

The Practice of Conversation
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(Last Revision: May 2022)

When I began to teach, I lectured a lot. I believed that, in every class, I was responsible to convey certain basic ideas and to ensure that you, the students, understood those ideas and could apply them in your work. I have not dismissed those beliefs entirely. I still think that in each of my classes you should learn core ideas related to the subject at hand. I still think the worth of those ideas is measured in practice: in how they inform and improve your lives and your work in the world. And I still think that lecture is sometimes an important part of your educational experiences.

But the more I experience the processes of learning, the more convinced I become that the most interesting, exciting, relevant, and memorable moments of education arise from discussion. I have read many excellent books and listened to many excellent lectures, but I now realize that what made those books and lectures memorable was the atmosphere of discussion in which they occurred, the conversations that preceded and followed them and made them come alive. And I recognize in you a condition that marked my own experiences as an undergraduate: you will not remember most of what you read or most of what your teachers say to you. That is not a condemnation of you. It is a truism about the educational experiences that occur in most classes. Nor is it a condemnation of books and lectures. You will remember some of what you read in books or hear in lectures, and those forms of communication may influence you in profound ways. But if you are like me, your most profound moments of education, in class or out, will occur because of conversation.

You need not take my word for this. Think of your own most profound learning experiences. Some of them may have been marked by an excellent lecture or book, but my guess is that most were marked by conversations that yielded a deeper connection to another person, or clarified an idea that you did not previously understand, or opened to you a new way of thinking or living. These were interactions in which people resonated with one another. Ideas flowed. One person's words sparked thoughts in the other. You collaborated in the creation of new and exciting insights. You did not want the discussion to end because it was charged with energy. It was fun.

Here is the problem: we do not often experience this kind of conversation, especially in the classroom. Why are the daily interactions in our classes not characterized by the kinds of energy and excitement that make learning fun?

Classroom discussions take a variety of forms. Often the professor will ask a question, which one student will answer, then the rest of the class will look to the professor for a response. Or other students will venture responses, each one a short monologue not connected to any of the contributions that came before it. This is participation, but it is not interaction, because those who speak are neither listening nor responding to what others say; their focus is on what they will utter when their turn rolls around (Rabow 28, 34). Usually the professor is recognized as the expert, the one who holds the trump card, so if she makes a statement discussion is likely to stop. And indeed most classroom discussions revolve around the person in charge, so even the most active conversations will involve only two parties: the professor and everyone else.

When lively conversations do occur in a classroom, they are often limited to three or four people who take center stage while the rest of the class observes. We have all sat through semester-long courses in which a small group of students dominated each day's discussion as

everyone else rolled their eyes, tuned out those who monopolized, and waited in exasperated boredom for each period to end. Why not join the discussion rather than withdraw? Various reasons exist for the choice not to participate: some people are shy, some are fearful, some unprepared. But most often we choose not to participate for a reason we might be unable to articulate: we realize that whatever is going on in the classroom, it is not a real discussion; it is not a genuine conversation motivated by a common desire to explore ideas and to learn from one another; it is, rather, an argument in the worst sense: a dispute, a contest, a wrangle, a polemic, an effort by each person to prove oneself right and one's disputants wrong. We do not participate because we do not want to lose or to be embarrassed.

The main question I address in this essay is: How might we create in the classroom the kinds of conversations that we want to participate in because they are lively, illuminating, and fun? I have long been struck by – saddened by, actually – students who celebrate when class is cancelled. Think about this irony: you pay many thousands of dollars for your education, and then you are happy when you do not get what you paid for. This probably does not describe all of you, nor does it describe every class you take, and I do not think for a minute that this reaction is always unreasonable. Some classes *are* monotonous. Some *are* marked by a type of interaction we would rather avoid. But they should not be that way. So the immediate question is: What can we do to make *this* class the kind of class in which you want to participate?

We should recognize, first, that if this were easy everyone would do it. You would be having captivating conversations with your friends and in your classes every day. We know from experience that we cannot simply set out to have a good conversation. The fact that your conversation last night was marked by excitement, insight, and connection does not mean that you can reproduce that kind of conversation today, even with the same person. Something

mysterious characterizes these interactions, and that makes it unlikely that we can create an enchanting discussion simply by stating it as our goal: “we want to have a good discussion in class on Tuesday.” Our goal, rather, must be to practice relational and intellectual behaviors and routines that make such discussions more probable (Strong 132). I do not pretend to know what all of those behaviors and routines might be – as I note above, they are mysterious, to the point where I am often unable to discern why one class is talkative and the next silent – but I have ideas about how we might prepare for class and how we might interact in class that will help to encourage the kinds of conversations we seek.

Preparation for class

We should begin with a clear definition of what we are after. What is a good discussion? Here is a formulation I like: a good discussion should “engage the entire group in a cooperative exploration of a topic or texts in which each person’s opinion is respected” (Zeiderman 12). Let’s parse this definition into its major components.

First, a good discussion will engage the entire group. To “engage” can mean lots of things. Its most pronounced meaning is to engross, fascinate, or enthrall, but at the very least it means to *involve*. That sentiment by itself might make some uneasy, for years of schooling have taught you that normal classroom behavior is to sit quietly and absorb what the teacher says. You probably are used to a passive role and have grown comfortable with the expectation that the teacher exerts control and you may participate or not, as you choose. For the practice of conversation to succeed, this expectation must change. Otherwise, even when I plan for classroom conversation, I will face a condition that tempts me to return to the lecture format: silence. When confronted with silence in the past I assumed my students were unintelligent or had not read the material or had not formulated their own ideas about the topic, but I think those

assumptions were usually wrong. The more likely explanation is that I am asking you to act in a manner that contradicts the standard model for classroom behavior you have learned over many years. The result is that the opportunity for discussion often gives way to long periods of awkward silence.

To prepare for discussion in this class, then, requires that each of us recognize how we are constrained by past habits and commit to a level of participation that surpasses common expectations. We all must see ourselves as responsible for what transpires during any given class period. This is a matter of attitude: each of us must attend regularly and be prepared to engage in the day's discussion.

Second, a good discussion is a cooperative exploration of a topic or texts. To explore an idea is to place ourselves in a relationship to that idea, and to each other, that differs from a relationship in which we defend ideas or try to convince others to adhere to our own points of view. This does not mean that we will not make arguments – state claims and give reasons to support the claims – but it does mean that we will do so in a spirit of inquiry, with the expectation of discovery and understanding rather than defense and admonition. We can envision this as a commitment to follow the discussion wherever it might lead. The goal in this type of conversation is not to teach or to persuade one another, but to think together and to trust the conversation will lead to understanding, even when that does not seem likely (Barr). Exploration implies cooperation. We do it together with rather than in competition against one another. The goal is not to win an argument, but to ask questions that inspire us to think differently and to understand anew, to realize that together we can interpret what seems complex and explore how what seems simple is more complicated than it appears (Strong 77).

For this to occur, of course, we must have something to talk about, some topic or text to explore. To some extent, the quality of the discussion depends upon the quality of the material we read. Even a group comprised of excellent conversationalists will not reach its potential if the texts are not of sufficient depth and interest (Rabow 48). But my responsibility to select significant texts does not free you from the responsibility to seek out points of interest in whatever you read. Several years ago several students in one of my classes were courageous enough to voice their complaints about a particular reading: “It’s boring.” “It’s too hard.” “It’s not interesting.” Another student responded to them: “I think good students will find interesting ideas in whatever they read.” This student recognized two important points that should guide our preparation for discussions. She recognized that we should look for ways to weave our conversations about texts with conversations about life; if we do that, we will be able to draw connections between our experiences and the ideas we discuss (Strong 10). And she recognized that to use discussion time to complain about the texts is unproductive. While we might question the choice of texts after class, the discussion in class will be better served if we focus on our collaborative effort to understand the text or topic before us, however difficult or boring we might find it to be. Complaining about the text does not help us to interpret or to understand it (Strong 155).

So a good discussion will, first, engage the entire group and, second, involve a cooperative exploration of a topic or texts. The third component of a good discussion is that we respect every opinion. None of us want to participate in a class discussion in which we feel attacked or belittled. At the same time, little value ensues from a discussion in which we all observe social niceties because we fear disagreement might be mistaken for disregard. Respect does not mean agreement, nor does it mean reluctance to challenge other people’s ideas.

Agreement, especially agreement to disagree, can be the result of laziness, or of unwillingness to do the labor required to achieve new insights (Barr). Respect does mean that, before we agree or disagree, we work to understand others' perspectives, we think hard about their arguments, and we think even harder about our responses to those perspectives and arguments (Booth, *Rhetoric* 21, 47). The commitment to this type of respect is an essential prerequisite to participation in a good discussion. But that commitment is hard to enact, because, in Booth's words, "one of the most difficult arts in the world" is "the art of recovering what other people mean and not what we'd like them to mean" (*Vocation* 182). This is the essence of conversational respect: to see that we are involved in a collaborative exploration that involves listening to understand the various perspectives at play, and working to extend our joint understanding to new ideas and insights that none of us possessed before the conversation began.

The initial step to prepare for class, then, is to make a commitment to the type of discussion I've just described. But there are other specific preparations that will make productive discussions more probable.

Sometimes the most obvious endeavors, the tasks we know we should do and believe we know how to do, are those for which we are most unprepared. Preparation for a discussion obviously involves reading the texts we will discuss, but often we are not good readers. Frequently this is because we do not use our time well; we read material quickly and once, either the night or the hour before class, and our goal is to remember the text's main points rather than to contemplate its meanings or to formulate opinions about it. When we devote time to such considerations we are often guilty of misreading, because though we believe we approach texts openly and strive to understand them on their own terms, we tend to "wrench complicated or

new or unacceptable messages into simpler, ready-made categories of old ideas” (Booth, *Vocation* 183). That works at cross-purposes to our desire to explore new ideas.

To counter this tendency to read without care, you should practice a close reading of the material, one that will enhance your understanding of what you read and prepare you to discuss it. Ideally this entails multiple readings of the text, punctuated by time for reflection: one reading to achieve a sense of the main ideas and issues, one to identify points with which you agree or disagree, or that inspire your thinking, and another to review your main ideas about the text. While I want to assume that everyone aspires to this ideal, I know that time and other commitments often conspire against such aspirations. But even without multiple readings, you can become better readers if you are willing to (a) take notes, and (b) follow a simple three-step procedure when you read.

First, you should strive to understand the reading. This means you should, at the least, *write down* and define new terms and concepts you encounter, write down a statement that describes the author’s theme, and write down statements that describe the main subtopics that contribute to the theme. Reading to understand is difficult, because our tendency – perhaps natural, perhaps learned – is to read new or difficult ideas against the context of what we already believe, so we usually look first for ways in which authors are wrong and for strategies by which we might refute their points. To understand requires that we first give the author the benefit of the doubt. Ask yourself: What are the most favorable interpretations of this text? If you presume the author to be a rational, well-meaning person trying to articulate an intelligent perspective, what would that perspective be?

Second, you should reflect upon the reading. This means you should *write down* at least two sets of comments. You should reflect upon how the material relates to other knowledge –

other readings, for example, or concepts from other classes. And you should reflect upon how the material relates to your own interests and pursuits – your life experiences or personal aspirations. To engage in this reflection requires that you go beyond simple understanding; you must do more than comprehend the author's main points. Ask yourself, instead, how the author is participating in an ongoing conversation with other authors (Graff, et al. 138-148). Everything you read is part of a dialogue – it agrees or disagrees with something or someone, it builds on arguments that others have stated, it stakes its own position in relation to other positions – and your reading will be more informed if you can identify that dialogue. Sometimes an author states explicitly the arguments to which she is responding; sometimes she presumes that readers will have that knowledge. In either case, you must figure it out, otherwise you might confuse the author's own position with positions she is refuting, or you might fail to see the rich and lively conversation to which you are being invited.

Third, you should evaluate the reading. This means you should *write down* your reasoned appraisals of the ideas presented and the author's means of presentation (Rabow 40). Evaluation is not synonymous with the type of complaining I warned against earlier. To evaluate is to assess why you agree and disagree with ideas, or why you think an author wrote well or wrote poorly; to evaluate is to provide reasons for your assessments, not simply to proclaim that a piece was hard or boring or uninteresting. And the step of evaluation should follow the steps of understanding and reflection. You should not evaluate until you have made the effort to understand. And you cannot evaluate until you recognize how the reading takes part in an evolving conversation.

Close reading should yield specific discussion material. If you fulfill the responsibility to read carefully you will come to discussion sessions with notes that contain not only summaries

of the texts, but ideas you want to explore. You may find it difficult, nonetheless, to identify a starting point for the discussion. Just because you possess a page or two of notes does not guarantee that you will recognize the best place for the conversation to begin. To guard against this problem, you should prepare one or two “opening questions” that will prompt conversation. To write good opening questions is not easy, but it is essential because the most beneficial conversations are usually generated by a sincere inquiry that invites various responses (Strong 96).

Many questions, perhaps most, are not questions at all. They are strategies meant to display one’s own knowledge, to prove a point, or to demonstrate a problem in someone else’s thinking. These strategies might be disguised as efforts to invite conversation and to explore ideas, but their goal is to assert a position and thus to stop the discussion. The fundamental characteristic of a good opening question is that it be genuine. You surely will possess opinions about the ways people might answer the question – otherwise you would not ask it – and you might even believe that a particular answer is best, but for the question to be genuine presumes that you want to hear what others think about it, and that you are willing to change your thoughts because of what they say (Zeiderman 20). Your opening questions, therefore, should focus not on the ideas to which you react most strongly, whether in agreement or disagreement, but on the ideas you think would be most interesting to explore in more detail. Keep your questions short. Make sure they are easy to understand. A good opening question will ask your discussion group members to think about the text, and about how the idea featured in your question relates to people’s individual experiences and to the thinking of the group (Strong 147; Zeiderman 20).

While some elements of a good discussion are mysterious and ineffable, the discussion itself does not occur by magic. It requires preparation. That preparation should include:

1. A conscious commitment to a type of discussion that requires your attendance and participation, and that features respect for others' contributions and an exploration of ideas.
2. A close reading of assigned texts during which you take notes that summarize your understandings of, reflections upon, and evaluations of the material.
3. The composition of opening questions that ask us to explore one or two interesting ideas from the texts.

The preparation itself, of course, is not the discussion. We must also consider the in-class practices that will yield the most fruitful conversations.

Participation in class

The presumption behind a discussion-based class is that conversation will produce a good educational experience. But even with preparation in hand, when we arrive for class we might face numerous circumstances that make participation difficult: we are reticent to speak, we do not want to appear foolish, we are unsure of the worth of our ideas. Many of these trepidations stem from our presumption that we should only speak after we have examined our ideas thoroughly and rid them of any weaknesses that might invite attack or refutation. But as should be clear by now, our practice will not be to attack those who voice their ideas, but to ask where the ideas any person voices will take us and how they can help us to explore the text. Though our ideas might sometimes be in competition with one another, they need not always be. We can posit that either this idea or that one will stand, but we can also ask what might happen when we conjoin seemingly disparate ideas. We need to replace our standard presumption – the notion that thinking is a solitary endeavor and that when we speak we should articulate completed thoughts and developed arguments – with the presumption that thinking is a communal effort and that unpolished ideas and spontaneous thoughts can be refined in conversation. Our wildest ideas

often bear more fruit than a forcefully argued conclusion, because they can lead to the playfulness in conversation that eventually yields greater insights (Barr).

Everyone likes to play. So the basic expectation when we gather for in-class discussion is this: everyone will participate. This does not mean that you must speak at every meeting, but in general, over the long haul, you “must both listen and verbally participate to be considered a true group member” (Rabow 36). If you typically are reticent in class you must put forth a special effort to contribute. If you typically speak frequently in class you must work to engage others who do not, and to refrain from dominating the conversation, especially with long monologues. To speak frequently is not necessarily counterproductive, so you should not hesitate to make contributions, but any utterance that diverts the group from its goal of cooperative exploration, perhaps because it is repetitive or takes too long relative to the idea expressed, does stifle conversation and ought to be avoided (Rabow 37). Whatever your propensities for in-class participation are, you must strive in this class to create spaces for everyone to contribute.

At the beginning of each discussion I will ask someone to pose an opening question or to identify a specific point of understanding, reflection, or evaluation that he or she wants to explore. As noted earlier, you should write these down before class and bring them to class. You should all be prepared to initiate every discussion.

Two principles will guide our discussions. Principle one is that you must interact with each other, not just talk to me--the professor--or “to the air.” Principle two is that you must interact about the subject, not just engage in “a bull session in which nobody really listens to anybody else” (Booth, *Vocation* 215). These principles are simply stated, but each suggests several implications.

Principle one: you must interact with each other. In my experience, one main impediment to observing this principle is the presence of a professor or some other appointed person who regularly facilitates the discussion. My presence in the conversation will tempt you to direct all of your comments to me and to expect that I will reply to every contribution. You have seen this situation before: students do not talk to one another, they talk to the professor, and too often the professor obliges by offering up a mini-lecture disguised as a conversation. But a good discussion is not one in which you learn what was in my notes before the class started. A good discussion engages, challenges, and teaches everyone, the professor included, and that cannot happen unless, in Booth's words, "there are many moments of opening out into unforeseen learning" (*Vocation* 216). While in discussion, then, my effort will be to assume a status equal to that of every other participant. I will not simply tell you how to interpret the text, because we all should contribute to understanding it. I will be a co-participant in the conversation, and my comments should be subject to the same expectations and evaluations as your comments.

We want our discussions to be playful and fun, but we also want them to be rigorous and productive. That requires a sense of order and procedure. To provide that order I will employ two simple guidelines. First, one person will speak at a time, and when that person speaks she will direct her comments to everyone and everyone will listen to her (Strong 153). This means that you should not interrupt one another. It means that the conversation will not devolve into a confrontation between two or three people that excludes everyone else. And it means that you should not engage in side-conversations, excessive note-taking, or any other activity that diverts attention from the speaker. Second, you will practice brevity when you speak. Long monologues do not stimulate interaction. This means you should practice the art of parsimony, or economy of speech, and that you should hold one another to that principle. It means that you should avoid

repetition and refrain from stating multiple ideas during any one turn in the conversation. Over the course of a discussion you will no doubt experience several opportunities to speak, so you need not fit all of your thoughts into any one comment. The discussion is more likely to continue in a productive fashion if you state efficiently the idea most appropriate for the moment, and save other thoughts for expression at later times.

Principle two: you must interact about the subject. Serious discussions require effort and focus, because humans gravitate easily toward subjects that are mundane and frivolous. Consider your own experiences in small group discussions. How often have you participated in discussions that began with a focus on a reading or a question, but devolved quickly into banter about weekend activities or television shows or movies or just about any topic that prompted laughter and required no rigorous thought? The propensity to let class conversations devolve in this way makes it essential that you maintain your focus on the subject matter. This does not rule out laughter – indeed, my operating assumption is that the practice of conversation is most likely to make education fun – but it does mean that our conversations should always revolve around the text. The text is the common focus for our discussion (Strong 57).

Sometimes a text's meanings seem transparent and the discussion will focus on its application in particular circumstances. Sometimes a text's meanings are opaque (and even meanings that seem transparent can become complicated as we dissect them) and the discussion will focus on its interpretation. In any case, a worthwhile discussion should take us beyond the obvious; it should explore the depth and breadth of applications and interpretations; it should *exercise our thinking*. Everything you read in a college class should not be easy to understand, for the point of a college education is to extend your capacities of thought, and that will happen only when you must work to comprehend ideas. But a common response to difficult material is

to dismiss it rather than to exert the effort required to understand it. When the temptation arises to disregard a difficult text, you should place faith in your abilities to decipher that text together. This may require a sentence-by-sentence discussion of the reading, during which “those who don’t understand must communicate that they don’t understand, and those who do understand must help them gain understanding” (Rabow 28). This may require time and effort. Each person in the discussion must be persistent in asking questions and patient in answering them, until you are satisfied that you understand the material.

Sometimes understanding gives way to disagreement. That is not bad, because new and innovative ideas arise when different perspectives come together. But for disagreement to be productive you must push yourselves to enact the most difficult conversational practice: finding the common ground beneath the conflict. Every disagreement involves shared beliefs, every argument involves shared warrants, every conflict involves shared assumptions; if they did not, disputants would be unable to converse at all (Booth, *Rhetoric* 10). As you provide reasons for your divergent perspectives, you should always look for the perspectives you share. Otherwise you eventually resort to declarations of your personal beliefs – with no concern for whether others find them believable – or defense of your argumentative positions – with no concern for whether others find them helpful. When disagreements arise, you should strive to make statements that facilitate discussion.

To ensure that we adhere to our two principles – to interact with each other and to interact about the subject matter – we will follow this guideline: whenever you speak you must either address an idea voiced by the previous speaker, or state a reason for shifting to another subject (Booth, *Vocation* 215). If you keep this guideline in mind, the practices that make in-class participation most fruitful will follow naturally:

1. You should listen to what others say and you should not interrupt them.
2. When you speak, you should speak to everyone and strive for clarity and brevity.
3. Everyone must participate if we are to understand the material and to create shared perspectives and new ideas about it.

The Benefits of Conversation

Education takes many forms, so you should not expect conversation to be the dominant practice in every class, nor should you expect it to be the exclusive practice in any class. Lecture has its place. Reading is a necessary precursor to discussion. And quality interactions transpire in formats different from what I have described here. My purpose is not to demean these other methods, but to suggest that the practice of conversation provides benefits both in the classroom and beyond, and that the skills you learn from conversation relate to a wide range of topics and situations.

Aside from the content you might learn during any particular discussion, what skills will the practice of conversation develop? At the core of this practice, as I've described it in this essay, is the assumption that you will encounter texts of various degrees of difficulty, and that through conversation you can move "from textual opacity to textual clarity" in your readings of those texts. This movement "contains within it the seeds of all conceptual learning" (Strong 21). You will, in sum, learn to figure out meanings for yourselves. Your personal, professional, and civic lives are a series of encounters with texts: the math, biology, or psychology book you read for class; the novel or magazine article you read for enjoyment; the technical report, economic forecast, or regulation manual you read for work; the city ordinance or school board report you read as a citizen. And these exemplify more traditional texts. You also encounter movies, television shows, songs, web sites, and podcasts that you work to interpret. Some meanings come

to you easily, some meanings you struggle to discern, but in every case you work to move from opacity to clarity, and the skills you learn in conversation improve your abilities to do that.

Of course, one option when it comes to reading texts is to accept the meanings advanced by others. That would, you might think, eliminate the need for you to do the work of interpretation. But the meanings advanced by others also come to you as texts that you must interpret, so you cannot avoid interpretive work, you can only perform it well or poorly. And why would you want to accept without question the meanings that others provide? Interpretation is a form of self-determination; you should embrace it. When you learn to create your own interpretations and understandings, rather than to accept routinely those voiced by authorities, you will find yourselves “in dialogue with all texts, all ideas, all experience, all of reality” (Strong 14). The practice of conversation prepares you to interpret well, to be proficient in the construction of understanding from the various texts you encounter throughout your lives.

One objection to a discussion-based class is that students do not benefit from the professor’s expertise. This might be true if the professor never lectures and never contributes to the discussion, but that is an unlikely scenario, and even then if you take seriously the practice of conversation you will still learn valuable intellectual and social skills, and develop important personal characteristics (Strong 16). You will learn intellectual skills: to speak clearly and concisely, to listening carefully, and to think critically. You will learn social skills: to practice teamwork, civility, and sensitivity to others. And you will develop personal characteristics: responsibility, initiative, honesty, integrity, and the willingness to accept criticism. These are skills and characteristics that employers look for, and that serve people well in their personal relationships and their civic responsibilities.

A good university education will eventually render your teachers superfluous, because it will provide you with the desire and the intellectual abilities to perform more advanced work on any subject in which you are interested (Booth, *Vocation* 212). The practice of conversation – the preparation for discussion and the participation in it – requires discipline: you must attend class having completed the work that will make you ready to converse, and you must engage the material and one another in a focused manner. If you enact that discipline, if you put forth the efforts described in this essay, your educational experiences in this class will be more fun and more profitable, and you will prepare yourselves for a lifetime of learning and thinking outside of the classroom.

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