

## THE CHRONICLE of Higher Education

### TEACHING

# Running Class Discussions on Divisive Topics Is Tricky. Here's One Promising Approach.

JULY 19, 2018

Hello and welcome to Teaching, a weekly newsletter from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. First, Beckie explores one approach to a common problem: leading substantive classroom discussions on divisive issues. Then we ask for your help finding examples of how colleges encourage professors to try new things in the classroom for an upcoming special issue. Dan shares what one instructor learned from student feedback, and we'll close out with some new books you may want to read.

### **One Way to Run Classroom Discussions on Divisive Issues**

In these politically polarized times, it can be difficult to meaningfully discuss a hot-button issue in the classroom — or anywhere else. Rather than considering something new, or even really listening, we're all inclined to shut out the views of those on the opposite side. After all, we already know what they're going to say.

Jill DeTemple, an associate professor of religious studies at Southern Methodist University, has encountered this problem in her courses. So she started using an approach called Reflective Structured Dialogue, which was developed by family therapists in Boston decades ago. DeTemple, who responded to our recent newsletter article about what professors can do when outside forces — including current events — push them to rethink the way they teach a course, says she learned about Reflective Structured Dialogue after reconnecting with a college friend whose organization, Essential Partners, developed the method.

While Reflective Structured Dialogue was initially adapted from tools used in family therapy to help the broader public navigate contentious debates, DeTemple quickly saw how the discipline of religious studies could benefit from it. After all, the discipline considers questions on which many students have deeply held positions.

Family therapists describe the problem that often arises in difficult discussions by saying they get “stuck,” DeTemple said. Research shows that humans go into fight-or-flight mode — in which their ability to think critically is compromised — when they feel threatened. The problem: “Your body,” she said, “can’t tell the difference between a viewpoint threat and a bear.”

The challenge for professors, then, is to help students get unstuck from this instinctive response. That’s what Reflective Structured Dialogue is meant to do.

Here’s how it works. The dialogues have a facilitator — the instructor, in a classroom setting — who guides the conversation along pre-agreed lines. Participants are encouraged to reflect before they speak. The approach hinges on the use of “curious questions,” those meant to let the questioner learn from others, rather than to trap them or convince them that they’re wrong. And it’s highly structured, with people taking set turns to speak and doing so under a time limit, and the facilitator following a script.

Difficult conversations often get off to a bad start, DeTemple said, because they begin with everyone arguing their position. Reflective Structured Dialogue opens instead with the facilitator having participants tell a story that has informed it. So to start off a discussion about guns, for instance, students might share their experiences hunting as a child, or describe an act of gun violence that touched their lives. Next, participants talk about the values that underlie these experiences. Then they talk about any ways in which they feel pulled in competing directions on the issue. That third question, DeTemple says, is meant to bring out empathy. Only after working through the three starting prompts do participants start asking each other questions. The goal is not to have anyone switch sides, she said. It’s to help students change the way they relate to one another, to listen and consider different perspectives. Doing so, it turns out, can enrich students’ understanding of difficult content, DeTemple has found, since they have an opportunity to consider it in context.

It probably wouldn't be practical for a professor to run every class as a full-on dialogue. But the model can come in handy when divisive topics come up in class — either on the syllabus, or unexpectedly. And elements of the approach can inform the way a course runs day in and day out.

Using the model has “spurred deeper and more engaged conversations among my students,” wrote DeTemple in an article written with John Sarrouf, the college friend who introduced her to the method. Students, she continued, “have spontaneously commented in weekly discussion posts and in end-of-term evaluations about new abilities to listen, speak about, and appreciate viewpoints and materials that initially made them feel off-kilter or defensive.”

DeTemple and Sarrouf are now part of a team working to spread and study the approach with a grant from the University of Connecticut Humanities Institute's Humility and Conviction in Public Life project. The group is teaching faculty members at participating campuses how to use Reflective Structured Dialogue and then interviewing professors and surveying students in their courses to study its impact. There are also plans for a book, DeTemple said, though she adds that nothing helps professors run a dialogue as well as practicing the skill at a workshop.

Still, DeTemple adds, there's a simple tip at the heart of the model that any instructor could apply: When students get stuck, ask them to tell each other a story.

Learning about this project, in which a system developed by therapists is being used by professors, got me wondering about other pedagogical insights from unexpected sources. Have you ever applied an approach developed for a setting outside of higher education to a challenge in your classroom? Tell me about it at [beckie.supiano@chronicle.com](mailto:beckie.supiano@chronicle.com) and it may appear in a future newsletter.

## **Get the Teaching Newsletter**

**Tell Us: What Spurs Instructors to Innovate?**

For a special issue of *The Chronicle* on innovative college teaching, we want to hear about how your institution encourages instructors to embrace change in the classroom. We've written before about individual professors' innovations — the goal here is to focus on efforts that support new approaches on a bigger scale.

Does your college have a teaching incentive program we should know about? We're eager to hear more. You can write to us at [innovators@chronicle.com](mailto:innovators@chronicle.com) by the close of business on Wednesday, July 25. Please keep the description short (no more than 200 words, please), and be sure to tell us: What prompted your institution to try this approach? What makes it innovative? How does it create conditions that encourage faculty members to rethink teaching, the curriculum, and/or student learning? And finally, what evidence do you have of its success?

If you submit more than one nomination, please send each one separately. We'll acknowledge receipt, and while we can't respond to individual requests beyond that, we do promise to consider all candidates.

### **Giving Group Members Time to Meet in Class**

In response to our question last week about how comments in student evaluations have helped you change how you teach, Phil Simon wrote to us to describe how he altered his capstone courses in analytics and system design at Arizona State University. “At the end of my first semester, my students gave me some feedback that never occurred to me,” he wrote in an email. His seniors — many of whom had jobs — told Simon that they had trouble finding time to meet with one another outside of class for their projects. So he granted their request to take about five minutes at the end of class to meet. While not every student uses the time for that purpose, sometimes they take these extra minutes to approach Simon to ask questions. “My students,” he wrote, “really appreciate this opportunity.”

### **New Releases**

Our colleague Ruth Hammond's latest list of selected new books on higher ed is out, and as usual, some of them may be of particular interest to newsletter readers. Among them:

- *The Fourth Education Revolution: Will Artificial Intelligence Liberate or Infantilise Humanity*, by Anthony Seldon with Oladimeji Abidoye, “describes a future for higher education in which artificial intelligence does the teaching,” Ruth writes, “and continuous assessment precludes the need for exams.”
- *How the Liberal Arts Can Save Liberal Democracy*, by Steven M. DeLue, discusses “how the autonomy of the individual that is fostered by a liberal-arts curriculum can be a safeguard against authoritarianism,” she writes.
- *Living-Learning Communities That Work: A Research-Based Model for Design, Delivery, and Assessment*, by Karen Kurotsuchi Inkelas and others, provides a system for examining learning communities, which are “aimed at improving undergraduates’ education and fostering a sense of belonging,” Ruth writes.

Thanks for reading Teaching. If you have suggestions or ideas, please feel free to email us at [dan.berrett@chronicle.com](mailto:dan.berrett@chronicle.com), [beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com](mailto:beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com), or [beckie.supiano@chronicle.com](mailto:beckie.supiano@chronicle.com). If you have been forwarded this newsletter and would like to sign up to receive your own copy, you can do so [here](#).

— Beckie and Dan

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