Chapter 5

Having a "Civil Conversation"

Passionate confrontation can be a powerful learning experience when the instructor feels that conflict around racial issues is normal and ultimately productive, and that emotion is not a fearful thing, but a force, an energy, for cutting through falsehoods and fears. But confrontation is not for everyone, nor is it the only way instructors can help students move toward a greater understanding of each other. A Social Science professor with white, Native American, and African American ancestry says:

I truly believe in people being civil to each other in the classroom. I think that if someone is domineering or disruptive, that has negative emotional fallout for all of us, myself included. And that is very hard to overcome; it will affect the dynamics of the class. So I differ from some of my long-time colleagues in this kind of work in that I do not think that a disruptive conflict is necessary in order to have the class go forward. I want to maintain civility in the classroom, even at a possible cost—and I want to stress positive—that people will not speak their minds fully. I'm not convinced that speaking one's mind totally fully contributes positively to creating a dialogue. I've had students say remarkable things in the classroom when they became trusting enough to say those things. And I think that can only happen when the class has a history of being able to talk together, even if it's very tentative.

A white instructor of Introductory Composition agrees. "We tend to think that the highly charged moments are the most significant," says Andrea,

but it's sometimes just the opposite. Students aren't always ready for direct confrontation or even much overt personal discussion of race, especially in their first year. Even though I think students sometimes shy away from conversations about race in unproductive ways, I don't blame them sometimes: first year students have so much on their plate. They're away from home for the first time, dealing with the demands of college level course work, all the while trying to make friends,
Having a "Civil Conversation" directly with issue as they arise seem to come from a consensus decision process of peace, if not quite the right sort of thinking. The other, more important aspect of the connection between the two issues is the connection between the two. The connection is that you are, and I don’t pay much credence to the notion that just because a group of people want to start a war, it is their right to do so. The connection is that you are, and I don’t pay much credence to the notion that just because a group of people want to start a war, it is their right to do so.
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lorunner of modern white feminist activism and principles. And Gunn Allen is calling them "mother." So the paper is modeled on that and asks students to inquire into who their "mother" is. And I say, "Well, you can write about your mom that's actually one way of doing this. But also, you might think about the other forming agents in your life." So students will begin to write, not really knowing what they're writing about. And this is my trickery, because it gets students to uncover another layer. They might start out by saying, "My mother is my community." So then in group discussion of that idea we ask, "Okay, is it about your community that formed you?" And then race might come up—or it might not. The student might not be ready for it, either as an individual or as a writer. So that's what I mean by indirect: if race comes up, OK, and if it doesn't, I'll let it go. I really believe that students learn when they are ready. So I'll try to create an environment that will help them be ready. And if they grasp that opportunity then they do, and if they don't, then they don't. I realize that's very trusting and somewhat naive—the idea that if they don't get it in my class, they'll get it somewhere else. But that's the way I learned, myself. The environment may be ripe in one place, and so that is where you grow. And if you aren't ready to grow just yet, it might happen later.

Scott is also aware that his preference for indirect and low key discussion is somehow connected with his general discomfort with the subject of race that so many instructors share:

I'm very race conscious. I notice black people. I notice Latino people, I notice Native Americans. Somewhere I'm sifting through a variety of stereotypes and contexts. I acknowledge that this is working on me in hidden ways, ways that would make me uncomfortable to think about and that I'm allowing to stay under the surface. I know this has an effect on me, and I know my students are affected by it as well. And I think, yeah, this undercurrent of race needs to be brought more to the surface in the classroom. But you only bring to your students that which you're prepared to deliver. So when someone brings the subject up I might just sit quietly, not trying hard enough to move the discussion forward. That communicates to my students, "It's okay not to talk about this."

I'm sure there's some denial on my part, and some self-consciousness about being white. Maybe it is because I'm unsure of who I am even at the age of forty-three. And I'm a person who would say I know myself pretty well. But there are hidden pockets, and race is one of them for me, that are still somewhat mystified. I don't want to dig into them too deeply. But I do question myself, and this is what I've come up with: When I was a kid I used to drive into the inner city. I wrote about that once: "Time to time I drive in the ghetto" was the title of it. It was the sixties and there were riots, and the black area of Buffalo was like an open wound. A lot of attention was being paid to it by the media and I was very curious about it. I had just got my driver's license. I think I still feel like that; in the classroom when I bring up the subject of race, I'm a white guy still driving through someone else's town, someone else's neighborhood. I feel a little self-conscious. So then I think, "Maybe I'm bringing this up because I have this burden that I need to let go of and this is my way of doing it." And I don't know if I should be doing that. Maybe by bringing it up I'm stirring the soup when it should just be simmering. But on the other hand I think it's really important to have these conversations.

Scott is aware of his contradictions: that he can be more honest than most about race even while he allows his deepest feelings to remain inaccessible to him; that he excites racial tensions through the readings he chooses but pulls back from addressing race directly in discussion; and that his indirect style tends to "get him off the hook" sometimes, while at the same time, it is also an important and valid expression of his teaching philosophy. But he is willing to live with that. Race relations in this country are contradictory, he says, so being perfectly clear and up-front about one's feelings and politics may leave some of the deepest and most interesting complexities unaddressed.

Even more than open discussion, Scott says, whites and people of color need to get to know each other better as human beings, and this has to happen naturally, outside the classroom. "Maybe that's why I still drive into the ghetto sometimes," he tells me with a smile. "That's fun. And it's scary. Go to a big inner city park on a Sunday and it's packed with black people having a good time and you will be among the few white people there and you'll also be from out of town. Last weekend I was in Detroit and I told myself, 'Let's try this, let's go!' I wasn't invited. And I didn't stay. I wouldn't have stopped to picnic. But still, I don't know . . . I think we need more interactions."

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Personal style, upbringing, ease or discomfort when dealing with race all affect the ways instructors approach classroom discussions. But in addition, the academic discipline itself may privilege a style of inquiry that directs the conversation away from the personal and emotional and more toward a kind of detached intellectualism. Two white Philosophy instructors talk about this style and how they modify it for discussions of racially charged issues in their classrooms.

"The accepted pedagogical style in Philosophy is that it doesn't matter who you are or what your personal feelings are on the subject," says Connie:

What matters is your reasons. If your reasons are good, you win, and that's the end of it. That style is of course a very impersonal way of relating to the issues. There's a place for that, but with the subject of race, students come into the class with a lot of emotions, and if they can't give voice to them they just get frustrated.
In one of my classes a white male student was being very rude and interrupting people. He was angry and frustrated because he'd had enough of feeling victimized by the idea that people like him are always to blame. The situation was tense and there were a number of students who were getting very pale and upset and finally one of them burst into tears and left the room. So at that point, I said, "You know, I think this is an important discussion and I think we have to have it, but it might be good if we take a break for five minutes so everyone has a chance to reflect on themselves. And I left to find out if the student was okay. When I came back, I said, "I would like to pick up the discussion where we left off—is that okay with people?" And they said yes, and after that the discussion was much calmer.

In cases like that, I do enforce civility. I tell the disruptive student, "You're interrupting, and you need to wait your turn. You'll have time to state your point of view, but this isn't the time to do that, and I expect you, as I expect every person in the class, to respect the others." I end up being very authoritarian about that. In a lot of ways I am a very accessible, friendly teacher, but about that, I really exert my authority. On occasion, I've even said, "It's now time for you not to say anything, and if that's a problem then you can go; I'll talk with you after class or in office hours."

This doesn't mean that Emma requires that discussion be unemotional. "I'm not opposed to people jumping up and getting angry and frustrated in a way that's not abusive to other students in the class and when it is in some loose sense, their turn," she says. "I don't require that people put their hand up and be called on. What I would be opposed to is if people were outright rude or offensive to another student or were not allowing another student to talk. I just need to have that sense of civility in the classroom so that some don't jump all over others and everyone has their space or opportunity to speak."

Both these instructors feel that students who have been the targets of racism do have a legitimate need to let go of their emotions at times during a discussion. Emma says:

I would have more tolerance if someone in a racially subordinate position says, "Stop, I can't deal with this right now; this person's opinion is just so misguided to me I've got to interrupt." I think that's a legitimate interruption. If students of color are getting frustrated because white students don't seem to have any understanding of where they're coming from, I'd ask them explicitly if they would talk about their personal experience—because I think students are very respectful on the whole of other people talking about their experience. It won't always enlighten everyone, but these stories, these perspectives, are so desperately needed in our classrooms! When students of color are willing to speak about their experiences, I just want to make sure it happens, because I feel that students who have had less exposure to communities of color are really impoverished; they don't have much of a sense of what is involved.

Connie adds, "Discussion about moral problems like race does amazing things for people. You get this sense that people often just read things and form opinions one way or another without really examining why. Once people start challenging each other intellectually, they grow, they shoot out rapidly. It's sort of an old fashioned liberal idea, I guess, but I think they're better citizens when they've examined why they hold the opinions that they do. "It's really a passion for me," says Emma. "I really get charged by this; I come out of class sometimes just panting and exhausted, but I love it."

While Philosophy courses are about assessing various arguments and objections, in many other disciplines students know that they need to learn the professor's "expert take" on the subject matter. Many white students find this difficult to do in courses that take a progressive stance on race, where the analysis they are expected to learn calls their own motives and behavior into question. Eric, a white professor of Economics, deals with this kind of student resistance by approaching the subject of racial justice through an analysis of class:

I'd rather guilt trip people about their economic privilege than about their racist attitudes. I personally believe that if the difference in unemployment rates were much lower between blacks and whites, negative racial attitudes would be enormously less. So in my classroom we don't discuss issues of personal prejudice. We talk about structural ways that political economies take advantage of racial differences. Most of my students know that rewards for employment tend to be
on the one hand, their upbringing may have stressed acceptance and harmony and, on the other, their experiences with racism may be provoking them to speak out.

"There is a tendency of the Indian people or Eastern people generally to be more quiet," says an Indian American student. "We tend to say, 'Oh well, whatever,' or 'Oh yeah, that's probably true.' We're tolerant. I think, and accepting. If something really offends us we'd rather say, 'Let them say whatever they like, I'm going to go study. I'm going to live my life and not bother to explain this to anyone.' But when you hear so many ignorant opinions and all the racism and stereotyping that goes on, you feel you should protest. But then I feel easily intimidated by people with strong opinions or class members who seem to be emotionally invested in an idea that I disagree with."

"Asian-Americans may seem happy with the cards we've been dealt because we're quiet," says a bi-racial Chinese/European American student. "I really hate that. We're constantly left out of discussions on race because we're overpowered by the black people making all the noise. I'm a Chinese woman and I wasn't raised to be so aggressive with my thoughts. I want to shout, to be an activist, to educate people, to tell my story, but . . . I can't always. Everyone in this world—my family, my culture, white people, black people—are telling me not to. I'm limited by stupid stereotypes and expectations." Gender differences among all ethnic groups may also emerge—if not in these discussions about group norms, then later, once the discussion is focused on the course content. Female students may become very annoyed at males (especially white males) who unconsciously dominate the discussion and who seem to have real difficulty being aware of their tone of voice, their tendency to interrupt when they become engaged, and their readiness to speak longer once they have the floor. On the other hand, males who have learned to be sensitive to gender and racial dynamics may go overboard in the other direction and remain almost completely silent, depriving the class of their opinions and observations. I tell students that whatever comes up in discussion of the ground rules will help them think about their own style and the fact that others may have quite different needs. They don't need to agree. They should just write down all the ideas they emerge. I then ask a few students to collect all the ground rules, type them up (culling redundancies), photocopy them, and distribute them in the next class period.

Another technique for creating ground rules, developed by psychologist Lorraine Gutierrez for her classes on race and gender, focuses less on students' own style differences and more on empathy with others. Each student thinks of one concern about the way class discussion might go and writes it anonymously on a file card. Typical responses are: "We'll just have one of those superficial discussions that never go anywhere." "I'll be forced to speak when I don't want to." "Conservative opinions won't be tolerated." "Certain people will always dominate the discussion." "We'll end up making race a black/white issue, leaving out all the other ethnic groups that have experienced racism." "Some people won't come prepared so their comments, if they have any, will be uninformed." The instructor collects and shuffles the cards, divides the class into groups of four or five, and hands one card to each student. The groups then discuss the concern expressed on each card, trying to come up with a ground rule to address it. The rules generated by all the groups are recorded, typed up, and passed back to the class as in the exercise above. Discussing rules that will make others more comfortable helps students to take responsibility for classroom dynamics along with the instructor. Students have to think, "What should we do about students who never contribute to discussion?" "How are we going to include the perspectives of Native American students, since there seem to be none in this class?" "How can we make it easier for someone to decline to speak about things that are too personal?" The animated discussion this exercise engenders is wonderful to hear on the first day of the semester, and the respect for others that it brings out will be important to remember when and if the going gets rough.

Regardless of how much time they have put into creating ground rules, students do tend to forget them when emotions run high. However, once students have made their own rules, instructors can always remind them of what they themselves came up with. A white instructor in Education says, "I think the first few times things started to erupt in my classes I just stopped and pulled out the ground rules. And I said, 'Wait a minute, we've developed these rules and here's what we agreed on.' So it never was a free for all. I once had a teacher in training who was really upset that the local schools had stopped celebrating Halloween because some religious minorities are against it. She could not entertain the idea that anyone would seriously believe it was devil worship. 'I came to this country to be American!' she told the class. 'We have a culture here and I expect to teach it in the schools!' She and another student went back and forth, disagreeing very respectfully with each other about this. They were both very strong in their tone of voice, but because of the ground rules they had developed, they were very respectful. And they both came away saying, 'Wow, I really learned something about the other side!'"
simply accept these procedures as fine.

Do not criticize the discussion. Play it safe or make certain top

Do not praise the discussion. Don't forget to notice.

Show the students close attention. Don't forget or remind.

Listen to others. Don't take all the time. Don't damage the bond.

Graduate: no age, background, or personality. Let everyone into the group and number them.

Look out for people who might be alienated because of that.

People did not believe these. This is how people remembered.

Don't ask such questions. Learn a few times.

Find on behavior groups. Always new and understand each other.

Assume that everyone wants to learn and understand each other.

Close to safe space as can be with a multicultural group.

Listening to the ideas and making some ideas known. This is

Role of the instructor. This is my domain. How things get incorporated. Their fulfilled. It's fun to do this. Don't let others become diving. You'll be asked to talk. These students' minds are good. How to with some practically good advice for instructors. Why I pass on the last place.

My own students in all courses. One course and all other can run.