

Outcomes

Our overall goal is to improve the learning climate on our campuses, making them more inclusive of minority voices and ways of knowing and safer places for learning and the free exchange of ideas.

UAA/APU Encountering Controversy Project

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FACULTY INTENSIVE

Outcomes

All in all, we moved things forward in a steady, relatively undramatic way. Very little blew up in our faces, and, with a few exceptions, very little rocked us to the core.

Grade us for effort and you'd find a normal bell curve. Some of us were achievers and stayed deeply engaged all year: redesigning old courses, holding risky community events, collaborating with new colleagues and friends. Most of us at least tried some new things: Codes of Conduct, Books of the Semester, Circle of Objects, Critical Incident Questionnaire. One dropped out altogether due to illness, and a few others did only the bare minimum. Of the original thirty participants, twenty-five were still seriously engaged at the end of the year.

Grade us for performance, and you'd get a different curve. Some events were so successful that people didn't want to leave. Others celebrated diversity, fostered community, and opened learners to new ideas. A few crashed and burned. But even these offered learning opportunities for those willing to take them. Just as you don't have to agree with someone to learn, so too are there lessons to be learned when things go wrong. As several people said, the important thing was that we actually initiated these dialogues. They were icebreakers to deeper conversations we need to have in the future.

We didn't solve the big questions of race, religion, global warming, or war. Nor did we kid ourselves that we could. Grade us for improvement, though, and you'd find it. This was what we were after, and this is what we achieved. We grew more comfortable with our abilities—as individuals and as a group—to engage in and strengthen civil discourse in our classrooms and communities. We are more likely to initiate important difficult dialogues and better able to field them when they crop up on their own. We're more thoughtful. We're better prepared. We're more of a team.

It is, as they say, a good start.

The Score

Working for us

- Effective faculty development model
- Greater awareness
- Increased strategies and skills
- More confidence
- More people to turn to for advice and support

Working against us

- Workloads still intense
- Teaching still challenging
- Time, energy, resources still limited
- Controversies won't go away
- World still needs changing

THE FACULTY INTENSIVE MODEL

Assessment results suggest that the faculty intensive model described in this handbook has measurable and sustained effects on participants. Among the statistically significant findings, our faculty participants reported themselves to be more comfortable about their abilities to create inclusive classrooms, more aware of how their own biases and political beliefs can get in the way of their teaching, and better prepared to handle disruptive or hostile students. They were also more knowledgeable, prepared, and confident about facilitating discussions on difficult or controversial subjects and less likely to avoid those topics in the future.

Primary Objective: Faculty Development

Dr. Claudia Lampman

Professor of Psychology

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The primary objective of the UAA/APU *Encountering Controversy* project was to prepare faculty members to facilitate difficult dialogues in and outside the classroom. In May 2006, thirty faculty fellows (in two cohorts of fifteen each) participated in an intensive weeklong seminar designed to teach them about strategies for initiating and managing student discussions on potentially controversial or politically charged subjects. The faculty fellows were challenged to:

- consider their rights and responsibilities with regard to academic freedom;
- prepare themselves to handle students who were disruptive, hostile, or threatening;
- examine their own and societal-level biases that affect the learning environment; and
- incorporate strategies to create inclusive and safe classrooms and campus climates.

The goal of the intensive was to arm faculty with knowledge, skills, and strategies that would increase how comfortable and empowered they feel about handling controversial issues or difficult students. As a condition of participation, faculty fellows committed to implementing new strategies in some of their courses and other on-campus events during the following year.

Methods

In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the intensive, faculty fellows completed a self-administered survey at three points in time: before the intensive (pre-test), at the end of the weeklong intensive (post-test), and one year later (end-test). The questionnaire was developed by the project's Assessment and Evaluation Coordinator in conjunction with the intensive's instructors and facilitators.

The survey contained 43 items in three sections:

1. Comfort and skills handling controversial issues or difficult students;
2. The learning environment; and
3. Academic freedom, rights, and policies.

All items were worded in the form of statements (e.g., *I am confident about my ability to lead classroom discussions on controversial subjects*). Participants indicated to what extent they agreed or disagreed with each statement on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*. Charts 1-3 display the mean response for each survey item at all three points in time, along with an indication of whether there were statistically significant differences in mean response between the pre- and post-test, pre- and end-test, and post- and end-test. Repeated analyses of variance were used to test for significant gains; statistical significance is reported at both the .05 and .01 levels.

Comfort and Skills Handling Controversial Issues or Difficult Students

Chart 1 summarizes the statistical results for this section. Faculty fellows reported feeling significantly more knowledgeable, well prepared, and confident about facilitating discussions on difficult or controversial subjects both right after the intensive and at the end of the year (items 2, 7, 12). They also reported feeling significantly more knowledgeable at the post- and end-tests about how to handle students who are disruptive, hostile, or threatening (items 5, 8, 9). Right after the intensive, they actually reported feeling slightly more fearful of losing control of their classrooms, but by the end of the year they were significantly more confident that this would not occur (item 3). Items 1 and 6 also show significant improvement following the intensive and at the end of the year concerning faculty members' likelihood to avoid teaching controversial issues.

The Learning Environment

Five items in this section showed positive and statistically significant gains from the pre-test to the end of the year (see Chart 2). Faculty participants became more confident in their ability to create inclusive classrooms (item 1) where Alaska Native students will feel comfortable (item 5), where students will feel comfortable expressing opinions that may be unpopular (item 10) or on sensitive/controversial issues (item 2), and where students trust that they will be fairly graded regardless of the opinions they express (item 8).

Although other gains were not statistically significant, two items showed that faculty were less likely to agree that minority students would feel silenced in their classroom (item 7) and more likely to agree that their students would perceive their classrooms to be safe (item 4) both after the intensive and at the end of the year.

Faculty fellows were also asked several questions about how their own biases and political beliefs might affect their teaching. They were significantly more likely to agree that their own politics or biases can get in the way of effective teaching both at the post- and end-test (item 6). Although the gains were not significant, faculty indicated they were more comfortable examining their own biases regarding race, religion, sexual orientation, or politics following the intensive (item 3), and were less likely to agree that their own views on religion would affect their teaching in the future (item 13). Faculty fellows were also significantly less likely to agree that they needed to learn strategies for creating an open classroom environment at the post- and end-tests (item 9).

Academic Freedom, Rights, and Responsibilities

The last section of the questionnaire assessed gains in faculty knowledge about their rights and responsibilities when dealing with difficult students and controversial issues in the classroom (see Chart 3). Our faculty participants reported significantly greater understanding after the intensive and at the end of the year about university policies regarding student conduct in the classroom (item 7); whom to contact when faced with a disruptive or hostile student (item 2); the role of the Dean of Students in dealing with problem students (items 3 and 6); and instructors' rights if a student becomes threatening (item 5).

Similarly, after the intensive and at the end of the year, faculty said they were much less likely to hesitate to report a problem student out of fear that it reflected poorly on them (item 9), and more likely to report disruptive students in general (item 4). Small but nonsignificant positive gains were also seen on the two items assessing faculty understanding of academic freedom (items 1 and 8). Finally, faculty reported being significantly more comfortable speaking freely (item 10) or expressing their own viewpoints (item 11) on controversial subjects in the classroom after the intensive and at the end of the year.

Summary

In sum, the data collected from faculty fellows before and after the intensive and one year later show that faculty felt considerably more comfortable and better-equipped to facilitate and manage difficult dialogues in their classrooms. The fact that most of the measures stayed the same or increased over the academic year suggests that this type of faculty development has measurable and sustainable benefits for faculty.

Chart 1 Comfort and Skills Handling Controversial Issues or Difficult Students

(Response Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree)

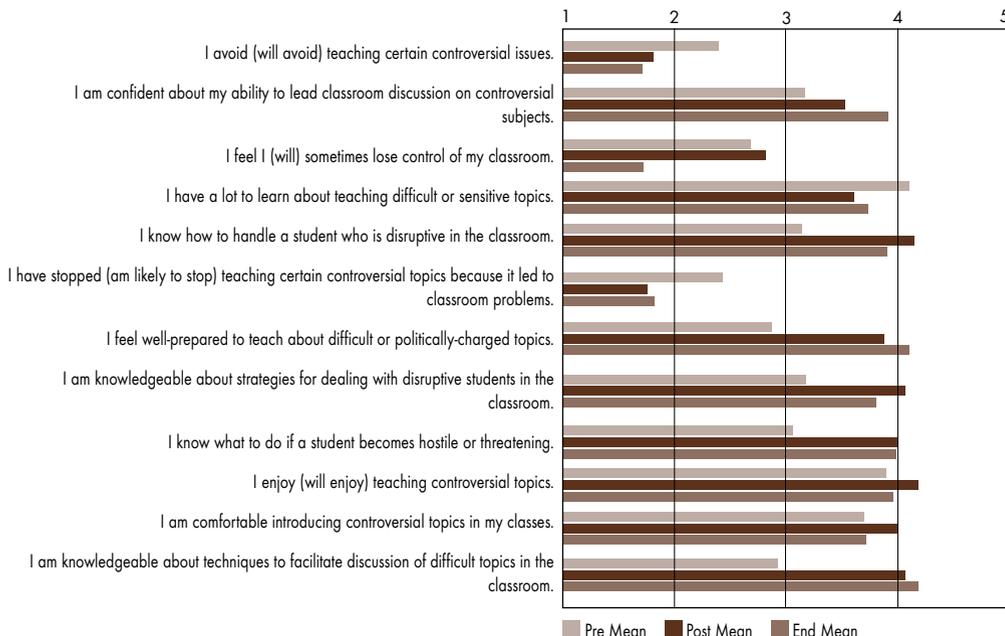


Chart 2 The Learning Environment

(Response Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree)

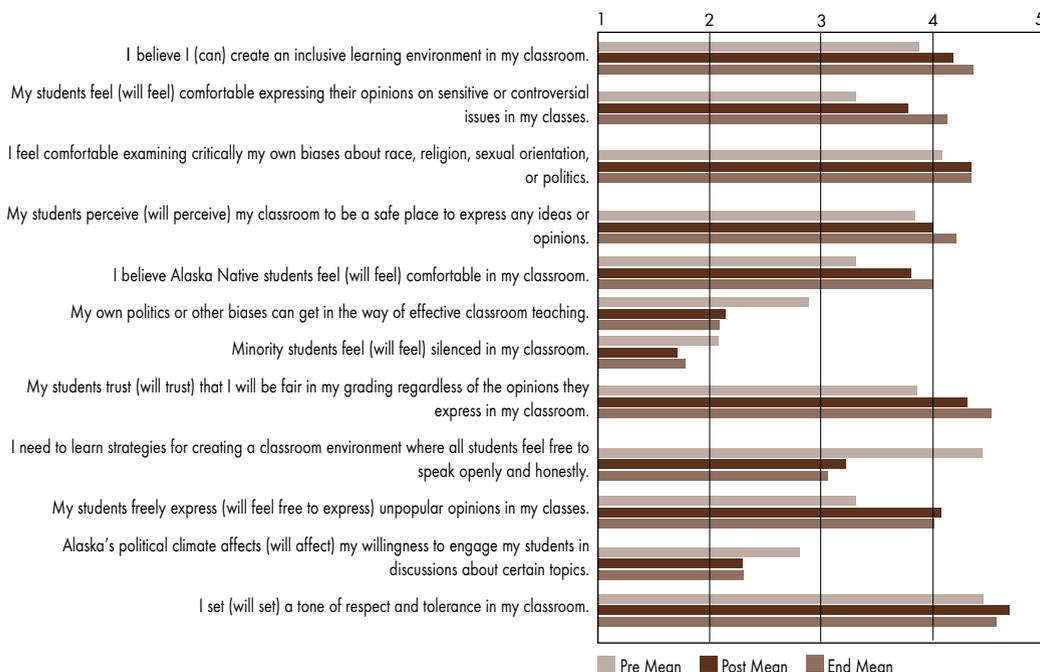


Chart 2 continued The Learning Environment

(Response Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree)

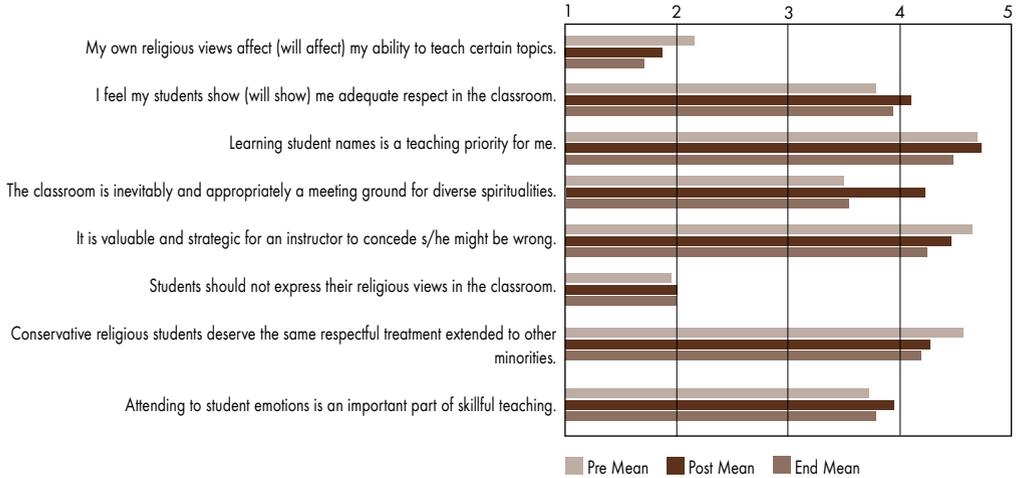
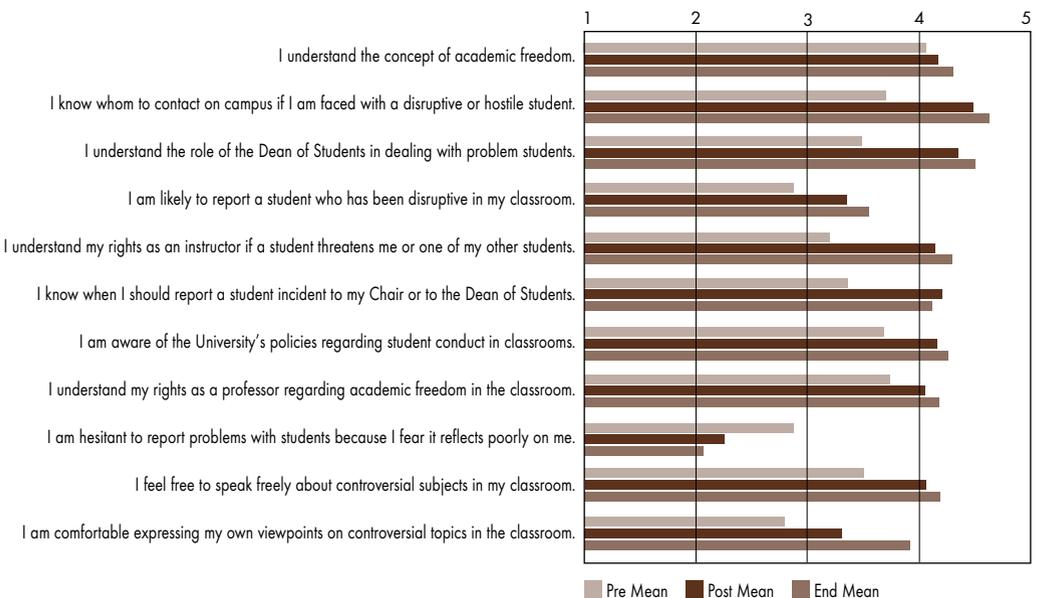


Chart 3 Academic Freedom, Rights, and Responsibilities

(Response Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree)



CHANGING THE WAY WE TEACH

In May 2007, our original two cohorts convened for a three-day retreat to share our experiences and reflect on what we'd learned. Although each of us had a unique story to tell, several themes seemed to be shared by many. Our year-long fellowship had strengthened our relationships, given us the courage to try new things, and changed, at least a little, the way we teach.

At UAA, these results were mostly personal and individual. At APU, they extended outward to the whole campus.

My participation in the *Difficult Dialogues* initiative brought home several important lessons that have helped to shape my pedagogy.

First, it is my responsibility to meet students where they are, to show them how to think about my subject and how to interrogate their own presuppositions, and to point out other ideas for them to pursue. It is not my job to show them that they are wrong or to change their minds, belief systems, or worldviews. It is up to them to decide whether or not to change.

Second, I must be open to the possibility that a student might learn something other than what I intend. Of course, they need to meet the educational objectives that I set, but they may also end up someplace I hadn't anticipated. In fact, I love that!

Third, my class is simply one of many that a student will take in college, and I am but one part of a process that may not bear fruit until many years later. I think we've all had that experience of suddenly understanding many years later what a certain teacher or professor was trying to say to us, and I know I treasure the notes and e-mails that I sometimes get from students years after they've taken my class.

Finally, as I tell students, I always reserve the right to contradict myself in class and say stupid things, because it's how I learn. If I can take the chance to learn something new by doing something risky and even potentially stupid, maybe students will too.

Dan Kline
English

The five Alaska Pacific University (APU) faculty members had the opportunity to work together differently, more consistently, and thus perhaps more effectively than any other group, leveraging their project participation into a catalyst for personal growth, professional transformation, and institutional change. Meeting regularly for coffee and conversation, weaving *Difficult Dialogues* strategies and techniques into classes and faculty retreats, opening dialogues on issues everyone was aware of but no one wanted to raise, these five colleagues started talking and kept it up all year long. This essay follows along on a few of their conversations.

APU's Fab Five: Collaboration, Community, Change

Dr. Tracy Stewart

Associate Professor of Leadership and Strategy
Alaska Pacific University

Dr. Maureen E. Austin

Associate Professor of Environmental Science and Outdoor Studies
Alaska Pacific University

APU's Fab Five

Dr. Leslie Cornick
Associate Professor of Marine Biology
and Statistics

Dr. Maureen E. Austin
Associate Professor of Environmental
Science and Outdoor Studies

Dr. Mei Mei Evans
Associate Professor of English

Dr. Tracy Stewart
Associate Professor of Leadership
and Strategy

Dr. Virginia Juettner
Associate Professor of Education

At the end of the year, when the project participants came back together to share their experiences and lessons learned with the group, the five of us from APU decided to make our presentation as a group. This says it all. As clichéd as it may sound, we had learned that the whole was greater than the sum of the parts. The synergies we experienced—as a group of five colleagues, as a university, and as part of the national *Difficult Dialogues* initiative—were more fulfilling than any of us initially imagined.

We used the metaphor of a banyan tree as a unifying framework for our presentation. The soil was seeded by the Ford Foundation and enriched by our two universities: APU and UAA. The main trunk represented collegiality, the five of us intertwined, individuals but working together. The branches were our classrooms, our campus, and the collaboration between the two universities. The leaves were our individual outcomes (more on this later) and the new trunks shooting down were representative of future outcomes, such as student changes, campus cultural changes, and the new group of faculty participants who would be starting on a journey of their own the following week.

We applied for the fellowship as individuals with a variety of individual reasons, but we left as colleagues, with stronger relationships between us, and more confidence in our teaching and our ability to affect institutional change. It was not until we neared the end of the year that we started to appreciate the full impact of what we'd experienced and accomplished.

Why We Applied

Leslie: I wanted some new skills and tools to help me deal with questions on science and religion—both in impromptu situations and in planned discussions. I also wanted to have more effective discussions in the classroom across the board, in all of my classes, especially my freshman class on Science as a Way of Knowing. I also hoped for increased contact with my colleagues at both APU and UAA.

Maureen: I was intrigued by the purpose of the grant and felt that by participating in the project I could learn ways to better engage my students in the classroom. I wanted to have a few additional teaching techniques to add to my toolbox. I have several friends who are part of the UAA faculty, so the opportunity to work with them and others from UAA was of interest to me as well.

Virginia: Fostering deep thinking in class discussion has always been a challenge. I wanted to learn new strategies for developing deep thinkers, enhance critical literacy lessons, and improve the quality of class participation and discussion, particularly in my undergraduate education classes.

Tracy: In hindsight, I realize that constructive use of dialogue has always been a key professional and personal tool. I applied because I hoped to find more structured or scientific ways to use discussion and interpersonal interaction as tools for learning. I was also intrigued by the opportunity to participate with UAA. The idea of collaboration, not competition, really appealed to me.

What We Expected

Leslie: I honestly tried not to have any expectations other than being excited to try new things. I suppose I expected that the techniques would help me facilitate discussion, but I really wasn't sure how or whether it would work, especially given the limited success I'd had before in getting students to really engage in my class discussions.

Maureen: I left the workshop very excited about the upcoming school year, full of ideas and insights into how to approach my class prep. I expected that teaching would feel different to me, but wasn't sure how that difference would manifest itself. I also expected that my workload would be more intense, given the various requirements that came with being part of the grant project.

Virginia: I was positive the workshop was going to be about critical literacy and rich discussions, so I was shocked that we spent the entire first day talking about disruptive students and safety in the classroom.

Tracy: I expected to learn some new and better ways of using discussion in my classes. I also expected to be able to learn from people with more years of academic experience. I was seeking wisdom.

Our Experience of the Intensives

During the May '06 training, we were divided into two groups: Maureen and Mei Mei attended the first week; Virginia, Tracy, and Leslie the second. We were all struck by a couple of repeated themes: limited or no time to engage in dialogue of our own, an emphasis on reacting to problems rather than stimulating discussion, and the assumption of a single group norm.

In fairness, there was an immense amount of material to be covered. Unfortunately, in the midst of so much information, we did not get to really engage in dialogues of our own. Practicing techniques, while helpful, was not the same as truly engaging. The early emphasis on reacting to difficult students and preventing classroom violence took us even further away from real dialogue. While important, and clearly a bigger issue on UAA's much larger campus, it seemed to be more about shutting down difficult dialogues than encouraging them.

The presenters didn't seem to notice that APU brought anything qualitatively different to the table. They seemed to think the challenges were the same at both universities, and that UAA represented the norm.

These became greater issues because so much of the training seemed to be UAA-centric. Materials tended to be prefaced with the phrase "at UAA..." When we pointed this out, the presenters made an effort to at least acknowledge our geographical differences ("at APU this is whom you would contact") but didn't seem to notice that APU brought anything qualitatively different to the table. There seemed to be a perception that challenges at APU were the same as at UAA, and that UAA represented the norm. We found this one-sidedness quite frustrating.

These three themes shaped the way we moved forward at APU. We wanted to promote controversy, find ways to engage, and avoid a campus-centric bias. APU's philosophy of active learning and the related notion of student-centered applied learning worked exceptionally well with the tenets of difficult dialogues. Discussion, student interaction, and hands-on approaches have long been a part of how we teach at APU. Our smaller size and emphasis on teaching give us extra flexibility to implement innovative approaches. The five of us started out with a sense that we wanted to "engage" not "encounter" controversy. We wanted to honor it proactively as part of our teaching.

The Academic Year

We began the year focusing on how we would meet our obligation to share the techniques with our colleagues. Jokingly calling ourselves the "Fabulous Five", we started meeting regularly for coffee, using the meetings to exchange ideas, lend moral support, solicit feedback, and plan and implement campus-wide activities. In keeping with our active learning mission, we wanted to teach the concepts dynamically, introducing techniques by fostering the very discussion we wanted to promote in the classroom. We quickly came to realize that there were parallel conversations occurring: the overt, stated conversation was about the techniques, and the tacit, unstated conversation was about having the conversation itself.

There was no turning back. We embraced this meta-learning. We were determined to address difficult, controversial conversations on our campus each time we shared techniques with our colleagues. Our willingness to model, to engage, made it easier. Courage to speak the “unspeakable” made it less dangerous, less risky.

In any organization there are unstated concerns—core controversies—that everyone is aware of but no one raises. Furthermore, there are gatekeepers: policies and procedures that impact what gets addressed and when it gets addressed. These may not be nefarious attempts to prevent action; it’s just that there is so much to do every day that organizations (and individuals within them) get stuck in patterns, habits, and ways of doing things until it becomes nearly impossible to see alternatives or to change things. Keeping these issues submerged only encourages them to fester, but broaching them the wrong way can be even worse, increasing toxicity in the organization as anger drives the discussion, and rage and pain make solutions nearly impossible. Hopelessness and helplessness become the way the system operates.

The mission to engage controversy made us determined to shake things up a little, promote new ways of doing things, address the previously side-lined or buried difficult dialogues, and—hopefully—positively impact teaching across the campus.

We started with the fall retreat, modeling a number of techniques (including Quick Writes, small group discussions, and a variation of the Encircled Circle technique that we called the Fish Bowl) to lead our colleagues in a discussion on a chapter from *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, our fall Book of the Semester. We also organized a fall colloquium to encourage others to consider the questions raised by the initiative. We used a version of the Shared Writing technique (see p. 199), asking each faculty member to write down what makes it hard for them to bring up difficult dialogues in the classroom. Breaking the group into triads, we passed our papers around and responded to two others before returning each paper to the original writer. We followed this exercise with a group discussion about what makes dialogue difficult in different disciplines. We also had people write about things they valued and did not value about working at APU. These responses were then read aloud, anonymously, by one of us. We ended the day with another open group discussion about the exercises themselves and the honest and meaningful ideas they had generated.

At the spring retreat we broached two of those unstated concerns that our campus seemed to be addressing only peripherally: assessment and sustainability. The first topic was raised as a departmental task with a structured constructive focus. The second was approached with a focus on sustainable organizational systems. We began by having people brainstorm definitions which were recorded without discussion. People were then asked to write about their thoughts/reactions to the notion of organizational sustainability and then to share their ideas with two other people they did not know

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well. We read the small group reflections to the larger group. People were asked to complete an exit sheet with their thoughts, feelings, questions and commitments (and their hopes about the institutional commitments too). Our intention was to turn these exit sheets over to next year's Fellows with the hope that they would continue the discussion in the fall.

Outcomes

Collegiality. Part of the process and a clear outcome was the sheer collegiality of it all. We developed a common language and purpose that merged well with the existing university mission.

It was not lost on us that we came from different disciplines, and indeed this fact helped to broaden the approaches we took. The fact that we came from different departments lent a perspective to our individual and collective work that we all found invaluable...Our selection bolstered our confidence, the training and networking provided the tools, but this was also clearly one of those felicitous occasions where personalities meshed and enabled a synchronous collegiality that benefited each of us enormously. We hope it will continue to benefit others at our university with whom we work.

Mei Mei Evans
English

The phrase "difficult dialogues" became shorthand for any topic that generated controversy. The camaraderie we experienced was not unlike a lifeboat in a sea of complexity and challenge. In survival training you are taught to link together for warmth, support, and safety. Our monthly meetings had the same effect on us. We were able to stretch in the classroom and on the campus because we were not alone.

Interdisciplinary Collaboration. Our informal gatherings also allowed us to learn more about our respective departments and made it easier to work together across campus. Together, we represented five of the six departments at APU. The very differences in our departmental perspectives forced us to listen better and learn more. Our collective experiences gave us more voice in campus-wide events because we could speak the different departmental languages.

Collaboration with UAA. Opportunities to work with colleagues from another university expanded the experience of interdisciplinary collegiality. Maureen joined her APU colleagues Regina Boisclair and Mike Loso and UAA's Steve Colt and Libby Roderick as discussion facilitators following several showings of *An Inconvenient Truth*. Tracy worked with UAA's Bogdan Hoanca to present an inter-campus showing of *The Corporation* (detailed in Chapter 5, pages 162-166). Virginia collaborated with UAA's Diane Erickson to show the movie *A Grain of Sand* (also detailed in Chapter 5, pages 194-200). Leslie participated in a lively panel discussion on science and religion with UAA's Travis Rector and Dan Kline (detailed in Chapter 4, pages 140-158).

Changing the Way We Teach

Our involvement in the *Difficult Dialogues* initiative gave us confidence to take chances in our classrooms, changing the way we teach.

Leslie: I'm much braver in the classroom. I'm not afraid to use discussion frequently now, and when it doesn't go well I'm not afraid to stop the class and ask why. Nor am I afraid to just let them sit with their silence. I'm much less caught off guard by random questions or comments that are controversial. I feel much better able to manage the classroom in terms of reining in unruly behavior and bringing things back to topic when a discussion gets off on a tangent. I'm also much less worried about how my classroom management will affect my teaching evaluations.

Maureen: This experience has broadened my approach to teaching. I used to channel my enthusiasm for learning into carefully designed exercises that were meant to teach students the content while inspiring their own desire to learn. This year I approached teaching with a more questioning and open mind, to the point that sometimes I went into the classroom not knowing how I would present that day's material or what might transpire. I was initially very nervous about this, but then I saw that the learning process can be enhanced for students when their instructor is learning along with them. This realization further energized and engaged me as an instructor. While I still came to class prepared and with an agenda to cover, I also allowed some time and created opportunities for my students to share their struggles and help each other better grasp the material. And I was much more willing to stop in the middle of class and call students out who weren't acting particularly engaged, ask them why and what we might do to help them feel more engaged.

Mei Mei: In the spring, when I discovered that the majority of my writing students were Marine Biology majors, I shifted an assignment to include a focus on the issue of over-fishing. Without my involvement in the *Difficult Dialogues* initiative, it is unlikely that I would have taken on a topic that is so unfamiliar to me. But I felt emboldened by my involvement to seek greater relevancy in my composition instruction: to explicitly use my teaching to address real issues that affect us all and to invite my students to engage and respond to that conversation as well. I think it was instructive for them to see their English teacher willing to risk her own ignorance in an effort to become better educated. I also think they enjoyed teaching me something about their field.

Tracy: There is a sense of seamless timelessness when things are going well in the classroom that seems to happen more often for me now. In those moments, there is true power in learning. I love being in that space. You can almost see the wheels spinning in the minds of the students. I have found better ways to use discussion to facilitate learning. While more adept at planning to introduce controversial topics, I also find I react more fluidly to the unplanned ones as well. My comfort as a teacher has improved.

I'm much braver in the classroom. I'm not afraid to use discussion frequently now, and when it doesn't go well I'm not afraid to stop the class and ask why.

Virginia: I completely enjoyed our textbook and tried out many of the strategies and techniques, combining them with children's literature on social justice themes for use in K-8 classrooms. My syllabi changed to include a detailed description of the importance of classroom discussion, and I began every class with guidelines for quality conversations developed by the students. I had the opportunity to present some of my students' work at the *Difficult Dialogues* regional meeting in January 2007, and I brought back ideas from other universities (such as the Illumination Project's Theatre of the Oppressed technique) to try out in my classrooms. I conducted two conference presentations to model *Difficult Dialogues* techniques to middle, high school, and post-secondary teachers, and I developed a summative evaluation of student learning using scrapbook techniques to synthesize *Difficult Dialogues* activities, readings, and reflections. I do not think I would have done so much or changed my courses so significantly if not for the *Difficult Dialogues* experiences. These opportunities enhanced my growing interest in engagement and the process of developing meaning through personal response using discussion, writing, performance, and art. I believe I am a better teacher and my students are more engaged and thoughtful about their assignments.

Campus-wide Changes

The techniques we modeled for our colleagues have reportedly been used by some of them in their own classrooms. We have also gotten feedback from people who want to use the concepts, to increase conversation in their classes, to explore the application in science/math etc., or who voiced a desire to participate in the next group of Fellows.

We started talking about a few things that had previously been buried, and we did so civilly. Using the fellowship, the training, and Tracy's position as faculty chair, we leveraged the very core of our university mission, active learning, to bring in topics that might have otherwise seemed contrived or false.

We started talking about a few things that had previously been buried, and we did so civilly. Using the fellowship, the training, and Tracy's position as faculty chair, we leveraged the very core of our university mission, active learning, to bring in topics that might have otherwise seemed contrived or false. We started small, giving successes and examples of civil discourse on topics not directly impacting the university and then built on this. The participation of the academic dean and the president's wife on the project's steering committee helped to legitimize the openness of the topics. We are particularly grateful to Dean Marilyn Barry for setting the tone of listening to, not shutting down, difficult topics, and to Tracy Stewart for using her role as faculty chair to weave the use of techniques and intentional topics throughout the agenda

of our year-end faculty retreat. Many of our colleagues feel it was the most useful retreat they had ever attended and thanked us for finally creating the space to discuss topics that were ripe for dialogue. Some of the acrimony that often arises with these topics was not evident. Furthermore, people were able to voice some unpopular views/suggestions and were heard, not shut down or drowned out.

Individual outcomes

Individually we have all been changed. There were transformations, large and small. Most of us found it expanded our boundaries, academically and personally. At the same time it was grounding, allowing us to reconnect with core, primal qualities.

Leslie: I definitely feel more empowered to tackle difficult conversations with my colleagues and administrators, and have the courage to state my opinions, even if they are counter to others'. It's probably what gave me the gumption to go up for promotion, and definitely gave me the courage to ask for other improvements in compensation for my program. I think that being able to express myself with more confidence in these situations makes them more likely to come out in my favor because it allows me to come across as deserving and worthy. That's something I've really struggled with in my academic career.

Maureen: This experience has filtered into other aspects of my life. I found myself more willing to stop and engage in discussions with family members that previously I might have avoided or simply let slide. When a family member commented on the war in Iraq, saying he doesn't understand the way "those people" think, I pressed him further, asking who exactly he meant by "those people." What transpired was an enlightening discussion, not only about the war, but about how generalizations can limit rather than encourage dialogue. To me that's a powerful example of how all my discussions, inside and outside the classroom, have become more rewarding. This training and experience has made me more willing to "go there."

Mei Mei: This fellowship has had the effect of encouraging me to devote significant amounts of time and energy to envisioning and constructing alternative models in my classroom and in my personal and professional life. It's not that I think there are any fewer conflagrations or that the work of stemming their proliferation is beneath my dignity; it's that I think we ignore the work of building what I'll call possible futures at our peril.

Parting thoughts

This story is a beginning, not a conclusion. Although our year in the hot seat is over, a new group of Fellows has been proceeding on their own terms. The five of us will continue to grow in our classrooms. None of us is likely to stop now. We all want to be a positive part of civil discourse on campus in the service of improving our university—for ourselves, for our students, for the community, and hopefully, in some small way, for the world.

We developed a common language and purpose that merged well with the existing university mission. The phrase "difficult dialogues" became shorthand for any topic that generated controversy.

Most of us gained confidence in our ability to manage difficult dialogues and expressed a new willingness to engage in them. But confidence is one thing. Actually engaging is something else. This essay follows one faculty member as she takes a chance on having a new kind of conversation in her class.

The Confidence to Have Difficult Dialogues

Dr. Nelta Edwards

*Assistant Professor of Sociology
University of Alaska Anchorage*

The faculty intensive introduced me to a variety of techniques that I experimented with over the course of the next year. But the most important benefit came unexpectedly toward the end of the spring semester, when thirty-two students and faculty members were killed by a lone gunman (who then killed himself) at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech).

The shooting occurred on a Monday. The next day, as my Introduction to Sociology class was ending, I asked students if they would like to take some time to talk about what happened. We might be able to look at it sociologically, I told them. They seemed interested, so I postponed the chapter that was assigned for Thursday, asked them to read as much as they could about the shooting, and told them we'd talk about it in class.

There were about 30 students in class on Thursday. We arranged the desks in a large circle. I started to my left and went around the circle, asking students to tell us what they knew about the incident. They had obviously been reading and watching the news and had picked up on a lot of different details. One student had gone to an anti-gun Web site and gotten some statistics on the amount of gun violence in the U.S. and information on how easy it is to purchase a gun. A few students knew about guns and discussed the types of guns used in the attacks. It took about 40 minutes to get around the circle.

I had prepared three things to get students to think about the incident sociologically.

First, I brought in a documentary film called *Tough Guise* featuring feminist anti-male-violence educator/activist Jackson Katz, and we watched the section called "School Shootings" that described several earlier incidents. Students were quick to note that the Virginia Tech shooter Cho Seung-Hui had eulogized Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the Columbine High School shooters, linking his own actions explicitly with theirs. Katz links the actions of shooters in general to the culture of violence that surrounds all men. He points out that when we think of the shooters as crazy, lone individuals we miss noticing how firmly violence is embedded in our cultural understanding of masculinity itself. Violence is part of what it means to be a normal male in this society; it is not just tolerated but encouraged. We had discussed gender socialization earlier in the semester and the students had already completed an assignment of identifying instances at a local shopping mall. The connection between masculinity and violence is clear in boys' toys such as guns and action figures and in violent video games which are primarily marketed toward boys.

I also shared the example of a 1989 shooting in Montreal in which a male would-be engineering student opened fire on female engineering students while yelling "you're all fucking feminists."

Fourteen women were killed in this incident; another nine women and four men were injured. The shooter, Marc Lepine, felt threatened by women entering a formerly all-male profession. Caputi and Russell (1990) point out that even if shooters are crazy themselves, their craziness took place in a cultural context that condones misogyny.

I asked students to see Cho not just as someone with personal mental health issues but as someone taking his cues from the culture at large. What, I asked, does what happened at Virginia Tech have to do with the culture in which Cho lived? How do Cho's actions reflect normalized masculine violence? I had found some statistics on the symptoms of mental illness to make the point that it is much more common than we think and thus not a very convincing explanation for violence: nearly 18 percent of respondents reported some symptoms of mental illness during the previous year.¹ Finally, the vast majority of violent behavior is carried out by those who are not considered "mentally ill."

Students seemed to take this information in stride, with no one reacting much at all to it. They probably needed time to process these points in the context of the unfolding Virginia Tech story.

Near the end of the class period, I asked students to consider the appropriateness of the media coverage. I shared my own opinion that it was overblown: while the shooting was tragic it was no threat to the democracy, as many other things going on that week were, such as funding for the war in Iraq and the actions of U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales. I saw no reason for all of the major news organizations to send their lead reporters to Virginia when there were other, much more important issues to cover. I reacted very strongly to this question. My students were not so moved.

I directed their attention to all the personal profiles of those who had died, pointing out how different it was from coverage of U.S. soldiers who die in Iraq and Afghanistan. They are about the same age as the Virginia Tech students, but we're seldom told about their hobbies, hopes, or dreams. I suggested that perhaps the difference in media interest was class-based, since college students are more likely to be middle class, and soldiers are more likely to be from working class or poor families.

Two students disagreed with me. One said the difference is that although soldiers are serving their country, they are also getting paid for a job that includes the possibility of dying. Another student, whose high school friend had died in Iraq, said she didn't think soldiers' families would welcome any more media attention, that it might feel like an invasion of privacy. When these two had finished, I summarized their disagreements, asked them if I had gotten it right, and asked if any one else had anything to add about the media coverage. In a few short minutes we had modeled civil disagreement. Students shared their points of view, disagreeing with me and with each other, and nothing unseemly happened.

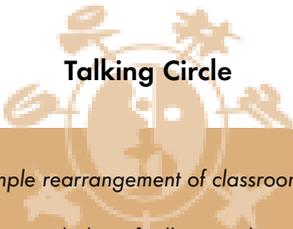
I'd been kicking myself in the hours before class started, wishing I had stuck to my syllabus, afraid that I would not be prepared enough, that the discussion would flop, and that I would have wasted a class period. But in the end, I was pleased with the way it went. Students seemed to appreciate being able to talk about the incident and had prepared themselves to do so. I got to teach some

Violence is part of what it means to be a normal male in this society; it is not just tolerated but encouraged.

¹ Weitz 2004: 184

sociology along the way. One student commended me personally, saying I was the first teacher in her experience who had ever offered to discuss something big like this as it was happening.

As a teacher, I like to have my classes well prepared, and I typically outline what will happen in class in 15-minute chunks. Events like school shootings, however, do not present themselves on a schedule. Because I am so attached to being well prepared, I have often passed up potential teaching moments like these when they have occurred. This time I had some confidence that I might be able to pull it off. I would not have had this confidence if I had not been through the *Difficult Dialogues* training.



Talking Circle

A simple rearrangement of classroom space can help open up a discussion.

The general idea of talking circles is that everyone gets a chance to speak in turn, without interruption. Sometimes a stick or other object is passed to indicate who has the floor, and allowances may be made for interruptions under certain conditions. Mostly, though, participants are encouraged to hold their thoughts until they have the floor.

Sometimes the solution to one problem just poses new problems of its own, as the following essay demonstrates. Changing the way we teach is an ongoing process of experimentation and reflection, with each new semester offering the possibility for continuing growth.

Hey – It Works! Now How Do I Stop It? (Thoughts on Taming the Beast)

Deborah Periman

*Assistant Professor of Justice
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For me, one of the most interesting consequences of the *Engaging Controversy* project occurred at the very end of spring semester. After two semesters of my experimentation with a variety of techniques to encourage dialogue in the classroom, my students turned those techniques around on me.

Every semester in one of my classes, I reserve the last three and a half hours of class time for students to give mini-lectures on some aspect of legal development. Every semester, we struggle mightily to fit all the student presentations into the time reserved.

Presentations are typically five to seven minutes long. Often, students will close with “Any questions?”—an invitation that is typically issued half-heartedly and frequently meets with a desultory response. We then move quickly on to the next presenter.

This spring, for the first time, approximately twenty percent of the students had planned a dialogue session for the end of their presentation, complete with a prepared question designed to foster discussion on a social controversy related to their projects. One student had prepared a PowerPoint slide with a list of controversial questions that the class could vote on to decide which they wanted to explore. It was delightful! To my chagrin, however, it was also a problem. The semester was running out, and for the class to respond with a fully engaged dialogue on each of the questions (which were fascinating and well chosen) would have prevented us from hearing all the students present their lectures.

The problem I faced in figuring out to handle these wonderful student-initiated discussions, for which we just did not have time, was a more painful version of a problem I had faced frequently throughout the semester. That is, how do I shut down a dialogue that represents exactly what I had asked for from the students, from which they are continuing to learn, and which we are all enjoying, when the demands of the course schedule require us to move on to something else? And how do I accomplish that a) without making the students feel that their opinions and their energy are not truly valued or that I am insincere when I ask for their thoughts; and b) without chilling response the next time I ask for a dialogue? I have no easy solution, but I do have some ideas I plan to try next semester.

In hindsight, with respect to the student presentations, I should have emphasized well ahead of time, in both the written assignment and in class, the limited opportunity for dialogue. Next semester, I will warn students that the time allocated for presentations is finite, that it is challenging to get through all the presentations in the time available, and that dialogue will inevitably be cut short so that each student has an opportunity to present his or her material.

Controlling the duration of dialogue interspersed with lecture during normal class time is more challenging, both in terms of avoiding a chilling effect on later participation and avoiding a situation in which students who are not allowed to speak feel dismissed or undervalued. Potential solutions include:

- At the beginning of the semester, make clear why student dialogue is valued and that it will be an important part of the learning process, while at the same time emphasizing that the balance between dialogue and lecture is difficult, and that productive dialogue may sometimes be interrupted in order to cover necessary course content.
- Set a time limit in advance: “Let’s take ten minutes and think about . . . ”
- Warn students as time is running out: “We’ll just have time to hear from one or two more people . . . ” or “We’ll have to make this our last comment.”
- Express regret when discussion is cut off: “I’m sorry there isn’t time for everyone to speak.”
- Express sincere appreciation for the students’ engagement.
- Explain the need to move on: “Our exam is next week, and we need to cover a few additional points.”
- As lecture resumes, make eye contact with students who were cut off and, to the extent appropriate, call on those students for short-answer responses.
- When time allows, reopen discussion at the end of the period, again expressing regret for having interrupted students’ thoughts previously.
- Give students an opportunity in the last five minutes of class to express their ideas on the unfinished topic by writing an ungraded response statement. This allows each student to speak, even if the instructor is the only one who will hear his or her thoughts. Alternatively, this provides a mechanism for reopening discussion in a later class, if the instructor retains the student submissions and redistributes them. These papers also provide a nice trigger for later small group discussion.

In summary, there is nothing more satisfying (and fun) than engaging a class in high-energy dialogue on a topic of importance to the students’ development in their discipline and as citizens of the larger community. It is painful to have to cut short the exchange of ideas. I hope that I can accomplish this more gracefully in the future.

STUDENT OUTCOMES

To find out if gains in faculty knowledge and comfort translated into measurable student outcomes, we queried 243 students across eleven disciplines, two universities, and three campuses. Although the “n’s” in most cases were small, the aggregate results were positive. Most of them created Codes of Conduct in their classrooms. Most of them told us they were more comfortable talking about hot topics now than they had been before. Overall, they compared their instructors favorably against others in the same university. They appreciated the techniques they’d experienced, especially Shared Writing, the Circle of Objects, and Silence.

Secondary Objective: Student Outcomes

Dr. Claudia Lampman

Professor of Psychology

University of Alaska Anchorage

Although the primary objective of our project was faculty development, the ultimate goal was to have a positive impact on our students as well. In order to examine whether students in test classes benefited from particular strategies and approaches, faculty participants were encouraged to include in their end-of-term course evaluations a set of common items that could apply to any class in which one or more of the new techniques was incorporated. The following analysis is based on data collected from 243 students in sixteen different courses and seventeen different sections.

Comfort level

Chart 1 shows how students rated their comfort level in speaking openly about difficult or controversial topics in the test class compared to other similar classes they’ve taken. They responded on a seven-point scale in which 1 = *much less comfortable than in other classes* and 7 = *much more comfortable than in other classes*. Projecting that the mean response across a random sample of similar sections would approximate the midpoint of the 7-point response scale, the obtained overall mean of 5.34 (SD = 1.34) is significantly greater than 3.5 [$t(239) = 21.32, p < .001$]. The mean comfort level reported by students was above 5.25 in every test course but one.

Effective Instructors

Similarly, Chart 2 shows student ratings on how effective their instructor was at making them feel comfortable speaking up in class, compared with other instructors they have had (where 1 = *much less effective than other instructors* and 7 = *much more effective than other instructors*). Faculty Fellows were rated as significantly higher in effectiveness than the scale midpoint of 3.5, with a mean of 5.68 (SD = 1.37), $t(239) = 24.66, p < .001$. All but one of the faculty participants were rated as quite effective at making students feel comfortable speaking up about difficult or controversial issues in class, with means ranging from 5.61 to 6.28.

Effective strategies

Finally, as shown in Chart 3, the students rated fifteen different strategies for their effectiveness in helping to create positive discussions on difficult issues or topics (where 1 = *not at all effective* and 7 = *extremely effective*). All of the strategies were rated, on average, as quite effective by students; no strategy received a mean rating below 4.25 on the 7-point scale. The strategies rated as most effective included Respecting the Silence, Shared Writing, Cocktail Party, small group discussion, community of inquiry, and Circle of Objects (all means of 5.5 or greater on a 7-point scale). These ratings suggest that students tended to feel that the strategies implemented in their classrooms did encourage positive and open dialogues on difficult or controversial subjects.

Cautions and Conclusions

Although the student ratings gathered appear to be quite positive, it is important to keep a couple of things in mind when thinking about these data. First, not all of our faculty participants requested these ratings from their students, so it is difficult to generalize to the entire cohort. Second, students were not asked to complete pre-course ratings about their feelings or comfort levels in these or other courses at the beginning of the semester. With only post-test ratings, it is impossible to pinpoint change in levels of comfort. Finally, the data is self-reported in nature. Classroom observations would also be important to truly assess the degree to which difficult dialogues actually occurred.

Nonetheless, these data do suggest that the faculty who participated in this initiative were effective in creating classroom environments where students felt comfortable. It would be worthwhile to conduct more rigorous assessment of student outcomes in future efforts.

Chart 1 Compared to other, similar classes you have taken at APU/UAA, how comfortable did you feel in this class speaking openly about difficult or controversial topics?

1=much less comfortable to 7=much more comfortable



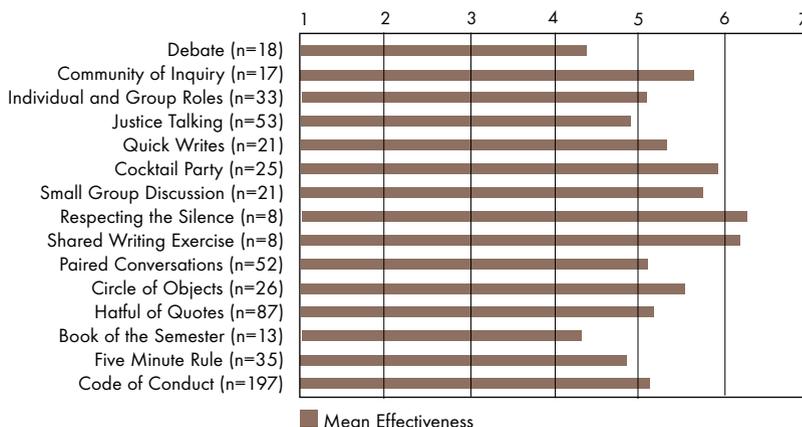
Chart 2 Compared to other instructors you have had at APU/UAA, how effective was this instructor in making students feel comfortable speaking up in class about difficult or controversial topics?

1=much less effective to 7=extremely effective



Chart 3 How effective was this strategy/technique for creating positive discussions on difficult issues or topics?

1=not at all effective to 7=extremely effective



Course design is an obvious place to begin if you hope to effect changes in your students. This essay describes a course designed to deliberately engage a controversial topic in order to challenge students to take intellectual risks. Because students respond differently to taking risks, a variety of techniques are employed to encourage participation at the level of risk that they can personally handle. This creates a mutually safe space for all students in which they can challenge their own assumptions and consider an issue beyond their first gut reaction to an intellectual place of reasoned conclusions and broadened perspectives.

Transforming Students

Dr. Leslie Cornick

*Associate Professor of Marine Biology and Statistics
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Few topics are as controversial among marine biology students as whaling. Students typically have very strong feelings about the special nature of whales and their status as icons of the marine conservation movement. They also tend to have little sympathy for whalers and the international agencies that manage and regulate nonwhaling and whaling nations alike. If the techniques we learned in the *Difficult Dialogues* project were as effective as I hoped they would be, they would help students objectively consider more than one perspective on whaling and come to reasoned conclusions—rather than emotional reaction—about its practice. The annual meeting of the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in Anchorage last year provided a perfect opportunity to test the hypothesis that equipped with the right tools, students could—and would—take the intellectual risk of engaging in objective civil discourse with proponents and opponents of whaling on a number of scales (subsistence, scientific, commercial).

To coincide with the IWC meetings, I offered a special topics course entitled Whaling: Past, Present and Future. The sophomore-junior course examined whaling from historical, ecological, cultural, literary, and policy perspectives, and included readings, videos, a museum field trip, and guest speakers from a variety of constituencies in the IWC. We covered the complete spectrum of international attitudes about whaling, from Greenpeace (ban all whaling except carefully managed subsistence use), to nations like the United States with only local subsistence hunts (e.g., Alaska Native bowhead hunts) that are supported by the IWC members, to nations like Japan that practice scientific whaling under special permits, and those like Norway that continue a commercial harvest under objection to the current moratorium on commercial whaling.

I used a variety of techniques to facilitate discussion, but the most important of these turned out to be having the students keep a personal journal of their thoughts, perceptions, and responses to the materials covered in class. The journals allowed students to examine their ideas and perceptions privately before joining the class discussion, and also to decide which parts of their response to share with their classmates or to share only with me as I read their journals. The journals also provided a venue for formulating questions for guest speakers prior to their visits, following discussion of their published works.

To establish a baseline for their attitudes, perceptions, and civil discourse skills, I asked them in their first journaling assignment to describe their current understanding of whaling and their feelings and/or opinions about it. The majority opinion is vividly captured in the following excerpts from student writings:

- *“I think whaling is wrong...”*
- *“There is no need for it anymore with all the other food sources available...”*
- *“Although Natives used to be traditional hunters of whales [they now] seem to have turned into sport hunters...they use modern technology instead of old fashioned ways, which I think is wrong and immoral.”*
- *“Japan is industrialized enough, but whaling makes them seem primitive.”*

For the next four weeks, students wrote personal responses to each video, field trip, and guest speaker in their journals, and each set of readings was tied to an in-class discussion exercise using dyads, Quick Writes, small group discussion, and other techniques. The exposure to so many different perspectives challenged them to examine their own assumptions and biases, and they were transformed in ways that were surprising and thrilling. The process was a slow one, with new ideas being considered and incorporated into students’ perceptions as each new experience built upon previous ones. This developmental process

is illustrated by the small changes from week to week in the students’ journaling, and ultimately in their willingness to take those intellectual risks in open discussion with the class, as well as their willingness to pose difficult questions to guest speakers.

An early field trip brought them to the Anchorage Museum of History and Art to see two photographic displays of Alaska Native whaling culture that were part of a special exhibit entitled A Summer of Whales. One display consisted of historical photographs; the other was from a recent expedition specifically aimed at

chronicling the cultural significance of the hunt. This visual exposure to actual whale hunts, as opposed to the hunts they imagined, produced palpable changes:

- *“...actually seeing pictures of it...will help me understand the sustainable whaling a little more...not sure if I approve of it or not – [but it’s] not like I need to give them permission...”*
- *“It did not look modernized the way I pictured it. I thought they were using gas-powered boats and guns...but they still hold to their traditions. I liked seeing that it still took many people working together to pull the whale up, it shows a trust between them by having to rely on each other... seeing it through pictures lets you see what really goes on, which was a lot different than I thought.”*

The exposure to so many different perspectives challenged them to examine their own assumptions and biases, and they were transformed in ways that were surprising and thrilling.

Early guest speakers included two members of the IWC's Scientific Committee who were outspokenly critical of Japan's scientific whaling program and the "small-scale coastal whaling" Japan was proposing to start. These presentations tended to reinforce the anti-whaling sentiment in the room and by the third week of the course, when Japan's Commissioner to the IWC was scheduled to appear, the students were feeling bold and ready to discredit him. The day before his visit, however, I asked them to read a paper defending Japan's programs, and to respond to it in their journals as if they had no previous knowledge of whaling issues. The goal of this prompt was to challenge students to try to ignore their own preconceptions and consider the argument on its merits. This is a difficult, if not impossible, task for anyone; but more so for young undergraduate students, many of whom may be unaware of how often preconceptions color our ability to consider challenging ideas with an open mind. I didn't expect them to succeed necessarily, but I did want them to recognize and face their own prior judgments.

The commissioner's visit was interesting—he was clearly experienced at presenting the Japanese perspective to hostile audiences. He spoke flawless English, was even-tempered and cordial, and presented his well-rehearsed argument in a confident and persuasive manner, taking a cultural anthropological perspective: "Would India ask the United States not to eat beef?" I specifically refrained from participating in the discussion as much as possible so that the students would engage directly with the commissioner, rather than relying on me as an intermediary. With only a touch of visible trepidation, the students asked pointed questions about Japan's scientific whaling program ("Can't you get the same information with nonlethal methods given current technology?") and their extensive promotion of whale meat in school lunch programs ("Knowing that whale meat is contaminated with mercury and other dangerous compounds, how can you push it on your school-children?"). The commissioner answered the questions with the aplomb of a seasoned politician—essentially not answering the contamination question, and insisting that lethal methods are necessary to collect population and age data (an assertion that U.S. scientists refute).

After the commissioner had come and gone, I asked students to reflect again on their perceptions of Japan's whaling program and to include their personal responses to the commissioner. Again, it was easy to see them wrestling with their perceptions and developing their ideas:

- *"Japan, unlike subsistence whaling villages, doesn't need the protein source from whale meat...however, is it really appropriate to deny them a food source on the basis that there are alternatives? Although I didn't necessarily agree with all of the points (the commissioner) made, I did find myself reevaluating some of my perspectives on the whaling issue because of what he said."*
- *"One nation cannot dictate what another chooses to do without infringing on their sovereignty...Japan is patronized as being barbaric since whale meat is used as a food source much like subsistence hunters in Alaska, but Native Alaskans are seen as living in harmony with their surroundings – why the double standard?"*
- *"I think they (Japan) are being set up to look bad..."*

By the end of the course, students were asked to reconsider their position on whaling issues, including commercial, subsistence and scientific hunts. Among the most dramatic transformations occurred in the student who, at the start of the course, was most vehemently opposed to all forms of whaling:

"Subsistence hunting I am not against, not supportive of it, but I can't come up with a good reason why they shouldn't. Scientific whaling, I can go either way—if it produces some valuable data that we can't get any other way, then I feel it is okay as long as the population is not diminished in any way... I have enjoyed hearing other points of view, and even changing my own a little bit."

Other students experienced similar expansion of their perspectives:

- *“A lot of interesting topics that made me question things I thought I already knew...”*
- *“I am still unsure where I stand on whaling, but I almost think it is just taking the easy way out to say whaling should be banned everywhere and in all forms...”*
- *“Other cultures that see whaling as a historical part of their way of life deserve consideration...even if they are industrialized...”*
- *“I think it is important to be well informed and get all sides of an issue before making judgments or decisions. I now feel that I have a very solid, well-rounded perspective on the issue. It hasn't really made it easier to pick a side or decide exactly what my feelings are. I don't think it is a black and white issue at all.”*

In a mere four weeks, with the right tools and opportunities, these brave students questioned their assumptions and examined their personal biases, engaged in open and respectful civil discourse with international scholars and diplomats on one of the most controversial issues in marine conservation, and came away with expanded perspectives. Not all of the students changed their minds about whaling, and that wasn't the ultimate goal of the course. However, the process transformed these students from young people with very strong opinions that they had little interest in revising into thoughtful citizens willing to consider the opinions and perspectives of others, even when they were initially horrified by them.

Reflective Writing (Journals)



Personal journals are an effective and safe space for students to consider and develop their ideas about controversial issues before discussing them with the class.

Writing

Consider asking students to write something every day. Examples include answers to a specific question posed as homework: comments on a reading, video, or guest speaker: or simple free-writes describing their reactions to that day's discussion.

Confidentiality

Assure them that the instructor is the only person who will see their journal, and that it is up to them to choose how much to share with the rest of the class.

Open discussion

If you plan to share selections anonymously with the class, first get the class's consent. Passages should be transcribed onto separate media such as a typed handout or PowerPoint slide so that students cannot identify other students' work by seeing the journal from which a particular passage is read.

OVERALL OUTCOMES

We knew the overall outcomes for individuals would be uneven, and they were. Some of us got far more out of the experience than others. But in spite of all the risks, the extra work, and the aggravations that go along with trying something new and making it up as you go along, most of us would agree that this project has done our institutions a huge amount of good. We've come a long way together, and today we are in a much stronger place than we were when we first started talking.

We have developed a shared language, a shared culture, and a shared awareness among a growing number of people—not only the faculty, but also administrators, staff, students, and our families and friends—about something called difficult dialogues. Our partnerships have been strengthened. We're a little less isolated now, and a little more skilled. Today when we encounter—or engage—a difficult dialogue we have more people in the game, and the assurance that someone will offer a better way to respond as a result of this experience.

In the end, difficult dialogues—however well prepared for, however well managed—are still difficult. They're about our identities and our cultures, about power and inequality and who gets to decide how things are and where we're going from here. On the presenting level, they're about religion and politics and science and tradition. But underneath, they're about those deeper human needs we're all trying to get met: security, respect, to be valued, to be part of a community, to contribute to the ongoing conversation of our times.

Difficult dialogues are the things that usually force us apart, but for this year they were also the things that brought us together. Looking forward, we hope they will continue to be a catalyst for strengthening our teaching, engaging our students, and making our campuses better places for learning and the free exchange of ideas. As we make more room for difficult dialogues in our classrooms and communities, we should be encouraged by the words of Clark Kerr, who spoke these words at the University of California at Berkeley many years ago: “The university is not engaged in making ideas safe for students. It is engaged in making students safe for ideas.”

START TALKING

Questions for Discussion:

What are the core controversies in your organization that everyone is aware of but no one wants to talk about?

How could you redesign one or more of your courses to incorporate more active learning and a deeper engagement with multiple perspectives?

How could you begin a difficult dialogues program in your own department?

What are you willing to risk in the interests of strengthening your teaching?

