8).

Two main ideas drawn from the literature lead to better teaching in this context. The first is the importance of creating disequilibrium to inspire motivation for learning. The second is teaching the process by which we learn content information and not just the content itself. This combination of practices gives students the maximum experience in thinking critically, and it respects their background experience, their emotional investment, and their ability to contribute.

To try to connect the students deeply enough to the topic, we introduce disequilibrium on several levels. The course content is about immigration and national identity, a deliberately challenging and political topic that both provides information that runs counter to the narrative about immigrants with which my students are familiar and sparks emotional responses. The books that the students discuss in the breakout sections challenge typical narratives about immigrants and refugees or about how the larger culture favors certain groups over others, reinforcing a sense of disorientation in students' learning, since what they thought they knew turns out to be more complicated, at the very least, or perhaps simply

incorrect. For instance, one reading is Warren St. John's nonfiction book *Outcasts United*. This book tells the story of a soccer team composed of refugee teenagers, a group that the students know nothing about. That it includes both stories about individual refugees and a dramatized account of the tensions between the refugees and the local community prompts students to begin to identify with the refugees. In addition, a required service project working with the refugee community, including coaching soccer, provides an even deeper immersion in the topic. Even for those students who have fewer direct roles in the service project, empathy with the refugees' experience is a focus of discussion. One discussion topic explores the parallels between refugees adjusting to the new world of America and first-year students adjusting to the new culture of college. This unexpected connection creates disequilibrium, and the connection between the two situations makes the topic relevant.

The first few weeks include a "fishbowl" exercise in which students discuss their own experience of being "outcasts" and the feelings that such a condition evokes, encouraging them to be vulnerable and create intense personal connections within the group. Several of the assignments are disorienting and immersive, including one that asks students to attend monthly diversity activities that are cultural activities on campus or in the community, which push them outside of their personal comfort zone. But perhaps what is most disquieting for students raised in the "No Child Left Behind" generation is that 20% of their grade is based on weekly small assignments, all of which are graded on a check system rather than numerical or letter grades to push them to prioritize feedback instead of playing the grade game, since they are unable to calculate their final grade. Put all together, students regularly report that the class was "different" from any other class they had ever taken and "more challenging" than any of the classes they were currently taking, although not because it was necessarily harder or more work but because it challenged their preconceptions and was taught "differently." The class as a whole also has an immersive element because it is part of a living-learning community; 90% of the students in the course are also living together in the same residence hall, and some of the residential programming reflects the themes

of the course. The ways that the Colloquium class meets conditions that seem to encourage openness to diversity can be seen in Table 1.

Although the results come from anonymous end-of-course surveys administered as part of modest scholarship-of-teaching-and-learning (SoTL) efforts rather than any kind of larger, controlled experiment, some compelling evidence indicates that there has been both disequilibrium created and some resultant transformation in students' openness to diversity. I have very high response rates (80%+ out of 150-200 students each year), and once I formalized the basic structure of the course in 2011, I began to see evidence of success in changing student perspectives on diversity. (See Table 2.)

In addition to internal assessments of the course, my university's Center for Community-Based Learning had one summative assignment rated by two faculty members from different departments using Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) rubrics. (See <https://www.aacu.org/value-rubrics>.) This independent assessment revealed evidence that the course has an impact on one of the outcomes that was found in the study abroad courses: openness. (See Table 3.)

Table 1. Class Conditions that Encourage Openness to Diversity

	Multi-Cultural Experience	Exposure to Insider Perspective	Functional Multi-Cultural Learning	Grappling with Both Cultures	Destabilization of Existing Norms
Diversity Assignment	X	X	X	X	X
Readings	X	X	X	X	X
Service Project	X	X	X	X	X

Table 2. Percent of Students Who Agreed that the Course Gave Them a Different Perspective on Immigration and Helped Them Appreciate Diversity

2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
55%	84%	86%	88%	79%	84%

These results demonstrate that the highest rating, two years in a row, was for openness. Civic action and empathy are next, followed by connections to experience. The variation in ratings gives me confidence in the validity because the first-year students seem to be more open than they are skilled at synthesizing course content with their experience.

Finally, I have analyzed some data from the National Survey of Student Engagement, which was administered on my campus, comparing honors to non-honors students. In answer to the question of how much students perceive they have changed in terms of their understanding of others who are different from them, honors students report a significantly higher gain than non-honors students. Because the survey is administered in the spring, targeting first-year students and seniors, the results suggest that, among other probable contributing factors in students' academic and out-of-class experiences, the gains made specifically in the Colloquium class are lasting. (See Table 4.)

Such information convinces me that the course was successful in creating some disequilibrium and in encouraging students to

Table 3. Community-Based Learning Evaluation: Openness (Scale of 1–4)

	2013	2014	2015
Openness		1.72	2.24
Civic Action and Reflection	1.04	1.54	1.98
Empathy	.55	1.42	2.21
Connections to Experience	.30	1.18	1.85

Table 4. Perceived Gains: Understanding People of Other Backgrounds (Economic, Racial / Ethnic, Political, Religious, Nationality)

	Honors	Non-Honors	Difference
Quite a Bit	43.9%	28.5%	15.4%
Very Much	24.2%	25.8%	-1.6%
Some	13.6%	19.5%	-5.8%
Very Little	10.6%	8.5%	2.1%

become more open and interested in diversity, the kind of shift the study abroad literature suggests is helpful to long-term outcomes.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROCESS IN DISCUSSION-BASED PEDAGOGY

Experiential learning and discussion replicate to some degree the immersive quality that is only one part of what prompts the shift in openness to diversity. The second shift is building an emphasis on process within the course. This shift makes particular sense in the context of a first-year seminar, where the main goal is to help the students build critical-thinking habits, empathy, and professional skills to help them master college and beyond. Also, part of the course goal is to help the students experience good discussion and then recognize the prerequisites to good discussion, the value of it, and their role in creating it. The metacognition involved in such work is perhaps more important in this case than the content of the discussions, but the students nevertheless still need to perceive the discussions as valuable enough to warrant effort and energy.

The students are required to submit weekly discussion questions. This practice serves multiple purposes, as outlined by both Finkel and Simkins and Maier. The first is a recognition that the process of identifying meaningful questions is a) not subjective, as demonstrated by the number of students who submit the same question, b) the beginning of the paper-writing process, and c) a

Finkel's Process for High Engagement in Discussion

- Students arrive with questions that spark their curiosity.
- They select which questions to discuss.
- There is a focus on specific passages to explore them thoroughly.
- Students seek contradictions, matches and mismatches with their own experience.
- They explore hypotheses, test them with evidence, and use that information to push deeper into the text. (37)

skill that needs to be developed. The weekly questions also ensure that students have done the reading, allowing me to observe at least some of every individual student's participation in class discussions and evaluate him or her at the end of the semester even though I cannot observe every discussion in the breakout sessions. The practice of weekly questions also focuses the discussion on passages or ideas that are of interest to the students, motivating them to participate. Like Simkins and Maier's "Just in Time Teaching" (JiTT) method, it allows the student facilitators (and me) to gain a sense of what the students understand or are confused by so that the class discussion can accommodate their needs. The focus on process has come to penetrate the class quite deeply. When preparing for each week's breakout session, the facilitators must first determine the purpose of the week's discussion. This was not a step I ever took myself when I was teaching. In some classes I took the lead in generating discussions, and in others a discussion pattern evolved without my being fully aware of it. But when talking to the facilitators, and when observing how their discussion went, I would get nagging feelings that some discussions were going in the wrong direction or were not going in any direction somehow, even if students were talking. Needing to help the facilitators and appease my internal nag, I began to identify the field of possible discussion directions.

I realized that some discussions are exploratory and need to be focused on who, what, or when, or definitions of concepts to make sure that the students have understood the material. Others need to connect students to the topic, asking them to relate the general topic or specific incidents to the students' own lives, which helps them care about the topic and which develops empathy. Others need to elicit the largest range of views on a topic to demonstrate the complexity of a topic or to push students out of their preconceived views on a topic. Still others need to be focused on a task the students need to complete, like brainstorming for a paper. Many discussions are designed to help students practice critical thinking, which could mean using evidence for their positions, or synthesizing (connecting ideas among texts or between lecture and text),

or noticing patterns within a text. Others are focused on modeling and practicing careful, precise thinking about a term or definition or theory. Other discussions are reflective, illuminating a process or helping students recognize what they think or how much they have accomplished. There are deliberative discussions, whose function is to demonstrate careful, balanced critical thinking and evaluate multiple positions evenly and fairly.

Being explicit about the purpose of discussion has many virtues. It helps to make sure that the discussions are efficient and purposeful so that students value class time. When I point out the purposes, and particularly when I identify the connection between purpose and what students are graded on (for example, "we are practicing the kind of critical thinking in this discussion that I am looking for on your quiz answers"), I inspire much greater student engagement.

This focus on the purpose of discussion and the process by which to meet that goal has led to a further development. The possibility of multiple purposes for discussion has prompted questions about the kinds of "moves" (Brookfield and Preskill 101) one can make in a discussion, an emphasis on process that empowers students to contribute more meaningfully to a discussion. My students had already been using a game that assigned roles to students to try to even out discussion—that is, curb the role of the talkative ones and draw out the quieter ones—so that some students were "gagged" and could not be the first to raise their hands, while others were tasked with being "devil's advocate" or "discussion starters" to give them a clear task, but also a more active role in the discussion. We expanded the game to include more roles: "clarifier," who asks follow-up questions to focus on precision and clarity; "connector," who offers or asks about connections among themes, ideas, and texts; "evidencer," who asks for specific examples, quotations, paraphrases; "observers," who point out patterns in the discussion; "extenders," who ask for examples of general or theoretical statements; "evaluators," who ask questions that seek judgment; and "summarizers," who try to pull together points made. This scheme was first presented as a game, where each student is given a card with the role explained and an example given, and then they have

to play the role. Later, after the facilitators mixed the roles so that students would have the chance to try out each one, they talked about how each role represents a conversational "move" that might be appropriate in any class, and students are encouraged to use them organically. Brookfield and Presskill have a similar list of "conversational moves" and a list of "roles" for students to practice in discussion, intending that the students will recognize their wide applicability and use them in discussion in all classes.

Another method for determining who should speak next came out of the discussions on pedagogy with student facilitators. Deliberate strategies such as the "popcorn" method have students call on each other, sometimes by tossing a "speaking object" to the next student, but most faculty members retain that control themselves, and they call on students. If there is considerable enthusiasm, a choice needs to be made about how to determine the order of speakers. Most faculty call on students, using either chronology or geography. Using chronology, the teacher carefully notices and remembers the order in which the hands went up, and he or she

Brookfield and Presskill's List of Roles in Discussion

Problem / Dilemma / Theme Poser: introduces "topic of conversation," draws on "personal ideas and experiences" to illustrate.

Reflective Analyst: records "conversation's development" and "every twenty minutes" gives "summary [of] shared concerns" and "issues the group is skirting," along with "emerging common themes."

Scrounger: listens for "helpful resources, suggestions, and tips," keeping "a record" to relay at the end.

Devil's Advocate: looks for "consensus" and articulates contrary views.

Detective: listens for "unacknowledged, unchecked, and unchallenged biases related to culture, race, class, or gender."

Theme-Spotter: identifies "themes . . . that are left unexplored" and that might be explored later.

Umpire: listens for "judgmental . . . offensive, insulting, and demeaning" comments that "contradict ground rules." (115–16)

takes great pains to ensure "first come-first served." The instructor may even relieve the students of the work of holding their hands up in the air by enumerating the order: "I saw Joey first, then Susan, then Doug." This arrangement seems fair. The second method is geography: from one end of the room to the other. This is random, but easy to remember. But neither makes sense in terms of the discussion itself. Many discussions lurch in zig zags as Joey talks about

Brookfield and Presskill's "Conversational Moves"

Questions or "Moves" that Convey Interest and Affirm Others:

- "Ask a question . . . that shows you are interested."
- "Use body language . . . to show interest."
- Make a specific comment about what you found "interesting or useful" in "another person's ideas."
- Make a comment that "paraphrases" someone else's point.
- "Express appreciation" for what you've specifically learned from someone else's comments.

Make Connections:

- Make a comment that "underscores the link between two people's contributions."
- "Contribute something that builds on . . . what someone else has said."
- Make a "summary observation" that includes "several people's contributions."

Clarify Points:

- "Ask a question" that "encourages someone else to elaborate on something that person has said."
- "Ask a cause-and-effect question"—e.g., "why do you think it is true that if X happens, then Y will occur?"

Other "Moves":

- At an "appropriate moment," ask for a "minute's silence . . . to think."
- Disagree in a "respectful and constructive way." (Brookfield and Presskill 101–02)

the point just made, Susan refers to the one before that, and Doug returns to the same point Joey was talking about, and then Dan after him builds on what Susan said about the other topic that came up, or else Doug or Dan withhold comment, feeling like the discussion has moved on and their point should be sacrificed to let the discussion move. The problem is that the students individually have information about the kind of connection they are making and the importance of their point to the discussion, but the teacher sees only perhaps eagerness if a hand shoots up or waves urgently, and he or she has no information from those gestures to determine which comments will lead to the best overall flow. Having experimented a little with online synchronous platforms like Blackboard's "Collaborate" or other webinar programs, I was struck by the scrolling typed comments that we could all read as we also listened to whoever had control of the mic. A multi-tasking moderator or a partner could identify from those comments who should speak next. This observation was raised in a discussion with facilitators, and we developed a series of hand signals drawn from ASL to signal the words "same as," "related to," and "different from" instead of a simple raised hand. Suddenly, the teacher or facilitator could

Keys to Success

- Inclusion of texts or topics or viewpoints that go against the mainstream, that provoke disequilibrium
- Classroom discussion culture of openness to new ideas, and willingness to "try them on"
- Classroom discussion culture of respectful deliberation, the idea that our friends are rational, and the onus is on us to listen carefully and thoughtfully to understand how something that seems irrational to us could be rational to someone else
- Classroom discussion habits that include analyzing function, worldview, assumptions, evidence, looking for similarities and differences, and "cultural logic"
- Classroom discussion habits that appreciate the benefit of listening to alternate viewpoints and so work to draw them out

make more informed choices. Ours typically chose geographically, chronologically, or in order of urgency those who were "same as" first, then "related to" before turning to those who intended to change the subject altogether. Students seemed to appreciate the smoother discussions, and the method gave us all—students, facilitators, and me—the opportunity to think in a different way about the discussion.

A FINAL LESSON

The consequences of articulating the purposes, steps, and strategies of discussion were manifold: my teaching improved, the facilitators' discussions improved, student engagement improved, and grades improved. So much that had been totally invisible—processes absorbed and developed over the course of years by observation, osmosis, and trial and error rather than by deliberate reflection—was suddenly revealed as a final lesson when I paid attention to subtleties of discussion pedagogy of which I had never before been conscious.

This experience has taught me that it is possible to transform students through disequilibrium that motivates students to seek answers and integrate new and old ways of thinking so that they change their perspective about deep-level attitudes such as openness to diversity. By making discussions experiential through a focus on a process that articulates how to have a good, engaging discussion, a teacher can empower students with deeper reflective skills as well as create a classroom environment that supports students' deep, lasting, and transformative learning.

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APPENDIX 1

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