THE SKILLFUL TEACHER

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Please note that this workshop packet is a resource. I will not go through the items sequentially, nor will I address every one. They are there simply for reference.

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A S S U M P T I O N S
O F S K I L L F U L
T E A C H I N G

GOOD TEACHING = WHATEVER
HELPS STUDENTS LEARN

BEST TEACHING IS CRITICALLY
REFLECTIVE - CONSTANT SCRUTINY
OF ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT TEACHING
/CONDITIONS FOSTERING LEARNING

MOST IMPORTANT KNOWLEDGE
TEACHERS NEED TO DO GOOD
WORK - HOW STUDENTS
EXPERIENCE THEIR LEARNING

TREATING PEOPLE AS ADULTS
AN APPROACH TO TEACHING

(3 'R's)

R E S P E C T

R E S E A R C H

R E S P O N S I V E N E S S

C R E D I B I L I T Y

E X P E R T I S E

E X P E R I E N C E

R A T I O N A L E

C O N V I C T I O N

A U T H E N T I C I T Y

C O N G R U E N C E

F U L L D I S C L O S U R E

R E S P O N S I V E N E S S

P E R S O N H O O D

E R R O R

E X P E R I E N C I N G
L E A R N I N G

I M P O S T O R S H I P

C U L T U R A L
S U I C I D E

L O S T I N N O C E N C E

I N C R E M E N T A L
F L U C T U A T I O N
(ROADRUNNING)

C O M M U N I T Y

BUILDING COMMITMENT TO LEARNING 5

R E S E A R C H

F O R M E R
R E S I S T E R S

M O D E L I N G

S I M U L A T I O N

V A R I E T Y

P R A I S E

F A I L U R E P R O O F

C O N V E R S I O N A L
O B S E S S I O N

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MODELING CRITICAL THINKING & CRITICAL REFLECTION

TALKING OUT LOUD

C. I. Q.
(Performance
Instruction
Meetings)

TALKING PRACTICE
- taking the lead

JOURNALING
& public airing

INSTRUCTION
assumption analysis
devil's advocate
questions unanswered
group participatio

LEARNING STYLES

Kolb – Adapative/Learning Style Inventory
MBTI
Syllabus Bound/Free
Convergent/Divergent
Field Dependent/Independent

Pre-assessment

Group learners by style

Use varied modalities – individual, group, visuals, presentations, kinetic – based on 5 senses

Talk out rationale for varied modalities

Team teaching

Negotiate projects & assignments based on different modalities

C L A S S R O O M
R E S E A R C H
T E C H N I Q U E S

C. I. Q.

MUDDIEST POINT

ONE MINUTE PAPER

AFTER CLASS GROUP /
CLASS ADVISORY PANEL

VIDEO

PEER OBSERVATION

TEAM TEACHING

LEARNING AUDIT

L E A R N I N G A U D I T

WHAT CAN YOU DO NOW
THAT YOU COULDN'T DO
THIS TIME LAST WEEK ?

WHAT DO YOU KNOW NOW
THAT YOU DIDN'T KNOW
THIS TIME LAST WEEK ?

WHAT COULD YOU TEACH
SOMEONE TO KNOW OR DO
THAT YOU COULDN'T TEACH
THEM THIS TIME LAST WEEK?

ONE MINUTE PAPER

WHAT WAS ....

THE MOST IMPORTANT
IDEA / INSIGHT

THE QUESTION THAT
MOST NEEDS ADDRESSING

"*THE MUDDIEST POINT* "

WHAT WAS .....

THE MOST CONFUSING IDEA

THE MOST POORLY
EXPLAINED IDEA

THE MOST POORLY
DEMONSTRATED PROCESS

THE LEAST CLEAR
IDEA OR TECHNIQUE

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The Classroom Critical Incident Questionnaire

Please take about five minutes to respond to each of the questions below about this week's class(es). Don't put your name on the form - your responses are anonymous. When you have finished writing, put one copy of the form on the table by the door and keep the other copy for yourself. At the start of next week's class I will be sharing the group's responses with all of you. Thanks for taking the time to do this. What you write will help me make the class more responsive to your concerns.

At what moment in class this week did you feel most engaged with what was happening ?

At what moment in class this week did you feel most distanced from what was happening ?

What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most affirming or helpful ?

What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class this week did you find most puzzling or confusing ?

What about the class this week surprised you the most ? (This could be something about your own reactions to what went on, or something that someone did, or anything else that occurs to you).

W H Y C.I.Q.'s ?

P R O B L E M S W A R N E D

G R O U N D S A C T I O N S

S T U D E N T
R E F L E C T I V I T Y

B U I L D S T R U S T

D I V E R S E M E T H O D S

C R I T I C A L
T H I N K I N G

H E L P F U L
E V A L U A T I O N S

CLEAR **IMMEDIATE**

REGULAR **ACCESSIBLE**

INDIVIDUALIZED **AFFIRMING**

FUTURE-ORIENTED

EDUCATIVE

Discussion Ground Rules 15

1. Think of the best group discussions you've ever been involved in. What things happened that made these conversations so satisfying ?
Make a few notes on this by yourself.

2. Think of the worst group discussions you've ever been involved in. What things happened that made these conversations so unsatisfactory ?
Make a few notes on this by yourself.

3. Now form a group with 3 other people. Take turns in talking about what made discussion groups work so well for you. Listen for common themes, shared experiences and features of conversation that a majority of you would like to see in the course

4. Take turns in talking about what made discussion group work so awful for you. Listen for common themes, shared experiences and features of group conversation that a majority of you would like to see avoided in this course.

5. For each of the characteristics of good discussion you agree on, try and suggest three things a group could do to ensure that these characteristics were present. Be as specific and concrete as you can. For example, if you feel good conversation is developmental, with later themes building on and referring back to earlier ones, then you could propose a rule that every new comment made by a participant is prefaced with an explanation as to how it relates to an earlier comment.

6. For each of the characteristics of bad discussion you agree on, try and suggest three things a group could do to ensure that these characteristics were avoided. Be as specific and concrete as you can. For example, if you feel that bad conversation happens when one person's voice dominates then you could propose a rule whereby once someone has spoken they are not allowed to make a second comment until at least three other people have spoken (unless another group member explicitly invites the participant to say something else).

7. Try and finish this exercise by drafting a charter for discussion that comprises the specific ground rules you agree on. We will make each group's rules public and see if we can develop a charter for discussion to guide us in the coming weeks.

Creating Discussion Ground Rules through Video Vignettes
Instructions to Students

You're going to see two 5 minute excerpts of different discussions. Please watch for the kinds of comments, contributions and actions that you think are good, and bad, discussion behaviors. Note these down by yourself. Don't discuss your reactions

with others at this stage. You might find it helpful to watch the video with the following questions in mind ...

(i) In your view which participants made the best, most helpful or most useful contributions to the discussion ? Why were these contributions so worthwhile ?

(ii) In your view which participants made the worst, least helpful or least useful contributions to the discussion ? Why were these contributions so irrelevant or unproductive ?

(iii) What changes would you introduce to improve either of theses discussions ?

Now, compare your responses with the reactions of others in your group. Look particularly for areas of agreement. Based on these, could you suggest any guidelines that would ensure that helpful discussion behaviors are encouraged ? When we reconvene we will see if your notes can help us decide on the discussion guidelines we want to follow in this course.

Making Ground Rules Specific

Our role as teachers in these exercises is not to suggest images of how we think good discussants behave. That's the business of group members. However, when it comes to translating these images into specific rules of conduct we have found that students do need some help. If the class agrees that good discussions involve lots of people talking then we'll work with them to suggest ways to make this more likely to happen. We'll suggest some specific possibilities such as putting a time limit on individual contributions or regularly calling for a circle of voices where each person in turn is given the floor. "I want people to listen carefully to what I'm saying" can be accomplished by suggesting a weekly circular response discussion period in which students take turns to listen carefully, paraphrase and then respond to each others' contributions).

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CRITICAL DEBATE INSTRUCTIONS

Find a contentious issue on which opinion is divided amongst participants. Frame the issue as a debate motion.

Propose the motion to participants. By a show of hands ask people either to volunteer to work on a team that is preparing arguments to support the motion or to volunteer to work on a team that is preparing arguments to oppose the motion.

Announce that all those who have prepared to work on the team to draft arguments to support the motion will now comprise the team to draft arguments to oppose the motion. Similarly, all those who have prepared to work on the team to draft arguments to oppose the motion will now comprise the team to draft arguments to support the motion.

Conduct the debate. Each team chooses one person to present their arguments. After initial presentations the teams reconvene to draft rebuttal arguments and choose one person to present these.

Debrief the debate. Discuss with participants their experience of this exercise. Focus on how it felt to argue against positions you were committed to. What new ways of thinking about the issue were opened up? Did participants come to new understandings? Did they change their positions on this issue at all?

Ask participants to write a follow up reflection paper on the debate. Here's the instructions ...

1. What assumptions about the issue that you hold were clarified or confirmed for you by the debate ?

2. Which of your assumptions surprised you during the debate ? In other words, were you made aware of assumptions you hold that you didn't know you had ?

3. How could you check out these new assumptions ? What sources of evidence would you consult ?

4. What new perspectives on the issue suggested themselves to you ?

5. In what ways, if any, were your existing assumptions challenged or changed by the debate ?

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Circular Response Discussions

The circular response exercise is a way to democratize discussion participation, to promote continuity and to give people some experience of the effort required in respectful listening. In this process participants sit in a circle so that everyone can see each other, and each person in turn takes up to a minute to talk about an issue or question that the group has agreed to discuss.

Speakers are not free, however, to say anything they want. They must incorporate into their remarks some reference to the preceding speaker's message and then use this as a springboard for their own comments. This doesn't have to be an agreement – it can be an expression of dissent from the previous opinion. The important thing is that the previous person's comments are the prompt for whatever is being said in circular response. What speakers articulate depends on listening well to the preceding speaker as much as on generating new or unspoken ideas. The optimal size for this exercise is 6-8 participants. Here's the instructions:

Choose a theme that the group wishes to discuss, form into a circle and ask for a volunteer to start the discussion. This person speaks up to a minute or so about the theme chosen. After the minute is up, the first discussant yields the floor and the person sitting to the discussant's left speaks for a minute or so. The second discussant must show in her contribution how what she is saying springs from, or is in response to, the comments of the first discussant. After a minute or so, the second discussant stops speaking, and the person to her left becomes the third discussant, and thus the discussion moves all the way around the circle. To sum up:

1. no one may be interrupted while speaking;

2. no one may speak out of turn in the circle;

3. each person is allowed only a minute or so to speak;

4. each person, in all comments, must strive to show how his or her remarks spring from, or respond to, the comments of the previous discussant.

After each discussant has had a turn to speak, the floor is opened for general conversation, and the previous ground rules are no longer in force.

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CONVERSATIONAL MOVES

Paste the conversational moves listed below on 3x5 cards and randomly distribute them among participants before a pre-arranged discussion session. Ask participants to practice their move during the discussion that follows. When the discussion is over distribute the entire list of moves so people can see the wide variety of ways that questioning, listening and responding can be practiced. Point out to participants that virtually all the moves listed are designed to strengthen connections among group members and to reinforce the notion that discussion is truly a collaborative process.

Specific Moves

Ask a question or make a comment that shows you are interested in what another person says

Ask a question or make a comment that encourages another person to elaborate on something they have already said

Make a comment that underscores the link between two people's contributions - make this link explicit in your comment

Use body language (in only a slightly exaggerated way) to show interest in what different speakers are saying

Make a comment indicating that you found another person's ideas interesting or useful. Be specific as to why this was the case

Contribute something that builds on, or springs from, what someone else has said. Be explicit about the way you are building on the other person's thoughts

Make a comment that at least partly paraphrases a point someone has already made

Make an summary observation that takes into account several people's contributions & that touches on a recurring theme in the discussion

Find a way to express appreciation for the enlightenment you have gained from the discussion. Try to be specific about what helped you understand something better

Ask a cause and effect question - for example, "can you explain why you think it's true that if these things are in place such and such a thing will occur?"

When you think it's appropriate, ask the group for a moment's silence to slow the pace of conversation and give you, and others, time to think

Disagree with someone in a respectful and constructive way

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CONVERSATIONAL ROLES

Practice in playing different conversational roles helps create opportunities for the more tentative students to speak, thereby building their confidence. Any roles assigned must be alternated so that everyone takes their turn.

Problem, Dilemma, or Theme Poser

This participant has the task of introducing the topic of conversation. She draws on her own ideas and experiences as a way of helping others into conversation about the theme.

Reflective Analyst

This member keeps a record of the conversation's development. Every 20 minutes or so, she gives a summary that focuses on shared concerns, issues skirted, and emerging common themes.

Scrounger

The scrounger listens for helpful resources, suggestions, and tips that participants have voiced as they discuss how to work through a problem or situation. She keeps a record of these ideas that is read out before the session ends.

Devil's Advocate

This person listens carefully for any emerging consensus. When she hears this she formulates and expresses a contrary view. This keeps group-think in check and helps participants explore a range of alternative interpretations.

Detective

The detective listens carefully for unacknowledged, unchecked and unchallenged biases that seem to be emerging in the conversation. As she hears these she brings them to the group's attention. She assumes particular responsibility for alerting group members to concerns of race, class and gender. She listens for cultural blindness, gender insensitivity, and comments that ignore variables of power and class.

Theme Spotter

This participant identifies themes that arise during the discussion that are left unexplored and that might form a focus for the next session.

Umpire

This person listens for judgmental comments that sound offensive, insulting and demeaning, and that contradict ground rules for discussion generated by group members.

Textual Focuser

Whenever assertions are made that seem unconnected to the text being discussed, this person asks the speaker to let the group know where the point being made occurs.

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Hatful of Quotes

One question that invariably arises regarding exercises such as the circle of voices and circular response, concerns whether or not teachers should require all students to participate. Mandating speech seems like an exercise of teacher power that stands in direct contrast to the spirit of democratic conversation. However, I believe that there are occasions when it is justifiable to exercise power in this way. bell hooks (1994, p. 41) describes how she requires students to read out paragraphs from their journals in class so that none feel invisible or silenced. To her this is a responsible exercise of teacher power. Always allowing students the option to pass in discussion circles means that those who are shy and introverted, or uncomfortable because they perceive themselves as members of a minority race, gender or class, end up not contributing. The longer this pattern of non-participation persists, the harder it is to break. So what seems like an empathic, benign action by the leader - allowing students the right to silence - serves to reinforce existing differences in status and power. Those who are used to holding forth will move automatically to speak, while those whose voices are rarely heard, will be silenced.

One way through this dilemma is to make the mandated act of contributing as stress free as possible. This is the purpose of the 'hatful of quotes' exercise. Prior to a discussion of a text the leader types out sentences or passages from the text onto separate slips of paper. In class she puts these into a hat and asks students to draw one of these slips out of a hat. Students are given a few minutes to think about their quote and then asked to read it out and comment on it. The order of contribution is up to the students. Those who feel more fearful about speaking go last and take more time to think about what they want to say. Because the same five or six quotes are used, students who go later will have heard their quote read out and commented on by those who spoke earlier. So even if they have little to say about their own interpretation of the quote, they can affirm, build on, or contradict a comment a peer has already made on that quote. This exercise is a good way to create a safe opportunity for everyone to speak. Those who are diffident get to say something, thus building confidence for subsequent contributions. They avoid the feelings of shame and anger that come from feeling excluded from the discussion while lacking the confidence to break the prevailing pattern and project their voice into the mix.

bell hooks Teaching to Transgress. New York: Routledge, 1994

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QUOTES TO AFFIRM & CHALLENGE

Here students choose quotes from a text that they wish to affirm and quotes they wish to challenge.

Quotes to Affirm

Students form into small groups and each member takes a turn to propose a quote they wish to affirm and the reasons for doing this. The quote does not have to be defended as empirically true. Sometimes a participant will propose a quote because it confirms a point of view she holds. Sometimes she feels the quote states the most important point in the text. At other times the quote is affirmed because it is rhetorically rousing or expressed so lyrically. When everyone in the small group has proposed a quote to affirm the group then chooses one to report back to the larger class.

The choice of which quote to report back to the whole class can be done randomly or through deliberation. Using the random approach the small group members each type out their quote beforehand. At the end of the small group conversation group members hand all the pieces of paper to one person who then randomly selects a quote. This quote is read out to the whole class with everyone (not just the student who originally chose the quote) trying to explain what it was about the quote that was so compelling. In contrast to this random approach, the small group can simply report the quote which drew the greatest support.

Quotes to Challenge

The 'quote to challenge' activity follows the same procedure only this time students choose a quote that they disagree with, find contradictory, believe to be inaccurate, or consider reprehensible and immoral. Each person proposes their quote to the small group and group members choose one to report back to the larger class. One thing that has surprised us in this reporting back phase is the unexpected advantages of randomly choosing a small group quote. Because group members don't know which quote will be drawn out of the hat, they have to stay alert to hearing the merits of, or objections to, all the quotes proposed. When a quote is chosen by consensus in the small group we have noticed that groups often pick one quote early on and then spend their time rehearsing a presentation on all the reasons why it's terrific or appalling. This ensures an impressive small group report, but it also means that the opportunity for fruitful discussion of the merits of diverse, even contradictory, quotes is lost.

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The Circle of Voices

Participants form into a circle of about 5. They are allowed up to three minutes silent time to organize their thoughts. During this time they think about what they want to say on the topic once the circle of voices begins. After this silent period the discussion opens with each person having a period of uninterrupted air time. During the time each person is speaking no one else is allowed to interrupt.

People can take their turns to speak by going round the circle in order or volunteering at random. Although the latter arrangement sounds the most relaxed and informal the opposite is often the case. The order of the circle removes from participants the stress of having to decide whether or not they will try and jump in after another student has finished speaking. Not having to decide this is one less thing to worry about. An important benefit of using the circle of voices at the start of a discussion is that it prevents the development early on of a pecking order of contributors. Introverted, shy members, those whose experience has taught them to mistrust academe, or those who view discussion as another thinly veiled opportunity for teachers to oppress or offend, will often stay silent at the beginning of a course. The longer this silence endures, the harder it is for these individuals to speak out. By way of contrast, in the circle of voices everyone's voice is heard at least once at the start of the session.

After the circle of voices has been completed, and everyone has had the chance to say their piece, then the discussion opens out into a more free flowing format. As this happens a second ground rule comes into effect. Participants are only allowed to talk about another person's ideas that have already been shared in the circle of voices. A person cannot jump into the conversation by expanding on his own ideas, he can only talk about his reactions to what someone else has said. The only exception to this ground rule is if someone else asks him directly to expand on his ideas. This simple ground rule prevents the tendency toward 'grandstanding' that sometimes afflicts a few articulate, confident individuals.

To recap the ground rules:-

Begin by going round the circle with each person contributing & no interruptions allowed

After this, move into open discussion, but remember your contributions can only be about, or refer back to, something one of the other group members said in the opening circle.

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Mutual Invitation

Developed by Eric Law (1993) mutual invitation is a technique designed to promote egalitarian group talk. The facilitator begins a discussion by sharing her views on the topic at hand. She then invites another member of the group to respond to what she has said, or to contribute whatever is on her mind regarding the topic. After that person has spoken she then chooses the next person to speak, and so on until all have had the chance to be involved. If someone does not want to offer a comment she can pass, but she then has the responsibility to choose who will speak next. No-one is allowed to interrupt the chosen speaker. Once everyone has been called on open discussion ensues & the ground rule doesn't apply.

This process is a way of structuring the opportunity for all to speak, and also of giving the participants the power to choose the direction of participation. One advantage is that in classes where students know each others' interests and areas of expertise better than the teacher does, those students are able to make more skillful choices about who should speak next than a teacher would.

If the process is used a second and third time the facilitator does not start off by sharing her view. However, she does start out choosing who will be the first to speak.

E.H.F. Law *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community*. St Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1993 (pp. 79-88).

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ROTATING STATIONS

Another way to avoid the usual format of reporting back through a series of summaries is to locate each small group at a station where they are given 5 or 10 minutes to discuss a provocative issue and record their ideas on newsprint or a chalkboard. When this time is up the groups move to new positions in the classroom where they continue their discussion. But now the comments written on the newsprint or chalkboard by the preceding group at the station add a new voice to the mix. Rotations continue every 10 minutes until each group has been at all of the positions and has had a chance to consider all of the other groups' comments. Here's the instructions:

We're going to do another small group activity, but this time you won't be staying in one place for long. Each of you should join a group of about five participants at one of the stations that have been established around the classroom. Together you will have the responsibility of answering some questions by making comments on the newsprint directly in front of your group. You will have 10 minutes to do this. When the 10 minutes is up move with your group to a new station where you will continue your conversation by responding to the comments left behind by the group that has just vacated that station. Record the main points of your discussion at this station and then, after another 10 minutes, rotate to the next station, where you now have the comments of two other groups to consider.

Again take 10 minutes to respond, and then move when the 10 minutes are up. When every group has occupied each station, leaving remarks behind at all of them, break out of your groups and read all of the newsprint comments. Add questions, comments, or criticisms to these news sheets wherever you are inspired to do so. Remember that each station will include comments from all groups, making orderliness a challenge. Write as small and as legibly as you can, please!

Rotating stations encourages students to examine critically ideas that originate outside their group. The safety and intimacy of small groups is retained, yet the diversity of viewpoints experienced in whole class discussion is incorporated. Momentum and excitement tend to grow as groups rotate from one station to another. People feel they have heard from, and responded to, many voices in the classroom in a way that is less threatening than in large group exchanges. On the debit side, the 10 minute period for each rotation is not particularly conducive to deep discussion.

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NEWSPRINT DIALOGUES

Small groups summarize their conversations on large sheets of newsprint or chalkboards. Individual members of the class are then free to wander about the room reading all the responses & adding comments.

Here's the instructions:

In this activity, you will be working in small groups most of the time. I have prepared some questions for you to consider in these groups, but don't follow them too slavishly. Use them as a jumping off point for ideas you find especially worth exploring. You will have 30 minutes in your groups to discuss these questions and to write your answers to these on the newsprint provided.

You should appoint someone to be recorder but don't start writing immediately. Take some time to let your responses emerge from the discussion. Covering all the questions is not important, but you should begin to jot some ideas down on the newsprint provided within 15 or 20 minutes of starting.

When the 30 minutes is up, post your newsprint sheets around the classroom and tour the answers recorded by other groups. Look especially for common themes that stand out on the sheets and for possible contradictions that arise within or between groups' responses. If possible, write your responses to others' comments on the same sheet of newsprint containing the point you're addressing. Finally, note any questions that were raised for you during the discussion on the separate sheets of newsprint specially provided for this. We will bring the activity to a close with a short debriefing in the large group.

Attractions of this activity are that it takes people out of groups for a while and lets them act as relatively autonomous free agents. It also reminds people that dialogue can work as a written as well as spoken exchange. On the other hand, it is frequently difficult
in the limited space and time allotted for students to explain fully the meaning of the words and phrases on the newsprint. Still, is an interesting alternative way to keep the conversation going.

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SNOWBALLING

One way to illustrate how discussions can be developmental and increasingly inclusive is to use a process called "snowballing" or "pyramiding".

Students begin this activity by responding to questions or issues as individuals. They then create progressively larger dialogic groups by doubling the size of these every few minutes until by the end of the activity everyone is reconvened in the large group. At each stage as students move from pairs to quartets, quartets to octets they recap the chief point of difference, or the chief question that emerged, in their previous round of conversation.

Here's the instructions students follow:

We are going to try something a little different today. It's called "snowballing" and it gives you a chance to think and talk about issues in a variety of different configurations. Please begin with some private, solitary reflection in which you gather your thoughts about the questions at the bottom of this sheet. Jot down some notes if you wish.

After about 1 minute of solitary thought join with one other person to continue the dialogue. After about five minutes you and your partner should join another pair to form a group of four. As the two pairs merge, each pair should recap the chief difference that emerged, or a question they raised, in their conversation.

The quartets will continue the discussion for another 10 minutes and then they will merge with other quartets to create octets - groups of 8. . As the two quartets merge, each quartet should recap the chief difference that emerged, or a question they raised, in their conversation.

The discussion proceeds for 20 minutes this time and continues in 20 minute intervals until the whole class is brought together at the end of the session.

This exercise gets a lot of people talking to one another, while retaining much of the value of small groups. It also contributes a festive quality to the class. People mill about excitedly and greet each other warmly as they meet in new configurations. On the other hand, snowballing can sometimes have a frenetic, disjointed feel.

WHY DISCUSSIONS FAIL

UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

UNPREPARED STUDENTS

NO GROUND RULES

REWARD SYSTEMS ASKEW

NO TEACHER MODELING

WHAT WOULD IT TAKE TO ENGAGE ME (AS A SKEPTICAL, RESISTANT, HOSTILE LEARNER) IN DISCUSSION ?

I would be more likely to participate if …

Former resisters testified to its utility

Faculty modeled their own participation

I had the right to silence & silent participation

I knew it was genuinely open & I wasn't being asked to guess the 'correct' interpretation & risk humiliation

The group had developed norms to equalize participation

I knew that participation counted towards my grade & that a range of indicators had been specified

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CASE STUDY - "THE BEST LAID PLANS"

It was 6.30.pm. and David Threlfall felt that familiar tingle of excitement that always accompanied the best moments of teaching for him. Tonight would be a special night. David worked at Gotham Community College – a college that prided itself on its open-entry policy, and its willingness to work with students who lacked well developed academic skills. At 7.15.pm. his new course 'Introduction to Critical Thinking' would get under way. For the past year at the college David had chaired a task force to design this course after arguing to the President that all incoming adult students needed a grounding in the most basic academic skill of all - critical thinking. The powers that be had agreed with him and, starting this semester, all new incoming adult learners across the college had to take an 'Introduction to Critical Thinking' course in their first semester, along with the 'Introduction to Study Skills' the college already required.

David made sure he got to the class early. It would be important to welcome students, he felt, on this particular night. Although a White American himself, he felt that welcoming someone was a cross-culturally stable indicator of good practice. When he walked in to the room where the class was due to start in 20 minutes or so, he found a couple of students sitting silently in different parts of the room. He introduced himself to them, shook their hands, and welcomed them to the course. As other students filed in he did the same to them. This would set a good, warm, welcoming tone for the evening and the rest of the course he felt. Some seemed surprised, and a little shocked at his offering his hand, others shook it in new ways he didn't know, others obviously felt pleasantly surprised by the personal tone he was setting. As students took their seats they noticed that a copy of the course syllabus was on each chair. Some of them picked this up and read it, some put in inside their folders. David had also left adhesive name tags on the chairs, and he asked students to write their first names on these and put them on their lapels. He waited till a few minutes after the class was due to begin, checked the corridor to see if any latecomers were in sight, then walked to the front of the class. About 30 people were in the room. About half were White, the other half split roughly equally between African-American, Latino/a and Asian Americans. There was one Native American woman. David noticed in fact that most students were women.

"Good evening everyone, thanks for coming to the class", he said. "I want to say again 'welcome' to this class, I think you're going to have an interesting time. Before we start talking about the course in more detail, why don't we take five minutes to get to know each other. I'd like you to turn to the person either side of you, introduce yourself to them, and tell them what the words 'critical thinking' mean to you. I don't expect anything too intellectual - if you already knew what critical thinking was then you wouldn't need to be in this class. But let's see if any ideas, pictures or associations suggest themselves to you when you think of the phrase 'critical thinking'." After five minutes of conversation David called out "O.K. folks, let's see what we've come up with. Who'd like to suggest what the words 'critical thinking' mean to them. Just shout out anything".

There was silence. David did his usual trick of counting off fifteen seconds in his head before opening his mouth again. Still no-one said anything.

With a friendly smile on his face, David tried another approach.
"O.K., well, critical thinking is a difficult idea to get hold of. How about this? If you're in a supermarket check out line and you hear the person in front of you telling her friend that she just read Elvis Presley was alive because she'd seen a photo of him in a Texas diner that appeared in the 'National Inquirer' would you say that person was thinking critically ?"

A White woman in her 20's sitting in the front row raised her hand.

"Yes Vicky?" asked David, reading her lapel badge.

"Why do you assume that women shop in supermarkets and read the Inquirer?" she said.

"Well, I don't assume that", he replied, "I just said 'her' without thinking. It could just as easily have been 'he'. So ... would 'he' be thinking critically Vicky?"

"What do you mean by thinking critically?" asked Levon, an older African-American man sitting further back.

"Well" said David with a friendly smile, "that's what I'm asking you!"

"I don't see how you can expect us to tell you what critical thinking is. I mean we've come here to learn about it - that's why were here", Levon said.

After a couple more unsuccessful attempts to get students to talk about the idea of critical thinking, an elderly White student - Jack - spoke up.

"Well, I've been married twice and I can tell you that I wish I'd done a bit more critical thinking in my time" he said in a hearty voice. Jack looked round the room for support and appreciation of his comment. David laughed - a little nervously. He saw Vicky roll her eyes.

Joan, a White middle aged women student sitting next to Jack, began to speak.

"One thing you learn as you get older is that you can't trust what people tell you just because those people are important.
To me critical thinking means not taking things on trust, checking them out, not believing rules just because they're rules"

"Exactly" said David excitedly. "When we think critically we start to question beliefs and assumptions that we've never really looked at carefully before and we realize how we've been misled".

Joan spoke again.

"Yes, that's one thing that I always felt my generation did well. I grew up in the sixties" (here an audible groan escaped the lips of several younger students) "and I learned to think critically about the Vietnam War, about Nixon, about racism and sexism. I got pregnant early so never went to college but now I'm here I know it's the most important thing anyone in this room can do."

David thought about following up this comment but he'd been thrown by the early pregnancy information, so he decided to switch tack. He saw people muttering to each other, laughing at Joan, digging each other in the ribs.

"O.K. If you look at the syllabus I've prepared for the course you'll see that on page 2 I ask you to prepare a learning contract."

Marcia, a Latina woman near the back raised her hand.

"Yes?" asked David.

"Do you mean that critical thinking makes us question our beliefs and values?"

"Yes"

"Well I don't see how that's right. I mean my commitment to Jesus Christ is the most important thing in my life. I don't see why you're attacking him"

"Well that's not what I meant. Of course I don't want you to abandon your religious beliefs. I just meant that when you think critically you start to look at some things - not everything - a bit differently"

"Like when you're wasted" he heard a male voice mutter. Sniggers followed.

"O.K. folks" David said quickly, "let's have a look at the learning contract instructions. Like I said - page 2 please".

Pages rustled as students found the relevant page.

"As you can see, a learning contract is a way of letting you tailor the course to your own pace and interests. Instead of me setting all the assignments, I want you to feel that you have a say in what you do. So, for the next few minutes before the break, I want you to take sheet of paper and write on it some suggestions for course assignments that you think you'd like to do. Don't put your names on the sheet. In 10 minutes I'd like you to leave the sheets on the table by the door over there and then take a 5 minute break".

David busied himself shuffling papers and re-reading his own course syllabus for the 10 minutes that students spent jotting down ideas. As they started to file out for the break he felt pleased with the class so far. There'd been some discussion of critical thinking. He'd been a relaxed and respectful teacher. And the different ages of the adult students would lend an interesting dimension to the class. There'd been a couple of hitches, but that was only to be expected. People would be a lot more comfortable by the fourth or fifth week. He was especially proud of the learning contract idea. In the contract format he'd designed, he asked students to suggest activities they'd involve themselves in, and things they'd produce, to show that they'd been thinking critically. By giving them freedom over how they demonstrated that they'd been learning, David felt that students would become much more engaged in the course. They'd suggest assignments that meant something to them, rather than jumping through hoops that he'd set and that would probably appear meaningless. After the break he planned to talk about the suggestions the students had made for things they might do for their learning contracts.

His satisfaction turned to panic, however, as he went to get coffee at the machine in the faculty lounge. As he walked along the corridor he started to read the suggestions for their learning contracts that the students had left. First of all, only 12 of the 30 had left pieces of paper. Of those 12, all but two were hostile. Their general tone was typified by one which read as follows ...

"I don't see why we have to do this work. It's not fair for you to ask us. We don't know what critical thinking is. How can you expect us to suggest anything ? Anyway, you're the expert, why don't you just tell us what to do?"

Several of them contained complaints like the following ...

"I don't know why we have to do this. I came here to learn to be an engineer, I don't see why I have to do all this psychology stuff"

"If you want us to write contracts, shouldn't we be in a law course or something like that?"

Those students who did suggest ideas for their contracts came up with the following.

"Write an essay that you set me" "Do as little as possible"

"Do a 5 minute talk on something you want me to read"

"Whatever the minimum acceptable is" "Do a book report"

David was dismayed by the lack of response to his first assignment of the course. Less than half the students had bothered to write anything down. And of those who had, the tone of what they'd written was undeniably hostile. As he walked back to the class he wondered how on earth he could have a good discussion on possible learning contract activities. When he got back in the room after 15 minutes, only half the students were

there. Joan and David were talking animatedly in the front row. Knots of other students sat with their feet up on the desks in front of them. Three young men had earphones on and David could hear the tinny sounds of rap and rock seeping through. A man and woman in the corner of the room were smoking and chatting to each other under the 'No Smoking' sign. The rest of the students were gazing at the ceiling, yawning, or reading the paper. One of the papers being read was the 'National Inquirer'.

Instructions for the Case Study Analysis.

1. READ THIS CASE STUDY BY YOURSELF (10 Minutes)

2. AFTER YOU HAVE READ THE CASE STUDY PLEASE MAKE SOME NOTES BY YOURSELF ON THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS (10 Minutes)

> ***WHAT IS YOUR INTERPRETATION / READING / EXPLANATION / PERSPECTIVE ON WHAT IS HAPPENING HERE ?***
>
> ***WHAT DO YOU THINK DAVID SHOULD DO IN THE SECOND HALF OF THE CLASS ?***
>
> ***IF YOU WERE OBSERVING THIS CLASS THROUGH A ONE WAY MIRROR, WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO DAVID ABOUT HOW HE MIGHT RUN THINGS DIFFERENTLY AT THE START OF THE COURSE THE NEXT TIME HE TEACHES IT ?***

After you have finished writing down your responses, form a group with 4-5 other people. Take each of the 3 questions above and spend about 10-15 minutes sharing your responses to each question. List on a sheet of newsprint all the responses and ideas that emerge. Where appropriate feel free to build on any insights or suggestions you have picked up during the workshop that might be relevant.

Time for Case Study - Approximately 1 hour

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