

Critical Communities: Intellectual Safety and the Power of Disagreement

Ashby Butnor

Metropolitan State College of Denver

I was involved in p4c Hawai‘i for many years during my graduate studies. It was my first introduction to “teaching,” or, more accurately, the facilitation of philosophical inquiry. I cannot imagine a better way to prepare for a lifetime of such work, though admittedly, the wisdom, imagination, and openness to the world expressed by my young students then has set the bar very high for the men and women I now see on a daily basis. For this reason, I begin each semester anew with the promise of philosophy for children; the promise of a term filled with fruitful dialogue and hard thinking as well as laughter and camaraderie.

What I would call the “p4c pedagogy” has become infused into my undergraduate teaching. The Good Thinker’s Toolkit, the model of reflective community inquiry, and the desire to “scratch beneath the surface” are woven into the foundation of my courses, even when p4c is never explicitly discussed. At the beginning of each semester though, there is one concept that stands out as a recurring challenge: intellectual safety.

Intellectual safety is often conflated with the feeling of being comfortable. Susan Herbst (2010), in her book *Rude Democracy*, writes that, “72 percent of students agreed that it was very important for them always to feel comfortable in class.” I imagine this feeling of comfort as similar to feelings of relaxation and belonging, free of stress and doubt, while being entertained, amused, or satisfied in some way. Herbst adds to this sense by including the students’ desire to remain “unthreatened intellectually.” While we may all strive to maintain classrooms absent of physical or emotional threats, a college classroom without intellectual challenges is likely one of complacency and mental laziness.

It is my claim that intellectual growth, for both an individual and a community, must involve some kind of *discomfort*. I see this discomfort as a natural by-product of an initiation to interactive, dialogue-driven learning. A

dialogic pedagogy is one in which new ideas, arguments, and positions emerge through serious, intellectual conversation. In this approach, all participants are responsible for their own contributions and accountable to the community of inquirers. If a student is accustomed to, and thus comfortable with, learning directly from a teacher, a textbook, or a PowerPoint slide, being asked to think and talk about what one thinks may be a truly threatening experience. Thinking may be painful. Being asked to defend a point of view may feel intimidating. Having to create or change a position can be taxing. For some, even speaking seriously in front of others may be foreign and disconcerting. Fear, insecurity, and embarrassment may be completely normal reactions to a change in teaching strategy and, hence, a shift in what is expected of each student.

Even for those experienced in community inquiry, moments of discomfort may be common when engaged in dialogue. What is so exciting about interactive and dialogue-driven learning is its open-ended structure. In some sense, one must be ready for anything—for changing one’s mind, becoming aware of one’s own implicit assumptions, being attracted to or disturbed by new perspectives, struggling through a difficult idea, or impressing even oneself with an articulate expression of insight. Along with moments of discomfort are also these moments of excitement, discovery, affirmation, and achievement. It is these “aha moments,” and their persistence and reappearance, that make the struggle and pain worthwhile. It is precisely this sense of accomplishment that comes from the thinking process itself that I want my students to experience.

I recommend that we reconceive intellectual safety to embrace something more than simply feeling comfortable. An intellectually safe place ought to be established with the recognition that *vulnerability* is a central component of the epistemic mission. We are vulnerable whenever we willingly

put our ideas and positions at risk—risk of being challenged, revised, defeated, or elevated in the course of conversation. In some sense, we are putting our very selves at risk. We truly give of ourselves in this collective, dialectical process. Not only do we openly share our own partial interpretations of the truth, but we must also relinquish our stake in those ideas in order to fully hear and be present to the positions of others. And all participants must then be invested in a quest for truth and meaning and willing to follow the inquiry where it leads. In our search for an understanding greater than our own, we seek, in the words of Hans-Georg Gadamer, a fusion of horizons. For a genuine fusion, a genuine—i.e., risky, vulnerable, and challenging—dialogue must take place. This fusion involves more than a mere merger of ideas. There’s a sense of an internal debate taking place; a sense of striving to understand different positions in the process of presenting a better account of one’s own and, further, supporting the best position overall.

There is, I imagine, nothing more tedious than a classroom of students who constantly agree with one another. This kind of agreement is not the expression of shared ideas, but, rather, an unwillingness to put anything at risk. In my classrooms, I want students to become fully invested in the value and power of disagreement. Thus, I engage in the formation of what I call “critical communities.” The mission of a critical community is the pursuit of truth through intellectual engagement with texts, ideas, and one another. At the heart of such engagement is disagreement. With my students, I work to foster and develop the skills necessary to challenge, critique, and disagree in a constructive manner. It is the moments of disagreement that push us forward in the dialogue and allow us to get somewhere, however indeterminate that place may be. However, I dissuade them from seeing disagreement as a facile, two-sided debate. Given the prevalence of over-simplified and factionalized political debate, this model of disagreement is one that students either emulate or seek to avoid in their complacent agreement with one another. Thus, part of establishing a critical community that seeks truth and common wisdom is to show them another way to disagree. Disagreement reveals complexity, nuance, and subtlety, rather than simplification and over-generalization. Disagreement raises questions and draws people together in a search for answers, rather than drawing the lines of insurmountable difference. A critical community wants answers, but not easy answers.

The question then remains as to how we can create intellectually safe places while simultaneously elevating the value of disagreement and criticism. How can one feel intellectually safe while explicitly making oneself vulnerable to challenges? I believe a crucial first step is empowerment. Students need to come to value themselves, their community, their ability to think, and their capacity to cultivate thinking skills. I see students who are often intimidated, and even incapacitated, at the possibility of getting something wrong. This incapacitating level of self-consciousness needs to be dismantled. I begin this process in the simplest of ways; I begin each term by simply getting them talking. I will spend the first few weeks of each course with as much dialogue-driven talking as possible. My expectations for the level of discourse at this point are fairly minimal, though I try to raise the bar gradually. So much rides on a student’s perceptions of her own abilities and her belief in the kind of learner she is (typically, a quiet one who prefers lectures!). If I can persuade each student to articulate her thoughts to others and to validate those thoughts and ideas with as much encouragement as possible, students may begin to gain more confidence. For students who are already accustomed to such methods, I may begin to prod them for better responses or encourage others to disagree or raise an objection to their points. I try to do this in as light-hearted a way as possible, pointing out that laughter and good fun can be part and parcel of intellectual challenge and learning. In addition to instilling useful habits in each student and modeling a form of critical engagement, this process also builds community. In a way, we are “in it together.” Students begin to realize they are embarking on a journey and everyone plays a role in this expedition. The better we work together, the better this journey will become.

The analogy of a journey helps to remind all of us that we are engaging in a process. As educators, we need to instill in students the idea of learning as a process, and, even better, a communal process by which communities of inquirers can progress together. Wisdom does not come via instant gratification. It is a slow, arduous process of maturation and skill building of which we are all capable. Establishing intellectual safety requires instilling a necessary amount of confidence to recognize vulnerability as a legitimate and vital aspect of learning. Understanding that errors, misjudgments, and revisions are part of the learning process, students may be more likely to value constructive criticism, disagreement,

and challenges to their current ideas. Furthermore, with growing confidence in their abilities and progress, students will come to be even more motivated to learn, explore, and find joy in the process itself.

Intellectual safety, then, should not be understood as feeling comfortable. Rather, it should be conceived as a feeling of trust in oneself and one's community to honestly and genuinely engage in thinking together. Gadamer (1980, p. 121–122) describes shared inquiry as the activity in which we “willingly put all individual opinions to the test while abjuring all contentiousness and yielding to the play of question and answer.” Here, we see the beauty of dialogue; it is both a testing and challenging of our perspectives as well as a playful and joyful pursuit for truth through dialogue. However, it is precisely intellectual safety, the “abjuring [of] all contentiousness,” that allows for this dual identity as both critique and play. While we should reject belligerent quarrels and unproductive squabbling amongst our students, we need not eliminate intellectual “threats” or challenges. These, we have seen, are the engines of this enterprise. And lest we not forget the point of this process, Gadamer concludes this passage by stating, “shared inquiry should make possible not only insight into this or that specific thing, but, insofar as is humanly possible, insight into all virtue and vice and the whole of reality.” While this may be a bit too lofty an aspiration for our own critical communities, the role of our shared inquiries is no less important.

REFERENCES

- Herbst, S. (2010). *Rude Democracy: Civility and Incivility in American Politics*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Gadamer, H-G. (1980). *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*. P. Christopher Smith. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.