

Semester-Long Student Discussion Groups: Maximizing the Public and Private Benefits of Higher Education

Dr. Scott Fitzgerald
Department of Sociology
University of North Carolina Charlotte
sfitzger@uncc.edu
<https://clas-pages.uncc.edu/scott-fitzgerald/>

Abstract:

Recent scholarship has brought renewed attention to the ongoing debate regarding the public and private benefits of higher education. In this article, I posit that both are legitimate aims of liberal arts education and that the classroom can serve an important role in pursuing these aims. To this end, I introduce and evaluate a student-centered discussion process aimed at cultivating both private and public returns to higher education. This pedagogical technique develops students' communication and critical thinking skills while simultaneously providing breadth and depth to their knowledge acquisition, developing transferable skills desired by employers, and preparing them to be thoughtful, engaged citizens. In the context of scholarship on student-centered learning that identifies the benefits of engaged students and active learning I describe a new pedagogical technique—the Interactivity Foundation's (IF) student-centered discussion process. This process develops semester-long, small group “sanctuary discussions” designed to encourage collaborative and deep exploration of ideas and develop broad communication skills. I delineate the strengths and weaknesses of this pedagogical technique and identify how it contributes to the public and private benefits of higher education.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Why do I have to take general education classes? What is the point? How is this going to get me a job? Anyone who teaches, advises and/or talks with concerned parents on college visits has faced these questions time and time again. The motivation behind this line of questioning is clear: students and parents seek to maximize the returns to education as efficiently as possible. They typically want to know the quickest, and by extension the cheapest, paths to obtaining the credentials that have become necessary for gaining entry to a successful career track throughout the economy. To many, the value of liberal arts curricula, comprising a broad array of general education and discipline specific courses designed to prepare thoughtful, deliberate and intellectually robust students, is questionable at best. A liberal arts education is seen as little more than a required stepping stone—it is something to get out of the way in order to get on with the real business of job-training and career preparation. From this perspective, higher education is a “private benefit” that is valuable inasmuch as it produces value-added benefits for individual students—specifically, expectations of greater incomes (Schneider 2011).

As the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) has reaffirmed in two reports on college learning, *Greater Expectations* (2002) and *College Learning for the New Global Century* (2007) this preoccupation with the private benefits of higher education has obscured the public benefits and civic value of producing broadly educated citizens. As Schneider (2011) observes, the guiding rationale for higher education that developed in the aftermath of World War II was premised on the notion that democracy, and by extension global peace, required citizens to develop “a rich understanding of the larger context in which they live, work and contribute” (2011:1). The need for civic-mindedness and broad concern for developing adaptable, global citizens still rings true today but has been eclipsed by individualistic language and material pursuits.

A concurrent trend in the United States has been a hardening of political discourse. In the past few decades the development of sound bite politics enabled changing norms in print, radio and television news media which discourages careful deliberation and efforts to search for greater understanding and common ground. More recently, the prevalence of blogs and tweets has further encouraged brief, pithy and inflammatory rhetoric. Political *discussions* rarely take place. Rather, politicians, pundits and citizens quickly stake out their position and seek to defend it from the attacks of others. Our politics is characterized by the language of warfare rather than the language of learning and careful deliberation. What role can higher education play in reversing this trend? How can general education courses be structured to address these concerns? What opportunities can we provide in our classrooms to cultivate the public benefits of thoughtful and civil discourse?

Although the public benefits of higher education are important, private benefits are legitimate aims of liberal arts education. What is needed now is renewed attention towards articulating the goals of higher education and specifying how we can contribute to these goals through general education courses. To be competitive in the labor market and to develop as a thoughtful and engaged citizen, today's students require not only discipline-based knowledge but also communication and critical thinking skills (Lo, 2010; National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise, 2008; Pillay and Elliot, 2001). There are at least three broad goals of higher education consistent with both public and private interests: (1) substantive knowledge formation, (2) professional skill development, and (3) civic engagement. General education classes can serve an important role in realizing each of these goals.

In this article, I seek to contribute to the scholarship of teaching and higher education in three steps. First, I provide a rationale for refocusing attention on the public, as well as private,

benefits of higher education and identifying how the undergraduate classroom can be used to do so. In particular, by developing our students' communication skills, content knowledge and capacities for critical thinking we are able to simultaneously provide breadth and depth to their cognitive development, develop transferable skills desired by employers, and prepare them to be thoughtful, engaged citizens. Second, I review recent scholarship on student-centered learning that identifies the benefits of engaged students and active learning. Against this backdrop I describe a new pedagogical technique, a process of collaborative student-centered discussions (in what follows, the terms "student centered discussion process" or "sanctuary discussions" refer to a specific discussion process developed by the non-profit Interactivity Foundation).¹ This process centers around semester-long, small group "sanctuary discussions" designed to encourage collaborative and deep exploration of ideas and develop broad communication skills. Third, drawing from my experiences using this process in teaching three courses that meet general education requirements at a large, public research university, I delineate the strengths and weaknesses of this pedagogical technique and identify how it contributes to the public and private benefits of higher education.

ENGAGED STUDENTS AND ACTIVE LEARNING

Faculty and administrators are continuously in search of "high-impact educational practices" (Kuh, 2008). What pedagogical practices can be used in both general education and discipline specific courses that enable intellectual, professional and civic development? My experience redesigning and teaching courses structured around the student-centered discussion process suggests that this pedagogical technique is particularly well-suited to produce these desired outcomes. As elaborated below, the student-centered discussion process utilizes multiple

teams of 6-8 students as “thinking groups” that work together throughout the semester.

Following a semi-structured format these teams collaboratively explore topics that are amenable to multiple perspectives, such as complex policy issues while concurrently developing individual facilitation and group discussion skills.

The sanctuary discussion panels function as *thinking groups* and not as *study groups*. They think about *what could be* the case rather than researching *what is* the case. They explore possibilities both in the ways an area of policy concern might be described and in the ways it might be approached by public policy (Prudhomme, 2006:2).

Participants are explicitly tasked with exploring and developing diverse perspectives and contrasting possible responses. They are discouraged from using “I” statements (e.g., “I think...”, “I believe...”, “I feel...”) and the implications of all ideas are to be explored regardless of the perceived value or desirability and regardless of the speaker. This process encourages abstract, deep-thinking, and when used in conjunction with a more traditional sociological approach employing empirical research, can produce important critical sociological knowledge.

Employing the student-centered discussion process represents an intentional departure from the traditional “teacher-centered” classroom by de-centering authority and encouraging student involvement in guiding the course content. Some approaches to “democratizing the classroom” allow students to discuss and debate all aspects of the course requirements (Bickel, 2006). While the student-centered discussion process is certainly amendable to this type of approach, not all faculty are inclined towards nor comfortable with relinquishing this much authority in the classroom. In particular, as Fobes and Kaufman (2008) articulate, a central question guiding critical pedagogy and approaches to de-centering authority is: “How do we

allow students (through their generative themes) to establish the curriculum of the course when there is a discipline-specific body of knowledge that we feel compelled (or required) to cover?” (2008:28). As discussed below, I utilized the student-centered discussion process in ways that allowed students to generate the ideas and insights relevant to the course topic and then later in the semester we created assignments that brought sociological research to bear in assessing the policy possibilities developed.

The scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) has identified the importance of student engagement, inquiry, and active learning in producing a wide array of desired outcomes (Crone, 1997; Green and Krug, 1997; Justice et al., 2007; Lee, 2011; McCarthy and Anderson, 2000; McKinney et al., 2004; Pitt and Packard, 2010). This literature has enumerated many useful techniques and assignments that can be used to produce engaged and active learners. Two popular approaches that have much in common with at least some of the objectives of the student-centered discussion process are in-class debates (Kennedy, 2007) and stakeholder meetings (Pitt and Packard, 2010). In developing the foundation for their stakeholder meetings, Pitt and Packard (2010) identify three important benefits of in-class student debates. First, they represent an active form of learning that encourages mastery of content and the development of critical thinking skills. Second, “debates allow students the opportunity to develop better oral communication skills that are increasingly rare and important in both the marketplace and a democratic society” (216), and as Bruss (2009) argues, students need to be *taught* these skills. Third, in-class debates can be a welcome alternative to traditional lecture-based or routine coursework thereby encouraging student engagement. However, as Pitt and Packard note, one limitation to the “traditional debate format, in which a small group of students is given the task of presenting arguments for or against a particular issue, can promote pro and con dualism that is

both incomplete and counter to developing sociological imagination (2010:215). The student-centered discussion process avoids dualistic thinking by requiring students to develop at least four *contrasting* conceptual possibilities. The discussion format encourages broad thinking by requiring participants to develop four contrasting possibilities for addressing the course topic. These possibilities could be divergent theoretical or practical approaches to a complex topic, different conceptual ways of understanding a topic, or different policy approaches toward some area of public concern. These four contrasting possibilities will reflect the differing values, concerns and goals of multiple perspectives and stakeholders. The goal is to develop these possibilities in an internally consistent manner and to explore the implications of each decision without attempting to determine the “best” or “correct” answer. In other words, the goal is to avoid common pitfalls such as binary thinking (i.e., there are two and only two sides to every issue) or a “Goldilocks” construct (i.e., there are two extremes and a happy medium). There is significant value in providing opportunities for students to “accurately and convincingly” present opinions and arguments that they do not personally advocate (Pitt and Packard, 2010:217) and using the student-centered discussion process students routinely and systematically do so.

DESCRIPTION

Group-Based sanctuary discussions using the student-centered discussion process

I have employed the student-centered discussion process framework in three sociology courses taught at a large, public university. As part of the General Education requirements, each undergraduate student must complete at least one course with an “O” designation, signifying a course that explicitly develops oral communication skills. These courses are offered within majors in each of the colleges and are designed to teach both discipline specific content and

general oral communication skills. The maximum class size for “O” designated courses is 25 students. To illustrate this course design I will describe a single course that I taught using this method (an upper-level undergraduate elective on religion and the state) and also draw from experiences and variations employing this course design from two subsequent courses (upper-level undergraduate electives related to political sociology).

The goals of my *SOCY 4092 Religion and the State (O)* course are threefold. First, students learn and implement discussion group facilitation and oral communication skills. Second, students examine the social, political, moral and economic implications of religion and public policy. Third, students learn to apply social science data and research to key issues involving religion and the state. During the entire first half of the semester students learn and participate in the student-centered discussion process. I have used this process in the classroom to explore issues related to religion and the state, political sociology and the “American Dream.” Broadly, the student centered discussion process encourages conceptual, collaborative, and exploratory thinking related to topics of the broad social situation of human action or public policy. Public policy is defined broadly to include social decisions, whether governmental, corporate, or organizational decisions. The discussion process “encourages the discussion of dimensions of public policy that often might be overlooked (such as ethical, psychological, social and cultural dimensions). The policy possibilities that emerge from the process are not intended to be highly detailed administrative or legislative plans, but general descriptions that lay out the basic conceptual framework with which such administrative plans could be developed by others” (Byrd, Gundersen and Lea, 2009:i).

During the semester each student has an opportunity to facilitate small group discussions and actively participate in using this process to broadly explore the public policy possibilities

regarding religion and the state. The possibilities developed within this discussion process provide direction for the remainder of the course—as we examine the specific issues and possibilities developed by the respective groups by introducing relevant social science research and producing group research projects. Additionally, the possibilities developed within each group provide the basis for a group term paper and oral presentation. This course provides a unique and exciting learning opportunity, one that is likely to be quite different than what students have experienced before. Throughout the semester we focus on both *process* (facilitation, communication and discussion) and *substance* (ideas, issues and possibilities).

In order to place students at the center of their learning and to create sustained, student-centered discussions students are placed in small groups (6-8 members) which function as their learning “team” for the duration of the semester. While the process is likely amendable to class sizes up to 40, there are logistical challenges for instructor observation and small group discussions if there are more than three teams to be observed. Each of my courses discussed in this article enrolled 22 students. To enable the selection of diverse working groups, I ask each student to fill out an index card answering a series of questions. These questions collect basic demographic information, year in school, related course work. In addition, students fill out a brief survey designed to elicit attitudes towards working in groups, self-presentation, and motivation. To the extent possible, I then use these data to aid in creating balanced and diverse work groups.

The class meets twice a week for 75 minutes a session. On the second day of class I place students in their respective groups and provide brief activities for students to get to know one another and begin to develop a group identity. Prior to this class period, students have read selections from Interactivity Foundation (IF) materials on facilitating group discussions and

creating sanctuary discussionsⁱⁱ. Each group is then asked to develop group specific “contracts” that identify goals and expectations for the group work and semester project. These contracts must also identify procedures for how the group will address conflict and/or challenges within the group. When developing their team contract and strategies students are encouraged to consult the written materials that directly address potential issues and challenges and incorporate these insights into their procedures and plan. They discuss the importance of creating space for sanctuary discussions and how they will individually and collectively contribute to maintaining this important dynamic. This approach is consistent with collaborative learning that requires students to work together to identify problems and work together to strategize how best to deal with them (Baldwin and Keating, 1998; Caulfield and Persell, 2006).

The guiding principle of the student-centered discussion process is to encourage students to collectively develop contrasting ideas about a complex topic. Therefore in this course, students are focused on developing at least four contrasting ways to understand the interrelation between religion and the state. By following the discussion format developed by the Interactivity Foundation (and customized by the instructor) students systematically develop these contrasting possibilities throughout the semester. The basic structure follows three stages: 1) exploring contrasting perspectives and generating alternative ways to frame the basic questions or concerns about the topical area, 2) developing contrasting responses to those questions or concerns, 3) testing out and revising those possible contrasting responses (see APPENDIX I). The level of the discussion is focused on thinking broadly about conceptual possibilities rather than present-day nuts-and-bolts issues.

Using the student-centered discussion process, on any given day each group has a “facilitator” and a “recorder” while the remaining members serve as the discussion group.

Students rotate these positions so that each student facilitates and records twice. Requiring students to rotate positions within the group encourages greater participation and engagement (Fobes and Kaufman, 2008; Yamane, 2006). Facilitators are expected to engage all members of the group in discussion and will collect participants' comments on a large flip chart. As each page of comments is completed it can then be hung on the wall for the group to reread and incorporate as they continue their discussion. The recorder will jot down additional information that can be used to supplement the flip charts to create the "developing document" or summary notes following the class period. The developing document is the cumulative summary record of the ongoing discussion and is augmented and modified after each class period. This document is not a narrative of the discussion but a thematically organized cumulative summary of the discussion. The ideas can be arranged in outline form and should provide enough detail so that individuals who did not participate in the actual discussion are able to make sense of the content. The summary notes and other working documents focus on the substance of the discussion rather than providing a verbatim transcript. Further, in order to help students focus on the content under discussion, and not on the person who made any particular statement, names or other identifying information is not recorded. This is an important component of creating sanctuary discussions and also serves the practical function of allowing students who miss class an opportunity to seamlessly join back into the discussion and to contribute to the interrogation of ideas through continued discussion, clarification and expansion.

On a typical day, students enter the class and immediately join their group. Students arrange their desks so that each group is in a circle facing one another and I position myself in the middle of the classroom so that I can observe all three groups. I've found that this process works best in classrooms that have moveable desks and enough space for the groups to arrange

their circles far enough from one another so that they do not serve as distractions to other groups. During the next hour I closely observe each group and fill out feedback forms for each facilitator. These forms contain rubrics that assess the facilitators' performance on a series of dimensions identified in the *Facilitation Guidebook* (Byrd and Gundersen, 2005). Broadly:

Facilitators enable discussions and keep them focused. Facilitators rarely contribute to the discussion itself. The facilitator's spoken contribution will be in such areas as:

- Introducing/describing a step in the process
- Asking clarifying questions
- Prompting the discussion of new areas of exploration
- Keeping the discussion flow on target
- Bringing clarity to each of the various useful positions expressed
- Recapping the sense of the discussion from time to time and at the end of each session and the beginning of the next one

(Byrd and Gundersen, 2005:39)

I employ a single-sheet rubric that identifies thirteen elements (keeping the discussion focused, setting the tone for discussion, limiting facilitator bias, managing time, providing the proper level of discussion leadership, observing the non-verbal side of facilitation, maintaining the discussion at the right level, handling discussion challenges, stimulating original ideas, maintaining the proper role, maintaining a high energy level, displaying proper facilitation, and mechanics). There is space to provide an evaluation score and comments for each element. Because of the logistic challenges of completing feedback forms while observing three simultaneous group discussions I often do not fill in all thirteen dimensions. Rather, I use the form to provide specific, although not comprehensive, feedback for each facilitator to use to help improve his/her own performance as facilitator. Students are required to address the issues raised in the feedback, and from the debriefing session, in their student portfolio entries. To assuage fears and performance anxiety the scores on the feedback form are not entered into the grade book and do not directly affect students' course grades. Rather, the quality of their process journal entries,

including responses to peer and instructor feedback, is graded. High quality entries are self-reflective, detailed and multi-dimensional.

STUDENT AND FACULTY REFLECTIONS

When developing the courses discussed in this article I did not employ a study design or data collection strategy that would facilitate systematic assessment or compare the learning outcomes of this approach to those of other pedagogical approaches. Rather, I draw from student-reflections gleaned through writing assignments and small group conversations, as well as my own classroom observations, to reflect on the process and outcomes of this pedagogical approach. As such, these reflections serve as suggestive findings in need of future empirical verification. Overall, it seems that the majority of the students were successful in learning and using the student-centered discussion process. Specifically, they avoided ping-pong style debates; were self-reflective and self-monitoring; worked collaboratively, and contributed to the development of alternate viewpoints.

The creation of student portfolios is an essential part of this process because it provides an opportunity for students to share what they been thinking and doing during the student-centered discussion process. The student portfolio contains weekly journal entries, instructor provided assessment of the student's facilitation performance, and the student's written responses to this assessment and feedback. The specific purpose of creating a portfolio is to assess students' performance as group members engaged in sanctuary discussions and the broader process as well as their individual development as a facilitator. As such, the guidelines of this assignment specify that I look for honest, insightful and self-reflective observations about student's experiences in the group and their performance as a facilitator. I require students to

draw specifically from the assigned *Facilitation Guidebook* in their reflections about what worked and didn't work for the group or for their facilitation. Perhaps most importantly, I ask them to write about how these observations and reflections can be used in the further development of individual facilitation skills and style. To illustrate key findings from my qualitative evaluation of the student-centered discussion process I present, anonymously with permission, excerpts from student portfolios. I highlight three prevalent themes contained in student entries: *the challenges of group work*, *the challenges and rewards of learning the discussion process*, and *the benefits of expanding view-points*.

The presence of significant group work in a course can generate considerable consternation for many students (Fobes & Kaufman, 2008; Yamane, 2006). Students have typically been required to engage in group work throughout their educational careers but have often had very mixed experiences. Based on responses to pre-process essays that I require students to write during the first week of class, I have gleaned that my students' prior experience largely conforms to a free rider model: in their experience the majority of the work in group work is completed by a minority of members. Whether this is considered a desirable or undesirable outcome is variable. Some, often "underperforming" students, report overall positive impressions regarding group work characterized by free riders—presumably because they have been able to get by on the work of others. However, even some "high-performing" students report positive attitudes towards group work, apparently because they have been able to take control of the group and produce a level of work that is consistent with their own expectations.

The student-centered discussion process is intentionally designed to minimize the possibility of free-riders and to encourage *collaborative* work rather than typical group work that often reflects the inputs of only a few members. Of course, even when significant attention is

given to laying this foundation (i.e., through detailed course materials and reinforcing instructor comments), challenging issues still emerge. As one student notes:

The tension in the group is still here. Some individuals just don't seem to work well in groups. They present themselves as highly competitive and view this discussion as a competition of ideas rather than a group thinking exercise that has no right or wrong line of thought. It's hard dealing with people who like to control everything; but it's also difficult when group members don't contribute.

Another writes:

I'm afraid _____ is here for a free ride. So far she has contributed nothing to the group dynamic. I hope things change when she is the facilitator. Reflecting back to the book, I am forced to question whether or not _____ is here for a free ride or is "someone who remains passive." It seems that she has no ideas or answers because she is unprepared for the discussion taking place. This could be because she doesn't understand the goals and conversations taking place, or it is that she is not devoting the necessary outside time to preparing for the daily meetings.

These entries demonstrate that students were faced with behaviors and issues that went counter to the spirit and guidelines for discussion process set forth in the course materials. Fortunately, requiring students to write student portfolio entries each week created an opportunity for reflection and analysis of these tensions thereby providing another tool for overcoming the challenges of collaborative learning (Brufee, 1999; Yamane, 2006). This format allowed students to step back from the conflict and attempt to *learn* from it and even remedy it. Students were directed to read and respond to sections of the *Facilitation Guidebook* (Byrd and Gundersen, 2005) discussing strategies for addressing problems in a group. With varying levels of detail and thoroughness students used their process journals to reflect on: What issues were involved? How did different members of the group respond? How could it have been dealt with

differently? What can be learned from this and how can this new knowledge be used in the future?

Learning the *process* of the sanctuary discussion was a challenging and rewarding experience for students. As mentioned above, the concept of sanctuary discussions and how they relate to the student-centered discussion process was reiterated and clarified throughout the semester. One student commented on the struggles associated with learning how to really listen to group members (rather than simply waiting for the person to stop talking and expressing one's own thoughts) and the challenges of carefully and deliberately developing ideas as a group over many weeks:

At times our comments seemed like they are somewhat repetitive or that we were advancing at a very slow pace. Maybe if we had some help getting our concepts organized, it would have put all the various points of view into the proper perspective. I'm still trying to remember to listen to people's thoughts all the way through without going off into my head and thinking about specific aspects, so that I can get the big picture before I fully digest what they are saying. I don't know if everyone else in the group is doing this but somehow we seemed to mush through things at relatively positive speed.

Learning the language and protocol of the student-centered discussion process provided an opportunity for groups to learn new ways of interacting. As the comment below illustrates, successful groups used these guidelines as a way to gently remind one another of appropriate group behavior. Through intentional efforts they were able to do so even when the infraction occurred while members were excitedly trying to "help" the discussion (as opposed to attempting to derail it):

A couple of times during the discussion one or two of the group members became excited enough to add to the discussion that they would accidentally interrupt the person speaking. Each time that happened people stopped and apologized and were able to continue afterwards. I think that this is actually a good thing to happen

within our group because it helps create an atmosphere where everyone feels comfortable, where we can laugh with each other, and apologize when one of us makes a mistake.

The development of trust, a key element of sanctuary discussions, is encouraged by establishing semester-long working groups where students can work together repeatedly and have opportunities to reflect upon and discuss those interactions. The sanctuary discussion process encourages participants to treat ideas as objects to be collectively interrogated rather than representations of the thoughts or opinions of individuals. This helps to separate the exploration and evaluation of ideas from the appraisal of the person who introduces those ideas into the discussion, a practice that serves to encourage the exploration of alternative ideas and perspectives beyond the participants' own personal preferences. Participants are discouraged from using "I" statements and all ideas are to be explored regardless of the perceived value or desirability and regardless of the speaker. Generally, students appreciated this process and identified the importance of the sanctuary discussion guidelines:

I think that confidentiality was definitely a key part of our group. I think that we felt open to express ideas specifically because of the environment. I felt that I could say what I wanted without fear of exposure or condemnation

The student-centered discussion process encourages a form of intellectual exploration that often proceeds in a non-linear fashion. As Caulfield and Persell note, "Trained throughout their educational careers to sit back and maybe take notes, many students actively resist having to take an active and engaged role in their education" (2006:49). Non-linear learning can be very challenging for students accustomed to PowerPoint lectures that proceed in bullet-point fashion to convey information in a clearly defined and step-by-step manner. The student-centered discussion process mitigates the anxiety associated with this non-linear development by allowing students to "own" the process by creating a shared set of guidelines and goals and also by

offering detailed procedural instructions that provide structure and direction while allowing for wide-ranging and exploratory ideas.

My classroom observations, assessment of student assignments, as well as informal student feedback suggests that students benefited from thinking broadly, abstractly and systematically about the subject matter (in this case, religion and the state) using the student-centered discussion process. One student wrote:

I really feel like this is important and that I am developing my thoughts through interacting with the group. But at first, I really had no idea what to think about when it comes to religion and the state. Abortion? Gay Marriage? Those were the only things that I could come up with before today. But as we started talking in our group, ideas came pouring out—even from me! I really couldn't stop thinking about different issues. We just had to break the ice and then it's like we hit the jackpot of ideas. Every time I drew a blank and swore that I couldn't possibly come up with another issue, someone would bring up a different point and we would start all over again, examining it from all different perspectives.

A frequent student observation, made both within their process journals and informal conversations with me, is that students were ultimately surprised by what they were able to come up with. When they started the course they had no idea what the topic meant or what issues were involved, other than abortion or gay marriage, and felt quite uncomfortable being asked to discuss a topic that they thought they knew nothing about. However, during the subsequent group discussions they were able to collaboratively identify new avenues of inquiry and intellectual exploration. The final group papers and presentations, which reviewed relevant social science research to evaluate and explore one of the four policy possibilities developed by the group, were generally strong (although see my comments below about shortcomings in scholarly content). The papers and presentations demonstrated a comfort level with broad, conceptual thinking that I have not witnessed in comparable courses taught using different methods.

The majority of students were successful in developing their own facilitation skills, working collaboratively, developing contrasting viewpoints and policy possibilities and avoiding back and forth style debates. However, as revealed in my classroom observations and within student process journals in each of the three courses that I have employed this process, there have been students who struggled repeatedly throughout the semester. The most frequent difficulty occurs when group members stray from their group contract, the sanctuary discussion guidelines developed by their team. These guidelines provide the framework that encourages a supportive, open and collaborative exploration of *ideas* rather than argumentative, polemic and personal claims making. In one particular group the repeated violation of the group contract created ongoing tensions within the group that presented serious challenges. In this case, multiple intervention strategies were attempted by concerned group members and the instructor. At first, I allowed the group to address the deviations on their own. During our daily debriefings I reminded students of the benefits of referring back to the group contract they had collectively written. When these early strategies did not completely mitigate the problems, I spoke individually with the students causing the disruptions and we also discussed the conflict as a group. During this entire period, I also encouraged students to write about the conflicts in their individual participation journals and to propose potential responses and techniques for the next time they are faced with similar challenges. These challenges to the sanctuary discussion process can serve as important learning experiences for the students—including developing communication skills to manage conflict, and using self-reflection to identify their own patterns of behavior and response. By providing students' the opportunity and tools to deal with an immediate issue and plan for how they might deal with similar issues that will inevitably emerge in the workplace and community, this process contributes directly to their professional and civic

development. While not every discussion functions optimally, it is important that the students can learn even from bad discussion experiences.

The development of individual facilitation skills is an important goal of the student-centered discussion process. The development of these skills is an important part of preparing students for successful participation in our economy and in civil society. Being able to work well in groups, exhibit active listening skills and guide collaborative efforts are important skills to develop. In addition to course reading on facilitation skills and personal reflection on desired facilitation traits students are able to gain direct experience putting these techniques to work.

One potential disadvantage of training student facilitators is that when difficulties emerged regarding the group dynamic or when the discussion got off track, it was not always possible for the novice facilitators to maintain the tenets of the sanctuary discussion. My own experience of facilitating community-based discussions using a variation of this discussion process confirms that many of the challenges to sanctuary discussions can be effectively managed and overcome by an experienced facilitator. However, students with limited hands-on experience facilitating discussions are often not able to do this. The result is a departure from some the tenets of sanctuary discussions. In other words, there is a trade-off between having student's develop their facilitation skills and having an optimal sanctuary discussion. I think that the advantages associated with developing facilitation skills, in addition to encouraging sustained and abstract thinking outweigh the imperfections of the actual execution of the sanctuary process. In fact, I came to view the difficulties that arose during the semester as teachable moments rather than distractions. In their roles as citizens and workers students will routinely face challenges and departures from true collaboration and respectful interaction. Identifying these challenges and building a toolkit of effective strategies and responses will serve both the

private and public interests. Learning from suboptimal student performances is a necessary feature of any instruction that focuses on skill acquisition.

During my first experience using the student-centered discussion process I developed concerns regarding student's content mastery. This issue was not the direct result of the student-centered discussion process *per se* but is worth considering in the context of attempts to de-center authority in the classroom (Fobes and Kaufman, 2008). I structured my initial course so that the selected readings and lectures for the second-half of the course directly built on the issues developed by the students in their sanctuary discussions and working documents. In fact, I did not assign any substantive sociological material until the second-half of the semester. In order to focus on what the students had identified as important areas of inquiry I did not prepare lecture material until that time. While this "just in time" approach to substantive course content was an exciting departure from a more traditional approach, I worried that students did not ultimately learn as much substantive sociological knowledge as they would have in a more traditional classroom environment. During this particular semester I did not employ traditional quizzes or exams to assess substantive content mastery; therefore my observation is based only on my assessment of student's group research papers and presentations. When grading these assignments I was disappointed in the scholarly content compared to other upper-level courses that I teach using more traditional methods. The group research papers did not go considerably past the working documents, i.e., the ideas that students generated through their team discussions. In particular, there was far less interpretation and citation of peer-reviewed journal articles and lecture notes than I had anticipated. I had assumed that having spent nearly an entire semester generating and exploring ideas that students would be poised to bring specific sociological *research* to bear on these pressing issues. Clearly, my disappointment stems from a

particular view of what represents content mastery. Alternately, it may well be that students using the student-centered discussion process felt like they “discovered” key ideas on their own rather than linking these ideas to established authorities and scholarship. In other words, it could be that the shortfalls I noted did not stem from a lack of content knowledge but from a deficiency in a particular form of scholastic performance that links students’ insights to published sociological research. If so, this deficiency could be rectified with additional guidance and clearer instruction on the expectations for citations and applications of peer-reviewed research in particular assignments.

Finally, and related to the question of content mastery, in my first course design I wanted to encourage students to actively engage in the *process* of the sanctuary discussion rather than being preoccupied on traditional performance indicators. To this end, I chose to link course grades to individual performance as facilitators and group members, critical self-reflection as evidenced in process journals, and group projects rather than individually assessed content mastery (e.g. quizzes and exams). This departure from students’ typical classroom experience at my institution may have had an unintended negative effect. Near the end of the semester, once the in-class group discussions were concluded, class attendance dropped to a lower level than I have experienced in any other course that I have taught at this university. Typically, my undergraduate courses are reading focused and I give daily 5-minute quizzes on the assigned reading on most days. This procedure contributes to high-levels of class attendance and creates an expectation that mastering the reading content is crucial for success in the course. By structuring the course the way that I did, I inadvertently created a different set of expectations. Once we moved beyond what the students had come to identify as the key component of the course, they were no longer motivated to engage in traditional classroom behaviors. I observed

that the attendance issues and the sporadic timely completion of reading assignments came from many different students—including many who were very engaged in the discussion process and the final research paper. This evidence suggests that at least some students were engaging in a form of cost-benefit analysis that indicated their time would be better spent working on the research paper, attending to other classes, going to work and/or dealing with family responsibilities. In short, they seemed to ask themselves: why put in the extra hours reading a textbook or going to a lecture that wouldn't *directly* affect your course grade?

In response to this situation, I have reintegrated quizzes and exams on assigned reading material in my subsequent two student-centered discussion versions of this course. As a result I have seen a marked improvement on these issues. In terms of weighting student assignments, I have modified the syllabus to balance participation in the student-centered discussions with activities that demonstrate mastery of course content. The weights that I now use are: (1) *Student Portfolio*: weekly journal entries = 50 pts, facilitation assessment and feedback = 50 pts.; (2) *Group Paper* (Contrasting Policy Possibilities) = 100 pts.; *Group Presentation* = 100 pts; (3) *Classroom activities and quizzes*=100 points; *Two exams* each worth 100 points. This modification allows group discussion work to remain at the center of the course (50%) while demanding accountability in mastery of substantive content. I have not experienced attendance related problems since making this adjustment. Nearly all the students complete the reading assignments on time.

CONCLUSION

Higher education has the potential to produce both private and public benefits by providing general and discipline specific knowledge acquisition, transferable skills of the type

that desired by employers, and broad worldviews and values necessary to becoming thoughtful, engaged citizens. As the Association of American Colleges and Universities has noted, in recent years the public discourse has been preoccupied with the private benefits of higher education. This focus has obscured the important public benefits of developing adaptable global citizens who possess broad knowledge and civic-mindedness.

In this article, I have contributed to the scholarship of teaching and higher education in two ways. First, I have situated the importance of developing our students' communication skills, content knowledge and capacities for critical thinking into broader discussions of the importance of general education and civic engagement. I have argued that apart from the specific contributions content-specific courses make to student learning, the undergraduate classroom can contribute in multiple ways to the goals of general education and civic engagement and by doing so play an important role in realizing the public benefits of higher education. Engaged, thoughtful, civic-minded citizens are a foundational element of a democratic society and we can develop these traits in our students regardless of our particular point of view regarding the nature and/or goals of general education content areas.

Second, as recent scholarship on student-centered learning has documented there are significant benefits to cultivating engaged students and active learning. I augment this literature by presenting the student-centered discussion process as one pedagogical technique designed to engage students and produce active collaborative learning. This particular technique has much in common with attempts to de-center authority in the classroom and with various approaches of shifting from a teacher-centered model of teaching to a student-centered model of learning. Much the same way as learning communities can be used to create integrative learning environments (Mahoney and Schamber, 2011) student-centered discussion groups create

opportunities for sustained, collaborative explorations of ideas from multiple perspectives. Further, the student-centered discussion process aligns with each of the three identified desired outcomes of higher education—substantive knowledge formation, professional skill development, and civic engagement.

The detailed description of how I have employed this technique in redesigning three undergraduate courses taught at a large, public research university serves to provide a starting point for others interested in incorporating innovative pedagogical techniques into the general education classroom. Throughout the student-centered discussion process students experienced challenges while working in groups, learning to conduct productive discussions, maintaining discussions at the proper level, developing alternate viewpoints and contrasting possibilities, and other components unique to the IF discussion process. Far from being roadblocks, these challenges proved to be important learning opportunities and when coupled with particular assignments and guidance serve as essential paths to the rewards of engaging in the process.

By participating in the student-centered discussion process students develop both private and public benefits. The private benefits include developing students' interpersonal communication, teamwork and critical thinking skills. These skills are increasing in demand in the current labor market and are expected to become even more important as firms continue to adapt to the changing nature of work. While increasing our student's labor market competitiveness is a legitimate aim of higher education, the public benefits are equally important. There are important public benefits associated with developing our students' ability to engage in active listening, civil discourse, and the collaborative exploration of ideas (rather than positions and talking points). The development of civically engaged citizens is essential to a thriving democracy. In light of persistent inequalities and polarized political discourse in our nation, it is

paramount to provide students with both the opportunity and the skills needed to participate in meaningful collaborative and creative discussions, characterized by mutual respect and civility.

APPENDIX I

Note: This overview provides a snapshot of the stages of the student-centered discussion process, as adapted by the author for the courses discussed in this article. Each student group loosely followed this process over an 8-week period within the 16-week semester. Students also receive IF course material (e.g., Prudhomme 2006) that provides detailed explanations and applications of each of these stages.

An Overview of the Sanctuary Discussion Process

Stage 1 Preparing for Sanctuary Discussions

Row 1 Develop a starting point to foster unfettered conceptual discussions as free as possible from bias.

Stage 2 Exploring and Developing the Area of Concern

Row 2 Describe (without defining) the various aspects of the area of concern from multiple perspectives.

Row 3 Develop initial general questions to which public policy possibilities might respond.

Row 4 Expand the description of the area of concern by continued development of possible questions along with initial indications of possible policy responses.

Stage 3 Exploring and Developing Contrasting Governance Possibilities

Row 5 Brainstorm conceptual policy possibilities for addressing the area of concern.

Row 6 Continue development of contrasting conceptual policy possibilities that represent distinct responses to the area of concern, with the goal of producing at least four.

Stage 4 Exploring Potential Consequences, Review and Revision

Row 7 Explore the potential consequences and real-world implications of the policy possibilities from a variety of perspectives in a democratic society.

Row 8 Exclude or change policy possibilities that the panel finds deficient (e.g. conceptually incoherent, falling short of its own goals), while aiming at producing contrasting conceptual possibilities regardless of feasibility or personal preferences.

Row 9 Select policy possibilities that the panel would like to take forward into joint panel discussions with the other groups.

Stage 5 Clarifying Policy Possibilities and Renewed Exploration of Consequences

Row 10 Develop concise descriptions of at least four conceptual policy possibilities based on the above review activities, including the general exploration of consequences, with the goal of focusing attention on the basic ideas of each possibility.

Stage 6 Joint Panel Discussions

Row 11 Based on the contributions of all groups, develop four policy possibilities and their possible consequences.

Row 12 Select one possibility to explore using social science research.

REFERENCES

- Baldwin, M.D. and Keating, J.F. (1998). Innovative team building practices for professionals: Developing inter-group skills to enhance effective performance. *Innovative Higher Education* 22(4):291-309.
- Bickel, C. (2006). Cultivating orchids: Promoting democracy in the classroom.” Pp. 93-107 in *Critical Pedagogy in the Classroom.*, edited by P. Kaufman. Washington, D.C.: American Sociological Association.
- Bonwell, C. and Eison, J. (1991). *Active learning: Creating excitement in the classroom.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bruffee, K. A. (1999). *Collaborative learning: Higher education, interdependence, and the authority of knowledge.* 2nd ed. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Bruss, K.S. (2009). Improving classroom discussion: A rhetorical approach. *The Journal of General Education.* 58(1), 28-46.
- Byrd, J. and Gundersen, A (2005). *Facilitation guidebook.* Parkersburg, WV: Interactivity Foundation.
- Byrd, J., Gundersen A., and Goodney Lea, S. (2009). *Facilitation guidebook for small group citizen discussions.* 2nd Edition. Parkersberg, WV: Interactivity Foundation.
- Byrd, J. and Goodney Lea, S. (2008). *Guidebook for student centered classroom discussions.* Parkersburg, WV: Interactivity Foundation.
- Caulfield, S. L. and Persell, C. H. (2006). Teaching social science reasoning and quantitative literacy: The role of collaborative groups. *Teaching Sociology* 34(1), 39-53.
- Carini, R, Kuh, G. and Klein, S. (1994). Student engagement and student learning: Testing the linkages. *Research in Higher Education,* 47(1), 1-32.
- Crone, J. (1997). Using panel debates to increase student involvement in the introductory sociology class. *Teaching Sociology* 25(3), 214-18.
- Fobes, C. and Kaufman. P. (2008). “Critical pedagogy in the sociology classroom: Challenges and concerns. *Teaching Sociology* 36(1), 26-33.
- Freire, P. (1998). *Pedagogy of freedom: ethics, democracy and civic courage.* Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Goodney Lea, S., Horowitz, E., and Byrd, J. (2009). *Diversity in the student-centered classroom.* Parkersburg, WV: Interactivity Foundation.

- Grauerholz, L. and Bouma-Holtrop, S. (2003). Exploring critical sociological thinking. *Teaching Sociology* 31(4), 485-96.
- Green, C. and Klug, H. (1990). Teaching critical thinking and writing through debates: An experimental evaluation. *Teaching Sociology* 18(4), 462-71.
- Hedley, M. and Markowitz, L. (2001). Avoiding moral dichotomies: Teaching controversial topics to resistant students. *Teaching Sociology* 29(2), 195-2008.
- Justice, C., Rice, J., Warry, W., Inlgis, S., Miller, S. and Sammon, S. (2007). Inquiry in higher education: Reflections and directions on course design and teaching methods. *Innovative Higher Education* 31:201-214.
- Kaufman, P. (2006). *Critical pedagogy in the classroom*. 2nd ed. Washington, D.C.: American Sociological Association.
- Kennedy, R. (2007). In-class debates: Fertile ground for active learning and the cultivation of critical thinking and oral communication skills. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 19(2), 83-90.
- Kuh, G.D. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Washington, D.C.: American Association of Colleges and Universities.
- Lee, V.S. (2011). The power of inquiry as a way of learning. *Innovative Higher Education* 36:149-160.
- LeMoyne, T. and Davis, J.M. (2011). Debunking common sense and the taken for granted: A pedagogical strategy for teaching social problems. *Teaching Sociology* 39(1), 103-110.
- Lo, C. C. (2010). Student learning and student satisfaction in an interactive classroom. *The Journal of General Education* 59(4), 238-263.
- McCarthy, J.P. and Anderson, L. (2000). Active learning techniques versus traditional teaching styles: Two experiments from history and political science. *Innovative Higher Education* 24(4):279-294.
- McKinney, K., Howery, C.B., Strand, K. J., Kain, E.L, and Berheide, C.W. (2004). *Liberal learning and the sociology major updated*. Washington, DC: American Sociological Association.
- McKinney, K. and Naseri, N. (2011). A longitudinal, descriptive study of sociology majors: The development of engagement, the sociological imagination, identity, and autonomy. *Teaching Sociology* 39(2), 150–164.

National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise. (2008). College learning for the new global century. Retrieved June 22, 2012 from http://www.aacu.org/leap/documents/GlobalCentury_final.pdf

Pillay, H. and Elliot, B. (2001). Emerging attributes of pedagogy and curriculum for the 'new world order'. *Innovative Higher Education* 26(1):7-22.

Pitt, R N. and Packard, J. R. (2010). Stakeholder meetings as a means of engaging student learning of complex social problems. *Teaching Sociology* 38(3), 215-225.

Prudhomme, J. 2006. *IF sanctuary discussion process redescription*. Parkersburg, WV: Interactivity Foundation.

Roizen, J. and Jepson, M. (1985). *Degrees for jobs: Employer expectations of higher education*. Nfer-Nelson.

Schneider, C. G. (2011). President's message: Civic learning in college: Our best investment in the future of our democracy. *Liberal Education* 97(2).

Tsui, L. (2002). Fostering critical thinking through effective pedagogy: Evidence from four institutional case studies. *The Journal of Higher Education* 73(6), 740-763.

Yamane, D. (2006). Course preparation assignments: A strategy for creating discussion-based courses. *Teaching Sociology* 34(3), 236-248.

ⁱ Information about the Interactivity Foundation's approach to student-centered learning is available at: <http://www.interactivityfoundation.org>

ⁱⁱ These materials are available at <http://www.interactivityfoundation.org/resources-downloads/guidebooks/>