

SWAP SESSION NEWSLETTER

No. 10

Swap Session held: 2-22-99

Sponsored by the Faculty Exchange for Teaching Excellence. Dr. Ann Stalheim-Smith, coordinator.

TOPIC: Classroom Strategies for Dealing with Difficult Dialogues

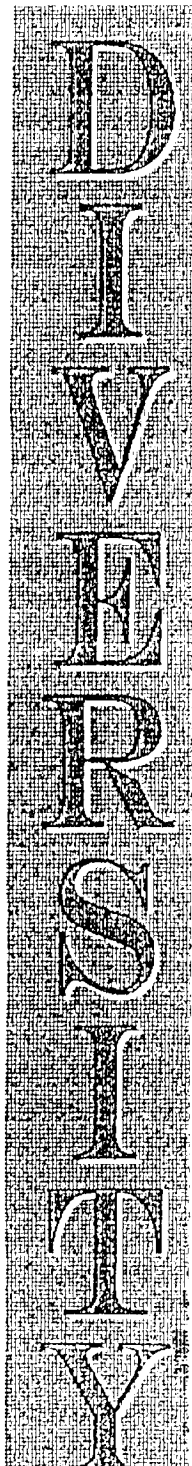
Presenters: Dr. Edgar Beckham and Dr. Larry Scharmann

Dr. Edgar Beckham is at the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Previous to that he was Program Coordinator for Education and Culture and Coordinator of the Campus Diversity Initiative at the Ford Foundation. Dr. Beckham highlighted the following points on appropriate approaches to initiating difficult dialogues in the classroom:

- **AVOIDANCE:** Faculty members often avoid diversity issues because they are fearful of the challenge of dealing with difficult dialogues in the classroom. Faculty cite classroom management challenges as the reason for not introducing material that might provoke situations that they find difficult to handle. Faculty fear loss of control in the classroom. The hard part is taking the risk to introduce material which is likely to cause anger, distress, and embarrassment. These difficult materials may even produce *silence!* Students, like us, try to avoid unpleasantness. They may tune out or duck an opportunity to engage directly in these dialogues.
- **PREPARATION:** This is the key to initiating difficult dialogues. We are responsible for preparing our students for what is coming in terms of the stress and strain they may be in for in dealing with controversial issues like race, gender, and sexual orientation. We must also adequately prepare ourselves for such dialogues. We must examine our own capacity for dealing with these materials and topics. It is important to establish clear ground rules in your class about how a discussion will move forward. An *explanation* should accompany the preparation given by instructors to students.
- **STUDENTS AS A RESOURCE:** We should use them to help us learn what will be a flash-point in a discussion. For example, if we want to know how an African American, Asian American or Native American student will respond to material or an event, *ask him/her!* Put together a focus group of students and have them address, in a discussion, concerns that they face in the classroom. We should ask ourselves what events make students of color experience a high level of discomfort likely to interfere with learning. For example, students have expressed in surveys that being singled out as experts on the group(s) they represent causes a high level of discomfort. We need to use students to inform us about sensitivities. We can also use students to help us teach. They can play a very significant role in managing a difficult dialogue. We can reward them with academic credit (or even food!). We should mentor and guide the student through the course of study and the student is then available to the faculty member as an advisor and co-manager of classroom situations.
- **CAMPUS STUDENT SERVICES AS A RESOURCE:** Some faculty resist the idea of receiving assistance from Student Services on the management of classroom situations. However, the Students Services staff members spend a good deal of their professional time dealing with management of conflict and negotiating out of difficult situations. Teaming up with Student Services could be very rewarding for teaching enterprises and effective for students too.



Dr. Beckham suggests dealing with difficult dialogues in the classroom is easy once you make the commitment to do it. Dealing with difficult dialogues is easy because of the tremendous resources available to faculty members.



More tips for preparing ourselves and students for difficult dialogues in the classroom

- **COLLABORATION WITH PEERS AS A RESOURCE:** We often shy away from this idea perhaps because we are loners. We don't seek as much information from colleagues as we should. We can use **Peer Collaboration** to build our capacity to deal with sensitive materials effectively, to benefit the education of all of our students. In the future, we can use **Swap Sessions** as an opportunity to share our experiences on how difficult dialogues have been approached.
- **COMMITMENT:** We must realize that including difficult dialogues requires our commitment to doing it. We recognize that our inclusion of materials and experiences which have been so severely neglected in education is imperative. Furthermore, if these materials create controversy, we have an obligation to meet it head on.

TEACHING EVOLUTION

Dr. Larry Scharmann, Chair and Professor of Secondary Education at Kansas State University, presented the following ideas on appropriate approaches to teaching a potentially contentious issue, such as evolution, in the classroom:

Recognizing four commonplaces of the curriculum: (1) We must understand our content, (2) We must understand the target learner, (3) We must choose teaching methods appropriate for those students and ourselves, and (4) We must understand the social situations into which those students, target learners, are placed. We need to come up with better ways of having them interact so they will gain and benefit from the discourse.

PHASE I: PRELIMINARY IDEAS. First have students read a statement that deals with Darwin's The Origin of Species. Then, to focus their attention, ask students questions: If Darwin's ideas are not perceived as a threat, why do we continue to hear or read about debates regarding this theory? Just what is the nature of a theory? Is a theory something to fear? Just what is science trying to prove, anyway?

Our target learners in high school and early college years tend to be dualistic individuals. They view the world as black/white, yes/no, up/down. For them, everything is an either/or proposition. This model is useful because it attempts to get students to see that there may be a place in between the two extremes for them to stand. It also helps them understand that scientific theories are not something to fear, but tools that help solve problems and understand the world. Prepare students by saying that you will be having a discussion, **not a debate**. In the discussion, we will respect and listen to what others are saying without persuading anyone to "your side."

QUESTIONS: Ask students to answer the following questions *individually*.

- 1) From a personal perspective, how do you feel or what do you think the theory of evolution is all about?
- 2) In your personal opinion, how do you feel or what do you think creationism is all about?
- 3) Do you feel that the theory of evolution conflicts with your personal religious views? Why or why not?

Turn to the next page for more ideas on teaching evolution. . .

PHASE II: DISCUSSION GROUPS. Have students form groups to discuss their answers from Phase I. Remind them this is not a debate. They should listen and try to understand why each other individual feels the way he/she does (religious values, scientific knowledge and understanding, etc.). At the end of this exercise, student groups should develop a set of reasons to teach in science courses one of the following:

- 1) Evolution only.
- 2) Creationism only.
- 3) Both evolution and creationism.
- 4) Neither evolution nor creationism.

Each group needs to come to a consensus on what should be recommended as if the group is presenting its position to a community school board. This gives students a feel for what really happens.

Toolkit Analogy: Explain to students that a scientific theory is an **important tool**. It matters less whether theories are true and it matters more whether they **work**. Tell them that it is okay to keep aesthetic tools in our toolkit, too (i.e., the theories we just know we like). Explain that you are not offering a new tool in exchange for one of theirs. It is important that students keep the tools they already have in their personal toolkits.

Why evolution in only science classes? It is important to recognize that theology, which uses ultimate cause, has a place; it just doesn't help us interpret scientific phenomena. We can advise students that sometimes, in science, we must "wear the blinders" of naturalism.

PHASE III: FORMAL COMMENTS. It is the instructors job to talk about formal comments. Have the groups come back together and summarize what is said in formal comments. The key here is not to just lecture on the topic of evolution. If the target learner is dualistic, he/she will probably not listen to the content of your lecture and the reasonableness of evolution, but he/she will be trying to decide whether you are on the same side as him/her. With this exercise, the fear of the instructor not being on "your side" goes away. Explain that theories are not something to fear: "Who cares if it's true? **It works!**" "Let's not even worry about whether you believe in evolution." At this point, a student's fears go away because no one is interfering with his/her belief system.

PHASE IV: REFLECTIONS. Ask students to go back and review their personal responses to the questions in Phases I and II. Ask them to answer the following questions: Has your viewpoint changed? Would your personal recommendations to the school board be the same as your group? What are your reactions? Do you feel less conflict now than when you came in? Students can answer these questions in a journal that only you will read.

EVALUATING DISCUSSIONS: After the exercise, give students an evaluation sheet that allows them to tell you what they thought of the exercise. It helps you find out what they liked and didn't like. They can tell you how they reacted throughout. This is a crucial part of the entire exercise.

Dr. Edgar Beckham and Dr. Larry Schumann asked the Swap Session audience members to discuss in small groups the following *discussion questions*:

- 1) What resources (faculty, student, etc.) might be used to manage contentious classroom discourse in educationally productive ways?
- 2) How would you assess the effectiveness of your strategies?

The discussion questions lead to the following comments from the audience:

- ❖ Students are more likely than faculty to depend on colleagues and student services because they have the most contact with that route.
- ❖ Faculty, on the other hand, are more likely to depend upon disciplinary-based issues and other materials they receive, while they are less likely to seek out help.
- ❖ Students are more likely to get help while many faculty feel like they already know the answers.
- ❖ Faculty need to move in the direction of seeking out and utilizing resources. Sometimes it takes artificial restraints for peer collaboration to occur (e.g., working on a grant with a colleague).
- ❖ One idea for another resource is having students take a **pretest** to help us get a feel for students' backgrounds.
- ❖ We should use other faculty as well as guest artists, lecturers, etc. We should guide students to presentations and research, but we should also allow them to use their own experiences so that they bring their own perspective to issues in class.
- ❖ Using the arts is a very effective way to give a buffer to difficult dialogues.
- ❖ If a student brings up an issue to discuss but you are not prepared, turn it around to see what the student is really saying so that you know how to prepare yourself for the discussion. Ask the student, "Why do you think this is important?"
- ❖ The use of list-serves for discourse may lead to problems because there is little chance to monitor what is going on.
- ❖ The Campus Diversity website is a tremendous resource!
- ❖ Many faculty members are not comfortable with their own feelings on these difficult issues. We need to help them, as well as students, achieve a level of comfort.
- ❖ We need to start being not only diversity educators, but diversity learners as well!
- ❖ We need to help students understand that both (all) perspectives on an issue are real. Help them see all sides.
- ❖ It is imperative in the classroom to present a balanced view and to weigh multiple sides. People can view the same phenomenon and come to radically different conclusions.
- ❖ Do we want students to side with one or the other or to *understand both sides*? **Understanding both is the diversity imperative.**

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Opportunities to write on your calendar.

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- SWAP SESSION: "Do Students Learn When We Teach?" on April 19 (Mon.) at 3:30 PM in K-State Union Room 213; Dr. Talat Rahman and Dr. Dean Zollman presenters.
- Distance Education Forum: April 22 (Thurs.) in the afternoon. Keynote speaker is Dr. Sally Johnstone. Other presenters are Dr. Beth Unger and Dr. Dan Bernardo. This forum is organized by Dr. Bryan Schurle, University Distinguished Teaching Scholar Chair.
- Workshop on "Peer Consultation" given by Dr. Dan Bernstein, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, on June 3, 8:30-11:30 AM. You are invited to a luncheon with Dr. Bernstein at noon. Following it, we can have informal discussions on Peer Consultation with Dr. Bernstein. Consider this another option on your **menu of educational opportunities.**