Orchestrating Classroom Discussions

By Judith Harmon Miller

Our task as teachers is to stimulate students' thinking, and develop their ability and confidence to express themselves in public.

After I led a discussion group for a National Endowment for Humanities (NEH) series on the Civil War, a participant sought me out to report that she could not believe what had just happened. "That's the most I've ever talked in a group!" she said. Four other members of the study group pulled me aside to thank me for leading a lively, inclusive, and intelligent conversation.

This experience aroused my curiosity. "What's going on here," I wondered. "How does it work? How did I learn this?" By habit, I turned to freewriting to reflect. The writing spawned a description of how I learned to generate discussions that drew in the diffident, the confident, and everyone else—people who look upon entering into group conversations as torment and those who savor participation and their more silent colleagues.

The Master Teacher

Bob Hansen, a public high school history teacher who taught my cadre of four interns in the Harvard Master of Arts in Teaching Program in 1961, was the major influence on my learning the skill of using class discussion. This master teacher was determined to wean us from the lecture and recitation mode of teaching. In traditional classrooms, during those years at least, the teacher stood at the head of the room; the student looked at the teacher; the teacher asked a question; the student replied with the answer, and on it went. Instead, Bob arranged the chairs and desks in a circle. He taught us to see our role as one of conductor, who expects the players to listen, talk to, and teach one another. We learned that our job in facilitating discussion was to keep students focused and in tune (providing evidence to support claims), and to move the discussion along (at a good pace) toward substantive learning.

After observing a class one of us had taught, Hansen would routinely pull out a classroom seating chart on which he had drawn a diagram full of lines and checks that showed how many times a student responded to or questioned another student. "What you want is less pupil-to-teacher

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talk and more pupil-to-pupil response when you run a discussion," he advised.

What follows is a reconstruction of one of my early forays into classroom discussion under Hansen's guidance.

Ms. Harmon: Last night you read excerpts from Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. How would you describe his commitment to Enlightenment values that we studied?

Nick: Not at all. He talks about the superiority of the Germanic peoples, not equality.

(Long silence.)

Hansen encouraged us to practice what he called *wait time*. "Ask the question and wait," he'd say. I waited. He was correct. Finally Martha fulfilled our master teacher's promise.

Martha: But he also talks about the need for order, which we learned is a western value.

Ben: Yeah, Martha, but for him, order was the prime value. He didn't believe in liberty to balance the possibility of an excess of order.

Martha: I don't get it. He was the leader of a western nation. Mr. Hansen told us western values that grew from the Enlightenment were liberty, order, equality, and peace. Why then did he stamp out liberties, Ms. Harmon?

Ms. Harmon: Martha, why don't you ask Ben? He's the one who made the claim. Try to explore why he thinks that.

Over time, I learned to talk directly to my students about the relationship between their participation and their learning, almost as if they were teacher interns themselves. I might say after I started an inquiry, "Don't forget. Talk to each other. I want you to learn to express, experiment with, and exchange your ideas with one another, not just me. You often learn more from one another than from the teacher."

Classroom Culture

It takes time to set in place a classroom culture in which students automatically fall into pupil-to-pupil exchanges. Since those early days, I have learned to use my eyes and my hands to set the rules for interaction. If a group member is talking and looking only at me, as in the old-style recitation mode, I often circle the room with my eyes or raise a finger and move it in a circle to indicate, "Talk to everyone." If I am meeting a group for the first time, I will tell them beforehand what the signals mean. If I have to, I will interrupt and say quietly, "Be sure to talk to the whole group." If learners wander or are inaccurate, then intervention is appropriate. Even if there is nothing to be "corrected," I still exercise my right to be an active member of the conversation, keeping it on track, rescuing them if their conversation gets caught in a rut, offering insights, and reframing questions.

Our task as teachers is to stimulate students' thinking, and develop their ability and confidence to express themselves in public. My NEH classroom had the same mission as the public school: to provide not only leadership, but also space and time to promote open and civil exchange on important issues to prepare citizens for participation in a democratic society.

Setting the Stage for Discussion

I advise teachers to think of planning each discussion as if they were novelists or artists, taking the time to construct a clear beginning, a definite middle and end, and to distinguish the focus from the background. How a facilitator orchestrates the beginning of a discussion is key to establishing the trust that allows honest, open conversation. In a new group, I always have participants introduce themselves to one another. In the case of the NEH Civil War discussion, I asked them also to tell us briefly what had struck them about this series so far—combining the personal and the academic. In the midst of their introductions, my instincts told me we needed a bit more punch. "Why don't you name the teacher of American history that you best remember?"

We laughed together at the collection of memories; we caught of glimpse of each personality. Even though the age range in the Civil War group started at 40 and skipped up to over 80, remembrances of our favorite history teacher linked us to one another, helping people who had only just met start to feel as if they knew one another. The funny memories mixed with the serious responses set a relaxed atmosphere in which serious talk, coupled with humor, would be welcome around this discussion table.

While reflecting on what qualities an adept facilitator needs, I realized that I had learned to take notice of opportunities to build a community of learners out of a group of strangers. Informalizing relationships at the beginning of group discussion releases the anxiety that accompanies first meetings in a classroom setting. Humanizing yourself builds participants' trust that they can express their ideas without worrying about being corrected.

Forming the Question

Choosing the question to launch the conversation is critical to a successful exchange of ideas. I was worried that the questions recommended by the NEH series would lead to a dead end or to a series of short responses that called for a detailed memory of the reading and a "right" answer. "School-ly questions," I call them. Or, "answer-hunting," "guess-what-is-on-my-mind" questions. I prefer questions that Paul Connolly, past director of the Bard Institute for Writing and Thinking, called "odd angled"—questions that guarantee invention and a unique point of view, that promote the synthesis of several ideas rather than the recall of pieces of information. I used to urge my graduate education students to avoid asking their students questions to which they, the teachers, knew the answer.

The overall theme for the NEH series was "Making Sense of the Civil War," and the title of the chapter from the anthology of readings for this night was "The Shape of the War." Instead of questions suggested in the guide—"Was McClellan's behavior affected by his being a Democrat?" "If Antietam was a Union victory, why did the Democrats win the 1862 elections?"—I started us off with an inquiry sparked by the chapter title: "If you were to describe the 'shape of the war,' what would it be and why?" I asked them to do a four-minute freewrite in response to the question or to be brave and try to draw the shape of the war as they imagined it. I announced we would hear and see these.

I could tell that the Civil War study group was taken aback by the peculiarity of the question. For a fleeting moment, I could sense the resistance, the kind I used to feel when I asked 8th-graders a quirky question.

Jean, who had sat quietly at the far end of the table, was the first to make public her image: "I see it as a series of shapes, with edges and spikes that rise and fall, 'looks like we're winning, now we're losing . . .'" She showed us a drawing that looked like a graph of unemployment since 2007.

Janet, a visitor to our town from England, announced that she had written only "I don't know what shape of the war means because I don't know enough."

"Janet," I said, "suppose you based your response on what you do know? Or you wrote some questions about what you would like to know? The idea is that we each work from the place we know, not the place we think we ought to be or that you imagine the teacher wants you to be." I was launching an idea that might convince her to freewrite the next time.

When it appeared time to start a new thread of conversation, I turned to a question I had prepared in advance: "Given that the theme of this series is 'Making Sense of The Civil War,' what sense are you making?"

"We're learning that the study of war is far more complex than just why it happened, and that random acts had an impact on its course—like the crater debacle at Petersburg, and McClellan's caution," said Kurt, our Civil War buff.

"Sheldon [the historian for the series] gave us another way of thinking about the meaning of the war when he talked about the far-reaching effects of the war on freeing woman," said Lynn, who up until this point had not talked much, though her eyes had shown her engagement.

"Right," Jean added, "and this whole series has changed my perspective on the meaning of the war—not just on the increased role of women in the economy, but with the role of civilians, such as in Geraldine Brooks's novel *March*, which we all read, the importance of changing technology in war—those cannon causing such high death counts—the effect on race relationships, on our daily lives."

When selecting questions or prompts, I have a set of criteria. First, I look for inquiry questions—questions to which no specific answer can be found. (What was the shape of the war?) Such questions are problematic, invite speculation, inspire curiosity, and sustain discourse. They tend to draw us into conceptual and holistic thinking about the topic at hand. I included the visual thinking suggestion because it inevitably draws out unique perspectives. Visual thinking adds layers and texture to our understanding.

I also devise questions that require a combination of personal knowledge and an understanding of, or questions about, the curriculum materials—questions that result in responses that will be unique to the individuals—questions that lead the responder to make connections on the basis of his / her own experience and perspective on the academic material. For example, what meaning are you making of this war?

In addition, I avoid questions in which the answer is embedded in the query or the answer can be found in a line or two of the text. For example, the answer to the query

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about McClellan's behavior being due to his affiliation with the Democratic Party lies in the question. McClellan's military decision not to pursue Lee into Virginia after Antietam matched the Democrats' political policy that the federal government should defeat the Confederacy by preventing it from waging war in the north, not by sweeping in to conquer the south.

Finding questions in the subject you are teaching that involve conflicts between values leads to interactive, lively discussion. These questions maximize the potential for debate, for commitment out of conviction, and engagement in the discourse. The teacher's role is to use these experiences to encourage listening to one another, and believing before doubting, as author Peter Elbow says, and even the willingness to change your mind.

The Success of Writing to Think

Successful discourse depends on questions that invite full participation. One of the best ways I know to maximize the numbers of the "confident" is to ask members of the group to write informally before we talk. Writing gives everyone time to think. Writing tends to lead to reflection. In classrooms, as in life, it's easier to slip into performance and showing off what we know when we are called on to talk. Writing and hearing that writing maximizes thoughtful and honest discourse. When participants begin to talk rather than read their writing, I quietly remind them, "For now, we're hearing your writing."

I always take a seat in the circle. I write and read along with the participants. It's possible my actions will send a message that we all have a similar role in here, like being selected for an office in the organization. It legitimizes participation for the more diffident.

Fellow teachers to whom I recommend this approach often resist: "Oh, they will never write." I reply: "I can't teach anyone how to set a mood that assumes we are all participants in the venture. It's about wearing an attitude that communicates several thoughts at once: your thinking is valuable, we will not judge, jump in; your classmates or I will rescue you if you start to drown, you will benefit from being part of the exchange of ideas." If the teacher's bearing transmits the words *I expect this*, students of all ages catch on, despite their natural resistance. Becoming adept at setting an expectation that everyone will participate takes will (a belief in the process) and practice, practice, practice. Magic happens when we are patient.

Listening

Energy flows when ideas and questions in the inquiry emerge organically in discourse. Once the discussion takes off, the skills needed are careful listening to responses, and, when there is a lull or the conversation appears to lose momentum, inserting a question that causes participants to jump to another level. To recharge a discussion, I often refer back to a comment someone made earlier.

Again, developing the skill of remembering the multitude of responses takes time. I take notes, often without looking at the paper, tracking what participants have said, starring the comments that I predict will set off a spark—my way of easily identifying juicy thoughts when I want to return to them. Recalling who said what, so that you can use those responses to generate interaction and momentum, can't be taught from a text. It requires becoming a vigilant listener and developing antennae that radiate in all directions

Closure

Every discussion should have a beginning, middle, and end. When I looked back on how I drew closure to the Civil War discussion, I realized that I devise appropriate endings by keeping an eye on the clock, picking up on a comment from a participant, and predicting that comment will be a good ending spot. Or, I like to ask for a quick write with a prompt like: "As a response to this discussion, complete this sentence: 'I wonder, I wish, I learned, or I'm puzzled by.'" Then we hear as many of these as time permits. My intent is to have students' voices be the last we hear in class.