Creating Dialogue in the Classroom

Stephen Rader, (Chemistry) and Tracy Summerville (Political Science)

One of the most important goals - and greatest challenges - of educators is to create a learning environment in which the students participate actively in their education by becoming engaged with the course material. An effective way to promote active participation is through dialogue in the classroom. Unfortunately, many students, trained by years of passive education and cowed by the fear of making mistakes, are extremely reluctant to enter into dialogue in the classroom. So, how do you get students to begin to actively engage in substantive dialogue? We argue that the essential pre-requisite for classroom dialogue is an atmosphere of trust.

Building trust in the classroom means that sometimes “dialogue” has to wait and the instructor needs to be patient in trying to get the students to believe that you, and their classmates, are really open to dialogue. Most of us know the old saying that “no questions are stupid questions,” but many do not know how to react when someone actually asks an ill-informed or thoughtless question. Creating an open and honest dialogue does not mean that every contribution is equally valid or useful. Yet, every contribution needs to be acknowledged and critically assessed. The instructor may need to take the time to let students see that each time a question is asked that the instructor has taken it seriously, that the instructor is not intimidated when they do not know the answer and that the instructor follows up questions or concerns over the course of their lecture series. Not every question can be answered at the moment the question is asked. Once students begin to see how the instructor responds they will feel more comfortable asking questions and participating.

For example, some years ago, an instructor was discussing “crown corporations” in a class on Canadian politics. At one point a student interjected, “what about Canadian Tire?” Most of the class was unable to resist the temptation to laugh but respectfully the instructor explained that that was an easy mistake to make considering the nation’s name in the company title. This answer helped the other students to see that what is obvious to some is not always obvious to others and that making a simple mistake should not preclude you from participating in the future.

Types of Dialogue

Question and Answer (Q and A)
Q and A sessions are undoubtedly the most common way in which we expect to create dialogue in the classroom. Instructors can invite students to ask questions at any time during the lecture or set aside a specific time for questions. The choice to allow students to interrupt during lectures, however,
will help in building an active learning environment because students can engage with the instructor throughout the lecture. It is also important to remember that the instructor can ask questions of the students too.

**Think / Pair / Share**
Think / pair / share is a technique that allows students to interact with a peer to work out a problem or question that the instructor has assigned. Students are asked to work with a partner in order that the students can actively work through problems. Think / pair / share works in large classroom settings because students can simply turn to their neighbour to begin this exercise. They are then asked to share their solution with each other or with the class as a whole. However, large classes also have their drawbacks because it is often difficult to ensure that students are actually discussing the problem and not last night’s party.

The value of think/pair/share is that it can be used to build community in the classroom because sometimes students are more comfortable talking to each other rather than in front of a large class. It can also be used as an evaluation technique. See the section on evaluation for related tips.

**Small Group Discussions**
Small group discussions also work to create interaction between peers. Again, this may be an opportunity to get students to work through a single problem or for the instructor to design different problems for each group. The instructor may have each group share their findings with the whole class at the end of the discussion.

**Informal Debates**
Informal debates may begin in a classroom quite unexpectedly. They should be encouraged and the instructor should take the time to discuss the debate, outlining the different positions including flaws in reasoning, incorrect assumptions or facts. Make sure the students understand that free flowing debate is not tangential to lecture material. Some students assume that the only “voice” that matters is that of the instructor. Take the time to point out how students may have used ideas / concepts from the course to argue a point.

**Formal Debates**
Formal debates are a good tool to get students engaged in both careful research and presentation techniques. The competitive nature of debate can often spark student interest. The instructor needs to set out the debate rules, to expect that research is done beforehand preferably demonstrated through an assignment given to the instructor before the debate. One technique for ensuring that students take the debate seriously is to ask that students dress appropriately on debate day.
Presentations

Individual and group presentations are good tools to teach the important skill of oral communication. For some students presentations are a joy; for others presentations are wrought with anxiety and fear. There are two vital parts of a presentation, first there must be clear, well researched content and second, they must be organized and clear. It is important to help students understand that presentations cannot be all “bells and whistles” without substance. Instructors may want to ask the students to design the grading rubric for the presentations. Students are likely to put the emphasis on the content when they are asked “what makes a good presentation”. A presentation may have lots of bells of whistles but if the content is lost or unclear the audience will feel that they have not learned anything.

Oral examinations

Oral examinations can be a very effective way of determining whether or not the students can articulate ideas they have learned in the course. It becomes very clear that a student has done the course readings when you are having a one-on-one discussion with them about the course. When the exam is designed as an open ended interview session with a number of critical questions along the way, the instructor can often gauge what aspects of the course had the most impact on the student. Two notes of caution: first, it is necessary to have a grading rubric template that is completed at the end of each exam otherwise it is very difficult to remember individual student responses; second, it is necessary to mix up the questions so that students do not share the exam questions. This also means that the instructor has to be very clear about what the students should be getting out of the course (i.e. what is examinable) so that there is no basis for students to say that they got “hard” questions whereas others got “easy” ones.

Some Difficulties You May Experience

In this section we discuss a few of the difficulties that arise when instructors engage their students in the classroom and when instructors ask peers to work together.

Instructor to the class

There are, at least, three broad types of students: those who love to participate (think Hermione Granger in Harry Potter), those you are reluctant to participate and those you are somewhere in the middle. For those students who love to participate it is important for the instructor to make sure that their enthusiasm is monitored. If the student’s contributions are made humble and are substantive, well thought out additions to the course then the instructor can find ways to give that particular student opportunity to contribute in many ways. These students are often viewed as leaders among their peers and their enthusiasm can be nurtured so that they understand their greater civic and social responsibility in the classroom.
Contrary to this type of student is the student who does not participate in a humble manner, takes over every discussion, interrupts constantly, or provides long commentaries without asking a question. For these students, the instructor has a responsibility to the class dynamic to help the student understand that their interjections in the class are not always welcome. This is a difficult situation to deal with. Many assume that a student like this is simply arrogant but this is not always the case. In fact, in many instances, this type of student has low self-esteem and uses a kind of bullying technique to keep people from finding out that they “don’t know.” One of the best defenses against this is for the instructor to not be intimidated when they don’t know the answer to a particular question. This shows students that knowledge is not about storing up facts in one’s mind but knowing how to find out the answers to questions and to be able to think critically. The student who overpowers the class needs to know that their interjections are not thoughtful. Remember open dialogue does not mean that every interjection should receive the same weight of importance or acclaim. This helps students to learn the important skills of listening and thinking before speaking.

At the other end of the spectrum are those students who are reluctant to participate. Among many reasons, this may be because they are painfully shy, or because they are apathetic about the course material. It may be cultural or it may be because of their particular learning style. Some students, for example, do not feel comfortable discussing material until they have had a chance to think about it, re-read their notes, etc. It may therefore be useful to devote some time to each class to discussing material from the previous lecture, partly to review, and partly to give these “reflective” students a chance to participate. Drawing out the reluctant student means that you need to remember that each student in the course is a unique individual. Quite frankly, it may be that the student does not participate because they didn’t get enough sleep or a proper breakfast. We cannot deal with every student’s individual needs but over time we can think about the litany of reasons that students find engagement difficult.

**Peer to Peer:**
As with instructor-class dialogue, there are also a number of problems that may arise when dialogue is held between students. Small group discussions may be dominated by one student who is particularly outspoken or who understands the material better than the others. As there is pedagogical value in students verbalizing their thoughts even (or perhaps especially) when they do not fully understand the topic, it is desirable to avoid situations in which only the most assertive or most competent students speak up. Another potential problem with small group discussions is if the group does not understand the question they may either not say anything, or their discussion may wander in unproductive directions.
One effective tool for promoting dialogue is to anticipate potentially confusing material and have some questions ready for the students. Frequently, students will not volunteer that they are not following your presentation, but if you ask them some careful questions to test their understanding, it rapidly becomes clear whether you have successfully explained the material. A technological aid for this purpose is the instant polling system, which we hope to acquire eventually at UNBC. With this system, an instructor can project a question and the students anonymously signal their answer to the instrument, which then tallies the results and immediately displays the results. In this way, it is possible to monitor your teaching success as you go. Until such time as we are able to purchase this technology a simple show of hands may be useful.

Many students are terrified of being asked a question in class. You may wish to consider other alternatives, such as allowing students to raise their hand if they wish to answer. The problem with this is that generally only a few students will raise their hands, and it is difficult to evaluate whether the others do not understand, are too shy, or simply do not care. One strategy that appears to be effective is to ask students to raise their hand if they do NOT understand. You then only call on students who have NOT raised their hand. This way you not only find out about the student who answers, you also get a quick view of how much of the class is confused.

Preparing questions is also a useful exercise for the students, as it forces them to think about what they do and do not understand. There are a variety of classroom scenarios in which their questions might be used and/or evaluated, from simply collecting all the questions to using them as the basis for classroom or small group discussions. This is one format where even the most shy students are generally willing to participate, so it may be worthwhile to ask one or two students for their questions in each class.

An important point to consider in creating classroom dialogue is that the dialogue is much more effective and educational if the students have done their reading. One way to encourage this is with a “summary lottery,” in which a name is drawn at the start of each class and the selected student must then give a brief summary of the important points of the reading. If the name goes back in the hat for the next class, then all of the students have to prepare for each class. You may feel that marking these summaries is a further incentive, but that may not necessarily be the case (see the section on marking below).

More structured dialogue can be fostered through informal class presentations (e.g. a five minute presentation on a topic related to the course), or formal presentations that might constitute a course project. While such presentations are relatively easy to evaluate, and force the students to spend a considerable
amount of time working with the course material, they may not be an effective way to promote extemporaneous discussion.

The issue of creating dialogue in the class is part of the broader question of how to create a community of learners and how/whether to foster a sense of social responsibility among students. This has been well articulated in the literature on service learning and engagement in the classroom. Edward Zlotkowski argues that,

...what students reflect on results not just in greater technical mastery (i.e. course content) but also in an expanded appreciation of the contextual and social significance of the discipline in question and, most broadly, in “an enhanced sense of civic responsibility.” Thus, students in a chemistry course may be asked to connect testing for lead in housing projects with what they have learned both in the classroom and in the laboratory while also processing their personal reactions to conditions in the housing projects and their evolving sense of children’s rights to a safe environment.¹

Should you mark class participation?

It is tempting to include a class participation mark as a means of encouraging dialogue. There are two problems with this that merit serious consideration: first, can you and will you evaluate participation fairly, and, second, does a mark (i.e. a threat) promote the kind of active engagement you are seeking? Students often pay more attention to how you mark them than to the course content, so if you are marking class participation “in your head” or as a subjective impression of who contributes, they will resent it and even suspect you of favoritism. Consequently, if you wish to mark class participation, you need to have an explicit rubric (e.g. 1 point for each question asked in class, 2 points for each correct answer, etc), and to have clear written records of who did what in each class. In other words, you will be spending a significant amount of class time noting who is talking and assigning marks to it.

The second point is perhaps even more important: what kind of classroom atmosphere do you want to promote? Do you want an engaged community of learners who are not afraid to contribute and who are thinking about the course material and what is interesting about it? It is difficult to achieve this when students feel coerced into something that they are not comfortable doing. They may be distracted by the pressure and the tension, and so actually become less engaged with the material. And, of course, the students who are

really uncomfortable will not participate anyway, and will therefore be penalized to no effect.

**Conclusion**

Creating dialogue in the classroom is about creating trust; it is about thoughtful and critical analysis of each contribution; it is about connecting theoretical ideas to practical considerations; and it is about helping students to think about their citizenship both within and outside the classroom.