MRFA Lunch and Learn - Facilitating Classroom Dialogue Across Difference: An Introduction

Presented by Mirjam Knapik. (December 1, 2023)
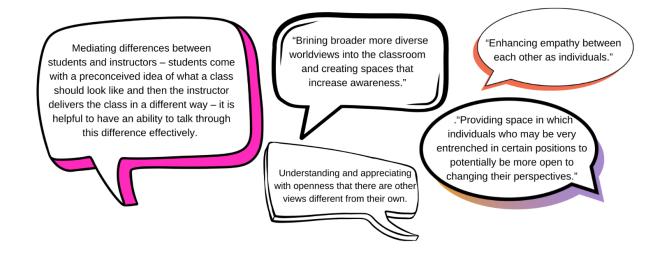
Overview

Discursive forms shape our relationships, and they can restrict our ability to relate to each other in effective ways when engaged in dialogue across difference. We need to look at our interactions and how we engage in these interactions to make improvements. The problem is not going to be solved by training people to be better informed about difficult topics; however, it can be addressed by better preparing individuals to talk about topics that can be challenging and preparing individuals to anticipate and respond effectively to the disquiet that will occur in these interactions. The reflective structure of dialogue approach is a method for handling conversations on highly controversial topics with the aim to help people talk to each other when they are having difficult conversations from emotional and entrenched positions. This session provides an introduction to this mode of interaction and this will be considered in much more depth in a series offered by ADC – Look for more information in early January.

Reflective Structured Dialogue facilitates conversations wherein people who have different beliefs and perspectives seek to develop mutual understanding.

Session Notes

- When we want to create an environment that supports dialogue across difference, it helps to know our dialogue participants as more than identity categories. One way to do this is by creating connecting questions and using these in the beginning of meetings, classes, dialogue sessions. These questions help participants to recognize each other as people with individual personalities, perspectives &c.
- This helps participants to be known better in ways that they would like to be known

Question to Consider: What do you hope your students would experience or gain from being better able to better engage with difference in classes?

Mediating differences between students and instructors – students come with a preconceived idea of what a class should look like and then the instructor delivers the class in a different way – it is helpful to have an ability to talk through this difference effectively.

"Brining broader more diverse worldviews into the classroom and creating spaces that increase awareness."

"Enhancing empathy between each other as individuals."

Understanding and appreciating with openness that there are other views different from their own.

."Providing space in which individuals who may be very entrenched in certain positions to potentially be more open to changing their perspectives."

Reflective Structure of Dialogue (Continued)

This method for handling conversations was developed to facilitate public conversations on highly controversial topics with the aim to help people talk to each other when they are having difficult conversations from very emotional and entrenched positions.

There are a lot of ways we talk to each other; for instance, we can shift into a different mode of interaction when we are speaking on a panel, in a debate, or in a Classroom. We are, likewise, able to shift how we engage in interactions where we will have dialogues across difference.

Potential Responses to *Disquiet*:

- We can become passionately certain in our positions,
- Those who are not certain one way or another or those who have nuanced views may be silenced,
- There can be a tendency to minimize within group differences (sometimes the withing group differences are not tolerated) there is an intolerance of difference within a group due to the perceived need to protect the group,
- People start to talk in slogans, use of specific vocabulary, claims of single meanings of words, using a single definition of a work to shut down dialogue,
- Defeat mode can take over where it seems like there can be a winner or loser in the conversation,
- There is a potential to attack the person and engage in personal attributions, and
- There is the tendency to engage in we/they positions to create an oppositional dynamic.

The Effect of Position on Perception:

In a study of how people's perceptions could be influenced by their commitment to a particular group and cause, participants watched a video of a protest. Certain viewers saw a protest of individuals engaged in an earnest expression of dissent. Others, with an opposing position on the same topic, saw the same video and an instance of people violently interfering with the freedoms and liberties of others. What people saw depended on their affiliation – it depended on their beliefs on the topic of the demonstration.

Possible Responses to Anticipated Disquiet in the Classroom: to Soothe

1. Avoidance of ideas that threaten one's position.

   We can feel the embodied response to the topic which is about to be broached in a conversation or article and we, therefore, avoid it completely.

2. Find shared narratives, values, and common ground.

When all is equally valued what is invoked is a simple call to mutual understanding. Relativism can have a devastating impact on productive conversation and dialogue. This is a challenge for faculty who have their own ideas about a position, and it can be hard to facilitate these conversations around difference.

3. Teach carefully around anticipated difference.
   This can result in self-censorship and have an impact on dialogue. While self-censoring can be protective in nature it does not facilitate progress or growth through dialogue.

How do Students Respond to Disquiet in the Classroom?

Drapeau, Cormier, Korner, & Whitley, 2022 study on students speaking in the classroom – [Radicalisation, Polarisation and Censorship in Psychology.](#)

- 1 in 3 were concerned someone would post critical comments about their views on social media,
- 42% were afraid to speak about gender identity,
- 33% were somewhat afraid that the professor would criticize them,
- 50% were concerned others would criticize their views, and
- 20% did not think their right to express themselves would be defended by the university.

'Safety' and 'Safe' spaces:

- What are you being protected from?
- How are these safe spaces being framed?
  - o To create a safe space we want to be able to have spaces where participants can talk about their perspectives in a space that commits to upholding their dignity, knowing they will not be shamed for expressing their perspectives.
  - o **This is not intellectual safety – you may hear difficult ideas, you may hear ideas counter to your own, you may hear things that challenge your perspectives.**
- 'Brave' and 'courageous' spaces:
  - o Courage may be required to say something, and we do not all come to the table with the same experiences in speaking in dialogue. We need to create spaces where you do not need as much courage.
  - o It takes courage to speak in many spaces in academia and for some people it can take more bravery than it does for others to speak.
  - o It may take more courage to talk to the member involved in the conversation rather than going to another individual to talk about a difference.
  - o Student Counselling Services offers a [workshop by request](#) on Skills for Professional Communication (How to Talk to Your Professor) in recognition of this as an area of growth for students. (SCS invites community members to create a group of interested individuals and they will then try to arrange a time that works for as many as possible).

Shifting the Locus of the Problem

Beginning a difficult conversation with the assumption that it will be difficult because the problem is in people creates immediate barriers for talk across difference. Instead of looking at training with intention of changing attitudes and beliefs prior to going into talk across difference, we can focus on setting up interactions that make it more likely that the dialogue will support mutual understanding. We need to consider how our interactions shape our ways of relating, and how we can engage in interactions that support staying in relation.

Discursive Forms:

- Debates / Speakers/ Panels
- Classrooms lectures etc.
- Talking Circles
- Witnessing Events (where people speak to their experiences and people listen e.g. mental health, BHM, Indigenous individuals). These witness moments are spaces where we listen and serve as witnesses and there is a different expectation on responsiveness in these moments

These discursive forms shape our relationships, and they can trap our ways of relating to each other. For instance, if you are in debate, people are expected to take a position and argue it effectively without any expectation that the interaction will shift their understanding. Patterns of interaction need to be considered and how they can be adjusted to lead to better outcomes.

Patterns of Interaction

This comes from family therapy and can help people move forward in dialogue across difference

Statement / critique / defence / critique

- [some of the things that are important about this for me are ….] they offer a position
- Then someone mentioned they are overlooking something
- Then the first indicates that they did not overlook
- Then the second speaker reinstates how they were overlooking again.

    This is a standard format in a debate but this defense and critique interaction can come into our other patterns of interaction.

- Statement
- Receive and reflect then state back
- Receive reflect and confirm and add
- Then mention how you may differ in this opinion

    This is more of an ideal situation for a conversation and this only tends to happen when we have really good agreements for how we interact with each other.

Another Pattern of Entrenchment

I think we should delay – "what matters me most is…. Then the grand pronouncement…"

Then offence is taken and a defensive reaction then shifting into a "we" perspective and not speaking from personal experience

Alternative to this pattern:

- I think we should delay – we are close but what worries me is … "What I mean is…" avoid the big pronouncement
- Receive and reflect
- Respond and consider

Embodied Interactions:

"Responses arise in us" - John Shotter

> This idea that there is no ideal conversation that we can create that can ever eliminate the responses that can arise in us. We all bring our histories and our personalities our nervous systems and physiological reactions and we can be triggered differently. We need to make room for this for knowing that responses will arise in us and talk about how to manage that.

"Be willing to meet the unexpected, or not-before-met perspective, event, or practice of living"

> We bump up against other practices of living that are different to our own and we need to be prepared for that. -McLeod and Sundet, 2022

"Respectfully talk across difference is mutually accomplished by orienting to the task at hand"

> We cannot just agree to be respectful. Respect is mutually accomplished through structured dialogue. – Mercer, 2022

EP's Reflective Structured Dialogue – a definition:

"A conversation in which people who have different beliefs and perspectives seek to develop mutual understanding"

- Opens up the possibility that you walk away from the conversation either changed or unchanged in your perspective but either way the goal is for a better understanding others' perspectives.
- This is an exploration of difference: how do we differ?
- This is not a panacea – it will not solve everything - and it does not replace other forms (debates and panels, talking circles and witnessing events – these are all ways to engage)

Reflective Structured Dialogue:
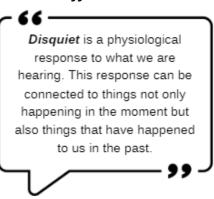
1. Focus on mutual and new understanding,
2. Allows for ways that foster connection and inclusion,
3. A Form of deliberation on difference while connecting to shared humanity (people may find similar hopes in this dialogue),

4. Listen with curiosity and move away from dichotomies, and
5. Realize that we can accomplish ethical relations when we are able to talk back and forth.

Includes agreements that guide interactions, turn taking, and structures that slow down interactions, create time for reflection, in ways that decrease defensiveness, emotionally reactive responses, and polarization.

Sample Agreements that Support *Dialogue Across Difference*

- This is part of the structure that facilitators set up for interactions between participants in dialogue.

- In a classroom you may, for example, examine competing hypotheses and things can move smoothly when all are oriented to the same task at hand. However, when we are oriented to the exchange in diverse ways and different perspectives collide, people can experience *disquiet* that can range from discomfort to outrage about what is being heard. We need to consider how we respond to this disquiet.

> **Disquiet** is a physiological response to what we are hearing. This response can be connected to things not only happening in the moment but also things that have happened to us in the past.

- By having agreements we can create patterns that we can all adhere to and recognize. Then, as a facilitator we can bring a conversation back to an agreement and ask that a comment be shifted slightly to fit with an agreement. A sampling of these follow:

  o ***"We will speak for ourselves"***

  > When we only speak for ourselves it interrupts a pattern of speaking as if the speaker represents what whole groups believe and experience, which can set up an "us against them" positioning. As well, speaking for ourselves will helpfully tap into what led us to arrive at our conclusions and beliefs, a process that for all involved treats everyone's conclusions and beliefs as ones we have come to (as opposed to found truths).

  o ***"We will avoid grand pronouncements"***

  > This helps participants to be aware of how such pronouncements create less space for other voices. =When we make grand pronouncements like "we all know that…" or "we are all in agreement…," these kind of statements close space and make it more difficult to bring forward other perspectives.

  o ***"We will listen with resilience"***

  > This normalizes that we may experience *disquiet* in response, that it may be because there is something happening in the conversation causing this response, but it may also be connected to something beyond that conversation: our personal history, our capacity for tolerating discomfort, etc. It recognizes people may need to exert effort to listen with resilience, to continue to be in the conversation even if it is uncomfortable.

  o ***"We will share the 'airtime'…"***

  > ▪ There is the responsibility to create and share airtime – to do this you also need to provide time for folks to prepare what they are going to say. Giving participants time to write down their thoughts supports their ability listen fully to others, knowing that when it is their turn to speak they can refer to their notes. It also tends to reduce the possibility that people share their reaction to what was said, and makes it more likely they will share their own thoughts.

- o **"We will avoid making negative attributions…"**
    - ▪ This acknowledges our tendency to make assumptions about people's intentions and beliefs from very little information. It supports making an effort to check in with each other that we have understood another correctly before responding.
- o **"We will speak from our own experiences…"**
    - ▪ Having the perspective and self awareness to know why we have come to have a specific position is helpful in engaging in conversations that open space and lead to mutual understanding.
- Comments on these sample agreements in the classroom:
    - o These agreements reflect broader goals and create a structure
    - o Not every class needs to be focussed around dialogue across difference but we can shift into this dialogue mode when we need to when there is disquiet in a classroom
    - o This dialogue can help lead to a different experience and interaction than we are typically used to.

Moving Forward:

A series offered through ADC about how to incorporate in the classroom and how to apply it in different situations. Please look for details in early January. As well there is another presentation on [Dialogue Across Difference for the Conversation That Matter Series, online January 10, 2024](#).

If we consider the problem with talk across difference (polarization, entrenchment) occurs because of how we interact – we can forego pointing fingers at people. There is little evidence that focusing on as the problem and training them on the issues, is going to be the solution. The actual effect of diversity training for example, is not, so far, showing good outcomes and some of the literature on the subject indicates that this training can actually can make situations worse by causing further entrenchment etc.

The hope for reflective structured dialogue is that we will be able to observe, in the moment, if the structure and format has improved the dialogue and if mutual understanding has emerged.

Discussion:

There are students who are very shy and they are going through things that they may not or should not share – is there a way for them to share some things in an anonymous way to share information about themselves to help them to be better known to their peers. This anonymous sharing could bring empathy in the classroom and can help to humanize people in this dialogue.

- Use a non-threatening question that is enough to share and help to recognize us as individuals.
- Make a comment that there will be things that happen to us all throughout the semester that can impact our ability to engage and so we need to not make assumptions or attributions to individuals – to our peers – we need to create a culture where we recognize we are all individuals.

- Building this understanding in the classroom early in the semester helps moving forward. Then you can check in mid-way through the semester: ask that students remind each other of the resources that are available and to talk to each other, to you, or to the Chair when they need to.
  - o Peer evaluation in group projects should be mindful of mutual understanding and attribution errors.
  - o There should be opportunity to recognize this and be able to face situations in your group and have a mechanism to respond. The students should talk to each other in these situations and be open: not hostile or angry.

There is a training June 4-5 from the Essential Partners organization on creating dialogic classrooms and how to incorporate this in various sized classrooms.

We do not all come to the conversation with the same capacities – talking from your experience is helpful but there can be oversharing that can happen too.

Listen to understand rather than listening to respond.

- There needs to be an intentional effort to listen to understand a perspective rather than listening while preparing to respond.
- We need to step away form the requirement to have an immediate response – build in time to reflect and respond.
- Step back from a particular divisive issue and consider a broader perspective on the topic at hand and consider it from a values perspective. Take time to reflect and write it down then listen for everyone to say what they think and to listen intently.
- If you have a question, write it down when they are speaking and consider if it is a genuine question or if it is a question you are using to make a point.
  - o If it is not a genuine question can it be reframed?
- Using this reflective process where everyone is truly listening ensures that everything gets slowed down: this interrupts the pattern that creates polarization.