University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive | National Collegiate Honors Council

4-1-2000

On Discourse

Jim Herbert
National Endowment for the Humanities

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchcjournal

Part of the Higher Education Administration Commons

Herbert, Jim, "On Discourse" (2000). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive.* Paper 206.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchcjournal/206

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

On Discourse

Jim Herbert
National Endowment for the Humanities

Exactly twenty years ago I bored this conference to desperation with an interminable disquisition on "Smaller Teaching." While I hope that essay helped open the way to larger learning, I must admit now that it was not only too long, but that it fell short of an important truth about the honors classroom. In the intervening two decades, experience in the peer review panels of the National Endowment for the Humanities and the academic advisory committees of the College Board has helped me understand more deeply this central site of honors education—and, I dare say, liberal learning. I hope to suggest that dimension to you today, albeit very briefly.

In "Smaller Teaching" I did not understand fully why the honors classroom contained more than two people. I talked about extending the "tutorial principle" to a group. I did notice that, the more various the learners in a group, the more the context of their thought could become the content of their study. But only recently have I begun to understand that the implicit rules of procedure in the honors classroom, as well as in other thoughtful groups, are the very conditions under which we can hope to know the truth and do the good.

Most of us have had, at the end of a class period, that peculiar sense of regret over not having gotten to where we had hoped to get. I don't mean those occasions when the proceedings were interrupted by horseplay, or perhaps colt play. Nor do I mean that some sort of unilateral, linear exposition fell short. We all know that trying to "cover the material" is the original sin in honors teaching. No, the experience I am trying to get at can also include an odd tinge of elation. The class discussion didn't get where we had wanted it to go, but it did end up someplace very, very important indeed.

I want to suggest that what happens on these occasions is that the group shifts from normal communicative interaction to what the philosopher Jurgen Habermas calls "discourse" proper. The group does not get sidetracked, but rises to become engaged with what Immanuel Kant might have called the transcendental or what our own intellectual generation might call the meta-communicative. That is, it begins to sort out explicitly the presuppositions and conditions involved in successful communication. Far from a waste of time, "discourse" in this sense—it can plausibly be argued—is the very structure for human knowledge and morality.

When we speak with each other, we are not only trying to convey a certain content or proposition, we are also doing something. In the most important case, we are offering and accepting each other's promise to be comprehensible, to be consistent or trustworthy, to be truthful, and to act in accord with the right. We accept each other's offered obligations because the validity of these claims can be tested in the course of communicating. We can engage in reciprocal paraphrase to make sure we understand what the other means. By constructing narratives, we can

examine the consistency of action and interaction over time. The validity of a claim to truth can be tested by examining the grounds on the basis of which it is made. The validity of a claim to rightness can be tested by examining its justification. Sometimes these tests are fairly straightforward: the stone exists because Dr. Johnson broke his toe; Officer Krupke has the right to arrest me because he shows me his badge.

Sometimes, however, we are not convinced. Dr. Johnson has gout; his toe is always red and misshapen. Officer Krupke is a stooge for a racist regime bent only on domination. At this point, normal communication has broken down! Participants have several choices: they can resort to force; they can resort to trickery and deceit (what Europeans like to call "strategic" communication); or they can engage in "discourse." The last is a special kind of communication in which we put out of play all motives except that of coming to a rationally grounded agreement. Discourse is open to progressively more radical or speculative challenges. Agreements reached are valid for all potential participants, that is to say for all rational subjects.

Such discourse implies what Habermas calls an "ideal speech situation." For all participants there is a symmetrical distribution of chances to speak and respond. The conversation is free of such distorting influences as open domination, conscious strategic behavior, subtle kinds of self-deception (for example, professing what you believe the teacher wants you to think). When we act as if we can agree, we are 'driving under the influence' of the ideal speech situation. When an honors class does not make linear progress but raises and attempts to respond to more and more challenging questions, it is making explicit the suppositions of such discourse and rising toward intimations of an ideal speech situation.

Because the goal of honors education, indeed of liberal learning, is not only knowledge but also understanding of how that knowledge is put together and supported, I suggest that the home ground and practice field of such education is this "ideal speech situation."

Catherine, English teachers and other language teachers make such great honors teachers because, as Habermas puts it: "What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: language. Through its structure, autonomy and responsibility are posited for us. Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus."

In short, liberal education affirms "the possibility of reaching agreement through the use of reason, and thus by recourse to, rather than by violation of, the humanity of those involved" (T. McCarthy).