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Take a Stance: Embodied Dialogue

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The first time I did this in class, my students looked at me like I was crazy. I wanted to try something new. The traditional rigid "academic dialogue" model was no longer sufficient to inspire courage and honesty about topics that were dividing the world right in front of my eyes. They expected me to throw some discussion questions on the PowerPoint, break up into small groups for discussion, and then have them report out into a larger class discussion. I use this method of discussion often. Today, I invited them into an embodied dialogue.

I smile warmly and offer instructions for our dialogue together.

"I'm going to say a statement. If you agree with it, stand on the right side of the room. If you disagree with it, stand on the left side of the room. And if you are unsure, don't know yet, or want to say, 'It depends,' you stand in the middle."

Embodied Dialogue is Generative

The vitality in the room changes as students anticipate the first statement.

Statement 1: "It is possible for a Christian to be racist."

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The energy in the room is palpable as students physically take their stance. The movement creates a sense of generativity as students anticipate where their peers will stand.

I wait for the movement to cease, for students to be in place. “Ok, is everybody in place?” I ask.

I read their faces. Most students stand eager to engage. Others look about pensively, still trying to figure out if they want to move from one side to the other or to the middle.

The statements fluctuate between levels of intensity. We move from less intense statements like “Education is the key to success in life,” to more intense statements like “Metal detectors keep schools safe,” and “Students should be suspended from school and arrested for violent behavior.” Then we move to even more intense statements like “God is at work in the government,” and “Protest is essential in America in order for justice to take place.”

Embodied Dialogue Prompts New Awareness

The “take a stance” activity invites students to exercise agency during the entire process of dialogue. Each participant actually gets to *choose* where he or she stands, even if that stance is “I don’t know.” Perhaps the recognition that everyone is invited into a certain level of risk helps level the dialogical playing field. Choosing our stance is nothing new. We are always choosing where to stand. This activity makes student aware of that.

When they are standing in place students suddenly become aware of their body. Not just their body, but the bodies of others. Many are surprised to see which side of the room their peers decide to stand.

“Why are you taking this stance?” I ask students. “Please tell us why you are standing where you are.”

The invitation to respond to the “why” question is one of the most effective ways to invoke critical thinking. Students hear from those who stand with them, discovering that even those who say “I agree” may choose this stance for reasons different than their own. Many even surprise themselves with their own inability to say why they have taken their particular stance. The embodied awareness of their stance invites them into further exploration, into further participation.

In a developmental stage where undergraduate students are still making sense of who they are, what they believe, and why they believe what they believe, it seems unfair to force them to choose one position or the other. And yet, this pressure to choose *one* way dominates Western understandings of adulting. To be a mature adult, we must know the “why.” We must know the right answer.

The either/or dichotomy sometimes traps students. Captive to the desire to please those they

admire, or to feign intellectualism, students rush to an answer. When students rush to an answer, they rush past another's perspective in a hurry to arrive at their own. Our dialogue is no longer participatory. Mutuality is exchanged for "right" or "wrong." We don't internalize what others say in order to examine our own thinking; rather, our way of understanding becomes the rubric by which we judge all else. We judge, assess, and evaluate what others say against what we already think.

Embodied Dialogue Illuminates the In-Between

What I have found essential for this assignment is the in-between space. I tell students that at any point during this activity they can move from "I agree" to "I disagree" or from "I disagree" to "I don't know." It never ceases to amaze me how often students move in between these spaces. They exercise the muscle that enables critical thinking in real time. They demonstrate with their bodies that our opinions and perspectives can change and can also be changed in dialogue with others.

How many times do we only provide two options for students? Yes or no! Democratic or Republican. Liberal or Conservative. Providing the either/or inadvertently communicates that there is only one right answer, and we are required to know it. We must choose a side, the right side. Our thoughts have to be settled.

The incessant need to box people's thoughts into categories does not leave room for everything else that comes between right and wrong, yes and no. It leaves no room for the nuances that exist in the liminal space of *not yet*, *not sure*, *uncertain*. It hides the continuum that always exists when it comes to peoples' thought lives and rationales.

What has fascinated me the most in this activity is how students create their own continuum. The three clear positions I offer somehow get stretched out during the game. Students who are not quite in the "I agree" category may lean there but may stand in the middle between "I agree" and "I don't know." They make the invisible visible through their bodies, helping us to see that even three clear positions cannot capture the complexity of some topics.

The invitation to the in-between space is an invitation to sit in the "I don't know." To acknowledge that we exist in a world of unknowns and uncertainties more often than not. Yet in our rush toward certitude, we sometimes miss the process that gets us from "I dont know" to "I know," "I feel certain," and to "I agree" or "I disagree."

What if our desire for questions *and* answers was really an attempt to simplify hard, unanswerable questions? What if a more faithful way to seek understanding is through "questioning and wrestling?" [1] What if we refused to settle into the comfort and assurance of our "I knows"? What if we were required to embrace our "I thinks" and allow ourselves to be formed in and through our wrestling with God? These are the questions that emerge for me as an educator when I facilitate this activity.

Embodied Dialogue is Participatory

Participation is inherent in the word "dialogue;" thus, participatory dialogue should be a given. But it's not. Not all dialogue is participatory.

Too many students get lost in large group classroom discussion, are never really challenged to reflect critically. The one or two students who have something to say speak. Those who are more reserved remain silent, keeping their thoughts to themselves. It is possible to be invisible even in dialogue. Embodied dialogue makes it difficult for students to hide. This activity invites even the quietest students to be actively engaged in the dialogue.

Academic dialogue may also be one-sided, where students tend to talk at, about, and over other students. Embodied dialogue is about talking *with* others. It invites not just participation but mutuality. To invite others to engage with our thought life even as we engage with theirs. Additionally, it models visually that our deepest beliefs often put us in proximity or out of proximity to certain people, especially when the conversation centers around diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Hot-button topics remain easy to avoid in the classroom. This activity has become a regular part of my pedagogical toolbox, especially when engaging topics that are intense. After saying a statement, I hear students respond, "Woah, that's tough." In other words, the "hot" doesn't disappear from the topic when using this approach. Students still exhibit passion and conviction. At the same time, students are less cautious with sharing. Something about the approach itself is disarming. This approach to dialogue offers the learning community space to reflect on controversial topics in a generative way.

Dialogue was never intended to be passive. Rather, dialogue is an active, dynamic process where students are invited to explore, discover, and come to know themselves, others, and the world differently.

[1] Carol Lakey Hess, "Echo's Lament: Teaching, Mentoring and the Danger of Narcissistic Pedagogy," *Teaching*

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