Discourses for Fostering Generative Classroom Dialogues

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Note: *Aside from minor edits, this worksheet is the property of Sally St. George and Daniel Wulff (Professors in the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary), created to support a workshop ("Responsibilities in Creating 'Safe' Classroom Spaces") they facilitated on May 1, at the 2018 University of Calgary Conference on Post-Secondary Learning and Teaching. With their permission, I have created a new title, added examples to the "Problematic Discourses" section, explained origins of the "ethical space" concept [*], and reflected some of our discussion in "An Ethical Classroom Attitude".*

Grounding Ideas

1. Creating "safe" classroom spaces is the responsibility of all participants.
2. Developing safety is a "necessary but not sufficient" condition for an active learning process—active learning may require us to push into and beyond our comfort zones.
3. Facilitating dialogues that push beyond comfortability is an important skill set for instructors.
4. Our goal is to participate in generative dialogues.
5. Various strategies to counter disruption to dialogues need to be developed.
6. Developing ways to access feedback becomes a crucial continuous practice.

Spaces

1. The idea of "safe space" usually conjures up images of having a sense of comfort or relaxedness with no fear of challenge or having to defend oneself;
2. The idea of "brave space" refers to venturing into conversations and relationships that are fraught with danger and work; or,
3. The idea of **"ethical space"** involves a willingness to examine differences between people with care and love. This involves humility and genuine curiosity about positions other than one's own. These spaces are characterized not by a strategic negotiation of differences, but a real appreciation of other people and positions—this is a coming together of persons, communities, or viewpoints in a solidarity of common humanity. This is more a humanitarian act than a pragmatic act.

According to Roger Poole (1972), who first formulated the concept of ethical space, seeking "objectivity" in human affairs is a myth, because it it is an assertion of a singular perspective that erases diverse human experiences and ways of knowing. He argued that a more accurate "truth", what he called "stronger objectivity," can be constructed from multiple subjective accounts of reality from various viewpoints. Poole argued that the "space between" people that results from a breakdown of communication can become an "ethical space of engagement," characterized by: a) dispersal of hierarchies, b) diversity of worldview, and c) subjective reflection by the people involved. More recently, Cree scholar Willie Ermine (2007) has resurrected Poole's concept to construct a space for reconciliation between Indigenous peoples and nation states in a way commensurable with Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

Problematic Discourses: Discourses of Dialogue Disruption

1. Binaries/dichotomies
   - problem of the "excluded middle"; = no room for nuance or degrees of truth, only "camps"
2. Certainty and fending off challenge
   - "no debate"; "in reality"; = maintains status quo
3. Taking it personally rather than at the level of ideas
   - = when one person's comment is perceived by another as personal discrimination
4. Singularity/universality
   - "everyone knows; = not taking responsibility for one's views

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[*] *The authors have given me permission to share this worksheet, a form of personal communication, for use among Royal Roads University faculty, students, and staff. If needed, authorship should be attributed to Drs. St. George and Wulff.*

An Ethical Classroom Attitude

- In imagining generative dialogue, the metaphor of "ballroom dancing" is helpful: the goal is to get to know and to be responsive to the other, not to cling to or give up one's own position
- Focus on the quality of the relationship, and keeping the possibility of relationship open
- Treat conversations as tentative explorations, using a tone of authentic curiosity

To avoid problematic discourses that disrupt the possibility of dialogue and ethical space, use questions related to one or more of the following *generative* discourses:

Generative Discourse	Generative Questions: Antidotes to Problematic Discourses, Inviting of Dialogue
Clarification	*To a comment that seems negative or attacking:* I'm not sure if I fully understand what you are saying—could you add some more words that would help me comprehend better? *To a comment that seems bossy or overly self-assured:* You seem to be really confident in your view. Do you have some doubts? *If you would like to disagree:* I have a view that is different, would it be OK with you if I share it? I do not want to discount your ideas but would like to put mine out there too.
Construction	What is this? What might we name this? How can we best describe this? What connections are we making? What can we see/hear in these spaces of integration?
Legitimation	What are the stories that lend coherence to this? What are some illustrations and examples of this? What evidence would support this idea or position?
Difference or Position	How might others (insiders, outsiders, competitors, supporters) describe this, legitimize this, view this, or react to this? Would their views differ from mine, yours, or ours?
Uncertainty	How else might we describe this? What doubts do you hold? In what ways might this not quite measure up? What still needs greater clarification to avoid being misunderstood?
Possibility & Potential	How could/might this be different? In what way are these ideas productive and how might they fall short? What might this lead to that we cannot now see or imagine?
Enabling Contexts & Relations	How can we create a space in which different conversations can transpire? How can we talk so that all voices contribute and all ideas are seen as contributions even in their incompleteness or tentativeness? What other positions can we occupy in order to think differently?
Imagined	How might we make this better if we had the ability? What imaginings does this provoke? What can't we yet see/hear? What could this idea lead to?
Inclusion	Who are the primary beneficiaries of this position? Whose views/perspectives/ ideas have been woven in here? How have we nurtured participation?

References

Ermine, W. (2007). The ethical space of engagement. *Indigenous LJ*, *6*, 193-203.

Poole, R. (1972). *Towards deep subjectivity.* London: Allan Lane.