DISCUSSION AS A WAY OF TEACHING

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES FOR DEMOCRATIC CLASSROOMS

SECOND EDITION

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CONTENTS

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Second Edition

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Since the first edition of *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* appeared in 1999 we have received continuous feedback on its benefits and omissions. The benefits seem to be those we had hoped for; readers have told us that the book is a comprehensive “soup to nuts” guide to planning and conducting exercises that is full of helpful exercises and practical suggestions. However, two omissions have been brought to our attention. The first concerns the explosion of online learning that has occurred in the first few years of the twenty-first century. We alluded to this development in the first edition but that analysis was clearly insufficient given developments in this area since 1999. Consequently, Chapters Eleven and Twelve have been added to explore this new phenomenon. Chapter Eleven examines the underlying dynamics of online discussion and concludes that although they are not that startlingly dissimilar to those of face-to-face discussion they do suggest specific practices and approaches uniquely suited to an online environment. Chapter Twelve suggests how the online environment can be adapted to discussion as a way of teaching. We explore how to increase participation, assign students to small groups, link interaction to content modules, and evolve ground rules for discussion. The other omission readers noted was the lack of attention to contemporary theoretical positions such as structuralism and post-structuralism and their relevance for understanding and practicing discussion-based teaching. To remedy this omission we have written Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen. These two chapters explore a number of theoretical concepts—cultural capital, disciplinary power, teachers as judges of normality,

repressive tolerance, and the discourse theory of democracy—and describe the discussion practices and exercises that these different ideas call forth.

August, 2005
St. Paul, Minnesota
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Stephen Brookfield

Stephen Preskill

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

This book is born of friendship, curiosity, anxiety, and service.

The two of us became friends while we were both faculty members at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. Our friendship was fostered by a common passion for many things—the films of Woody Allen figured prominently in our early conversations—but what we kept returning to as we talked was the joyful yet contradictory experience of teaching through discussion. In coffee shops, at home, in university corridors, and on the street, we spent hours celebrating the glorious unpredictability of discussion and exploring its purpose and value. Usually our conversations ended with us giving each other advice on the problems we faced as we used the method in our own practice.

During these conversations we often remarked how we'd love to have a book available to us that laid out a rationale for using discussion, guided us through its different configurations, and suggested various resolutions to the problems that arose in its use. What would the authors say about guided discussion (a topic about which we talked heatedly and repeatedly)? How would they conceive of the teacher's role in discussion? What would be their thoughts on using discussion in groups characterized by racial, class, and gender diversity? How would they deal with students who dominated conversation or those who never spoke? As we considered these and other questions, we would often say, "You know, we ought to write a book about this." An idea that was first mentioned lightly and jokingly became a serious possibility when Steve Preskill accepted a position at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. We realized that distance threatened our friendship but it stood a better

chance of remaining strong if we worked on a common project. The project we chose is the book you now hold in your hands.

What kept us going as we coauthored this book was curiosity about what would end up on its pages. We asked ourselves a series of questions that essentially became the book's chapters. We wanted to know how we would justify the use of discussion to colleagues who saw no connections between how students talked to each other in class and promoting democracy in the wider society. How would we respond to the charge that discussion was a time-wasting distraction from teachers' primary work of transmitting content to students? What advice would we give on how to prepare students to participate in discussion? What were the best ways we knew to get discussion started and keep it going? What were the most creative adaptations we'd seen that kept routine and ennui from creeping into the conversation? How did factors of race, class, and gender play out in discussions? What advice would we give to each other about how to ensure that all students felt their voices were heard and respected? We were intrigued to know what we would say in response to these and other questions. Writing this book became our way of finding out.

Anxiety and service also played their parts. As teachers committed to discussion, we are alarmed that so many of our students and colleagues appear to have lost hope in the moral, political, and pedagogical promises of discussion. To many students, discussion seems like busy work, designed to fill up time or give the teacher a break. Students frequently claim that discussions wander so far off track that what is spoken about bears little relation to the curriculum being studied. Others complain that the experience of discussion is distinctly unpleasant—a time for a few students to dominate or to talk in racist, sexist, or demeaning ways without any control or opposition. We are

also concerned that many teachers who continue to use discussion do so in an uncritical, unexamined way that only serves to bring the method further into disrepute. We know, too, that teachers who are committed to using discussion and who use it thoughtfully are constrained by economic forces. Colleges are increasingly held hostage by market forces that force them to run as businesses. Institutional budgets are cut, faculty and staff are reduced, yet student numbers rise. Colleges and universities are forced to demonstrate their profitability and utility by showing how they can serve more and more people. A belief that increased class size equals increased profitability or greater community-mindedness undermines discussion-oriented teaching.

We want to offer this book as a service to educators struggling to preserve their commitment to discussion. We have tried to make the book as practical and helpful as we can. Although we argue strongly for the moral, political, and pedagogical importance of discussion, we are not much concerned with rhetorical exhortation. We want *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* to be a book full of ideas, techniques, and usable suggestions. Our hope is that teachers who feel pressure to abandon discussion in the face of students' complaints or institutional constraints will read our book and find their commitment to discussion renewed. We hope also that they will find many new exercises and approaches to try that will convince students that participating in discussion is worth the effort. And we want teachers to feel that they can experiment with the methods and techniques we suggest without falling behind, sacrificing content, or losing control of the curriculum.

However, we want to stress that we are not out to proselytize. We are not trying to convert skeptics into taking the method seriously. Indeed, our experience has been that this is fruitless. Teachers who resolutely dismiss discussion

as time-wasting, touchy-feely, experiential mush only come to take it seriously when they are so dissatisfied with what they're doing that they'll try something new or when they are irresistibly intrigued by the sense of joyful engagement they witness in their own colleagues' experimentations with the method. But we do think there are many college teachers out there who are interested in introducing more discussion activities into their classrooms but who aren't sure how to do this. We also believe that many teachers are trying to use the method but are having difficulties doing so. In some ways we count ourselves among both these groups. So we have written this book for ourselves as well as for them.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Before a word of the manuscript was written, we had planned its layout. The opening two chapters make what we hope is a strong and convincing case for using discussion. Chapter One focuses on its moral and political justifications, particularly the experience it provides of democratic process. In that chapter we describe what differentiates discussion from conversation and dialogue, and we blend elements of these ideas into the concept of critical discussion. The chapter ends with an outline of the dispositions—the attitudes and habits—necessary for democratic discussion. Chapter Two focuses on the benefits of discussion for learning and teaching. We make fifteen claims for the ways in which discussion helps learning and enlivens classrooms (for example, it helps students explore diversity and complexity, it sharpens intellectual agility, and it endorses collaborative ways of working and the collective generation of knowledge). The chapter concludes by

summarizing the five most common reasons why teachers lose heart (in our view, prematurely) in their commitment to discussion.

Chapters Three and Four deal with the early stages of discussion. One reason why teachers give up on discussion is that students often seem unprepared to engage in conversation. How to ensure that they come to class able to talk about the discussion topic is the focus of Chapter Three. We show how teachers can use lectures to demonstrate the dispositions of discussion; how to model their own commitment to the method; how to set structured, critical prereading assignments; and how to evolve or clarify ground rules, expectations, and purposes. Getting the discussion started is the theme of Chapter Four. We point out a few of the common mistakes teachers make at the start that can kill discussion. Then we provide some specific exercises that we've found useful in prompting students to talk. We also suggest several ways that students' prior reading or writing can be debriefed.

Chapters Five and Six both deal with how to maintain the momentum of discussion. Chapter Five reviews the different types of questions teachers can ask in discussion and the benefit and purpose of each type. We propose three exercises to improve students' ability to listen carefully and three ways teachers can respond to students' contributions. Chapter Six examines the dynamics of breaking students into small discussion groups. We suggest different ways of bringing small group deliberations back into the larger class and offer some variations on the conduct of small group discussions that we have found useful. The chapter ends with a brief exploration of how e-mail communication can improve classroom discourse.

In Chapters Seven and Eight we move to consider how issues of race, class, and gender affect what happens in discussion. Chapter Seven focuses mostly on race and class.

We argue that discussions in culturally diverse groups must begin by honoring and respecting differences. How this could happen is explained through a series of exercises. We offer some diverse formats, such as dramatizing and drawing discussion, and we consider how to introduce verve into conversation. The chapter also proposes ways of monitoring racist speech and of creating outlets for anger and grief. We end with a discussion of middle- and working-class speech codes, and the disproportionate representation they have in discussion. Chapter Eight, written with our friend and colleague Eleni Roulis, looks at how male and female speech patterns manifest themselves in conversation. It begins by offering four vignettes that illustrate the complicated intersections between discussion and gender. The importance of acknowledging relational and rapport talk and the contributions of feminist pedagogy inform the exercises this chapter offers to help clarify the role gender plays in shaping how we talk to each other.

How to keep students' and teachers' voices in some kind of balance and what happens when they are drastically out of balance are the concerns of Chapters Nine and Ten. In Chapter Nine we look at why some students talk too much and others talk too little. We offer suggestions on how to curb those who are overly garrulous and how to bring into speech students who are reluctant to participate. Chapter Ten considers how to keep the discussion leader's voice in balance. We look at the most common reasons why teachers say too much or too little and then offer ways for them to avoid either extreme. The chapter ends with three scenarios that illustrate what happens when the teacher intervenes too much, too little, or just the right amount.

The dynamics and conditions of online discussion are considered in Chapters Eleven and Twelve. In Chapter Eleven we examine the architecture of online courses and lay out the four R's of effective online teaching—research,

responsiveness, respect, and relationships. Chapter Twelve reviews how we can create the conditions for effective online discussion—discussion that is participatory, thoughtful, and disciplined. We explore how to increase participation, assign students to small groups, link interaction to content modules, and evolve ground rules for discussion. The next two chapters view discussion through various theoretical perspectives. Chapter Thirteen examines stucturalism, post-structuralism, and repressive tolerance as three perspectives that have considerable implications for how we run discussions. We outline each of these ideas and then consider how they inform the practice of discussion leaders. Chapter Fourteen explores in some detail the work of Jurgen Habermas, the German critical theorist. Habermas believes that a society is more or less democratic according to the discussion processes its members use to come to decisions about matters that affect their lives. We examine his ideas on the way we learn communicative action, practice what he calls the validity claims of discussion, and use standards of discourse to judge whether or not we are behaving democratically.

Chapter Fifteen deals with the thorny question of how to evaluate discussion. We argue against the imposition of a standardized, “objective” evaluative protocol, believing that such an approach ignores the contextuality of most classroom conversations. We favor instead grounding evaluations in the multiple subjectivities of students’ perceptions. How these perceptions might be recorded is described through such instruments as discussion audits and logs, course portfolios, and mandatory evaluation forms. The book ends with suggestions on how we might judge the extent to which discussions meet the fifteen claims for discussion advanced in Chapter Two.

COMMON OBJECTIONS TO DISCUSSION

As you read this book, you may find that your interest in experimenting with some of the techniques it contains is contending with some predictable reservations about how realistic this is. We want to acknowledge these reservations and to provide our thoughts on them.

SPENDING TIME IN DISCUSSION WILL ALLOW ME LESS TIME TO COVER NECESSARY CONTENT.

The concern about having insufficient time to cover content is felt by teachers who believe that the material they want students to learn is too important to be left to chance. If they lecture, so their argument goes, at least this ensures that the material is aired in students' presence. We share this same concern. We want our students to engage seriously with ideas and information we think important. In fact, it is precisely for this reason that we think discussion is worth considering. As we argue in Chapter Two, building connections—personal and intellectual—is at the heart of discussion. Ideas that seem disconnected when heard in a lecture come alive when explored in speech. Arguments that seem wholly abstract when read in a homework assignment force themselves on our attention when spoken by a peer. There is no point in covering content for content's sake—the point is to cover content in a way that ensures that students engage with it. It is because we take content so seriously and want students to understand certain key ideas accurately and thoroughly that we feel discussion is indispensable.

A COMMITMENT TO DISCUSSION MEANS THINKING THAT OTHER TEACHING APPROACHES ARE SOMEHOW LESS WORTHY OR IMPORTANT.

Both of us use lectures, simulations, independent study, video, intensive reading, and any other method that works to engage students in learning. We believe that kinesthetic movement needs to be introduced into classrooms to engage the body as well as the mind. For us, anything goes as long as it assists learning. For example, both of us love to lecture and both of us believe that lecturing is often necessary to introduce difficult ideas and to model critical inquiry. But we do believe that discussion can serve many important purposes (which we outline in Chapters One and Two) and that teachers sometimes abandon discussion too early simply for lack of some creative ideas for implementation.

DISCUSSION IS UNREALISTIC TO CONSIDER FOR LARGE UNDERGRADUATE LECTURE COURSES.

We have taught core courses in laboratories or auditoriums with one hundred or more students present. We accept that these are important constraints and that they make experimentation with some of the exercises we suggest virtually impossible. But even under these conditions, we have usually found that it’s possible to do some small,

though not insignificant, things. For example, as we argue in Chapter Three, a lecture in an auditorium can incorporate two- to three-minute buzz groups or reflection pairs, followed by two minutes of random responses from students. Doing these things stops students from falling into a deep reverie while you're talking and forces them to engage with the ideas you think are important. It also allows you to make reference to students' reflections during the next segment of the lecture, which is one way to keep their attention high.

YOU CAN’T TAKE EXERCISES PROPOSED IN A BOOK AND SIMPLY PLOP THEM DOWN IN ANOTHER CONTEXT WITH THE EXPECTATION THAT THEY’LL WORK.

We couldn’t agree more with this point. Both of us now find ourselves working in graduate education, and though our experience covers high schools, community development, vocational institutes, community colleges, and adult education centers, our current situations and responsibilities as university professors undoubtedly shape what we write. So we expect that any ideas that you find potentially useful here will be adapted, altered, abandoned, or completely reshaped as you think through how they might work in your own practice with your own students.

I THINK DISCUSSION IS FINE IN PRINCIPLE, BUT BECAUSE I’M INEXPERIENCED IN WORKING THIS WAY, I’M BOUND TO FAIL.

One short response to this, of course, is that the only way to get experience of leading discussion is to do it! Another is to acknowledge that the two of us fail all the time—things don’t work out as we anticipate, students respond less enthusiastically than we had hoped, and so on. Indeed, some of the exercises we propose—particularly those in Chapters Seven and Eight dealing with race, class, and

gender—are quite risky. If you feel so uncomfortable about an exercise that you're overwhelmed with anxiety, don't bother with it. Instead, try to find colleagues who are experimenting creatively with discussion and ask if you can sit in on one or two of their classes, perhaps offering to be a sounding board, resource person, or cofacilitator. Observing their practice might give you a better sense of what to expect when you decide to work this way.

DISCUSSION NEEDS AN INVESTMENT OF TIME I CAN'T MAKE SINCE I ONLY SEE STUDENTS IN BLOCKS OF THIRTY TO FORTY MINUTES.

There is probably a minimum amount of time needed for a deep engagement with discussion. Serious consideration of ideas needs time for these ideas to be stated, heard, restated, questioned, challenged, refined, and stated again. Listening and responding take up at least as much time as exposition. Also, the time it takes to build the degree of trust among members that is such an important feature of good discussion cannot be rushed. If you take discussion seriously, you could experiment with the timing of classes (for example, canceling class one week and doubling up the next), if that's possible. Or you could try short buzz groups and paired listening exercises. But it may be that you're currently working in a teacher-centered situation where discussion is impossible. That's fine. At the very least, you can try to model through your actions as a teacher some of the dispositions of discussion that we propose in Chapter One.

DISCUSSION DOESN’T HAVE TO BE TIED SO MUCH TO DEMOCRACY—IT’S JUST ONE DIFFERENT TEACHING METHOD AMONG MANY.

We would have to disagree with this contention. For us a commitment to discussion and an honoring of the democratic experience are inseparable. We realize we may have a philosophical difference here with some readers, who see discussion as a method disconnected from any political significance. But for us the respectful engagement with others that lies at the heart of discussion encapsulates a form of living and association that we regard as a model for civil society that has undeniable political implications. Discussion is a way of talking that emphasizes the inclusion of the widest variety of perspectives and a self-critical willingness to change what we believe if convinced by the arguments of others. We believe that most political decisions boil down to choices about who gets what, about how the limited resources available in any social group are used or allocated. The conversations informing such decisions must, in our view, be characterized by the same respectful hearing of the widest possible range of perspectives and the same self-critical openness to changing ideas after encountering these perspectives that undergird discussions held in college classrooms. These classrooms may be one of the few arenas in which students can reasonably experience how democratic conversation feels. Taking discussion seriously moves the center of power away from the teacher and displaces it in continuously shifting ways among group members. It parallels how we think a democratic system should work in the wider society.

In this sense, classroom discussions always have a democratic dimension.

DISCUSSION IS FINE FOR "SOFT" SUBJECTS LIKE THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES WHERE DISAGREEMENT AND DIVERGENCE ARE POSSIBLE, BUT IT HAS NO PLACE IN "HARD" SUBJECTS LIKE MATHEMATICS, STATISTICS, AND THE NATURAL SCIENCES.

We agree that discussion should be used only when appropriate. In the teaching of unambiguous factual information (for example, the population of Baltimore in 1850, the chemical composition of sodium chloride, or Boyle's law) or inculcation of specific skills (how to load software or how to give an injection), there seems to be little scope for using the method. However, things are not always as simple as they seem. The exact figure given for Baltimore's 1850 population is actually a human construct, dependent on the data-gathering techniques and modes of classification statisticians decide to use, as well as on the learned behaviors of the data gatherers themselves. The hypothetico-deductive method that lies at the heart of intellectual inquiry in the natural sciences is actually a human system of thought, developed at a particular moment and place by a particular person (Francis Bacon)

and refined over time by philosophical advances in the logic of the scientific method (for example, Karl Popper's principle of falsifiability). What seem to be standardized, objective, and unambiguous skills of computer usage or nursing care are actually protocols developed by particular groups and individuals. Which program or protocol becomes accepted as professionally dominant, as representing common sense or the norm, depends on which group has the power to promote its way of interpreting good practice over other contenders.

So we would argue that there is no knowledge that is unambiguous or reified (that is, that exists in a dimension beyond human intervention). The seemingly immutable laws of physics are always applied within a certain range, and the boundaries of that range shift according to research and according to who has the power to define standards for acceptable scientific inquiry. It is salutary to reflect on how many intellectual advances have been initiated by thinkers who were ostracized and vilified as dangerous or crazy at the time they were working.

However, we would also acknowledge that there are times when discussion is not the best way to help students learn something. When we attend workshops to learn how to use the World Wide Web, we don't want to spend the first hour problematizing computer technology. Rather than consider how access to this technology is stratified by class, gender, and race and how it reproduces existing inequities, we want to know which search engine to use. Instead of questioning whether or not this technology privatizes people and, by reducing the chance for people to gather physically in public places, thus prevents new social movements that challenge the status quo from forming, we want to know which button to press to display graphics. Of course, we would argue that the best teachers start with learners' needs (such as which search engine to use and which button to press) and then

nudge them to question the social organization of the technology they are using.

We would also point to the example of McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, where medical students spend three years working in small groups. Ferrier, Marrin, and Seidman (1988) report that according to their supervisors, graduates of the program performed better in their first year of practice than graduates from other universities. When taking the exams of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, the first-attempt pass rate of McMaster students is higher than the national average. Palmer (1998) describes a large research university he visited where students (under the guidance of a mentor) work in small circles to diagnose and treat real patients. In the words of the dean of the medical school concerned, “Not only did the test scores not decline, but they actually started going up, and during the time we have been teaching this way, they have continued, slowly, to rise. In this approach to medical education, our students not only become more caring but also seem to be getting smarter, faster” (p. 127).

OUR AUDIENCE

The general audience for this book is all teachers and leaders who use discussion to help people learn. Our primary audience is college and university teachers, but we hope that some of the exercises, techniques, and approaches we suggest can be used, or adapted, in secondary schools, adult and continuing education, training and human resource units, community groups, and other areas of learning.

We write out of our experiences working in a variety of settings. Stephen Brookfield has worked with discussion in technical, adult, and higher education, and in community

development, in Great Britain, the United States, and Canada. Stephen Preskill has experience using discussion in public schools, colleges, and universities in the United States. Our diverse backgrounds mean that we write about discussion as a method with broad application to any situation in which people gather to learn, whether or not these are officially designated as “education.”

We wanted this book to be practical, usable, and accessible. Although our understanding of discussion has been strongly influenced by various traditions and philosophies, we didn’t want to add to the already voluminous interpretations of the meanings of discourse and dialogue. Instead, we wanted to write a book we could turn to for help on creating the kinds of conversations we desired. We also wanted the book to be immediately understandable to teachers across disciplines who decide, for whatever reason, to give discussion a try.

So the book is written in a deliberately colloquial tone, one that we believe mirrors the conversational way in which teachers give advice to each other. We took to heart George Orwell’s injunction in his essay “Politics and the English Language” (1946) that writers should never use a complicated word where a simple one will do. But this doesn’t mean that we’ve tried to write a gray, utilitarian manual. On the contrary, we’ve tried to write our own personal experiences as discussion participants directly into the text in the belief that you would appreciate knowing how we try to live the democratic process through group talk. We hope our belief is right.

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St. Paul, Minnesota
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