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Scaling Up Dialogues to Boost Engaged Learning

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Abstract

This paper discusses single-session, facilitated classroom dialogues developed by the CU-Boulder Dialogues Program as a pedagogy that promotes experiential learning. Facilitated classroom dialogues encourage open conversation related to difficult topics. In a dialogue, participants agree to speak from their own experiences and listen across differences. Dialogues with invited guests whose experiences reflect multiple perspectives effectively engage today's conflict-averse undergraduates in learning about current issues and provide a scalable model for integrating dialogue across the curriculum.

Introduction

Resources for providing experiential learning opportunities in the classroom are nearer than we think. The perspectives of community members from a range of socio-cultural backgrounds can powerfully complement course content and promote engaged learning about complex and/or contentious topics, if we can develop productive ways to integrate them into our classes. Undergraduates today tend to tune out polarized debates over contentious issues. A recent study of student political engagement on 12 campuses found that college students avoid discussions that leave no room for nuanced understanding of an issue. The study describes students as "eager for opportunities to talk about issues with a diverse group of people in open and authentic ways" (Kiesa et. al. 4). A facilitated (and, when needed, simultaneously translated) dialogue between students and invited guests provides an opportunity for authentic conversation and incorporates divergent viewpoints in non-polarizing ways.

A dialogue is a facilitated conversation that seeks to increase understanding through open sharing and reflective listening across social and cultural differences and/or power differentials. As Daniel Yankelovich explains, dialogue can be distinguished from discussion by three key principles: 1) the "absence of coercive influences," 2) "listening with empathy," and 3) "bringing assumptions into the open" (41-46). Facilitated classroom dialogues promote self-discovery, self-expression, and reflection upon one's own perspective within the context of studying a specific topic, issue, or theme.

Over the past five years, the CU Dialogues Program at the University of Colorado, Boulder has developed a method for incorporating single-session facilitated dialogues in courses across the curriculum. The Dialogues Program has assessed the impacts of classroom dialogues on student learning, drawing from feedback questionnaires completed voluntarily and anonymously by students, faculty and guests who participated in dialogues. [1] This article describes how the CU Dialogues Program developed, discusses how classroom dialogue methodology differs from other intergroup dialogue models, and explains the value of single-session classroom dialogues as a form of experiential learning. Facilitated classroom dialogues simultaneously prompt reflection on course topics, strengthen students' ability to see and understand issues from multiple perspectives, and foster social awareness and a sense of community.

Background

The CU Dialogues Program is a Provost-funded initiative that facilitates approximately 70 dialogues each academic year to provide experiential learning in undergraduate courses across the curriculum. The Dialogues Program has tailored dialogues for classes in History, English, Anthropology, Sociology, Communication, Writing, Economics, Business, Spanish, Women's Studies, and Film Studies.

The Dialogues Program evolved from a civic engagement course on the American West developed by Drs. Ellen Aiken and Karen Ramirez for one of CU's Residential Academic Programs (RAPs). [2] In looking for an experiential learning activity that would promote complex analysis of the often-polarized topic of immigration, Aiken and Ramirez discovered a Boulder County initiative that facilitated dialogues between immigrants and native-born residents in Boulder County. [3] They arranged a dialogue for their RAP students and, rather than inviting immigrants from the Boulder community at large, invited immigrant custodial staff members who worked in the residence hall. Housing Facilities Services administrators provided release time for staff members to participate during the workday.

This professionally facilitated, simultaneously translated dialogue generated open conversation about immigration within an academic setting. Both students and staff were invited to ask questions and speak based on their own experiences living/working in the residence hall. Staff members' stories of arriving and working in the United States gave students first-hand knowledge of immigration and a deeper understanding of immigrants' experiences. Students repeatedly referred to the dialogue as "eye opening." Student interest in staff members' immigration and work experiences made the custodial staff feel included in the University community. One staff member commented that he had worked at the University for over 15 years and had never been asked his opinion about anything before the dialogue.

Since that first dialogue, Drs. Aiken and Ramirez, and a team of people working for what has become the CU Dialogues Program, have continued to develop and assess classroom dialogues related to course content. Recent topics have included gender and workplace (with female University employees from different age cohorts); immigration policy (with undocumented students); and perceptions of Muslim women (with self-identified Muslim students on campus). The Program is developing relationships with CU's Veteran Services, Disabilities Services, International Student and Scholar Services, and the GLBTQ Resource Center to offer opportunities for their students to discuss their experiences and perspectives in a classroom

dialogue setting. Facilitated classroom dialogue is a widely applicable methodology for promoting experiential learning that could be replicated at other Universities.

Methodology

In general, teaching methodologies that involve dialogues bring together two different identity groups whose experiences and perspectives stand (directly or indirectly) in opposition to one another. The goal of intergroup dialogue (IGD) is to work through opposition to understanding. The CU Dialogues Program differs in that it structures dialogue around a class topic rather than defined social identities. The goal of a single-session classroom dialogue is to create an opportunity for authentic communication within a single class period around a topic that advances course content.

IGD is generally defined as sustained, face-to-face, facilitated communication between members of different social identity groups (Zúñiga et. al 2; Wayne 452; Dessel and Rogge 201, 211). IGD courses are typically semester-length courses led by co-facilitators who share the social identities of the groups involved in dialogue (Gurin et al. Ch. 2). Readings are chosen specifically to support dialogue between the social identity groups. The efficacy of this model for intergroup dialogue as a process for learning about and practicing social justice has been well documented (Nagda et.al.; Gurin et. al).

Although the CU Dialogues Program identifies guests who can contribute diverse experiences and perspectives to the dialogue, and guests may be invited because of a social identity grouping (such as recent immigrants, age, profession, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation), during the dialogue all dialogue participants are asked to speak for themselves and from their individual experiences or viewpoints. The dialogue therefore does not presume existing tensions between dialogue participants but allows the space and time to recognize individual differences. Frequently a classroom dialogue uncovers differences that are experienced but not necessarily recognized within classroom settings, where differences can be many, varied, nuanced, and masked. During dialogues students have shared experiences stemming from visible social identity group identifications, such as race or gender, and a wide variety of masked social identity self-identifications, such as being divorced, being the child of immigrants, being affiliated with various religions, being disabled, being a veteran, and being a first-generation student. A classroom dialogue often complicates perceived social identity groupings.

Single-session dialogues also differ from IGD courses in that the former reach a much larger number of students in courses across the curriculum. Though different, the two kinds of dialogue are not mutually exclusive; dialogue programs could offer both. Single-session dialogues could well spark interest in semester-long IGD courses.

Process

A single-session classroom dialogue requires close collaboration between the course instructor and the dialogue facilitator to adequately prepare participants. The course instructor initiates the dialogue request, identifies a topic and key questions to address, and works with the facilitator to identify guests for the dialogue. Before the dialogue, the instructor introduces the students to the dialogue process by showing a brief video about classroom dialogues, explaining the dialogue topic, and asking students to write down questions to discuss with dialogue guests. [4] Invited

guests receive a copy of the instructor's planning document and send the facilitator any questions they would like to suggest. When necessary, professional simultaneous translation is arranged so that all dialogue participants can speak comfortably in their native language.

The dialogue takes place during a single class period. A dialogue begins with an "ice breaker" activity that incorporates brief individual introductions. A trained facilitator guides conversation around the topic and ensures that all participants have an opportunity to speak. Facilitators must be trained in facilitation processes and should be familiar with the topic, but need not be experts in the subject matter. The facilitator establishes a set of clearly articulated ground rules for the dialogue, asking participants to speak for themselves and from their own experiences, listen courteously, not attempt to persuade others, avoid generalizations and stereotypes, and allow others time to talk.

The facilitator directs the dialogue by soliciting questions and conversation from both students and guests; highlighting statements that reveal similarities and differences; ensuring that all voices and perspectives are heard; modeling reflective and inclusive listening; and pushing the conversation beyond surface discussions. The facilitator concludes the dialogue by inviting participants to reflect on the conversation that has taken place. After the dialogue, students, guests and instructors are asked to provide voluntary, anonymous feedback. Instructors are encouraged to discuss the dialogue during the next class period in order to reinforce connections between the dialogue and course content. Instructors can extend student learning by integrating the dialogue experience into subsequent study and class discussions.

Impacts

Feedback data suggest that facilitated classroom dialogues promote engaged learning, encourage dialogic thought and build a sense of community. Combined data from Spring 2013 and Fall 2014 showed that all 19 faculty members responding to questions about the pedagogical impact of dialogues felt that the dialogue reinforced student learning. Associating instructors' goals for a dialogue with student comments in response to the questions "What did you learn from the dialogue in this class?" and "What connections did you see between the dialogue and the topics you are studying in class?" indicates more specifically how a dialogue augments course learning and promotes dialogic thinking.

A Communication class on "Discourse, Culture, and Identities" held a dialogue between students and Housing Facilities Services staff members with the intended goal of helping students to recognize and apply communication strategies learned throughout the semester. The connections students made between the dialogue and course content closely aligned with the professor's dialogue goals:

- "I saw real life examples of race issues and conversational dilemmas. I've never had much of a chance to interact with people that couldn't understand me, so seeing that conversation happen in real life made it easier to connect with what we have been talking about;"
- "Some connections I made were the use of code-switching, controversies, culture differences and culture norms. It seemed as if the dialogue was an application of the many things we've been learning."

In an English class on “Introduction to Women’s Literature,” the instructor scheduled a dialogue with women from different age cohorts to discuss gender and ambition/profession. Student comments indicate close alignment between the dialogue and the instructor’s goal of raising students’ awareness of how gender impacts everyday lives and influences ideas of profession/work. Student responses included:

- “I saw connections between how gender affects women not only in writing, but in the real/modern world with real life women, and how women do still face struggles today;”
- “The biggest connection that I saw was that oppressions and restrictions felt because of gender are real and quite common. [. . .] To hear testimonials and stories from the guests put it into perspective for me.”

Classroom dialogues promote the dialogic principles of embracing the possibility of multiple outcomes and recognizing multiplicity. Spring 2013 assessment data showed that 97 percent (126/129) students agreed or strongly agreed that the dialogues provided an opportunity to understand a topic from multiple perspectives. This observation is reinforced by students’ qualitative responses to the question “What did you learn from a dialogue in this class,” which included:

- “[I learned] to look at things from different points of view;”
- “[I learned that the dialogue] forced people to get out of their comfort zones, which is sometimes the only way people will actually change;”
- “I learned how diverse my class is.”

Students often comment that they appreciate hearing from their peers in a dialogue as well as from invited guests. For students, this aspect of open sharing adds to the experiential learning potential of a dialogue because students are actively responding to the perspectives offered by all participants and thereby developing a sense of ownership and a personal connection with the course material.

Finally, classroom dialogues promote community-building for students and guests alike, particularly when dialogues are held between students and service staff. Student comments often indicate a heightened awareness of their roles as community members and an increased interest in connecting to others within the CU community. Comments include:

- “I am more likely to say hi to CU employees now and be more outgoing;”
- “Now that I am more aware, I feel like I am more likely to interact with staff;”

In addition, we found that 19 out of 19 of the Housing Facilities Services staff who completed feedback forms in Spring 2013 felt that after the dialogue they were more comfortable communicating with people in the University community, including students.[5]

Conclusion

Facilitated, single-session dialogues turn resources already at hand—students with different perspectives, specific course topics or themes, and invited guests from diverse backgrounds within the University or local community—into opportunities for meaningful experiential learning. The simple yet seldom practiced act of deliberately speaking and listening across socio-cultural differences draws students into moments of personal reflection that fully engage them in their own learning. Dialogues also serve as a useful process for overcoming students’ reluctance to talk about difficult issues. The CU Dialogues Program model of sharing experiences and perspectives without aiming to endorse or adopt a particular point of view prompts students to broaden their understanding of a specific topic and, at the same time, consider their own

relationship to the topic. Dialogues afford participants the space to consider multiple perspectives and develop dialogic habits of thinking that can be further developed in subsequent class periods.

The process of openly sharing and listening that a facilitated dialogue brings about is itself a valuable pedagogical tool. Hosting a dialogue fosters a dynamic of tolerance within the classroom that carries over after the dialogue. Participants recognize and value the authenticity of the dialogue experience. A first-year student who agreed to talk about her dialogue experience for the CU Dialogue Program's instructional video reflected that it was interesting to participate in a class where all participants shared their perspectives "in a very honest way" and concluded "that's a rare conversation to have." Students often suggest that more students should have access to a dialogue experience. Comments include: "I think [a dialogue] should be mandatory..." and "I recommend it be experienced by more students; it will allow them to be more conscious of their actions and those around [them]."

In recent years faculty and administrators on campuses across the country have shown increasing interest in the practice and promise of dialogue. Single-session facilitated classroom dialogues offer a scalable variation on the more commonly practiced sustained intergroup dialogue model and could steer interested students toward courses and programs in sustained dialogue. While both dialogue models generate transformational learning experiences for students, single-session facilitated dialogues have the potential to reach many more students and transform teaching practices across the curriculum.

Endnotes

- [1] The CU Dialogues Program has begun mixed methods research on the intrapersonal and pedagogical impacts of single-session facilitated classroom dialogues.
- [2] A RAP is a living-learning environment for first-year students where students take small seminar-style classes in their residence hall.
- [3] This program, called "Dialogues on Immigrant Integration" was funded by a 4-year grant which ended in 2009.
- [4] The CU Dialogues Program video can be accessed at: <<http://www.colorado.edu/cudialogues/dialogue.html>>
- [5] The CU Dialogues Program has begun studying the impacts of dialogues for Housing Facilities Staff.

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