

## Creative Approaches to Stimulate Class Discussion

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When I began my teaching career I was committed to the use of discussion. My instincts and training told me that discussion should be my 'go to' method, partly because I felt it would be more engaging for the students I was teaching and partly because it seemed to me inherently democratic. I was a poor student myself and was bored stiff throughout my own schooling. The curriculum had nothing I could get passionate about and the pedagogy was, to be generous, unimaginative. So, as I approached my own first class as a teacher at a technical college in south-east London (UK) I was determined to avoid the teacher-dominated, passive pedagogy I had been subjected to as a learner.

My first weeks and months, indeed that whole first year, were pretty demoralizing. I would assign creative pre-reading and bring to class what I thought were interesting discussion questions. But student silence and non-compliance were very effective in sabotaging me, rendering me powerless. No matter how provocative the topic, and no matter how artfully I phrased my questions, the discussions were mostly lifeless.

My response to this situation was to force myself to get out of bed every morning and take the subway to what I knew was going to be another joyless day. But one optimistic thought kept recurring. I told myself that if I could stick it out I would gradually learn from experience how to adjust, improvise, bob and weave pedagogically speaking, and pick up the emotional rhythms of the students. As I got better at discerning how the class was feeling and at knowing what activities would be likely to engage them, I saw myself becoming a sort of discursive jazz musician able to riff and extemporize in the moment. Students' comments and the subtle clues of their body language would be quickly analyzed and lead me to make instantaneous decisions that would light the fires of student enthusiasm.

In this imagined narrative of my future practice I trusted that I would learn creativity in my handling of discussion. To some extent this was accurate. I do believe that 45 years later I exercise a much greater degree of improvisation and extemporaneous decision-making in the middle of class. But what I had omitted from my first year of practice was any attention to how students could learn to engage in discussion through the use of specific exercises and protocols. The creativity I had imagined characterizing my future classrooms was all centered on me, not my students.

Over the years I have come to understand that it is students who learn creativity, not just the teacher. In this chapter I want to present nine of the most successful techniques and approaches that have helped students broaden the ways they participate in discussion, learn a range of different discussion behaviors and activate their visual, dramatic, poetic and musical creativity. All nine exercises are designed to democratize classroom

participation, to address multiple learning preferences, and to bypass the privileging of speech.

### **Holding Silent Discussions**

Silence is usually something teachers feel should be avoided at all costs in most classrooms. Typical constructions of silence are that it indicates confusion; hence, when teachers ask questions and are met with silence, the inference is that students can't answer because they don't understand the question or lack the information or reasoning skills to provide an answer. Alternatively, silence is read as a sign of truculence, an intellectual strike by students whose refusal to say anything effectively disempowers the teacher.

But in discussions silence is a necessary interlude that allows for the processing of information. Students from Asian cultural backgrounds, indigenous students, introverts and students for whom English is a second language all value the time for reflection, cognitive connection and rehearsal that periods of silence provide. Student feedback on classroom process often highlights intentional silence as an engaging moment in class sessions. So, simply beginning a discussion exercise with the announcement that students should take a minute to think quietly about a question before starting to talk is mentioned in classroom evaluations as a helpful instructional act. It's the public intentionality of silence that's crucial. Naming silence as important, saying why a moment of silence is being requested, and building opportunities for silent participation into any rubrics for class participation are all important elements in socializing students to accept silence as a necessary part of conversational rhythm.

### **Silence in Discussion: Chalk Talk**

A very adaptable activity – *Chalk Talk* – was developed by Hilton Smith (2009) of the Foxfire Fund in Appalachian schools. It's conducted in silence and is very brief – typically no more than ten minutes. This is a great way to get a quick visual and graphic representation of where a group is on an issue. This exercise unearths the concerns of students and shows how well students understand an issue or topic. Here's how the process goes:

- The teacher, facilitator or leader writes a question in the center of a black or white board (or electronically) and circles it. In auditoriums or classrooms I have sometimes had to cover several walls with blank sheets of newsprint for groups of people to write on. Multiple markers or chalk sticks are placed by the board so lots of people have the chance to write simultaneously.
- Everyone is invited to come and stand by the board to participate in the activity. The leader explains that for about five minutes people should write responses to the question on the board. She asks for silence as this is happening so that people can focus entirely on the written dialogue.
- Several people usually get up immediately and start writing at different parts of the board. There are also frequent pauses between postings.

- Those who are not writing at any point are asked to observe what's being posted and to draw lines between comments that appear to connect in some way. If they have questions or responses to a posting they also write that on the board.
- The facilitator also participates by drawing lines connecting comments, by writing questions, by adding her own thoughts and so on.
- The facilitator closes the silent part of the exercise when the board is so full that posting new comments is difficult or when there's a distinct lull in posting,
- The facilitator and the group then talk about the graphic that has been produced. They identify clusters of common responses, questions that have been raised, and different analytical perspectives. Outlier comments are also noted.
- The leader invites people to take out smart phones, tablets and laptops to snap photos of the *Chalk Talk* board, and volunteers to post these to a group web site.
- If this exercise is used in an organizational setting the group then identifies issues emerging from *Chalk Talk* that will be addressed by teams that people volunteer for. These teams then develop these issues into new organizational agendas.
- If this exercise is used in an academic class to introduce a new topic, the instructor alerts students to her plan to return regularly to themes and questions noted in the graphic.

This is a very adaptable exercise and I've used it in a wide range of academic classrooms, professional development activities, staff training and community meetings. One advantage is that it secures a much higher rate of participation than typically happens in speech. If I pose a question to a group in class and then take ten minutes to have people to respond to it by raising hands or shouting out responses I get a response from maybe 10% of students. And I always feel obliged to add a comment or two in response to each student's contribution just to show the class that I am paying attention and earning my paycheck. By way of contrast *Chalk Talk* typically secures at least a 60% participation rate.

This technique also develops students' visual capabilities. For those who already gravitate to visual and graphic ways of communicating and learning this is a welcome alternative to speech-based modes of discussion. For those who rely on verbal modes of communication and who have been schooled to think this is the only way discussions happen *Chalk Talk* opens up the possibility of experimenting with visual communication. In particular it trains people to look for connections and contradictions using visual scanning. As students see multiple postings appear they are enjoined to draw lines connecting posts that appear on different parts of the board. This inevitably heightens their awareness of the importance of synthesis to good discussions. It's hard for many students to recognize connections when a flurry of words is being spoken and earlier comments are forgotten. With *Chalk Talk* every comment is recorded on the board and becomes part of the permanent record. This means that a comment made in the first minute of the exercise can be addressed in the seventh or eighth minute. Finally, this exercise is well suited to introverts, second language speakers and reflectively oriented group members who need time to think and process before contributing something.

Figure 1. Chalk Talk on 'When a Discussion Goes Well'



- The convenor participates by making contributions. She also steps in to remind people of the ground rules when participants start trying to convince or rebut each other, or when the conversation turns into a debate. Optimally, everyone takes on that responsibility.
- Bohm recommends talking about dialogue itself when people first come together through questions like; ‘What makes dialogue on this issue so difficult?’ or ‘What conditions foster good dialogue about racial tension?’
- There is no pressure to respond to the opening question immediately. People are encouraged to be silent and to speak only when they have something to say or a thought prompted by another’s comment. Silence indicates that people are actually thinking. If it’s helpful, participants can close their eyes or look at the floor, though some prefer to give non-verbal support and eye contact.
- This process continues for as long as seems optimal. Bohm recommends two hours but I have used briefer chunks of time.
- The process concludes with participants sharing what they came to understand more deeply.

The long silent pauses between contributions are often frustrating for people used to the ‘discussion as animated speech’ model. So an initial uncertainty, even hostility, about the process is normal and to be expected. The facilitator should not stop this discomfort being expressed but neither should she or he back down from the process too quickly. She should keep reminding people that the looseness of the process is designed to release imaginative thinking and foster careful listening. Bohm (1996) recommends a group size of forty members so the group represents the diversity of experience and opinion that often undermines dialogue. I have sometimes adapted this process to smaller groups of 15, 20 and 25. For me the process works best where groups are struggling with contentious issues such as race.

Despite the unfamiliarity of this process people often express their gratitude after the discussion. Slowing down the process means each person’s contribution to the whole is fully heard and the absence of competition and one-upmanship bypasses the temptation to rebut or proselytize. In Bohmian discussion facilitators step in if they have something to say, but there is no pressure to do so. Their most important role is to intervene to make sure the few ground rules are observed. So if they hear someone judging or criticizing a comment, or if they see an interaction becoming a debate, they remind people of the ground rules.

Participating in the process requires a leap of faith not only on facilitators’ part but also from students. After all you’re asking people to talk in a specific way that is experienced as strange and unsettling. So this activity should be reserved for times when a group has enough faith in you as its leader that they will trust in embarking on this journey with you. The activity also illustrates the role of facilitator power. People often assume that in a good discussion the facilitator becomes part of the furniture, an unnoticed fly on the wall. I believe the opposite is true. In a good discussion the facilitator models his or her commitment to the process by asking good questions that draw people out, linking different comments together, expressing appreciation for people’s specific contributions,

pausing to think silently before answering a question, making sure that quieter people get the chance to speak, and so on. When a process like Bohmian dialog occurs the facilitator has the responsibility to point out when the process is going astray by reminding people that the ground rules are being contravened.

### **Incorporating the Visual**

For a text and word based teacher like myself, visual elements are something I need to strive to incorporate in classroom activities. Since so much assessment and testing are conducted through text it's not surprising if visual communication is undervalued if not overlooked entirely by many instructors, particularly in discussion. The typical image of a good discussion is of people talking animatedly. There is little silence, people are making lots of enthusiastic eye contact, talk flows seamlessly and uninterruptedly and important things are said. When you announce to students that you're going to hold a discussion they don't usually think of people drawing.

#### **Visual Discussion: Drawing Discussion**

*Drawing Discussion*, like *Chalk Talk*, emphasizes visual and graphic ways of 'talking' to each other and is appreciated by those who process information spatially and communicate ideas visually. I use it to ensure that as wide a variety of participants as possible can feel engaged in a class, workshop or meeting. The process involves the following;

- A question or problem is posed such as: What does a good discussion look like? How do we know when a theory has explanatory power? How can photosynthesis be explained visually? What is a moral action? What constitutes a proof?
- Each participant is given a sheet of paper and a few markers to create a drawing or collage that addresses the question. Highly abstract designs with no attempt at representation are fine. People work by themselves for about ten minutes.
- Participants then convene in small groups and each person explains their drawing to the other group members.
- The group discusses how the individual images connect or contradict each other and works to produce a final group visual incorporating some aspect of each individual's composition. One member takes notes regarding what the group is attempting to communicate.
- Once the group pictures are completed, each is displayed on a wall around the room and a blank sheet of paper is placed next to each.
- People are invited to tour the gallery of visuals and provide comments, questions and reactions on the blank sheets. They are encouraged to do this using images rather than words.
- The whole group reconvenes and participants can ask different groups about their postings. The member who took notes as the group visual was developed takes the lead in responding to questions posed about a group's drawing or collage.

This is a refreshing change in settings where there's a strong and habitual reliance on the

spoken and written word. The energy unleashed in this technique often gets people to relate to each other more casually and amiably. *Drawing Discussion* is an opportunity to flex creative muscles and explore issues with a new freedom and intellectual abandon.

Figure 2. Drawing Discussion: 'Hope as Leadership'





Hope as a  
constant current  
= taking off in  
unpredictable  
directions



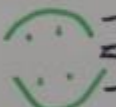
= structured collective discussions  
to fuel hope



= the spiralling down of a false start



= the fireworks of joyful change



- pessimism } always present but  
= optimism } disconnected from current  
of hope



= individual actions that flow  
out of the current + try to change things



## **Making Visual Discussion Safer: Collaging Discussion**

If you use the word ‘drawing’, people (and by that I mean me!) are often immediately beset by fear and embarrassment regarding their lack of artistic talent. But tell people they are going to be working on a collage and all that goes away. With collage you work from ready-made images in magazines, newspapers, flyers, your own photographs, images downloaded from online, or small objects that can be glued onto a poster. You don’t need to be an ‘artist’ to make a collage, or to be good at graphic design or draftsmanship; all you need are magazines, glue and a pair of scissors. In this approach provide the group with magazines, fabric scraps and glue and ask them to create a group collage incorporating each of their individual responses.

As Simpson’s (2009) account of her participation at a workshop for cancer patients illustrates, the freedom collage affords can be galvanizing and meaningful. She describes how, when participants were working on collages “the workshop was alive with color, cutting, and pasting, tears, laughter, a buzz of emotion, depth of understanding, optimism, and hope. THIS creative energy was exactly what I wanted to surround myself with. And this particular art form was clearly accessible to everyone in the room regardless of age, life place, previous creative experience, or artistic skill” (pp. 78-79). Cranton (2009) offers a similar verdict on using the method with vocational trades instructors at a Canadian community college. Teaching a unit on learning styles she asked these instructors to create collages to illustrate the different learning styles they felt they exhibited. She recounts how “both the process of finding or creating images and the creation of the collage itself led to a deeper examination of learning style, and the ensuing discussion in the whole group led us to question the premise of the concept of learning styles and challenge the idea of creating teaching methods to support each learning style” (p. 186).

One of the most powerful illustrations of collage is in Grace and Wells’ (2007) description of their work with sexual minority youth. To illustrate the way people’s identity became separated from their external presentation of self, participants worked with old school lockers to create an in/out representation of how they felt about themselves as compared to the way they were seen by the world. On the outside of the lockers were stereotypical depictions of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans-gendered people, representing how participants felt they were viewed by teachers, parents, classmates and communities. The inside of the lockers contained images, collages and dioramas that depicted the inner selves they kept hidden from families, friends and teachers. One participant combined shards of broken glass and fragments of a smashed mirror with disembodied and scratched-out photographs, with the phrase ‘running scared’ written amidst pairs of eyes watching the viewer.

## **Incorporating Body Movement and Classroom Geography in Discussion**

In American college classrooms discussion is usually done sitting down. Students stay static, seated in a particular place. They display animation by hand motion, swiveling

heads or nods, but typically don't get up and start wandering around in the middle of a discussion. Indeed, a student who suddenly started to walk to different corners of the classroom in the middle of a discussion would typically be regarded as disruptive, even deviant. The only permissible time to get up is for classroom breaks and sometimes to move chairs into arrangements for small groups. Because discussion is a teaching method we use to introduce complexity to students, promote an active engagement with material, and encourage intellectual flexibility, there should be a role for body movement to be incorporated into these processes.

### **Stand Where You Stand**

The *Stand Where You Stand* exercise deliberately incorporates kinetic elements and body movement to represent students' cognitive functioning. Its logic is that as students acquire new information and develop new understanding they move to different physical spaces in the classroom. In *Stand Where You Stand*, a discussion is held in which the purpose is to introduce students to three or four distinct perspectives that can be applied to understanding a new concept. The technique invites students to move to different stations in the room that represent each of these perspectives as their discussion of them persuades students of the relative merits of each.

I learned this exercise from Joan Naake of Montgomery College in Germantown, Maryland. I like how it teaches people about the complexities of an issue using physical movement and how it opens up the possibility of changing one's mind. Here's how it works:

- The facilitator identifies an issue of importance to a community, class or organization.
- Before a group meets participants are asked to read material that provides relevant information on the issue and explores it from different viewpoints.
- When people gather together the facilitator begins by stating an opinion or making a claim about the issue the group has examined in the pre-reading.
- Participants spend 2-3 minutes individually writing down all the reasons why they agree or disagree with the statement just made.
- While people are writing the facilitator posts four signs around the room reading 'Strongly Agree', 'Partly Agree', 'Partly Disagree' and 'Strongly Disagree'.
- When the individual writing time is up participants are asked to stand underneath the sign that most closely approximates their position on the claim or statement.
- In pairs or trios people at each station state the reasons for their choice of position.
- People at the different stations then share with the whole class their reasons for agreeing or disagreeing with the statement to the whole group
- As these arguments are shared people are free to move to another sign at any time if the arguments they hear convince them to change their position.
- When all four viewpoints have been heard the group reassesses the numbers of people who support the four positions. Those who have moved during the exercise are asked to share what convinced them to go to a different sign.
- Finally the whole group assesses which position secures the most agreement, if

other information is needed, next steps, and any subtleties and nuances revealed.

One of the chief reasons people respond well to this is because of the physical exercise entailed by moving their body around the room as a way of expressing the development of their viewpoints. It helps keep energy up during lulls and provides a physical representation of how a group's thinking on an issue changes and evolves. It also underscores that changing your mind because of new data or a better argument is a sign of strength, not weakness.

### **Introducing Rhythmic and Musical Elements in Discussion**

Rhythmic and musical analogies abound in discussion. We have crescendos of conversation when multiple voices are speaking followed by softer interludes, solo voices make arguments interspersed with choruses of affirmation or disagreement, themes of point and counterpoint interweave as arguments are made and rebutted, and improvisations are made on a theme as new points are raised. Adapting this language it's not the stretch it might at first seem to incorporate musical elements into discussion.

### **Musicalizing Discussion**

In this technique a wholly different set of capabilities is involved, sometimes using words (as in adapting well known songs with new lyrics or creating new songs on the spot) but at other times using pure sound. Having a discussion in musical form may seem outrageous to many educators and is something that will be harder to adapt to some questions or topics rather than others. But, as with the previous exercises, the intent is to release creative energy by inviting people to communicate understanding using an unfamiliar modality. Here are the instructions people follow:

- Small groups of 6-8 members are given kazoos, tambourines, harmonicas, ukuleles, triangles and any other small, inexpensive instruments so everyone has something to play.
- The group's assignment is to create a musical composition of up to a minute that uses instruments and voices to capture the dynamics of a problem, issue or experience.
- Members are told to keep in mind the possibilities of:
  - Moments of harmony and dissonance
  - Periods of silence, loudness, crescendo and decrescendo
  - Solos interspersed with ensemble playing
  - Variations on a theme
  - Different musical sounds connecting and responding to each other
  - Conflict that may or may not be resolved harmonically
  - Compositions that emphasize balance and symmetry
  - Compositions that emphasize chaos and disorder
- Facilitators briefly demonstrate how they might musicalize some of the bulleted examples to represent their understanding of a specific topic.
- Groups disperse for twenty to thirty minutes to create their compositions.

- When ready, groups return and each performs its composition.
- The whole group reconvenes to discuss what different compositions conveyed and any new insights that gained as a result.

Once the initial discomfort has worn off and people start to work in groups many participants, especially musicians and other artists, appreciate the recognition that communicating through music is a way to make sense of the world. This exercise frees people up to try out new ideas and communicate in a novel way and it tends to build relationships in a way different from how that happens through the formality of speech. I have found it a good way to infuse new energy into a series of classes, meetings or workshops where energy is declining and a sense of staleness has crept in. I would not advocate trying this out early on in a group's existence but it has been very successful in re-energizing groups that are falling into lulls.

### **Incorporating Theatrical Elements Into Discussion**

Most classroom activities have some degree of theatricality built into them. This is probably seen most evidently in lecturing where hand gestures, eye contact, the raising and lowering of one's voice, walking around the room and using dramatic pause for effect are used to emphasize important points, signal changes in direction and introduce multiple perspectives. Classroom discussions can also benefit from introducing dramatic elements to structure a discussion.

As is the case with other other artistic modalities, incorporating theatrical elements is intended to unleash a group's creative energy and to introduce a sense of play into classroom and organizational routines. It draws on particularly of improv theater (McKnight and Scruggs, 2008) and theater of the oppressed (Boal, 2002, 2006) by asking groups to respond to a question or address a problem by staging a short skit whose progress can be interrupted, or outcome altered, through the spontaneous intervention of audience members. In this regard Boal's work on using theater with revolutionary social movements, peasants and grass roots groups has been particularly influential and been widely used around the globe, and not just with adults. A recent volume (Duffy and Vettrano, 2010) provides accounts of theater of the oppressed being adopted in early childhood classrooms, elementary education, high schools, in Israeli-Palestinian encounters, and with incarcerated youth. In India, (Ganguly, 2010) estimates that Boal's methods have been used extensively for the past thirty years to reach over a quarter of a million villages in West Bengal alone.

Bringing the body into learning is for many a powerful experience (Snowber, 2012). Getting the body up out of a chair to illuminate or express an idea is usually remembered much more clearly than an explanation from an instructor, no matter how lucid. But the degree to which participants are pushed is a matter of judgment. At its extremes, the use of theater is disturbing and upsetting.

A good example of how the dangerous and discomfiting nature of theater can be used to shake up discussion is Butterwick and Selman's (2003) account of a series of workshops

amongst feminist groups in Vancouver. The project titled *Transforming Dangerous Spaces* was intended to explore conflicts and tensions common to feminist coalitions. Butterwick recalls a scene where a Subha (a pseudonym) – a woman of color - played a White woman and asked Butterwick to play a woman of color. Butterwick was somewhat intimidated by this prospect but agreed to go along with the exercise. Subha then stood on a chair and asked Butterwick to sit in front of her on the same chair. Subha talked loudly and forcefully while pressing her hands down on Butterwick's head, forcing her to bend to her knees. Butterwick eventually found herself folded in half struggling to breathe.

Butterwick recalls the debriefing of the scene ...

“I spoke of how powerful the scene was – of my deeper and embodied appreciation of White privilege and racial domination. I also expressed my fears of playing a woman of color, of stereotyping and essentializing. Sheila (the facilitator) asked why I had agreed to play the character. In my response, I said that I had deferred to the request – sensing the scene would be risky but important. Sheila challenged me, noting that deference can be a form of racism” (Butterwick and Selman, 2003, p. 14).

Scenes like the one above are indeed dangerous educational spaces to create and they need skilled facilitators, and willing participants, to engage in them. In the *Dangerous Spaces* project the participants were experienced and committed feminist activists. As such, there was a readiness to take much greater risks than would be the case in, say, a required college preparation program or a Freshman orientation institute. As Butterwick and Selman (2003) note, “a power and danger of drama process is that it can trigger participants in unexpected directions, and they can find themselves exploring, experiencing, and processing emotions, memories, and other aspects of themselves that were previously unknown or private. The results can surprise, shock, and reveal the unexpected” (p. 14).

In the Forum Theater derived from Boal's work a community watches a scripted scene in which a typical kind of oppression is acted out. So, for example, a group of adult illiterates watch a job interview in which the applicant tried desperately to hide his inability to read or fill in a required form. The 'Joker' (a key actor in Forum Theater) then asks the audience to suggest different ways the actor experiencing oppression could have responded to the situation. As alternatives are suggested the Joker entices audience members to come in and play the scene using the different alternatives they've suggested. Different audience members suggest different ways of confronting the oppression and after each replaying of the scene everybody discusses what just happened and what might be changed.

Forum theater can be used in multiple settings where people feel they are being pushed around. A good example of its adaptability is Tania Giordani and Mike Brayndick's Forum Theater piece titled “The End Game at Jansen School.” Dr Giordani is a parent of school age children in Chicago. In 2010 she conducted interviews with parents and

students faced with a round of public school closings and then developed a Forum Theater script designed to animate discussion about ways local communities could mobilize to fight these. The script has been performed in multiple settings: at a Midwest Title 1 conference with parents from Milwaukee, Detroit and Chicago, at Francis W. Parker School in Chicago, and sometimes with students as young as 4<sup>th</sup> grade being involved.

This last iteration was particularly powerful, according to Giordani: “Students thanked me at the end for including them in the conversation about what was happening at their own school. That was pretty powerful because as parents we tend to want to protect our children from what is going on, especially as we fight with hope against the school closures. Through the plays and discussion, we (parents) are realizing, we should invite our children to join the conversation and fight. The dialogues after the performances are so intense and engaging, we are always going over our 2 hour time.” (Giordani, 2012, personal communication).

The idea for Forum Theater is that it is a rehearsal for life. It provides a relatively safe space for people to try out different approaches to confronting power and pushing back against it. Of course it’s not totally safe because people take a risk to get up and try out their suggested alternatives. For people unused to performing or theater that can be intimidating. But it is safe in that there are no political consequences to their improvisations.

*Image Theater* is the use of the body to create images of oppression and is meant to be physically as well as intellectually liberating. For example, contorting the body into shapes that represent how oppression feels, or arranging several bodies that demonstrate the interaction of cells, is something that does not come easily to academic classrooms. So a crucial element in the use of *Image Theater* is teachers’ readiness to risk looking weird or foolish by themselves being willing to contort their own bodies. As explained by Williams (2010) “the body is liberated from unconscious movement, routine movement resulting from socioeconomic exploitation, and from the reduction of the body into an automaton” (p. 272).

In her adaptation of *Image Theater*, Lawrence (Butterwick and Lawrence, 2009) describes how a gay male participant created a sculptured image of how he had experienced oppression using his and other learners’ bodies. He placed his body in the middle of the sculpture holding his head to ward off blows in a schoolyard bullying and placed a circle of people gathered round him pointing, jeering and raining blows on him. The audience did not know his beating was because he was gay, since no talking is allowed during this kind of sculpting.

After the sculpture was ‘unfrozen’ those playing the oppressors and the gay participant playing the oppressed discussed how they had experienced the situation. The oppressed revealed his gay identity as the cause of the beating and those playing oppressors spoke about their discomfort in that role. The discussion was then broadened to include learners not in the sculpture who had been observing it. The exercise ended with people

suggesting alternative ways of staging a sculpture. In one a person playing the role of the gay student held his head high with a confident expression on his face as those playing oppressors turned away from him. In another he was leaning forward with a finger pointing out addressing the oppressors who were listening attentively. A third scenario had two former oppressors recast as allies to the gay student with the three of them challenging the other oppressors.

### **Dramatizing Discussion**

I use a stripped down dramatic exercise that incorporates some of the elements discussed above that runs as follows:

- Small groups of 6-8 members are given 30 minutes to discuss a question or analyze a text.
- Each group then spends another 30 minutes creating a brief skit that they believe captures the content, agreements, and disagreements of their discussion.
- Each skit is then presented to the large group.
- Any members of the large group may interrupt the skit at any time as new characters who introduce new plot elements or take skits in new directions.
- The group originating the skit can choose to follow the lead of the interrupter or continue their skit according to their initial plan.
- After all skits are presented, participants discuss how they captured the issues discussed in groups and any new insights raised.

Not surprisingly dramatizing discussion often works well with groups sharing a creative or artistic orientation, such as community arts organizations or museums. Instead of just talking about how things might be different, dramatizing discussion involves people using their minds and bodies to enact a different future. This builds momentum for change and provides an empowering glimpse into how a constraining situation can be altered.

Although improvising is something people do in everyday life, and particularly in conversations, converting this improvisational instinct into constructing a meaningful skit is a stretch for most of us. So dramatizing discussion greatly benefits from someone with improv training. Groups sometimes get stuck at the halfway point when they have to develop a skit and if that happens it may be helpful to reconvene the whole workshop or class and take a few minutes to brainstorm suggestions for specific skits.

### **Using Social Media**

The last creative technique I wish to present emerges from the explosion of social media tools in the twenty-first century. Instead of trying to ban smart phones, laptops, tablets and other devices from the classroom my strategy is to incorporate their use into classroom activities. Of course any time students are allowed to use devices there's the chance that these will be abused as they use them to text, check Instagram or Facebook, shop online or catch up with Twitter. But it's not as if wandering minds or diversionary

tactics are only evident in the digital era. I have brought copies of music magazines like the *New Musical Express*, *Spin* or *Mojo* to lectures so I could read them unobserved under the desk in the back row of an auditorium. Friends of mine used to draft their England soccer or cricket teams during class discussions. I still like to slip sarcastic notes to neighbors in large meetings or conferences, an antediluvian form of texting. So a wandering mind or inability to concentrate is hardly the province of millennial students.

My approach is to embrace technology rather than fight it and, as far as I can, to use it to stimulate and deepen discussion. I am always interested in securing the widest possible participation in discussion and to encourage students who find it hard to jump into the hurly burly of cross talk. I want to make sure that difficult questions are raised rather than being skirted around or passed by quickly. I want to serve introverts, people for whom English is not a first language, and those who, like me, need time to process and mull over and rehearse before speaking. For me the incorporation of anonymous social media tools is a highly effective way of pursuing all these purposes. If a permanent social media channel is open throughout a discussion, and if the instructor constantly checks the feed for questions, comments, overlooked points, and reactions to specific prompts, this is a way to democratize the classroom and widen participation. It also allows for the raising of contentious issues that people feel too afraid to speak for fear of the reactions they will provoke.

### **Today's Meet**

I particularly like to use the *Today's Meet* (<https://todaysmeet.com/>) tool as an electronic way of getting immediate and anonymous input from group members that can be used to structure discussion, check for understanding and generate new questions. It can be used with any group size from team meetings or classes of 10-15 people right up to town hall meetings, conference keynotes, workshops or classes of several hundred. Here's how it works:

- As facilitator you pull up the *Today's Meet* website (<https://todaysmeet.com/>) on a screen everyone can see.
- You show them how you create a unique page for the session, giving it a specific name. So, for a session on anti-racism your page might be titled: [todaysmeet.com/antiracism](https://todaysmeet.com/antiracism). For a class on photosynthesis it would be [todaysmeet.com/photosynth](https://todaysmeet.com/photosynth)
- Then you enter your fictional identity for the day. I often use 'Scouse', an English slang term for someone born in Liverpool.
- Participants then access the *Today's Meet* home page on their phones, tablets or laptops and create a fictional identity so they can enter comments anonymously.
- You encourage people to use *Today's Meet* to ask questions, give reactions, provide critiques, raise issues and suggest new directions for the discussion whenever these occur to them. You explain that you will pull up the feed on a screen every fifteen minutes so everyone can see what's been posted. Of course, anyone who is logged in can also view the feed on his or her device.
- At fifteen-minute intervals you address the comments people have posted. You



respond to questions, note suggested new directions, deal with criticisms and ask the group if they would like to respond to anything on the screen.

- Another use for this tool is to ask small groups to use *Today's Meet* to summarize the main points they discussed or the key questions they raised. Everyone can then review the postings on the screen in lieu of a series of spoken reports.
- Finally, a third option is to pose a question to a large group. Then, instead of hearing people speak their responses (which privileges the confident extroverts), everyone posts their responses to the question on the *Today's Meet* page you've created. If you ask for a minute or two of silence while people are doing this you will get far greater participation than if you'd gone straight to speech.

Millennial students like this tool because they are so used to texting as a medium of communication. But even for digital immigrants there are several clear benefits. People have the opportunity to ask questions or make points whenever these occur to them, even if the face-to-face session is focusing on something else. It also allows people to formulate and express a thought exactly the way they wish to. For those who rarely speak up in verbal discussions *Today's Meet* allows them the chance to shape how the discussion evolves. Those who wish to make criticisms, ask hard questions and introduce contentious ideas without fear of reprisal appreciate its anonymity. It also helps eliminate performance anxiety. In contrast to face-to-face discussions, the pressure to sound smart and highly informed is lessened. And just like the *Chalk Talk* exercise described earlier no one can dominate the *Today's Meet* feed by raising their voice or drowning others out. So for anyone wanting to democratize classroom participation this is a tool to consider.

## Conclusion

Discussion has got a bad reputation because of overuse and dreary familiarity. I am embarrassed by the number of times I've used it purely because I imagined I was supposed to. Growing up professionally in the field of adult education I was told not to lecture but instead to create collaborative learning spaces in which students' voices could be heard. Discussion was therefore my de-facto mode of teaching. As I moved into my career I monitored my use of lecturing to make sure this didn't go on too long and people would have the chance to talk. It was almost a pedagogic bifurcation – 'lecture bad (but sometimes unavoidable), discussion good'.

But there is nothing inherently more creative in discussion than there is in lecturing. Both can be done well or badly. Simply moving the chairs into a circle and saying 'we're going to hold a discussion' does not immediately democratize or energize the classroom. Nor does it equalize power. Your power as facilitator, teacher or leader still remains, as do the asymmetries of power relations and dynamics between the learners. I have been in many discussion circles where it looks as though contributions have been equalized but the facilitator uses his or her power to lead the discussion to a predefined conclusion. By asking certain questions, making eye contact with some and not with others, choosing to follow up some comments and ignoring others, and indicating what are 'good' points, a facilitator can exercise power in a passive-aggressive way.

So it is hardly surprising if students burned by endless discussions that essentially were held only because the teacher thought that now it was necessary for people to say something, display a marked reluctance, even hostility, to the process. The exercises reviewed in this chapter are all designed to provide creative alternatives to the 'now I've lectured so it's time to talk' model. They use multiple modalities of communication, build in silence as an intentional element of any conversational rhythm, and deliberately broaden the amount of student participation. For me a foundational reason to use discussion is to provide as much of an engagement with democracy as is possible within a classroom or organizational meeting. Just having people talking does not mean democracy at play. Indeed, discussions can easily replicate external power relations that are imported into the classroom whereby the most privileged and confident in the external world exercise their privilege in the academy.

One final comment; introducing more creative modes of discussion into classrooms will not be met with unalloyed joy by students who are comfortable with lecturing, or who sit back and stay silent in discussions knowing that the articulate few that always speak will take the burden off quieter students' shoulders. So expect resistance and suspicion when you first introduce these kinds of exercises and take it as a sign that you're doing something meaningful. Every classroom activity has advantages and drawbacks and every new initiative will be opposed by some and welcomed by others. The point is to mix and match as many different forms of discussion so that people can see you're trying to work in ways designed to involve everyone in the class at some point.

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