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Fostering Student Engagement: Examining the Roles of Self, History and Cultural Identity

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Abstract

This paper describes and analyzes a Debate-Discussion Learning Project designed to foster student engagement with the subject matter and each other in reflective and analytical dialogues. This project is a significant component of a course, The Rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement, which has a major goal of understanding how the legacy of racial discrimination in the past impacts self and cultural identity. In this essay, I argue that the design of the course and in particular the debate-discussion component, purposely created with a collaborative learning approach, successfully engaged students in substantive discussions of the events of the Civil Rights era and its present-day impact. This paper provides a brief review of literature on collaborative learning; a description of the course and the "Debate-Discussion Learning Project"; an analysis of why the project worked; and, best practices for using debate-discussion across disciplines.

Keywords: Student engagement, collaborative learning, classroom discussions, race relations.

Student engagement with course content seems like a pre-requisite for learning. A knowledgeable and enthusiastic instructor can make a difference in students' motivation and willingness to become actively engaged with the subject matter. However, successful teaching and learning (reciprocal acts) requires collaboration among teachers and learners.

As a Communication Studies professor, I have always attempted to facilitate students' engagement with course content, with their learning activities, and most importantly with me and their peers in reflective and analytical dialogues. My courses are designed with a constructivist learning philosophy and practices and collaborative learning methodologies. I designed the debate-discussion project as well as the course presented in this paper with this philosophy and classroom practices in mind.

In this course, The Rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement, designed and first taught in fall 2008, an important goal is to understand how the legacy of racial discrimination in the past impacts self and cultural identity. Although the success of this course can be credited to a variety of factors, the most distinguishing factor was that all students (in groups of 3) were challenged to facilitate a reflective 60-minute round-table debate-discussion

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for their classmates. It was during these round-table discussions that I observed student engagement through collaborative learning in its most productive form.

In this essay, I argue that the design of the course and, in particular the debate-discussion learning project, purposely created with a collaborative approach squarely in mind, successfully engaged students in substantive discussions of the events of the Civil Rights era and its present-day impact. I first briefly review literature on collaborative learning that facilitates student engagement now spanning several decades. Then I provide a brief description of the Rhetoric of the Civil Rights course and a description of the "Debate-Discussion" approach designed to promote student engagement with the course materials and each other. Then, I present an analysis of why the "Debate-Discussion" component worked and what students learned based on my observations of the discussions and the observations of students from a class survey at the end of the course. Finally, I offer best practices for using this Debate-Discussion component across disciplines.

A Brief Review of Collaborative Learning

There is ample evidence, discussed over several decades, that successful teaching and learning requires collaboration among teachers and learners. Collaborative learning is similar to cooperative learning in which knowledge is constructed and negotiated in social-cultural contexts with others in a collaborative process. It emphasizes the interdependence of the learners and the communal nature of the process as knowledge is negotiated and co-constructed through dialogue and problem-solving. Collaborative learning is anchored in constructivist philosophies and learner-centered methodologies; in these learning environments knowledge is co-constructed through active engagement (sense making) with ideas and phenomenon. (Bruffee, 1993; Fosnot, 1989; Lebow, 1993; Myers & Jones, 1993; Savery & Duffy, 1996; Slavin, 1991; vonGlasersfeld, 1989).

Cooperative learning approaches to teaching and learning are based on group theories and communication. To be successful, cooperative or collaborative learning groups must have an interdependent goal structure as well as a division of labor and resources, equal reward system, and individual accountability. Successful collaboration requires group members to perceive mutual benefit, build trusting relationships, and accommodate differences in values and cultures (Blumenfeld, Marx, Soloway & Krajcik, 1996; Chrislip & Larson, 1994; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; O'Donnell & 0'Kelly, 1994; Rothwell, 1998; Smith & MacGregor, 2000, Webb, 1982).

Continued support for these kinds of learning environments is evidenced by recent journal articles. They focus on innovative teaching and reveal that the case for constructivist and collaborative learning remains strong. What is particularly noteworthy in these issues is the continued focus on directly engaging students in the learning process. Kenny and Wirth (2009) rely on theatrical performance and improvisation strategies to help instructors understand how to involve students directly in their learning. Bryson and Hand (2007), in their article about student engagement, not only advocate constructivist teaching but also claim that for deep learning "multi-faceted engagement is required" (p 349). An important aspect of the multi-faceted approach means "engaging the learner's per-

sonal stance in the learning process" (p. 352) and thus the teacher's role is to "facilitate the student's task of constructing her/his own views about the subject and the world" (p. 351). I would also argue that part of this multi-faceted engagement should also help students' locate their own identity (understanding who they are, where they came from culturally and what kind of citizens they aspire to be) as they construct and co-construct knowledge and understandings (see Magolda, 2000 for examples of incorporating students' worldviews and identities into the learning process). This kind of engagement occurs through critical reflection and analysis and is fostered through collaborative dialogues in which ideas and different perspectives are "discussed, debated, and negotiated with peers and instructors" (Johnson & Brescai, 2006, p. 58). Furthermore, as Ash & Clayton (2009) explain "a critical reflection process that generates, deepens, and documents learning does not occur automatically—rather, it must be carefully and intentionally designed" (p. 28).

While I claim that the course, Rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement, is designed to engage students with the subject matter and with each other, it is my carefully and intentionally designed Debate-Discussion Learning Project which most successfully achieves this objective.

The debate-discussion project described and analyzed in this essay can be adapted in any discipline for somewhere in every discipline there are topics that benefit from students and instructors wrestling with the subject matter in reflective and analytical dialogues. While many instructors use teacher-led classroom discussions rather than lectures as a way of teaching, it is less common for students to prepare and conduct classroom discussions. This essay delineates why and how student-led discussions enhance students' learning and are rewarding for students and instructors.

Description of Course: Rhetoric of Civil Rights Movement

The major focus of this course is to examine the persuasive strategies employed by the leaders, organizations and ordinary citizens of the Civil Rights Movement during the time period captured in the PBS Documentary series *Eyes on the Prize*[2]. Using historical footage along with contemporary interviews, the series covers the major events of the civil rights movement from 1954-1985. The actual footage of the non-violent strategies employed by college students in the lunch-counter sit-ins along with the rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) in contrast to the rhetoric of Malcolm X and Stokley Carmichael and the images of the Black Panther Party members are just a few ways that students in this course become directly engaged with the subject material. The accompanying book (Carson, et al, 1991) and internet website[3] that compliment the documentary series cover the same time-period and events and extend the documentary coverage. For example, the first video documentary presents the Montgomery Bus Boycott and introduces young MLK's entrance into the movement through a snippet of his speech at the Holt Baptist Church. In the accompanying book, MLK's complete speech on December 5, 1955 is provided. The internet website serves as a study guide as it presents a link to each of the

[2] http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/eyesontheprize/about/index.html
[3] http://www.facinghistory.org/resources/publications/eyes-prize

video episodes which contain a description of that particular episode's historical events plus additional text of the interviews seen in the video episode; it also has questions to stimulate connections and discussion.

The PBS Documentary has fourteen 60-minute episodes and the first eight are covered fully in this course so that students can examine the movement's major events of the non-violent strategies and the rhetoric of "Freedom Now" espoused by MLK in contrast to the call for forceful-violent resistance and the rhetoric of "Black Power" which was advocated by Malcolm X, Stokley Carmichael, and the Black Panthers Party. With each video episode (and the accompanying book and internet guide), I have selected a specific academic article that analyzes the event, a speech or a particular individual in the movement. Thus students have ample resources at their fingertips; all course assignments, readings and resources are posted on our Blackboard site for the course. Furthermore, they receive a reading list of specific academic articles that they can refer to for further study. These assigned readings and resources are designed to assist students in their two major course assessments: a mid-term and final analytical research paper (for a copy of the syllabus, lists of readings, and these analysis-paper assignments, see the author's Internet site http://www.uncw.edu/com/RCR.html).

Before students are exposed to the footage and actual events beginning in 1954, we examine the events of a recent CNN Documentary of a modern-day protest and fight for Civil Rights which occurred in Jena, LA in 2006. This video documentary is used along with Barack Obama's speech on race relations (*A More Perfect Union* delivered March 18, 2008) to provide students with the understanding of the existence and complexity of race-related issues in today's world and to provide them with two different artifacts to use to conduct a rhetorical analysis first in small groups and then individually (see http://www.uncw.edu/com/RCR.html for a copy of the group assignment titled "Judgment in Jena" and the response analysis paper). Since this 2006 CNN documentary examines the controversy surrounding the events of "three nooses hung on a tree in a local high school," the charges brought against six (under-aged) black students of attempted second-degree murder and conspiracy, and the subsequent media attention and protest which brought over 15,000 people to the small southern town (population: 3000), it provides an excellent opportunity for students to engage in a debate-discussion of a modern-day civil rights protest movement and the issues of race surrounding it. As a result, students experience their first round-table, face-to-face discussion in which they are engaged with the subject matter and with each other. As the facilitator of this first debate-discussion, I encourage students to express their different perspectives and viewpoints surrounding these controversial issues of hate crimes and civil rights. I make an effort to create a comfortable trusting environment in which differences of opinion are tolerated and even encouraged. Therefore, the groundwork is laid for their Debate-Discussion Learning Project which fosters student engagement and occupies the vast majority of the course.

Debate-Discussion Learning Project: How it Works

I intentionally and carefully selected the name of the Debate-Discussion Learning Project avoiding the use of the word "presentation." Specifically my role is to teach students how to take on the role of facilitators of learning as they prepare and implement a focused debate-discussion on selected issues and questions from an episode of *Eyes on the Prize* and the related reading(s). By using the words "debate" and "discussion" students understand that their role is to expect and encourage different viewpoints on the topics and issues from the assigned course materials. Furthermore, by calling it a learning project they also understand that these discussions must be designed so that their classmates actively participate and contribute to their learning. Students receive detailed instructions about the product and the process for the debate-discussion and understand that they will be graded on their individual preparation and implementation as well as on the instructional design and execution of the whole project (see http://www.uncw.edu/com/RCR.html for this assignment and detailed instructions).

In the fourth week of classes, we begin with the viewing of the episodes from the PBS series "Eyes on the Prize" during a Thursday class followed by the accompanying student-led debate-discussion on the next Tuesday. This allows time for the student facilitators (groups of 3) to prepare their debate-discussion design and for the participants (the rest of the class) to be prepared for the discussion. Thus all students (in groups of 3) have the opportunity to prepare and lead a debate-discussion for a full class period while the rest of the class members (along with the instructor) become participants in the discussions. The success of this project relies on the diligent preparation of both facilitators and participants. Student facilitators must be guided as they construct the prompts and questions for discussion and student participants must be *required* to be prepared to participate in that discussion.

The student facilitators are instructed to prepare a two-page handout with prompts and questions for discussion that covers the essential events in the episode as well as the assigned reading. To assure success, students are presented with ample resources about how to prepare open-ended discussion questions and how to design and conduct a learning discussion (see http://www.uncw.edu/com/RCR.html for these resources). Once the facilitators have completed their final draft of the handout for discussion, they meet with me so that I can review it and make final changes. In addition, I review the essential aspects of facilitating discussions:

- Call participants by their names as they volunteer a response (students have desk name tags);
- Call on participants who have not "volunteered" to encourage participation from all students;
- Be comfortable with "think-time" or silence after posing a question for discussion;
- Make connections between responses from participants; and,
- Provide summaries between discussion topics.

I select questions from the facilitators' handout that address the assigned academic article for the corresponding episode from the *Eyes on the Prize* documentary. I, then, send these questions to the class as an assignment "Required Written Response" due the day of the discussion and part of their class grades.

On the days of the discussion, the three student facilitators are responsible for arranging the participants' chairs (22) in a semi-circle leaving a gap at the top of the circle for their three chairs. During these discussions, I became a participant and let students respond to the different topics before I add anything. At each chair they place a copy of their handout which has the discussion purpose as well as the prompts and questions (see http://www.uncw.edu/com/RCR.html for examples of these handouts—*The Awakening* and *Mississippi: Is this America?*—created by student facilitators and for the corresponding "Required Preparation and Written Response" for the participants). Although these discussions are scheduled for 60 minutes, they frequently last 65 to 70 minutes especially when students are actively engaged in discussing controversial topics.

Debate-Discussion Learning Project: Why it Works

It is essential to provide an open trusting classroom environment so students can feel comfortable expressing their opinions and different viewpoints. On the first day of classes I talk about why I designed and elected to teach this course which focuses on the rhetoric and the persuasive strategies of the Civil Rights (CR) activists and events. I also talk frankly about growing up in south Louisiana in the 50's and 60's and my memories and experiences as a white middle-class teenager; I disclose to students my "unawareness" of the real struggles of black citizens. I talk about my grandmother's (born in 1895) fear of blacks and my mother's (born 1921) memories as a young girl seeing water fountains with "whites only" and "colored only" signs. Since the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Freedom Rides are events that we examine in detail, I reveal that I had never ridden a bus until I was in graduate school in my late 20's as my parents did not allow it. I am convinced that this self-disclosure of my own identity and history sets the stage for a trusting and comfortable environment and helps students feel more comfortable to discuss sensitive and complex issues about race.

Second, a face-to face, round-table format is essential for this kind of discussion. As Graetz & Goliber (2002) recognize, the importance of "face-to- face interaction" remains strong especially for collaborative learning environments and "successful universities will provide student and instructors with environments that facilitate collaborative learning" (p. 20). Clearly, a physical environment which allows students to turn their desks and chairs towards one another to engage in face-to-face interaction personalizes and enhances collaborative learning. Furthermore, face-to-face interaction helps students feel more accountable to and, eventually, more comfortable with each other.

Third, engaging students, through documentaries (and interviews) in the events and lives of the CR activists from the 50's and 60's is central to the success of this course. As part of their own reflection process and for my edification, students have an opportunity to respond to open-ended questions at the end of the course One of the questions asks stu-

dents to describe what they learned about the Civil Rights Movement that surprised them. Several students commented that it was the actual visuals, the ability to see and experience what had happened and to listen to the testimonies of the blacks and whites on both sides of the fence that made their learning and discussions more meaningful and memorable. The following three accounts from students reveal the value of these documentaries:

> To see the brutality that blacks were exposed to on a daily basis was horrifyingly surprising. Of all the other content of the class, this stuck out the most. Sure, I was educated on several issues and several important figures and organizations, but nothing truly surprised me except the visual images of whites attacking and harassing blacks for no other reason than their skin color (White male, fall 2008).

> I have been reading about slavery and the Civil Rights Movement since I was a little girl. I don't think that I was particularly surprised by the content, but it was an entirely new experience to learn by watching the videos. It was amazing to see actual footage from that time, and to listen to people talk about their personal accounts with the movement. (Black female, fall 2008).

> Utilizing documentaries was a great way to capture the heart beat of the civil rights movement. It gave me such a unique vantage point; it was as if I was watching the events of the civil rights movement from an observation deck. What a fantastic way to view history and understand the severity and the historical significance of the events that took place (White male, spring 2010).

The documentaries and interviews of the CR activists sparked round-table discussions as students recalled the images and debated, for example, whether the CR activists were justified in using children in the marches. Two students argued about the "morality of using children in the marches." The white student asserted that young children should not participate in marches and be protected while the black student claimed that it is impossible to protect black children from discrimination and disclosed her experiences at age five when she first felt the stigma of not being white. This was a particularly instructive discussion as students explored the role of history and its impact on self and cultural identity.

That discussion and others similar to it inspired me to ask the following question: "How did the study of the Civil Rights Movement impact your view of yourself as an American?" The following two responses speak to the value of educating the whole person by incorporating students' world views as well as self-identities and reflective knowledge of history into their education (Magolda, 2000):

> At times I felt almost ashamed by still calling myself a southerner because of the horrible things that occurred in the South. I also feel that, not only did I become more aware about the Civil Rights Movement, I found a new respect and admiration for those who fought for their freedom. It made me proud to be an American because it shows our Nation can change (White male, fall 2008).

> I felt proud to be a biracial American, in that my ancestors fought for me to be able to have the rights that I do today. Furthermore, I would argue that they fought for my existence as a biracial American; it may have been harder for my parents to be together had these changes not occurred. I also felt hopeful because history proves that with the right inspiration we can create change. (Biracial female, fall 2008)

Finally, the debate-discussion project worked, I believe, in part because my practice was to routinely intervene in the process of learning by helping the student facilitators succeed. I made sure that their handouts for the discussion covered the essential aspects of their assigned *Eyes on the Prize* episode as well as addressed the important points of the assigned readings.

Discussion as a collaborative learning tool cannot be successful without a focused purpose and well designed prompts and questions to help carry out that purpose. Each handout constructed by the student facilitators needed to be fine-tuned to assure the kind of open-ended and challenging questions that can spark discussion and debate. For that reason, I required all student facilitators to meet with me as their final preparation to get feedback on the handout and to be reminded of the essentials of facilitating a discussion.

Furthermore, without the diligent preparation of the participants the discussion was doomed to fail. Students had to watch the *Eyes on the Prize* episode (copies are on library reserve) and had to do the assigned readings; thus, attendance was required and points awarded (or lost) for their written responses to these readings. I have learned through experience that many students fail to do assigned readings without extrinsic motivation. The loss of grade points was only partial motivation; the value of saving-face in front of classmates was an important motivator for students to be prepared. Several students acknowledged this in their end-of-course questionnaire. The following three student responses speak to the value of required and *graded* readings for discussion:

> . . . I must say that the required responses that we had to give to you may have played a part in this. I definitely took extra time to respond thoroughly and even take notes on the reading so that I could be well prepared for the round table discussions (spring, 2010).
>
> In a "round table discussion" style classroom, students know that they will have to discuss an issue or topic during almost every class meeting. This ensures that the assigned material will be read by students because they are expected to participate. The writing that followed the reading seemed like such a pain to me in the beginning of the class, but I found out that it was a great way to organize my thoughts in order to share them with the class (fall, 2008).
>
> These discussions also helped to demonstrate the relevance of doing the outside class readings and responses. I would have found some of the readings to be very tedious if I knew I was just going to sit in class and listen to a lecture the next day.

> But since we needed to do the readings in order to participate actively in the discussions, I found reading them to be very interesting (spring 2010).

It was reassuring to read that students realized the value of the required responses and found their individual written responses to be helpful for the round-table discussions. Even though these responses were only worth five points each, students diligently submitted them throughout the semester. Students were clearly motivated to complete these weekly responses because of potential points to be earned as well as accountability to their fellow students during these face-to-face discussions.

It would seem neglectful and a lost learning opportunity for students to view these documentaries and not spend time sharing their responses and engaging in critical reflection and analysis of what it means as part of their history and in their present lives. As one student explained (spring, 2010), "it [debate-discussion] encourages all parties involved to prepare, get involved, and take charge of their own learning and thinking." The following three student responses from the end-of-course questionnaire corroborate my observations of the value the debate-discussion:

> As a participant, I was able to learn from other students who would then spark my contribution. Participants were able to feed off the energy and responses of others, and this truly made the process dynamic. I thought about aspects of the Civil Rights Movement that I would not have thought about without the inclusion of my peer participants (fall, 2008).

> There were different opinions that led to branching out and critically thinking about different aspects of the movement, including the reasons why events happened and the leadership skills used by MLK, Carmichael, and Malcom X (spring, 2010).

> Anytime I have the opportunity and the responsibility to offer my feelings, observations and reflective thoughts through substantive discussion and debate, it increases my understanding of an issue and, at times, changes my view of an issue. Discussion is a great way to share, challenge, refine, defend, and even process what you believe. Processing through audible discussion helps individuals develop concrete, quotable answers to difficult questions (spring, 2010).

Students readily acknowledged the value of a well-planned and focused discussion in their ability to understand course materials and different perspectives. Collaboration and discussion among students is widely advocated in teaching/learning scholarship. In a joint report, titled *Powerful Partnerships: A Shared Responsibility for Learning,* a task force made up of members of three educational associations (American Association of Higher Education, et al, 1998) outlined ten "Learning Principles and Collaborative Action." While it seems that the design of this course and the Debate-Discussion Learning Project encompasses all ten principles to some degree, the following principle (#5) was most clearly evident: "Learning is done by *individuals* who are intrinsically *tied to others*

as social beings, interacting as competitors or collaborators, constraining or supporting the learning process, and able to enhance learning through cooperation and sharing" http://www.aahea.org/bulletins/articles/Jount_Task_Force.htm.

The debate-discussion worked best when all participants were prepared to engage and were in an environment conducive to engagement and collaborative learning. It enhanced students' learning and understanding of the roles of self, history and cultural identity.

Conclusion and Best Practices for using the Debate-Discussion Project across Disciplines

There is ample evidence that successful teaching and learning requires collaboration among teachers and learners. Although this collaboration can take many forms, I have found classroom discussions prompted by open-ended and increasingly challenging questions to be most rewarding. While classroom discussions work best with smaller classes (under 25 students) they are possible with larger classes. Discussion in large classes can be organized by dividing students in small groups to discuss issues and then gathering responses from the groups to bring back to the class as a whole. However, the key to engaging students in their learning is to have them think through the issues *individually* before they discuss it with their classmates. For discussions to be successful, participants must be prepared as well as willing to think out loud and take risks as they explore issues and co-construct meanings.

The debate-discussion project can be adapted in any discipline for somewhere in every discipline there are topics that benefit from students and instructors wrestling with the subject matter in reflective and analytical dialogues. I suggest the following as best practices for these dialogues to be productive and successful:

1. Regard students as partners in the learning process and trust them to be credible and competent; that is, have high expectations for them to succeed;
2. Create a trusting and comfortable learning environment;
3. Make certain that all participants are prepared to participate in a discussion;
4. Intervene in the learning process to assure that the discussion will be productive and successful; and,
5. Have students engage in face-to-face interactions and become a participant in the discussion.

It is important to note that facilitating substantive discussions as a way of teaching can be more challenging than using lectures; however, they are infinitely more rewarding for students and instructors.

I am convinced that the Debate-Discussion Learning Project worked to enhance students' learning and experience of the Civil Rights Movement. It was, in my opinion, student engagement through collaborative learning in its most productive form. It engaged the whole student, his/her world view, identity of self and reflective knowledge of history.

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