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English 957
Journal 4

Sample CCI Student Project

Part I: Interests/Concerns

Melissa, Mike, and I decided to collaborate on this observation project because we were all similarly concerned about the apparent lack of student discussion in our classes. The question we devised to guide our project/observations was: Is there a way we can engage students to have a better quality and quantity of class discussion in a large group? (All three of us agreed that small group discussion was not necessarily a problem in our classes.) I think that underlying this question was the notion that perhaps there was something all three of us were not doing as teachers, that we should be doing, in order to generate discussion. In other words, our focus initially was on our technique and our approach to handling discussion in English 150. Speaking for myself, I know that my take on the question of generating discussion was self-critical, in that I assumed I lacked tools for guiding discussion in class. (Darcie)

I feel like Darcie; my concerns about the lack of class discussion were centered on "what I was doing wrong." I ponder why students are able to talk to each other so easily in small groups and workshops, but when we come together as a large group, there is an overwhelming reluctance of students to engage in discussion. Was there something wrong with me? Did I seem intimidating or mean? Initially, I wanted to believe that maybe students are afraid of giving the "wrong" answer in class or were too shy. I even tried to think back to my knowledge of developmental issues for students at this age. However, this seemed too simplistic. This frustration made class discussion the central issue I wanted to investigate in my class. After talking to Darcie and Mike, I was excited (and then even more frustrated) to learn I was not the only one who was dealing with this issue in the classroom. (Melissa).

It's no surprise, then, that I felt like Darcie and Melissa. My class conversations seemed flat and dominated by a few students. I felt that I was trapped in a bind—how could I have class discussions with a variety of voices and at the same time rely on my talkative students to fill in the gaps without "overfilling" them. What was funny about our coming together as a group was that it was so unplanned—we came together, it seemed, out of convenience. Yet when we started talking about an investigative question, we found that we had almost the same kinds of concerns in our classrooms. As I remember it, Darcie and I talked first about a possible topic. As new first-time teachers we thought we were missing something—something we should have picked up on in either the

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workshop or in 957, or some other kind of teacher tool that everyone else was smart enough to figure out on their own. Working with Melissa though, who came to UNL with some teaching experience from Virginia, showed us that this was not a question of experience vs. lack of experience, but rather a question that affects even the most seasoned teachers. I think Darcie and I, especially, found this particular aspect important as we worked through just what kind of a question we were asking. (Mike)

As a means of discovering how we might best engage our students to discuss in a large group, we agreed on two alternate methods of encouraging discussion: (1) to have students self-select small groups, have them work on questions derived from Theresa Jordan's *Riding the White Horse Home*, and then have the students return to the large group and talk about the answers they formulated; and (2) to have students come to class with at least two questions about the Jordan text, and to have those students place those questions on index cards, and then have students select a card with a question that was not their own and read that question aloud to the class to which the class as a whole was asked to respond. We agreed that we each would try out these methods in our classes at different times (i.e., during one class period we would try the small group approach, and during another class period, the index card method), while we took turns observing the effect it had on our classes. Melissa, Mike, and I were all able to try out and observe the index card method, but only Melissa and I were able to observe each other's attempt at the small-group approach, because Mike was unable to participate in this part of the observation due to student conferences. (Darcie)

Part II: Observations

Darcie and I were able to observe each other as we tried the first technique of small groups working together in order to bring about issues as a large group. As I observed Darcie's class, I noticed that students were actively engaged in their small groups. Of course, there was some social time in the groups—talk of jobs, other classes, parties, etc.—that established their comfort levels, but most groups were focused on the task of answering questions, looking through the text, and recording their observations for the larger group's discussion. (Melissa)

My observations of Melissa's class yielded similar results. I was particularly impressed at how, once the students had self-selected their groups, they engaged at length with Jordan's text. Rather than have students answer pre-prepared questions, as I had, Melissa had them discuss with each other their reading responses for that day. The students in Melissa's class in general seemed to be quite comfortable with discussion in a small-group setting. Another interesting point I noticed is that the international students (Nadia and Kareem) opted to join a group together; I noticed, too, that in the group that they joined (which included three white American students), the white American students dominated the discussion. (Darcie)

When Darcie's class came together as a large group, there was as shift in energy. Large group discussion was not as lively and energetic as the small groups. What I noticed about Darcie is that she attempted to move the conversation,

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engaging the small groups for their response to various questions and asking the larger group if they wanted to add anything to the small group's "take" on the question. Darcie's main technique for getting the larger group engaged was to ask follow-up questions to the entire class. Of course, there were a few students that dominated the discussion, this number seems to hover around four or five. Interestingly, there were two moments when students prompted one another to speak in class. This occurred when members of the same small group encouraged one another to "say what you said in our group." This was the only evidence I could see in which students used the small group activity to engage a larger class discussion. Other than these moments, it was Darcie who "prompted" the flow of discussion. (Melissa)

Once again, my observations of Melissa's class were remarkably similar to what she found in my class. It was a real surprise to me to see groups I saw actively engaged with each other and the text fall silent in large group. I had been anticipating a really good large group discussion, but this did not materialize. Like myself, Melissa tried to facilitate a large group instruction by prompting each group with follow-up questions, and by trying to invite other students from other groups to respond. As in my class, there were about four to five students who would carry on the discussion in large group. Only rarely did one student directly answer or address another student; in almost all cases, responses were directed between teacher and student. (Darcie)

Surprisingly, there wasn't a huge difference when I observed Darcie's and Mike's classrooms with the index card exercise. Darcie's class was similar in that she "led the discussion" by prompting students to individually answer the question on the card and then ask follow-up questions to the entire class. The same four or five students dominated the larger group discussion. There was occasionally a dialogue between students. I thought that Mike's class was similar, but also quite different. It was similar to Darcie's class in that Mike was the "leader" in discussion. He prompted students to individually answer questions and then would offer the class several follow-up questions. However, Mike was able to put a twist on the assignment that I thought was useful in his class. He had the students write their names on the cards on which they wrote questions. When the students who read the card had a difficult time answering the question or didn't give a "complete" answer, Mike could ask who wrote the question. He could then ask that student how he or she had answered their own question. This alteration to the exercise was effective because it was a way of engaging at least two voices per question instead of one. This appeared to generate a bit more conversation. Again, like Darcie's class there was a tendency for four or

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five students to dominate the larger class discussion. (Melissa)

In response to Melissa's response to my index card variation: I think that having the student's name on the card helped to shift a certain amount of the discussion away from me—though I think it had limited success. I envision a way in which I could get students to talk with each other in class discussions instead of responding to me, though I'm not sure how that would work yet. (Mike)

I agree with Melissa that Mike's variation was useful for trying to generate some cross-student conversation, rather than having the dynamic be so much between student and teacher, or rather a dynamic in which students respond to each other through the intermediary of the teacher. But I also concur with Melissa, that despite this maneuver, still four to five students dominated the discussion. The same was true of Melissa's class, although my impression there was that the discussion level went up a little bit from what I observed with the small-group exercise. As with the small-group experiment, Melissa (like myself) tried to move discussion along with lots of follow-up questions; Mike also had a similar style of trying to "draw out" student responses. (Darcie)

Due to conferences, I could only observe Darcie's and Melissa's classes once—I think though, that through my own experiences with the small-to-large group exercise, that the dynamic I've seen in my class concurs with their findings.

In sitting in on Darcie's class, I found that she was able to "draw out" some good points in her discussion with students. While there were definitely a few students who dominated the discussion, I felt that Darcie was able to tie the chapters into larger concerns without being too obvious—I thought she handled women's issues in Jordan particularly well. Darcie made a point of talking about women and purity and a number of women in the class poke up on this issue—actually, there were quite a variety of women who spoke when it was related to issues of feminism.

The first index card question in Darcie's class prompted one of the best teaching moments I've seen. The student who picked up this card was noticeably hesitant in asking the question on the card. The question was, "What is the name of the chapter about Jordan's grandmother?" The class too sensed the "smart ass" nature of the question and there seemed to be an awkward moment of silence. Darcie took the question seriously and asked the class in a somewhat joking manner what the name of the chapter was. She then followed the answer with a provocative question, "What does it mean that Jordan is writing her grandmother's life? How can she do that?" To me, Darcie did two (if not more) important things here: she modeled to her students a respect for all questions, giving even the most fatuous question a respect by showing students that there is always a "why" behind every question. Furthermore, Darcie refocused the class out of an uncomfortable situation, parlaying it into an intellectual discussion—and that, I think, worked to save the discussion as a whole. (Mike)

In response to Mike, I just want to jump in here quickly and thank him for his really kind comments about how I handled the situation described above. I have to admit that I probably focus more on the numbers of times I screw up versus the times I pull off

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something successful, so I just want to note how nice (and reassuring) it is to be told that one is doing OK. (Darcie)

Overall, in both Darcie's and Melissa's classes, the index card routine worked pretty much the same, although Melissa had a much more difficult time in getting any larger class discussion to form. Melissa went all the way around the room asking each student to read his/her card, while Darcie and I made it about half way around the room. What I thought was helpful in Melissa's class with this index card exercise was that it "forced" each student to speak and briefly discuss the question at hand. While I am uncomfortable with the use of the word "forced," the index card exercise takes away a certain amount of anxiety, I think, since it is not the student's question. Further, since Melissa asked everyone to read their question, a certain kind of democracy was set forth in the class—no one had to feel as though he or she was risking more by speaking since it "was expected" by everyone. So, while the exercise didn't seem to be quite as successful in her class, I wonder if it wasn't helpful for her shy students. I know that I was particularly shy and exercises like these helped introduce me to speaking in class. (Melissa, I'd be interested in what you think of this?) (Mike)

I guess I didn't realize the potentially democratizing affect this exercise had on students in my class. However, now that I think about it, this was the first class period in which ALL of the students participated in the discussion. As Mike said, I would like to think that this type of "forced" exercise might help shy students, but is it correct to say that this was democratic since it was forced procedure? There is the knowledge that everyone will have to do the same thing, perhaps lessening students' perceived "risk" by participating in class discussion. I have to be honest in saying that even thought the index card exercise helped create more discussion there seemed to be the same tension surrounding class discussion. I feel like it is a constant battle in my classroom. It is important to note, however, that my earlier class does not have the same issues regarding class discussion. So, I was glad we were able to do this project in my "difficult" class. (Melissa)

I agree now with Melissa's problem with my terminology, but nevertheless, I think the general idea is understood. (Mike)

Part III: Assessment/Overall Thoughts

When Mike, Melissa and I gathered at Melissa's house to review our notes prior to writing our report, we began to discuss what we felt we discovered from our observations. WE agreed that in this project, we didn't fully succeed in answering the question, "Is there a way we can engage students to have a better quality and quantity of class discussion in a large group?" While both the small-group method and the index card experiment did generate some discussion, primarily that discussion was carried out by four to five people in each of our classes. In other words, we did not find a method that suddenly encouraged 24 students to speak up in class.

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This leads me to question whether there is such a "method" at all. As Mike pointed out during our discussion, if you think about it, in a class of 24, four to five students works out to be about one in five students who talk; to all of us, this statistical average seemed to make sense, in that one might only expect on in five people to have the confidence, desire and ability to want to participate in class discussion. Mike's point has been particularly helpful to me in reorienting my views about class discussion. I feel less critical either of myself for of my students; it's not necessarily bad teaching on my part, or laziness on the part of my students, but rather, maybe it is "the way things are." I begin to think of graduate seminars I have attended in which not everyone spoke, and I wonder if the same kind of average was working in those classes—that only one out of so many people will feel able and equipped to participate in a discussion. (Darcie)

Following up on Darcie's discussion of Mike's observation, I am interested in examining any developed studies that investigate class discussion in large group settings. To me, and I think Darcie and Mike would agree with this, the dynamics of the large group discussion are difficult. Why are students able to engage, seemingly with ease, in small group discussions, but when we open up to the larger group there is an extreme reluctance for students to speak? Perhaps small groups feel safer. It is possible that the usual absence of a teacher from small groups makes it a space that is free of authoritative evaluation? I don't know and this frustrates me.(Melissa)

I feel like now, when I go into discussion, I will focus on trying to give opportunities for everyone to speak (I think the index cards are really good in doing this), but I will be more accepting of a class in which discussion does not flow fast and furious across the room. I hesitate to say that some of what might be going on in 150 is developmental issues related to freshmen (given, as I noted earlier, not all graduate students speak either), but I think it can be hard to adjust from a high school environment, in which perhaps students were not always encouraged to discuss or give their opinions, to a college environment, where discussion is not only expected, but can be part of the grade. But I do believe that the more discussion occurs, and the more a teacher can be supportive and try to construct opportunities for students to participate, that more people will join in, if only for brief moments of time. I see this in my own classes now that we're in week 8. While four to five students do carry the discussion, I've noticed occasional forays into talking by students who have been previously quiet. While this might be motivated in part by concern about a midterm grade, I would like to think that it also results from increased comfort and confidence with the discussion format. I will be interested to see how the classes Mike, Melissa, and myself teach will be at the end of the semester. (Darcie)

I agree with Darcie to a large extent. I think we need to take more time to be reflective of the kinds of perception students are coming to college with, especially after high school, which seems to mostly emphasize raising your hand, being silent and all that other stuff that is drilled into them since the first grade. Further I have also been frustrated (and shocked) by graduate seminars in which many students do not speak. I think that perhaps we've uncovered a larger cultural force at work here—one that is not endemic with freshmen/undergrads. I

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suppose we could just talk about class discussion at some point in 150—talk about the differences between college and high school and the importance of speaking up. We could also talk more generally about public speaking and tie it into a rhetorical lesson of sorts. I tried to do that in my other class once (not in the class Darcie and Melissa visited). To my mind, there really wasn't that much of an effect of our discussion, but it may be wroth trying again—especially with some more thought behind it.

I've also come to see my class discussions differently after this, not to mention my presence in the classroom. Both Darcie and Melissa thought my discussion went well, and I thought it was average. I need to readjust the means by which I judge that learning is taking place in discussions. I think that the silent students are getting things out of the discussion and that I should not underestimate the listening that is actively going on. I also think I may need to reassess the criteria by which I judge a "successful" discussion. We all came to this project thinking that "flowing," self-sustaining conversation is best—yet is that the *only* discussion style that reflects engagement by a majority of the students? While I personally find this kind of discussion successful because students build off of other students' ideas, I wonder if students in a freshmen class don't need to figure out the basics first. So perhaps our class discussions in 150 eventually foster better large group discussion in other higher-level classes?

I think at the next class discussion after fall break I will try to get students to respond to each other, calling on "Joe" to reply to a comment that "hill" made. I'm not sure if that will work or not, but I think this exercise taught me that it is okay to play around a bit here—and I really don't think students will take it that much out of stride. I could also write something on a good journal by a silent student encouraging him or her to speak in class—something to the effect of: "You've got good stuff here and I think you should share it with the class…"

Like Darcie, I think I will try to look at my class differently now that we have completed this project. Right now, it seems that I can't have the "fast and furious" flow of discussion in my classroom that I would like. Perhaps I need to let the silences speak in the classroom. Until this point in the semester, I was afraid to let there be too much silence in the room during discussion. I would often let my voice fill in the gaps of classroom discussion. I know that in some ways this is dangerous because it is easy for the teacher's voice to become the only one in the classroom. Is this part of the reason why my students don't fully participate in discussion?

Melissa, I really like your phrase, "let the silences speak in the classroom." Besides sounding like part of a kick-ass CCCC paper title, I think there is something there. I've been so afraid of the silences that I end up answering the question and I don't think that serves any purpose. I worry that students have gotten used to this and so if no one answers a question outright, students know that I will end up saying something. I will have to make an effort to work these silences in too. I think they are important (though uncomfortable now that I'm in charge of the classroom!). (Mike)

I agree with Mike here, that part of becoming comfortable as a teacher might involve becoming comfortable with silence, and not being so hasty to "cover up" the gaps

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in the discussion. Why do we feel compelled to view silence as something to be eliminated? What is going on in our culture that makes silence something to be avoided? What's the worst thing that could happen if, as a class, we sit there silent for a while? (Darcie)

This leads me to think about a conclusion all of us agreed upon as we sat down to discuss our findings. We noticed that three of us shared a similar teaching style. That is, we all tried to engage class discussion by using follow-up questions for the class and we filled the gaps of class discussion by adding our own insights through reflective inquiry. This led us to ask why this would happen. We all attended very different undergraduate institutions. Although Darcie and Mike both did their Masters' at UNL, this is their first time teaching. The only thing that connects the three of us is our Ph.D. work here at UNL, and although we are all in 957 together we have not had any shared training as teachers. Therefore, why do we share similar teaching styles? Is there a "meta-pedagogy" that we have somehow subconsciously all picked up from our experiences as students? After discussing this, none of us were able to think of specific professors in our undergraduate experiences who necessarily taught this way, but we thought they probably did. Perhaps, this is a UNL influence? We were all intrigued by this observation but were unable to figure out any answer to this peculiarity? (Melissa)

I remember sitting in Melissa's class when this realization hit me—and while there are a lot of differences among us, our basic approach as teachers was eerily the same. I wonder if the underpinnings of 150 as a course in itself has something to do with our similar teaching styles. Does the personal narrative nature of the class lend itself to a particular teaching style? Since I'm new to this, I'm at a loss to be more specific. I do think that we all share very similar beliefs about our students and the kinds of things we find important in class discussions, so maybe we fit together in terms of the perspective we bring to the classroom?

Overall I was happy to participate with Darcie and Melissa in this project—I think that we all learned a tremendous amount about each other and ourselves as teachers. Honestly, it took a lot of pressure off me to see other classes facing the same challenges I was facing myself. If only for the relationship that we formed as a group this project was well worth the time and effort—we can now talk about our teaching with each other in a way that I don't think I could do with anyone else. I want to continue to think about these issues with my teaching comrades. (Mike)

I agree that this project was a great experience; I learned a lot not only from the observations, but from Melissa and Mike as well. Their suggestions and comments on teaching (such as Mike's use of the index cards, or Melissa's point about silence) have enabled me to improve and feel more confident as a teacher. (Darcie)

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