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Discussion as a bridge: Strategies that engage adolescent and adult learning styles in the postsecondary classroom

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Abstract: This essay examines areas where literacy researchers in secondary and postsecondary contexts have explored the use of classroom discussion for extending critical thinking and content comprehension among students. It provides an argument for the use of strategic conversations in postsecondary classrooms and outlines specific methods for planning and implementing class-based discussions aligned with areas of convergence between adolescent and adult learning theories.

Keywords: postsecondary instruction, pedagogy, andragogy, adult-learning theory, classroom discussion, literacy, engagement, critical thinking

Postsecondary classes include a range of students across developmental levels. Especially in introductory courses, instructors may find students of both traditional and non-traditional ages demonstrating learning characteristics described in both adolescent and adult learning models. Because of the range of levels that may be represented in these classes, it is of particular importance for postsecondary instructors to be aware of areas of theoretical convergence in developmental learning, and learning strategies that can be used across developmental levels to encourage student growth and comprehension of classroom material. One specific, but frequently under-used strategy that has benefits at both the adolescent and adult learning levels is strategic classroom discussion.

I. A Convergence of Needs.

Early research in the field of adult education, described by Knowles (1978), sought to make a distinction between *pedagogy*, or the teaching of children and *andragogy*, the instruction of adults. However, Knowles (1980) noted that *youth*, learners between the ages of childhood and adulthood, also may fit some of the characteristics described in his adult-learning model. As adolescent literacy researchers have become more cognizant of the importance of individual and social construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978), a nexus of learning needs between adult and adolescent learners has become perceptible, even if the parallels between andragogy and the needs of adolescents have not fully been explicitly acknowledged by those developing engaging in research based on related theories (e.g.,, Adler, Rougle, Kaiser, & Caughlan, 2003).

Adult learners are self-directed and independent, with a wealth of experience from which to draw when learning, and a need to see immediate relevance in their education as it relates to their current social roles (Knowles, 1980). They benefit from being directly involved in the development of their learning activities, and often seek help from others they see as more knowledgeable when they approach new tasks. (See McGrath, 2009, for a discussion about Knowles' model as theory or framework.). Adolescent literacy researchers indicate that, although

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they have fewer experiences to draw upon, adolescents similarly need to be actively engaged in their own learning experiences (O'Brien & Dillon, 2008; Sweet & Snow, 2002), and require more independence and choice (Smith & Wilhelm, 2002) as they progress through school. Additionally, adolescent learners, effectively learn through social engagement and interaction, especially when they see the activities in which they are engaged as relevant and relating to their lives outside of school (Irvin, Buehl, & Klemp, 2007; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002; Tovani, 2000)

Adults, according to Knowles (1980), are on a journey of learning that relates directly to their current interests and social roles. As such, they are more "performance-centered" in their approach to learning, than "subject-centered," and they look toward instructors who are knowledgeable, but who are also able to allow the adults to self-direct their learning. Because they identify themselves as adults, and traditional schooling as something that is done for children, adults prefer to learn in contexts that are less like traditional school, and Knowles recommended that learning in adult contexts be as little like "school" as possible. Similarly, Smith and Wilhelm (2002) found in their study of the literacy needs of boys at the secondary level, the adolescents frequently engaged in self-directed non-school literacy activities that focused on their personal interests, and they avoided activities that appeared to be too "schoolish" (83-84).

II. Why Both Adults and Adolescents Need to Talk.

Avoiding that which is *schoolish* is seemingly applicable to both adults and adolescents. As such, classroom activities must be seen as *meaningful* to participants. Meaningful classroom discussions require students to actively participate (Alvermann et al., 1996), and to critically ask and respond to open-ended questions (Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2003) as they negotiate meaning across texts and in relation to their individual experiences (Carico, 2001). Researchers in middle and secondary schools have shown that strategic classroom conversations enhance and extend student learning while also facilitating engagement and motivation (Alvermann et al., 1996; Carico, 2001; Lenihan, 2003; Nussbaum, 2002). At the postsecondary level, classroom conversation has also been linked to student engagement (Gunnlaugson & Moore, 2009), stronger academic achievement (Smith, Wood, Krauter, & Knight, 2011), and improved critical thinking skills (Garside, 1996); however, lecture remains the main form of instruction in secondary (Nystrand et al., 2003) and postsecondary (Garside, 1995) classrooms. Although Mulryan-Kyne (2010) noted that the presence of lecture-based instruction in large college classes seems to be on the decline internationally in recent years, lectures still tend to dominate postsecondary educational contexts.

Adults and late adolescents in postsecondary classrooms need to talk for a variety of both affective and cognitive reasons. From the affective perspective, classroom conversation and discourse help lead to group affiliation and development of academic identity (Gee, 1996). Furthermore, sometimes peers are more able to use shared connections and experiences to explain and build upon concepts from class in ways instructors cannot. One argument made for greater use of meaningful discussion in secondary classrooms is that the process of meaning-making through open exchange of dialogue appeals to adolescents' emergent sense of independence and need for social connection with peers (Adler et al., 2003; Alvermann et al., 1996; Carico, 2001; Irvin, Buehl, & Klemp, 2007; McLaughlin, 2010; Nussbaum, 2002; Smith & Wilhelm, 2002). Researchers in middle and secondary schools also indicate that strategic classroom conversations can enhance and extend student learning while facilitating engagement

and motivation (Alvermann et al., 1996; Carico, 2001; Lenihan, 2003; Nussbaum, 2002). These specific learning needs, independence and social interaction, also factor into Knowles' (1980) andragogical learning model.

Cognitively, classroom discussion provides an opportunity for students to gain deeper understanding of the content covered in the course (Chandler-Olcott, 2008; McLaughlin, 2010; Smith et al., 2011), as well as to practice the language and ways of thinking that are specific to different fields of study (Zwiers, 2008). Additionally, students who participate in classroom conversations invoking personal connections or experiences may gain insight into the relevance of those topics as they relate to their own lives outside of school (Gunnlaugson & Moore, 2009; Tatum, 2008). When students are able to collaboratively talk about classroom topics with their peers, they engage in activities that are more reflective of "real-world" problem-solving events within those fields, fulfilling adult learners' need to find relevance in their studies (Knowles, 1978).

Although there are parallels between Knowles' (1980) model and the needs of adolescent learners, one important potential divergence centers on the concept of experience. Adults have acquired a wealth of experiences from which to draw when learning, whereas adolescents, whether in secondary or postsecondary contexts, have not yet had the opportunity to amass as many experiences. However, personal experience, according to literacy researchers at both developmental levels, is where a social construction of knowledge through classroom discussion may provide a direct benefit to learning (Adler et al., 2003; Alvermann et al., 1996; Irvin et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2011; McLaughlin, 2010, Zwiers, 2008). Adult learners have a lifetime of experience upon which to build (Chan, 2010; Knowles, 1980), and conversations in class provide a structure for adult postsecondary students to make sense of new information in relation to what they already know. Because postsecondary classes may include students at both developmental levels, classroom conversations incorporating the lived experience of the adult learners may help to support the learning of those with less experience. As Wells and Arauz (2006) stated, "not only does [working with peers] harness the social orientation of students' interests, but it also enables them to achieve together more than any of them individually could have achieved alone" (p. 415).

IV. General Guidelines for Effective Classroom Discussion.

Drawing from Bakhtin's work with discourse patterns, Nystrand et al. (2003), explored the concepts of monologic and dialogic conversation in classroom discussion. Monologic classroom conversation emphasizes *teacher talk,* and is directed by the teacher, with little input from students beyond recitation (Nystrand et al., 2003) or clarification of the teacher's (or author's) ideas. One common example of monologic discussion is the ineffective and mechanical Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) structure (Wells & Arauz, 2006). In an IRF format, the instructor asks a question of the students for which there is already an established or anticipated answer. When the expected response is provided, the instructor makes a brief, evaluative statement with little instructional value (for example: "Good"), and then moves on to the next question. Consistent IRF episodes masquerading as classroom discussion often do little to encourage further student thought or consideration (Zwiers, 2008). Dialogic conversation, conversely, requires an exchange of ideas, and expansion or modification of the "contributions of others as one voice 'refracts' another" (Nystrand et al., 2003, p. 139), and a de-emphasis on the instructor as the distributor of knowledge, with students as passive recipients. Dialogic

discussion formats invite students to thoughtfully consider and respond to complex, disciplinary-based questions, even when there may not be a single correct response. Monologic conversation is the method for conveying information and establishing topics, but "it is dialogic discourse that opens the floor to discussion and the negotiation of ideas and new understandings" (Nystrand et al., 2003, p. 141). Moving traditional classrooms from monologic to dialogic discourse, however, requires planning and flexibility on behalf of both the instructor and the students, and authentic accounts of this type of discourse in the classroom are not often observed in research studies (Nystrand et al., 2003).

In order to participate in discussion at a level beyond Nystrand et al.'s (2003) concept of recitation, students must be oriented for authentic participation. From an andragogical (Knowles, 1978, 1980) perspective, guidance would begin by allowing students to draw on their own, personal, and out-of-school experiences negotiating meaning through discussion. In addition to drawing from learner's own experiences, orientation to meaningful classroom discussion may be aided by specific formats and structures that guide students toward organizing their ideas, creating and responding to student-generated questions, and actively listening to and drawing from the participation of others in the conversation.

A. What to Do Before Discussions Start: Orienting Students for Meaningful Talk.

The first step in strategically planning for a classroom conversation is to determine the overarching purpose and expectations for the discussion. Instructors, in conjunction with the students, decide what the students are expected to learn and do as they discuss, and how the process will directly connect to the larger goals of the course (Wells & Arauz, 2006). For example, one purpose for a conversation early in the introduction of a topic may be to help students access background knowledge in order to activate their analogical reasoning skills (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Another purpose may be for students to uncover personal biases and assumptions. Later in the course, conversation may be invoked to help students to wrestle with questions and ideas that arise as they learn more in a particular field. Knowing the ultimate purpose of the conversation in advance will help to determine the appropriate format for the ensuing discussion.

It is important to plan for an open discussion of the expectations for the conversation itself. As part of this *metadiscussion* (Zwiers, 2008) students and the instructor generate guidelines and expectations for participation. The metadiscussion may also include a demonstration modeling the specific format and structure selected. Sharing this decision making process with the students will help them understand why discussion is an important task that requires their active involvement and participation. It relates directly to Knowles' (1980) model, as adults have a need to know the value of their learning and, by extension, the value their educational activities.

Plans for classroom conversation should include strategic attempts by the instructor to ensure that all students actively participate. This may include a plan for breaking the class into smaller groups for talk, or finding ways to limit the contributions of some students who tend to dominate conversations, while also encouraging more reticent students to become involved. If all students are expected to participate during classroom conversations, they should be forewarned. Ideally, in a true dialogic setting, the questions and ideas discussed during conversation will be generated through active listening and response among the students; however, it may also helpful

to generate a list of potential topics and questions with students ahead of time, so that they have the opportunity to adequately prepare.

B. What to Do During Discussion: Facilitating Conversation and Encouraging Participation.

Once students are sufficiently oriented to discussion expectations, another general guideline for encouraging meaningful discussion is to ensure that sufficient *wait time* is provided as the conversations take place. When questions invoke higher-level cognitive responses, students may need a longer period of time to organize their thoughts than many instructors may initially expect. Appropriate wait-time allows students to access their knowledge and process ideas in order to critically respond to discussion topics. Traditionally wait time is considered a responsibility of the instructor; however, in a dialogic exchange aligned with adult learning models, students and instructor assume more egalitarian roles, thus the concept of waiting and pondering must be intentionally discussed, practiced and developed for all members of the classroom community. Although some participants may be uncomfortable with extended periods of silence in class, Gunnlaugson and Moore (2009) indicated that silence is an important part of dialogue and discussion, and chose to encourage their students to consider silence as a time for meditation and reflection on complex topics prior to participating in the general conversation.

Instructors can employ a variety of techniques to facilitate rich conversations, while also modeling ways of thinking and use of academic language specific to the field. An important component of effective modeling is developing and asking questions that help the students access higher-levels of thinking, and then providing opportunities for students to craft similar questions of their own. Drawing on Freire (1970) and other critical theorists, McLaughlin (2010) indicated that effective question generation by students leads not only to greater comprehension of ideas and texts, but also to their evolution as more active and critical participants, both in class and in the world. Examples of types of questions that encourage thoughtful classroom discussion include requests for clarification of student statements, support of claims through disciplinary-supported forms of evidence, and further elaboration of ideas. Responses and feedback from the instructor during classroom discussions should consistently be directed toward helping students construct their own understanding of the content.

Discussion strategies. Because of an increased level of intimacy, group discussions may provide more opportunity for involved participation from a greater number of students than whole-class conversations. As fewer people are included in each conversation, some students may feel as though it is less risky to contribute, and discussion may also delve more deeply into the topic (Zwiers, 2008).

Providing a structure for discussions may also be beneficial. Disenchanted with discussions on student self-selected journal articles in her pre-service teaching classes, Taylor (1998) developed a method for evoking more dialogic classroom conversations using a question grid to guide students as they selected and read their articles. Students were required to select at least three points for discussion from each page of an article read, and to write a brief comment about each. During presentations, students shared each point they selected, and listened to the comments from their peers. To complete the table, they then had to fill in a final space, summarizing what the other group members said. This specific strategy led to richer conversations among the students, and higher quality of articles selected for presentation.

Similar to Taylor's (1998) method, another general small-group discussion strategy developed by Short, Harste, and Burke (as cited in McLaughlin, 2010), is called "Save the Last

Word for Me". In this strategy, students are assigned a text-based assignment prior to the class session. As they read, they note quotes, phrases, or ideas that pique their interests, remind them of personal connections, or about which they have questions. On one side of an index card, the students write and cite a single quote or phrase they've identified, and on the other side they indicate why they chose that item. During class, each student individually presents the text-information in a small group, allowing the group members to respond to the information cited. When all group members have responded, the student who introduced the text flips the card over to share why it was selected. At this point, conversation may continue, or students may move on to the next group member's contribution.

Accountability. Regardless of strategies used for group discussion, one way to encourage students to stay on task and to have meaningful encounters is to require some form of tangible evidence documenting their conversations. This can be as simple as having each group report back to the entire class, or by asking students to write a brief exit slip or reflection on the discussion. Evaluation can also be more complex, again depending on the goals of the course and the conversation. In some cases, instructors may choose to develop general rubrics for assessing participation in group conversations, which can then be used as a self- or group-assessment tool by the students in each of the groups.

C. What to Do When They Get it Wrong.

Determining how to appropriately handle inaccurate statements made by students during classroom conversation may be difficult for some instructors, especially because an important aspect of meaningful discussion is the development of a community of willing participants who trust that their participation will be welcome and valued by everyone. If the students feel as though they will be ridiculed when they are wrong, they may be less apt to participate in the future; yet, it is counter-productive to allow misconceptions to be unaddressed, lest other students are influenced to adopt the same misinformation. Fisher, Frey, and Lapp (2010) developed a method for instructors to deal with student misconceptions based on the Gradual Release of Responsibility Framework. Using this method, when students provide inaccurate information during discussion, instructors proceed through several stages of metacognitive guidance, allowing the speakers to reconsider inaccuracies and misconceptions, and to have the opportunity to self-correct. In the first step of the strategy, instructors open conversation by asking students if have any questions about the topic, allowing them an opportunity to clear up any confusion about the topic they may have. The second step occurs after a student has actually made an incorrect or inaccurate statement during discussion. Instead of immediately correcting the student, the instructor is advised to respond with a question like, "What evidence do you have to support that idea?" or "Where did you come across that information?" Asking students to provide evidence allows them the opportunity to reconsider gracefully. If, however, asking for general evidence doesn't eliminate the misconception, the next option is to redirect the student or students to specific evidence from the class. For example, "Take a look at the chart on Page 9. Does the information there support your idea?" Though the third step is more proscriptive than the previous two, it still allows the students to make corrections themselves. If none of the previous three approaches seem to correct the misconception, the final option in the process is for the instructor to step in with a direct clarification.

V. Conclusion

Classroom conversations provide a wealth of opportunity for activating higher-order thinking in a way that aligns with aspects of both adult and adolescent learning theories. Holding effective classroom conversations, however, requires instructors to do more than just ask a few spontaneous questions in the middle of a planned lecture. In order to better foster postsecondary students' ability to think critically about course content and topics, and to increase interest and engagement in class, instructors must involve students in decision-making around classroom conversations, carefully consider goals for discussion, select effective formats based on those goals, monitor student participation and involvement, and actively model ways of thinking and the discipline-specific language of the field.

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