

How Not to Lead a Class Discussion

Dawn Skorczewski

“They wouldn’t answer my question.” “They looked at me like I had just spoken another language.” “I don’t think they read the assigned text.” “It was like pulling teeth.” We’ve all taught classes in which the discussion simply does not work. When we try to describe what happens in these hours, we often use visceral images that depict us as dentists pulling teeth from patients who have not been given anesthetic, or as miracle workers raising bodies from the dead. We cast ourselves as hardworking professionals who face crowds of lazy or passive or baffled students. When the discussion is not working, we invoke our authority and expertise as teachers to think carefully about what to do. But when our discussions go well, we are more likely to use plural pronouns and emotive imagery to talk about them. We say that “we were in the groove,” “on the same wavelength,” or “tuned in.” When it goes well, in other words, we relax into it; we let it flow. We become an earnest group of human beings thinking and arguing together. But what are we doing when the discussion is at its best? How is it that a teacher uses his or her expertise to transform a mass of individuals into a community of thinkers on any given day? In short, what does a teacher do to make the discussion work?

Consider this comment, from an award-winning teacher at an institution that enrolls students with very high grades and SAT scores: “When they are not talking, and I have tried every kind of question I know, I simply throw up my hands and lecture; this can go on for a semester. So I just chalk up the bad classes to experience and wait for the next good one to come along.” For this teacher, there is nothing to be done about students who do not answer her pointed textual questions. When her usual moves do not work, the class enters a stalemate, which she ends by becoming the only speaker in the room. We might argue that this teacher presents a simple problem, and that she needs discussion-leading strategies to help her “save” the bad class. I might agree, except that when I have offered teachers I supervise a set of suggestions such as those from teaching manuals (see Brookfield and Preskill, 1999; Gottschalks, 1994; and Tiberius and Tipping, 2000), the teachers often found that their discussions still

lacked energy and direction. I have also tried those techniques myself, with very mixed results. These experiences have led me to believe that perhaps more than a set of discussion-leading skills, teachers who want to improve their class discussions need ways of thinking about what is happening in their classrooms that are more specific to them, the language, or grammar, in other words, of their particular classrooms.

How does one speak about a teacher's "felt sense" of what it means to lead a classroom? I believe that we might begin to answer this question by examining moment-to-moment interactions between students and teachers in discussions that go awry. When teachers monitor their own and their students' reactions in the "here and now" of a discussion, they can first identify, and then make explicit use of their ways of interacting with students in the classroom as clues to improving their pedagogy.

As we lead discussions, we monitor the discussion with what Theodore Reik (1948), drawing from Freud's concept of "evenly hovering attention," calls "a third ear." We are both in the discussion and we are watching it from outside, looking for signs of students' interest, disinterest, engagement, or boredom. We monitor the conversation even as we participate in it. We help it stay on course, but we also look for cues about its direction. Henry Smith explains that "Evenly-hovering attention . . . serve[s] a kind of gyroscopic function in allowing the [teacher] to be both fixed and free, to scan for what may be missing, to return to a point at centre, and to be alert for surprises from multiple directions" (Smith, 1995, p. 69). Like the analyst, in other words, the teacher cultivates the ability to "listen simultaneously on many levels" (Heimann, 1950, p. 82). We might say that this happens all the time in discussions in writing classrooms, that we monitor the discussions we are leading from within and from the outside. We pay attention to our students' and our own reactions, even those just outside the realm of our immediate attention, as we attempt to keep ourselves and the class on track.

One of the requirements of my first semester writing course is that students lead a twenty-minute discussion of one of the readings on our syllabus. On the first day of class, I distribute a sign-up sheet and a list of suggestions for how to lead a discussion. I also include a list of the criteria by which the students will be judged: imagination, engagement with the text, and authoritative management of the conversation, student-centered writing activities, and enthusiasm. When we consider the discussion as something a class is creating together, something that is both in and outside of the individuals in the room, we monitor our own experiences of "it" for clues for how and where to proceed. We note our tension when a student who talks all the time raises her hand yet again, for example, or the anger that rises up in us when a student opens his mouth and releases an audible yawn. But what do we do once we have identified these reactions? And how do we teach new instructors to pay attention and act on their own reactions without becoming paranoid—reactive to every single gesture students make in a classroom?

Halfway through the semester in my graduate course in teaching composition last year, we confronted this dilemma head on. Sharon was leading a discussion of Mary Louise Pratt's (2002) "Arts of the Contact Zone." She began by asking a string of "guess what I am thinking and I will tell you if you are right" questions. "What is the contact zone?" she asked. "Where does Pratt talk about literacy?" "What is autoethnography?" The usually boisterous class became silent. A few students attempted to answer, but Sharon was unable to channel their answers into a larger discussion. Once they had defined the terms she listed, she did not have an idea of what they should do. She seemed frozen, responded in a monotone, with few words, and moved to present another series of questions. After each question a silence descended on the room. Quickly, the silence was filled by another question.

Sensing what I thought was a look of desperation on Sharon's face, and frustration on the faces of her students, and attending as well to my own feelings of anxiety and helplessness, I asked Sharon if we could call a "freeze frame" to discuss our progress thus far. Sharon nodded. Several students said that they felt that she had an idea of what they should say, and so they felt hesitant to speak. I concurred, adding that perhaps they could assist Sharon in finding a way to ask more open-ended questions. As I finished speaking, I noticed that Sharon had begun to cry. Other students noticed too. I felt the eyes of the class on me, and I struggled internally with what to do. Was this my fault? Had I precipitated a discussion that might have evolved more naturally, or at the very least, been initiated by Sharon rather than me?

"Oh dear," I said, "I am sorry if this freeze frame upset you."

"It's not you," she said, "or anyone here." "I have PMS. I always cry when I have PMS." Many of the students laughed. One woman said, "I know exactly what you mean." Another woman commented that Sharon was brave to be so forthright in front of the class. In the minute that followed, Sharon regained her composure, asked another, more open-ended question, and proceeded to manage a discussion that became quite lively. It was particularly enhanced by the comments of the women in the room, who began to take charge of the movement of the discussion. They provided examples from their own lives, made connections between quotations from the text and their experiences, and referred to each other's comments when they spoke. One woman brought up a text the students had read for the previous class, an essay by Adrienne Rich (2002), "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." She thought that the poems in Rich's essay were examples of writing from the contact zone, but she was not a big fan of the essay overall. She felt (as students often do when they read this essay) that Rich's tone was too dogmatic.

I relaxed in my chair as this discussion proceeded. Sharon was in control, and her classmates were helping her. They had become a working group, and they appeared to be enjoying themselves as well. Sharon's PMS comment had, I believed, altered the implicit relationships in the classroom by calling attention to the fact

circumstances. As I smiled to myself, one of the men in the class, Kevin, joined the conversation in an animated way. He agreed that Rich was dogmatic. He said that he was particularly angry with Rich's use of Diane Wakowski's poetry as an example of feminist writing. Rich's characterization of Wakowski was, he argued, completely wrong. He provided evidence. "I know Diane Wakowski. I had dinner with her one night when she read in Oakland, California, where I was a student before I transferred here. The poet Rich describes is nothing like the Diane Wakowski I know. Diane Wakowski is a wonderful lady."

As Kevin spoke, I continued to feel content with the way the class was moving. The students were engaged in a real discussion; they were making connections between the text and their lives, and had even ventured into another text for evidence for the debate. The student discussion leader had been saved, and might even decide that she had led a wonderful discussion after all. Buoyed by my relief, I then made a terrible mistake. I laughed aloud at Kevin's comment about Wakowski. I kept thinking about the presidential debate in which one candidate turned to the other and said, "Senator, you are no Jack Kennedy." As I laughed, others in the room joined me. After a moment, the room had dissolved into giggles and chuckles.

Kevin, however, was not laughing. He looked at me quizzically. "What are you laughing about?" I told him what his comment had reminded me of. The class looked at me, puzzled. Not one of them had heard this before. Second, they reacted to Kevin's face. He was hurt.

Suddenly I realized that my laughter emanated more from relief than from recognition of an old memory. I had been so nervous about Sharon's discussion, particularly my interruption of it that I had seized on Kevin's example as a ready release. In the process, I made him into an escape valve for the anxious energy that had gathered in the room, and in me. The class had joined me, perhaps because they too were on edge, and because I was giving them permission to laugh at this moment, just as I had given them permission to try to assist Sharon when I called a freeze frame. I also suspected that Kevin's gender contributed to my laughter. Was it possible that I was slightly embarrassed that women's bodies had entered our discussion? Perhaps I felt the need to assert my authority in response to a man, to show that women teachers could be "in charge" without having to deny that they also have bodies? At each of these moments, I held the authority in the room about as stridently as a teacher can; I authorized laughter in Kevin's case, and criticism of another student, in Sharon's. And my feelings of anxiety, embarrassment, and relief became the group's to manage rather than simply my own.

I realized the irony of my wielding of teacherly authority in a freeze frame attempt to "save" someone else's discussion in the split second that I saw Kevin's hurt face and noted the faces of his classmates, who clearly sympathized with him. So I decided that I needed to apologize to Kevin and called another freeze frame. This time I would be the one whose pedagogy was up for discussion, I said, and I encouraged all of the students to comment on my

disruption of the discussion. I purposely invited criticism at this point. I told my students that criticizing the instructor is very hard for students to do, that I recognized that it was difficult but that I really thought I had hurt someone's feelings, and I wanted them to comment on how this had happened, if they could. In the back of my mind I realized that this conversation could lead us right back to our discussion of the contact zone. But I also recognized that I was taking control of the class again—Sharon had no authority in this situation except as the discussion leader.

The tension in the room as I called a freeze frame to discuss my laughter at Kevin was palpable. Several of the women who had come to Sharon's rescue said that they thought my laughter had hurt Kevin's feelings and disrupted the class. Kevin insisted that he was merely confused, but I feared he could not say that he'd been hurt as well. I suggested that the problem was the way I was using my authority as a teacher even though it was not mine to use at that moment in the discussion, since another student was actually in that role. I was introducing a "way of being together" with my students that did not correctly fit the situation. In other words, I was misreading their implicit cues about how they wanted to be taught. Many students agreed. Susan, a student who could always be counted on to say exactly what was on her mind, suggested that we correct the problem by returning the leadership of the discussion to its rightful owner. All agreed, and the contact zone debate ensued once again. My comment and the freeze frame after it were not attended to again.

This example of what might be called an "interactive error" offered opportunities for me and my students to discover and explore "new ways of being together" in the classroom, ways that expanded our understanding of each other, the course material, and what was possible for us to do in the classroom (Tronick 2003, p. 2). It also taught me something about how important it is to consider when to reveal observations made by my "evenly hovering attention" in the classroom. When I called a freeze frame in Sharon's discussion, my internal reactions to the discussion were not terribly productive when shared with my students, because I was not the one in charge. In addition, my attention was not really "even"; my students' positions in the conversation were not taken into account, and my effort "to help" backfired into a usurpation of two students' authority. Add to this the difficult issue of the emotional atmosphere in the classroom when the conversation is stilted or when most of the class sits in silence while a few students attempt to move the conversation along. It would seem to be a wonderful strategy to attempt to release anxiety in such a class. But to do so at the expense of one of the students is neither fair nor productive, particularly when the anxiety is also, clearly, my own.

Perhaps the most valuable lesson to be learned from this and the other teaching encounters I have described here is of one of humility and flexibility. If a teacher can listen carefully to what is happening in the classroom, and respond to what is happening there from moment to moment, she might well be able to attend to and continue to shape what is going on even as she invites the

class to have a say in what that is. A class is something that students and teachers create together, so it is not the sole domain of the instructor to ensure that the discussion works. But it is the instructor's role to set up the conditions under which discussions might thrive, to closely monitor her reactions to the discussion as it is taking place, to try to see what she is bringing to the conversation, and to make the classroom a place where discussion of the here and now is a natural thing to do. In this sense, the teacher has a role in helping students establish and explore the parameters of what is possible to be thought and said in the classroom. This is particularly the work of an instructor in the very first part of a course, when a teacher demonstrates his or her willingness to, as Rouzie (2001) terms it "engage in the play" (p. 287).

My own favorite metaphor for the classroom discussion originated from early conversations about the teacher's "bag of tricks." Rather than thinking of the classroom as a place in which we perform tricks, or teach our students to do so, I now tend to imagine the classroom as a space we enter with our own "bags of toys." Our bags of toys are special to us, even precious, and they have been with us for so long that we sometimes take it for granted that they exist at all. Call these toys experiences. They may be interpersonal, as in our ways of relating in a group: lively or thoughtful, strident or shy. They may include our personal tastes and opinions, such as how we like the chairs to be close to each other in the circle, without extra ones in the middle, or how we like the break to occur two-thirds of the way through the class rather than halfway (so the last part flies by). They may include our ways of reading, with a pen, or highlighter, and our preference for reading aloud in a slow, thoughtful voice. They may also include our ways of questioning: in the voice of a pensive philosopher, or a drill sergeant, or a talk show host, or a crafty artisan.

If we are to have successful classes, we must attend to the fact that our students come into the classroom with their own bags of toys, most of which include the offerings of their previous teachers as well as those of parents, peers, and all of the other important relationships and experiences they have had. Whatever we all hold in our bags, it can be the case in any classroom that some peoples' toys matter much more than others. I recall a classroom, for example, in which our instructor effectively walked into the room, dumped her toys on the desk, built a beautiful interpretation with them, and then invited us to do the same. Or how about the classroom in which the only toys that matter are students' experiences? Course evaluations of such classrooms often indicate that the students wanted more guidance from the instructor. In the classroom discussion that I am trying to imagine here, students and teacher enter the room, spread their toys out on the floor, and then experiment with and think about what they might create together. They also reflect on what they are doing as they construct it, both to name what they are doing for themselves and to determine where they will go in their future work together. It is together, then, that they shape what is called discussion, and this discussion changes shape as it goes.

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