

Deconstructing a Crisis: Teaching to Promote Peace

By Cynthia Benn Tweedell

In times of national and international crisis, educators are in an important position to promote critical thinking and peacemaking to replace terror and disorganization. In times of intense public awareness, such as a “war on terrorism,” students are surrounded by messages promoting fear and irrationality, and this affects them on the most personal levels. Our mission as educators is to bring our students out of such terror and enable them mutually to reconstruct new understandings of the world around them. This article describes one such means of encouraging students to examine the world from other perspectives in order to deconstruct terror. The format described here empowers students to share responsibility for the content of their learning, promoting peace rather than terror -- in their lives and in their world.

Major barriers hindering students from developing new understandings are the classroom and the lecture/discussion format. The traditional classroom, with seats in rows facing a professor behind a podium, is well suited to reproducing existing systems of knowledge and authority, but is not designed to facilitate the development of a critical consciousness capable of transforming these existing systems. When students have little interaction with one another, social distance is perpetuated and there is little opportunity for peacemaking. The traditional lecture-discussion format is very difficult to manage. Often, lack of student preparation turns it into primarily a lecture class. As students become more alienated from one another, they become more alienated from the content of the course and more reluctant to participate in the process of knowledge construction. Essay tests and papers, designed to stimulate critical thinking, often become recitations of the instructor’s own ideas made during lectures. Generally, such classes often teem with conflict and intolerance on the part of students.

Collaborative learning in small groups has great potential to promote discussion and enhance learning. However, an unstructured group can reduce the classroom to a chat room with little substantive learning. Some students will eagerly get on task in a small group, while others are reluctant to join in a group and mentally withdraw from the activity. A perennial problem with small groups is the presence of the “free rider,” the nonparticipating group member who will allow others to do the work for him/her. To resolve some of these pitfalls of collaborative learning, I have successfully implemented a discussion format, which is structured and motivates student learning.

A few years ago, I began giving points for discussion, enticing students to prepare, attend and participate. Suddenly, class discussion, rather than being seen as a frivolous form of entertainment, became valuable because it was worth a large portion of the final grade. In assigning a point value to discussion, I strongly communicated to students my commitment to the worth of collaborative learning. Students became empowered as they went beyond my own suggestions for discussion and used the classroom community to help clarify their own personal concerns.

The class is very structured. Each day, students bring in five questions stimulated by the day’s reading assignment. After I introduce the material and suggest topics for discussion, the students meet with their groups to discuss their questions for about twenty minutes. I spend about five minutes with each group, listening and occasionally making brief comments, but do not lead or dominate the discussion groups. My presence in the group lets them know that what they were doing is important, and they generally respect my presence enough to stay on task. Leadership is rotated so that yesterday’s leader becomes an evaluator for another group. The evaluator completes a form giving students points for their questions and quality of discussion. The evaluators also earn up to three points, based on the accuracy and helpfulness of their evaluation as judged by the instructor. After the discussion period, the leaders from each group share the highlights of the discussion with the rest of the class. I conclude with a few points of clarification.

The structure of this course reverses the learning process in traditional college courses. There are no “lectures” which determine the content of learning. Students receive points from their discussions, as well as debates and short, reflective essays. There are no tests. This is an attempt to empower students to control their own learning process. Rather than be given questions as in an essay test, they are encouraged to come up with their own questions which they use for group discussion.

These adjustments produce a course that engenders peace and deconstructs terror. There is no need to use quizzes or tests to motivate students. Instead, the learning-through-discussion format rewards student attendance and preparation by giving them points for preparing questions and participating in discussion. Since student preparation is increased, the quality of discussion also is improved. Students focus on discussing the reading rather

than battling with one another. As students get to know one another in the small groups they grow to respect one another's ideas. Student satisfaction with this course is very high. Grades are generally good because the students are actually reading and learning.

This format has been used in sociology and other courses with great success. An important factor for success is the planning of the discussion groups. In the beginning, groups are formed alphabetically, but as I learn more about the social background and abilities of the students, cultural diversity can be maximized. I try to mix strong students with weak students, blacks and whites, males and females. I try to avoid a situation where there is a solitary representative of a cultural group; i.e., five men and one woman. As students learn more about one another, cultural battles subside and give way to respect. In many situations, the group becomes life changing. Fellow group members care for one another.

When monitored closely, such a course can help students understand and grow from one another's differences. Instead of having an endless clash among various gender/ethnic/racial groups, this learning-through-discussion format encourages personal reflection and interpersonal peacemaking. Through discussion in culturally diverse groups, the students in this course became aware that there are other realities which complement their own. Consequently, these students began to reconstruct rather than reproduce their cultural knowledge. Such reconstruction will become a key, liberating them from the prison of the social construction of terror – in their lives and in their world.