

Difficult Dialogues: Creating democratic spaces for civil discourse in university classrooms

The Difficult Dialogues project is an international initiative that promotes the art and skill of civil discourse in higher education. The project involves the creation of spaces in university classrooms for reflective discourse on contentious issues that relate to curricular content.

Within these spaces students can learn to display civility by expressing themselves and responding to others in a respectful manner. They also have the opportunity to construct their own beliefs, identity and social relations rather than having these dictated by others. Discourse of this nature consequently presents a wealth of learning opportunities, including the enhancement of academic proficiency, the development of skills essential for adult life, as well as responsible citizenship.

The Difficult Dialogues project emphasises the preparation of academic members of staff to facilitate civil discourse and to engage with controversy in teaching and learning. Since the launching of the project at the University of the Free State (UFS), South Africa in 2012, approximately 100 members of staff have undergone intensive development. Scholarship development is intentionally strengthened and a number of workshops, conference papers and publications have emerged from the project. A book publication containing rich evidence on the growth and experiences of the participants, as well as new knowledge created with regard to the deeper issues foundational to the project implementation at this university, is also in progress.

Research results have indicated that the project has enabled self-reflective practice and that participants have experienced transformative learning. It was found that transformative learning is stimulated in an enriching, inclusive learning environment. Practicing motivational conditions and dispositions for democratic discussion, for example, were found to be exceptionally helpful.

This interactive half-day workshop will be directed by the following questions: What are the basic best practices for the facilitation of civil discourse in a diverse learning environment? How can the content be contextualised for various settings and needs? Some of the most useful tools and techniques will be demonstrated. Topics to be explored are:

- the creation of an enriching and inclusive learning environment;
- the constructive use of silence;
- the incorporation of minority views and
- positive responses to incidents that could disrupt or derail discussion

Opportunity will be provided for participants to discuss points of interest, including how scholarship

The facilitator is an experienced teacher, researcher and academic developer who has acquired advanced facilitation skills and has been actively involved in the planning and implementation of the project at the UFS. She has presented her work at conferences and in publications both nationally and internationally.

References

Van Jaarsveldt, D.E. and Joubert, A. 2015. Navigating diversity with nursing students through Difficult Dialogues: A qualitative study. *International Journal of Africa Nursing Sciences*. 2(2015):34-41.