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Anne Marie Merline
Colorado State University

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ANNE MARIE MERLINE

Creating a Culture of Conducive Communication in Honors Seminars

ANNE MARIE MERLINE

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

In his book “The Courage to Teach,” Parker Palmer discusses the various roles of the teacher in the college classroom. One facet he speaks about is the power that teachers possess: “teachers possess the power to create conditions that can help students learn a great deal.” I believe teachers who are student-centered know this and carry this out to the best of their ability. One issue that I agree with, but other instructors reject, is another point that Parker Palmer embraces. He also contends that “we must talk to each other about our inner lives. The lives of the students must always come first, even if it means that the subject gets short-changed.” It is my experience that teachers have the ability to create a powerful learning culture when both teachers and students disclose their inner selves. I have found that students learn to attach meaning to the content of the course by discussing personal opinion and experience. Students and teachers alike teach and learn through mutual discussion. To me this is learning, and in the honors classroom where seminars are the norm, honest and productive dialogue is the key to learning.

In order to create conditions that help students learn and talk about their inner lives, I have actively used communication skills guidelines that can make a difference in the outcome of classroom dynamics. From teaching honors and non-honors sections of courses that cover the same material, it has become clear to me that our high expectations for honors students can overshadow the fact that they are at the same level of maturity and can consequently have the same level of interpersonal communication as their non-honors peers. Careful guidance is crucial for a respectful classroom experience that gives way to maximum learning.

The four one-semester seminars that make up the core of the Honors Program at Colorado State University facilitate the completion of the University’s written and oral communication requirements as well as historical perspectives, requirements in the arts and humanities, U.S. values in public institutions, the social and behavioral sciences, and global and cultural awareness. In these seminars, outside of courses that do not take the human condition into consideration, the importance of civil dialogue is key to success in the classroom.

All of the honors seminars that I teach consider issues of a diverse society. The definition of diversity incorporates a myriad of ideas which makes the discussion difficult. The course that serves as the basis of the lessons I have learned about creating

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a classroom culture of conducive communication is an honors course I call “Race from the Atlantic.” This seminar, like all of the seminars that are the core of the Honors Program at Colorado State University, relies heavily on student discussion and the guidance of the instructor to move the students through a conversation of the history and realities of the human condition.

“Race from the Atlantic” uses feature articles from *The Atlantic Monthly* magazine. With a generous educational copyright policy and feature articles about the diversity of ideas and cultural groups, *The Atlantic Monthly* works well for the interdisciplinary nature of the honors courses at CSU. Social facts, derived from other texts, give the articles a starting point for each topic to be discussed from a sociological perspective. These facts give the students a taste of the “sociological imagination.” The sociological imagination allows the students to understand the topic at hand and their life experiences in a different way, that of a larger social context.

These thoughts of communication came to me rather suddenly while teaching a section of “Race from The Atlantic” last fall when verbal attacks along racial lines became a part of my seminar. Half way through the semester, a white male directed a comment to a biracial student about minorities needing to move out of depressed areas to improve their lives. I knew that his comments were due, in part, to how and where he grew up, and I knew that he did not know any social facts about the state of urban minorities in the United States. His lack of knowledge and his opinion based on his rural background was hindered by a lack of skills to communicate his question in a way that would allow learning to take place. This interaction so deeply disturbed me and many of the students, that I had to dismiss the class for that session. For several hours I did not know how to respond to his statement and how to recognize and rectify what had been said so that we could continue to learn. I knew it was necessary to take time out from the content and concentrate on communication skills that the students did not have or were not using at the time. I suspended the syllabus for a week and gave my students the following set of communication skills gleaned from <http://www.coopcomm.org/workbook.htm>:

- Challenge One: Listening more carefully and more responsively - acknowledging the feelings and wants that others are expressing - compassionately allowing people to feel whatever they feel (which sets the example for others to hear and accept my feelings, also).
- Challenge Two: Explaining my conversational intent and inviting consent by using conversational openers such as, “Right now I would like to take a few minutes and ask you about... [subject].” The more important the conversation, the more important it is to know & share the overall goal.
- Challenge Three: Expressing myself more clearly and more completely -giving my listeners the information they need to understand (mentally reconstruct) my experiences. One good way is to use “the five I-messages”: what/how I observe, feel, interpret/evaluate, want, and hope for.

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- Challenge Four: Translating my criticisms and complaints into requests & explaining the positive results of having my request granted—doing this for both my own complaints and the complaints that others bring to me.
- Challenge Five: Asking questions more “open-endedly” and more creatively. “How did you like that movie?” is an open-ended question that invites a wide range of answers. “Did you like it?” suggests only “yes” or “no” as answers and does not encourage discussion. (How do you feel about this suggestion?)
- Challenge Six: Thanking. Expressing more appreciation, gratitude, encouragement and delight. In a world full of problems, look for opportunities to give praise. Both at home & at work, it is the bond of appreciation that makes relationships strong enough to allow for problem-solving.
- Challenge Seven: Making the effort... Making better communication an important part of my everyday life by seeing each conversation as an opportunity to grow in skill, awareness and compassion and turning each opponent into a learning and problem-solving partner.

That week we did some role playing, and we staged a debate where the communication skills were to be a central part of the dialogue. The rest of the semester went well, although at that time I was sure it was due in part to the fact that students stayed away from controversy and did not make statements they wanted to make. But I learned through teaching the next semester that productive communication in the classroom is in part due to active attention to how the students can better relate to each other and to the instructor, and learn the content of the course while making personal connections of understanding.

In the spring, the semester following this incident, I agreed to teach a non-honors sociology course entitled “Contemporary Race and Ethnic Relations.” This course had an enrollment of almost 80 students. As the new semester approached, I wondered if I was crazy to teach 80 students the same material that got 19 previous students in a verbal tangle only the semester before.

Indeed, I was crazy enough, and along with the syllabus I handed out the communication skills guidelines that I was felt compelled to hand out in the previous honors course. About three weeks into the semester it happened: Five minutes before the class period was over, a student, Drew, mentioned his family pride in Southern Culture and the value of a Confederate flag that his grandfather has stored in his basement. In the few minutes left, frenzied comments flew. All of these responses centered on the hatred that the Confederate flag represents. Saved by the bell, the students left, and I sighed a breath of relief that the conversation was over.

It remained so until I awoke around 3 o'clock the next morning. I realized that Drew had not mentioned anything except the fact that a Confederate flag was a treasured family heirloom. He did not say, or insinuate, that he was anti-Union or racist in any way. The students who did speak, did not hear what he was saying, and assumed that Drew was rallying for everything negative the Confederate flag represents. Those last few minutes of class that day were really just the beginning, and it was my responsibility to drag the Confederate flag out of the basement and wave it in front of my

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students the next class period, so I could present the ideas about how to talk about differing values, opinions, and experiences central to the learning process.

I went into the next class session and asked the students to pull out their syllabi and to again take a look at the communication skills that I had included. I asked Drew to again mention what he had said in class before, and for students to respond with the communication skills listed.

I asked the students to “listen more carefully and more responsively” (challenge one), and asked Drew to use challenge three, with “I” statements to re-state what he had stated before. The questions began with ideas like “I want to ask you about what this flag means to your family” (challenge two), and challenge five was articulated by asking “why did you tell that to us?” (the class). The conversation was broadened to include ideas such as differing value systems and the challenges of opinions and experiences used to understand the idea of diversity.

I used challenge six after class that day, sending them all a message of gratitude. I reiterated my feeling of classroom success that last class of the week. At this early point in the semester, the students learned that making the effort, challenge seven, would make this a course to remember. I was right. The rest of the semester went just as well. The students surpassed my expectations, and I will remember that week as one of the highlights of my teaching career.

One personal connection and several communication skills later, they learned both lessons. Throughout the semester, the students were not hesitant to ask the tough questions. Students shared their opinions as answers, others answered back with social facts, and vice-versa. The class became a safe haven and a climate of mutual respect, even though we tackled the tough stereotypes and questions of racial and ethnic relations. I was overwhelmed with pride in what they had learned and how they had learned it. This happened because they were willing to communicate in a respectful and methodical way. The motto of the class became “just ask” although high levels of respect were implied.

These two classes taught me my most important lesson for managing the psychology of students as individuals into a sociology of one class culture to encourage thought, learning, personal growth, and knowledge. I know now that if non-honors students can reach the height of respect and communication needed, honors students will benefit from the same instruction. As is the case at many institutions of higher education, the honors students at Colorado State University are not diverse, with most coming from white, middle to upper-class families.

I am glad I have “the courage to teach” the tough topics that this generation, and all generations, have to take on. Besides issues of social inequality, these guidelines can also be successfully used to examine other important social issues that are key to understanding the world in which we live but that are controversial to those with differing experiences and worldviews. We foster our charges with the elements that it takes to be an educated person. One that is of utmost importance for the classroom is the art of conversation. This is especially important when two or more divergent opinions or experiences are at the forefront of the learning process. The social facts are not debatable, but the lenses of life are in the eye of the beholder. It is our job as instructors to focus these ideas into an enriching learning experience.

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