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A Dialogical Exercise for Honors Students

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Abstract: To expand students' abilities to think critically, honors instructors ask them to step aside from their objections to a passage in *The Handbook of Epictetus* to consider how that passage makes sense to Epictetus.

Keywords: critical thinking; dialogic theory (communication); first-year seminar; Epictetus

Many honors students can evaluate evidence and sort out weak points as they analyze arguments; they can also be vociferous in articulating their objections to positions with which they disagree. Most have difficulty, however, with a key aspect of critical thinking: understanding a position different from their own. They lack the ability to think dialogically, to see a position from the inside, from the perspective of one who holds it; they have had little practice in setting aside their own opinions, at least temporarily, to think with an opposing view in order to comprehend it. This ability is a crucial skill because, as Laird R. O. Edman told us nearly two decades ago, "Until you can summarize another viewpoint so well those who hold it agree with your summary, you do not understand that viewpoint" (NCHC Monograph *Teaching and Learning in Honors*).

To help students develop their ability to think dialogically, we ask them to read *The Handbook of Epictetus* in our first-year Honors Seminar. We allot two class meetings to discussions of this brief Stoic text. In the first, students readily identify passages they find troubling. Routinely, they bring up the third passage:

In the case of everything attractive or useful or that you are fond of, remember to say just what sort of thing it is, beginning with the least

little things. If you are fond of a jug, say, “I am fond of a jug!” For then when it is broken you will not be upset. If you kiss your child or your wife, say that you are kissing a human being; for when it dies you will not be upset. (*The Handbook of Epictetus*, trans. Nicholas P. White, 1983)

Students find this passage troubling and downright objectionable; they struggle with its seeming demand for emotionless relationships and its ostensible reduction of human beings to the status of a jug. In our first discussion, the instructor receives the students’ objections and complaints without much comment; his or her main focus is having each student speak.

For the second class meeting, we ask students to re-read the *Handbook* and complete a brief exercise in thinking *with* Epictetus. The assignment reads:

Pick out a passage from the *Handbook* with which you disagree. Try to adopt the position of Epictetus and explain what he means by the passage. In other words, think analytically and dialogically about the passage, and try to understand it as Epictetus might have.

This is an exercise in dialogical thinking, so do not spend any time explaining why you disagree with the passage. Instead, look for another passage in the *Handbook* that helps you to understand the one with which you disagree and include it in your discussion. Focus on why the passage make sense to Epictetus.

We ask the students to do no research, not even the lightest of Googling, as they complete this assignment; we tell them that their own critical thinking will be sufficient as they enter into conversation with Epictetus. We begin by stating that we do not expect them to change their minds or even to agree with Epictetus, that they are free to make up their own minds, but we want to hear about their experience of dialogical thinking. As they share the results of the exercise, many of them begin with comments such as, “I hated the third passage, but I kind of see what Epictetus means now.” Some cite the famous opening sentence of the *Handbook* with its distinction between the things that are up to us and those that are not to analyze why Epictetus offers the advice they had initially found distasteful, even abhorrent. A few report having changed their minds. We never fail to have lively discussions. Through the rest of term, students preface their comments with “I don’t agree with x, but I can see dialogically where she is coming from.” Even better, some students begin to say something similar in speaking to each other; while I don’t agree

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with you, I can see how you arrived at your position. In end-of-term reflections, students remember this exercise and cite it as a catalyst for their growth as critical thinkers.

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