



Start Talking: A Handbook for Engaging Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education

Landis, Kay, ed.
University of Alaska Anchorage, 2008

Book Review

Tags: civil discourse | difficult conversations | higher education

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Funded by the Ford Foundation, neighboring universities joined in a two-year partnership hoping to make the “learning climate” on each campus “more inclusive of minority voices and ways of knowing” and safer “for the free exchange of ideas” (ii). This spiral-bound handbook documents the plans and experiences of the faculty, administrators, and staff at Alaska Pacific University and the University of Alaska Anchorage who sought to deepen “civil discourse” on each campus. The project primarily focused on faculty development for “difficult dialogues” within classrooms, but also addressed broader campus atmosphere and structures of support. The volume is meant to be a “conversation-starter and field manual for [those] who want to strengthen their teaching and engage students more effectively.”

The first four chapters (Ground Rules, Rhetoric/Debate, Race/Class/Culture, Science/Religion) are framed by the training faculty received as part of four day-long faculty intensives. Rather than a straight narrative, each chapter reads as both a how-to manual and an assessment of implementation - summaries of proposed pedagogical techniques are followed by faculty essays that document what happened when they applied those approaches in the classroom. A fifth topical chapter (Business/Politics) documents an additional set of teaching techniques and case studies. Brookfield and Preskill’s *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* served as a guiding text for the group’s work, but they also drew from the wisdom of fellow faculty. The book’s essays, by thirty-five faculty and staff involved in the initiative, make clear they found the project’s prompt to reflect and adapt teaching approaches to be helpful.

The final chapters (Outcomes, Keep Talking) offer an assessment of the two-year project (successful in its deepening of the sense of each institution as a place of “profound learning, of

courageous inquiry, [and] deep transformation” for “students, faculty, staff, administrators, and community partners” [247]) and brief suggestions for maintaining the project’s benefits. Every chapter includes color-coded lists, summaries, and tips, which prove useful when skimming the text for material relevant to a variety of topics and contexts. The volume closes with a list of references and readings on topics discussed in the chapters, including: academic freedom, safety, contrapower harassment, rhetoric, argument, debate, identity, privilege, culturally responsible teaching, politics, and social justice.

Start Talking includes a deep storehouse of pedagogical and practical wisdom. In many ways the volume reads more like a grant proposal and summary of results than a cohesive narrative. As a result, rather than reading the text straight through, faculty members or departments facing specific issues might search the volume for targeted resources to navigate difficult conversations. Similarly, institutions hoping to shift campus climates in contentious times might identify approaches to pilot with small teams over the course of an academic year. Finally, and particularly because most of the volume’s content addresses difficult conversations around issues other than religion (such as race, class, culture, politics, and science), the book’s resources provide a useful, lower-stakes entry point for faculties at religiously-based institutions to think about how to navigate contentious theological discussions.

https://wabash.center/resources/book_reviews/start-talking-a-handbook-for-engaging-difficult-dialogues-in-higher-education/