

Moving beyond Critical Thinking to Critical Dialogue

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College and university faculty members identify critical thinking as one of, if not, *the* most important competencies for undergraduate education. While the research is inconclusive on the effectiveness of various interventions and measurement issues abound, agreement exists that critical thinking is an essential life and workforce skill which students develop during the college years. Yet a larger challenge now awaits. In response to recent events across the U.S. where public demonstrations and clashes of beliefs resulted in violence, colleges now have a moral responsibility to move education beyond critical thinking to experience in critical dialogue.

Critical thinking is generally considered an individual characteristic and is integral to cognitive development. Critical dialogue is more than basic communication skills; it is an active group process and opportunity for students and faculty members to learn how to engage in civil, respectful, difficult conversations. In these conversations, we will tap not only into the cognitive domain, but also into our attitudinal and behavioral predilections. Critical dialogue is learned in community and serves the community, and the process can unite students and faculty members from divergent backgrounds and viewpoints around difficult, yet shared, issues and problems.

The most important conversations are often not easy. Sincere people are concerned about being misunderstood, sounding racially insensitive, or being ill-prepared to defend a viewpoint or a learned attitude. Yet the world and our communities are increasingly diverse—economically, demographically, and culturally; and our students will need to live and work in this maze of difference. Critical thinking will be necessary, but not sufficient; critical dialogue may be the ultimate survival skill.

Many faculty members in colleges and universities possess the foundational knowledge about global and local shifts in population and demographics necessary to draw traditional-aged students into discussions of the big issues of our time, such as climate change, extreme poverty, nuclear and biological weapons, global migration, and technology-human interfaces. Faculty members can also engage campuses in important conversations around community-based issues, which may be equally intense—housing, economic disparities, transportation, recycling, and schooling. These issues all hold important opportunities for disciplinary knowledge to transcend a class or a course; and they become mixed in the messy, real-world problems that are most productively explored through an interdisciplinary lens.

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The public demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia, which erupted into violence resulting in the death of one young woman, illustrate the urgent need to begin the difficult but necessary task of critical campus dialogues focused on the most important issues of our time. Critical thinking focused solely on professional tasks will be insufficient to live and work collaboratively in a diverse workplace or diverse community. Words matter; and students and communities must learn how to talk about the complex topics of history and public policy, individual rights and responsibilities, governmental authority and public expectations. Our opinions and viewpoints are informed by our unique individual experiences, all overlaid by race and gender, religion and sexual orientation, economics and employment. Colleges need to be these safe places for going beyond mastery in the major to developing an understanding of the basics of freedom of expression, while exercising maturity in behavior.

Faculty members in the humanities and social sciences use multiple pedagogical approaches in the classroom to help students learn how to engage in difficult discussions. Recently I came across two approaches. First, I attended an open workshop on campus that began with a short overview of freedom of speech and its legal underpinnings. This introduction framed the 90 minute workshop that followed and was skillfully led by Dawn Bennett-Alexander, a nationally known professor in law and business at the University of Georgia. The workshop proposed to give us a glimpse at how we could engage in difficult conversations by remembering the messages that we received directly and subconsciously across our lives about issues like race, religion, gender, disability, appearance, and so on. In dyads we talked about the messages that stood out. I paired with an African American male graduate student, whom I had met before but did not know. The room was buzzing when we were stopped to provide feedback on the task. In closing, Dr. Bennett-Alexander gave us the mnemonic, TOOLS, to continue to do the work of civil dialogue around difficult issues: T – Talk; O – be Open & authentic; O – be Optimistic; L – Laugh; and S – be Sensitive & strategic. Now, it is not suggested that the TOOLS can be used to build consensus quickly or bring disparate voices together. We were a mature university audience, seeking to learn; however, I could see utility in this approach with other audiences.

I found a second possible teaching approach in an article on Humboldt (Germany) University's return to its interdisciplinary roots (See <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/08/10/germanys-humboldt-university-tries-return-its-interdisciplinary-roots>). In the Bologna Lab's *Diversity of Knowledge* project students are given physical objects to analyze from multiple perspectives. Imagine the hot-button objects that could be brought to a discussion in a U.S. university, like the University of Virginia or the University of West Virginia — flags and statues, coal and solar panels. When these projects are comprised of students who cross disciplinary and cultural lines, the participants can begin to see the complexity of worldviews. Objects become more than physical representations; they represent multiple dimensions for analysis. I am afraid in our majors, as we are socialized to the discipline, we come to “think alike” and “speak alike.” Values are ingrained. Employers would welcome a workforce that is not only demographically diverse, but a workforce that can address difficult questions, talk civilly, respect other viewpoints, and problem solve together!

A major purpose of post-secondary education should be teaching students to think critically, speak respectfully, and act with civility. The ability to share knowledge, values, and differences in viewpoints in civil ways is foundational to family and community, to the nation and globe. If we teach students how to engage with diverse groups, how to consider the “big ideas” and challenging issues in college, they will have competencies when they graduate that will linger long after the skill-set learned for the first job has faded into obsolescence. They will be leaders in civil discourse. Our communities and workplaces need nothing less.