Let Freedom (and respect) Ring: Fostering Civil Discourse and Free Speech in the Classroom and Beyond

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As campuses and communities seek tools for addressing political polarization and division, we are often asked to provide advice and training about how to encourage "civil debate" among students. But civil debate is another way of saying "fighting politely." Although fighting politely is preferable to fighting with malice, it is not necessarily more likely to serve course learning objectives or foster understanding across difference. A paradigm shift from combat (gentle or otherwise) to collaboration makes our courses fertile ground for communication and robust inquiry.

Much has been written about the value of collaborative learning – from building relationships among students, to preparing them for the work force where teamwork is often required. But instructors and students alike can have concerns about group work- particularly how to assess it.

This module provides ideas for building collaborative work and mindset into a course, designing projects and assessments that involve dialogue across difference, and assessing group work.

        a.   Learning objectives

              i.   Learn to build collaborative learning into the fabric of a course
             ii.   Collaborative assessments and presentations
           iii.   Define successful collaborative work and build methods of assessing it

Build collaborative learning into the fabric of a course

Collaboration- much like active engagement in a course- is something that professors often want to encourage and assess but do not always define. Students arrive at college suspicious about group work. Many report bad experiences where they felt they had to carry the burden for an entire group. And those of us who assign collaborative projects know there's another side to that story too- that for every student who *had* to do all of the work, there is one who felt boxed out of the decision-making process and gave up. Collaboration is a skill worth knowing, but we need to define it, model it, and teach it- not just assign one group project and hope all goes well.

The following are some ways to build collaboration and listening into the fabric of the course, even outside of assessed collaborative projects:

      Take time to introduce yourselves

Don't skimp on introductions. In a hybrid or online course, ask students to share something about themselves on the LMS. Lead the way by sharing something about yourself. Remember that your students are in several classes and will not take the time to learn everyone's name unless you project that this is a priority.

It can be worthwhile to create stable small groups for discussion exercises- particularly in hybrid or online classes. That way, students are sure to become familiar with a subset of their class. Remind students to state their names at the beginning of small group breakout discussions and when they volunteer to speak, at least for the first few weeks of the class.

Include problem-solving exercises in class discussions

Problem-solving exercises give students a common purpose. They shift class engagement from "I" to "we," helping students get to know one another's competencies and skills.

Some guidelines for problem-solving exercises:

- Remind students that the goal is inquiry, not debate. They should spend time determining what they would need to know and what research they would have to conduct in order to answer the question well. This exercise also builds basic research design skills
- Avoid yes/no questions (e.g., should police unions be abolished) in favor of open-ended questions (e.g. what steps might we take to ensure police were held accountable for misconduct)
- Ask students to identify their points of agreement, including their shared goals
- Remind students to look to course readings and concepts in their discussions and to cite sources much like they would in a paper
- Ask for a final product: this can be a list of relevant research questions; a set of course readings or concepts that inform their problem solving, or a proposed answer. Have small groups share what they come up with on the LMS discussion board or share back in class.

Peer critique and editing

Students can also collaborate by reviewing one another's work, consistent with your academic integrity codes. If you choose to have students offer feedback on one another's works in progress, remember that it's important for your students to understand your assignments and expectations thoroughly, and assign your students the very specific task of helping their peers evaluate the extent to which their drafts or proposed theses meet the assignment standards.

- Provide a rubric or checklist that reflects your goals for the assignment and the standards by which you will assess it
- Have a classroom or discussion board dialogue in which you answer students' questions about the assignment
- Offer students a clear mandate as peer reviewers, such as:
  - Helping a peer clarify their thesis statement
  - Brainstorming course readings and concepts the peer could use to support their claim
  - Identifying potential opposing arguments their classmate should address in the paper

Collaborative assessments and presentations that emphasize collaborative process and communication across difference

The typical group project assignment asks students to solve some problem together and present it to their peers. The following are tools for maximizing the power of these group assessments to foster communication with peers and value collaborative processes

Incorporate a hypothetical audience into your problem-solving assignment and have students assume the role of that audience

Considering diverse perspectives is a foundation of productive dialogue across difference. And as every writer and writing instructor knows, understanding one's audience is a foundational writing skill. Adding a target audience to group projects and presentations helps the presenting students and their student audience build both skills.

Examples of specific target audiences for student presentations:

- Business owners
- Faith leaders
- Voters in a state that is unlike theirs (ex: a red, blue, rural, diverse)
- The university's board of trustees
- Union members
- A segment of voters such as suburban parents
- Gun owners or hunters
- Homeowners

Ask students who will watch the presentation to play the role of that audience and ask questions from that perspective.

Consider a dialogue across difference assignment

Problem-solving exercises are enormously useful. Outside of school, however, often difference is intractable (and without an assignment to reach consensus by a certain date, lawmakers and community members let problems go unsolved for a very long time). Students can benefit from exploring the nature of their disagreement and present their findings.

This is the "dialogue across difference" assignment prompt from a government course:

Sign up to work with a partner to explore a policy proposal about which you disagree. Your mission is to explore your understanding of the topic, tracking and documenting what you discuss. It is not necessary to reach a common-ground solution; you may explore and explain the nature of your disagreement.
The partners should engage in the following inquiry:
- Identify what you agree you need to know
  - in order to be fully educated about the issue (ex- what do you need to know about bail reform?)
  - in order to fully comprehend your partner's position (ex- what aspects of my partner's experience, such as military service, faith, or identity, might inform her preferences about bail reform?)
- Identify what you do not agree is relevant (ex- Sparkie doesn't believe cost is a relevant factor to consider in establishing alternatives to imprisonment; Penelope believes it is relevant);
- Identify shared values and interests (ex- we both want to eliminate racial bias in criminal justice);
- Identify goals that diverge (ex- only one of us wants to move toward abolishing incarceration);

> - Be able to articulate each other's initial positions and concerns in a way that makes the other person feel heard;
> - Collaborate on a presentation that explains the challenges of working across disagreement when it comes to this issue and offers advice to policymakers about how to work across difference on this topic. Remember to include course concepts and readings in your exploration.

You can apply the same assessment standards to this project as any other group project. The partners should treat their statements as primary source documents or interviews, and refer to them specifically (ex: "Michelle said her school was almost all white") rather than using blanket characterizations ("as a rural American Michelle doesn't have experience with diversity").

Defining success in collaborative work

If we are assigning group work to foster collaboration and communication, we should assess those objectives, and not only the final product. Self-assessment and peer assessment can all contribute (and ensure that all members of a group are equally accountable for completing the assignment).

Online LMS grading platforms enable you to create rubrics that incorporate any criteria you choose. For a group project, you might choose to grade the overall work product and presentation for the group as a whole, and grade collaboration separately. To do so, have all students complete a quiz on the LMS that includes questions such as: did you complete all of your assigned tasks in a timely fashion? Would your group members want to work with you again? Why? Would you want to work with this group again? Why? Give students an opportunity to describe the group dynamic in detail.

It's important to let students know at the beginning of the semester that they will be graded both on what they submit and on their performance as a colleague, as described by themselves and others. It is also helpful to let all groups and individuals know that if there is any concern about a group member, or if they have a barrier to participating fully themselves, they should communicate with faculty or a teaching assistant as soon as possible.

This mode of assessment does take some extra time. When you grade group projects, you need to look at all members' LMS quiz entries before assigning a grade to any individual. The process has rewards, however. It helps us learn more about students' learning process (including what modalities of communication and planning work for them), avoid penalizing students for peers' negligence, and recognize and reward effective collaboration. These reflections can also be extremely useful for faculty who are writing recommendation letters.

Next steps for your course:

Review your syllabus and identify opportunities to build collaboration into the fabric. Consider adding introductions- whether in person or on the discussion board. Look for class sessions that would benefit from collaborative problem-solving exercises. Consider dedicating class time to peer discussion of papers and projects in progress.

If you choose to create a collaborative assessment, build a grading rubric that includes collaboration and make this explicit in your syllabus, prompt, and communications with students.

Resources:

Sample collaborative project rubric (Blackboard):

Two tools for peer critique:

A writing checklist and guide to editing.

Video:

i. Paradigm shift
ii. Common purpose
iii. Challenges from K-12
iv. The case for collaborative work