



2018

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Astrid Alvarez
University of Houston

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Recommended Citation

Alvarez, Astrid (2018) "The Power of Class Discussion: The Art of Letting Kids Talk," *New Jersey English Journal*: Vol. 7, Article 17.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/nj-english-journal/vol7/iss1/17>

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The Power of Class Discussion: The Art of Letting Kids Talk

By Astrid Alvarez

“People should be free to live their lives,” fifteen-year-old Maria said with a toss of her head, “without anybody judging them or having to worry about people treating them wrong for stuff they can't control, like their skin color. It's supposed to be a free country, right?”

Class discussions are a major component of my particular teaching style and allow students like Maria a voice. I ask students thought-provoking questions meant to inspire them to think critically about our world. Last October my first-period class engaged in our first Socratic Seminar, where we discussed discrimination and prejudice in our community, a topic I was admittedly hesitant to engage in. Yet I merely reminded them that everyone was entitled to express opinions as long as they were stated in a calm, respectful manner. I stood back and crossed my fingers, hoping for a smooth discussion.

Of course, almost as soon as the discussion began, one student chose that moment to share her views on discrimination and the LGBTQ population, stating that she did not “think it's wrong to ask someone to stop being gay, at least in public. That's not discrimination. People don't like it and they have the right not to see that.”

Provocative Questions and Tough Answers

Well. This was a difficult moment for me as the facilitator. Should I intervene? Are they mature enough to engage in this particular topic of discussion without a shouting match? I was still debating internally when one of my shyer students sat up straight in her chair, a thoughtful furrow between her brows, and spoke up. “I wear a hijab and people don't like that either because they're afraid. What you're saying is

that people should also have a right to ask me to take it off. But I shouldn't have to do something that makes me feel wrong so other people feel better. Because it's not fair to me. And discrimination is all about treating people unfairly." It was a beautiful, simple answer. And it taught me a lesson as well: that the classroom should be a safe space, a place where students have the opportunity to question the world around them and the systems and beliefs that make up that world.

I have embraced these lessons: Do not be afraid to be asked a "hard" or controversial question; do not be afraid to not know the answer. Students will not only respect you more for admitting to a human weakness (imagine that!); you are also setting them up for a life in which they will sometimes flounder and teaching them that it is okay to make mistakes.

Building a Safe Classroom Culture

Unless we're testing, my sophomore English classroom rarely has a moment when my students are completely silent. This year specifically there have been some energetic discussions about George Orwell's *1984*, which was the first reading assignment of the fall semester. It is a difficult read (sometimes a bit boring), but with discussion prompts such as "Is rebellion needed to instigate change?" or "What makes a true hero?" students wanted to talk about the subject, because they connected their answers both to the novel and their own personal experiences. My second-period class, in particular, led a discussion (out of the blue) about the protagonist Winston, stating that he was "actually a terrible person" and was "not really any kind of hero."

This discussion was not planned, but I allowed the interruption because it was a teachable moment and I wanted them to talk their way through that which confused them. I allowed them a voice; thus, regardless of what we were working on, students felt secure enough to ask me questions, make

interesting observations about the reading or assignment of the day, or help their classmates understand a concept we are tackling. The students felt comfortable enough with me and with their own writing to allow me to read their essays aloud to them or project them on the document camera. Solid, effective class discussions cannot occur when students feel as though their input is unimportant, or that they will be judged for answering incorrectly or with a point of view that differs from the majority of the class.

Classrooms are a microcosm of what is right and wrong in society. Students need to build their confidence in this environment in order to become productive citizens capable of metacognition, cognizant of the systems around them. In order to achieve this, there must be constant communication and collaboration between peers and between the teacher and students. Dialogue needs to be built into the classroom before a formal Socratic Seminar is staged, as “neither teaching nor learning [is] possible without routine” (Stenning et al, 2016). I begin building these routines into lessons at the beginning of the year.

In the first few weeks of school, I have a daily Quick Write or Thought-Provoking Question posted as a morning opener. Students are asked to write first and then pair up with a partner and share what they have produced with them. During Pair and Share, each child gets one minute of share time and one minute of peer feedback. This is a great way for students to express their ideas before having to present them before the entire class.

I then give students the option to “share out,” and many do because they feel more confident about their ideas after receiving feedback from their partner. During discussion, I ask them questions (How did you come to that conclusion? What made you think about that?) and give suggestions for future thought. Building these small risks and feedback systems into everyday discussions allows students to

get used to the idea of being questioned. This way they are less likely to take feedback personally and are more able to approach criticism objectively.

Culminating in Socratic Seminars

We start new units with a provocative question that students research through various readings that will take place throughout the unit. We add layers to the question, making it more pointed and specific, culminating in a Socratic seminar. Socratic seminars are more formal versions of our daily classroom discussions and are usually “based on a text” or overarching theme covered during the unit (Israel, 2002).

A week before, I hand out a series of open-ended questions which will be asked during the seminar. This gives the students enough time to research and produce well-formulated opinions before discussing and defend their positions. Giving them the questions in advance allows them to be prepared to think “critically for themselves, and articulate their own thoughts” (Israel, 2002).

On the day of the seminar, desks are arranged in two circles- the inner circle will engage in discussions, while the outer circle listens carefully and takes notes. These two groups will switch halfway through the class period, allowing everyone an opportunity to participate. Inner circle members know that they must listen closely to their peers’ comments and carefully formulate an insightful, respectful response.

These seminars are challenging, as we often speak about controversial topics like discrimination, racism, and the true meaning of freedom. I encourage students to question their beliefs and the beliefs of others, not simply take their knowledge for granted. As noted before, these are matters that even

adults have difficulties discussing in a calm, rational manner. So how do I manage situations like the one we faced at the beginning of this article?

If a student says something inadvisable, I redirect them and move on. If a student says something that could be interpreted as hateful or just plain rude, then, as the teacher, I have the power to change the topic or stop the discussion if necessary. I, however, prefer to settle the conflict by talking it out. I always ask students why they think the way they do and encourage them to ask each other the same. The two students mentioned before obviously had some fundamentally different ideas on a rather divisive topic, but they were able to see this exchange as a learning experience rather than a debate or a way to change someone else's opinion. Students must be taught to respect the time, efforts, and opinions of their peers, even if they are fundamentally different from their own. This cycle of listening and speaking teach students essential skills and ensures "active student engagement—whether vocal or silent— [which] is the driver of learning" (O'Connor et al, 2017).

Knowing how to approach someone with opinions that differ from one's own is a fundamental skill needed to become a functioning adult in today's diverse society. Discourse is incredibly important, especially when pertaining to controversial topics. Establishing a safe environment where students are free to speak their minds encourages them to interact with the world in meaningful ways, to question systems and commonly held beliefs that disproportionately affect some group of people in their community in negative ways, like minorities or people of low socioeconomic status. Socratic seminars are a way to do this, "an attempt to turn the student's focus onto what is already latent within - to enable self-understanding and shared understanding through providing ways into existing knowledge" (Stenning et al., 2016). If our goal as educators is to prepare students for trials and tribulations of adulthood, we must first show them how to speak up, speak out, and speak their minds.

Editors' note: For more on "Think-Pair-Share," reference Dave Stuart Jr.:
<http://www.davestuartjr.com/think-pair-share/>

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Astrid Alvarez lives in Houston, TX, and has been teaching Pre-AP and On-Level English in Alief Independent School District since 2014. She is currently working on her Masters of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Houston. She is in a leadership position at her school and intends to continue empowering students to advocate for themselves and their communities through a democratically-led curriculum.