

# THE CLASSROOM AS CENTRE FOR DIALOGUE

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## Context

Higher education is often criticised for failing to equip graduates with skills for the real world. Top amongst a raft of shortcomings are communication and interpersonal skills, teamwork and collaboration, and leadership and self-direction. Central to criticisms is the inability of students to apply theory to practice—to generalise what they have learnt beyond the narrow confines of the academic environment.

Part of this problem is caused by the way teachers talk to (at) students, as opposed to talking with them or encouraging them to talk to and learn from one another. Too often, university classrooms treat students as passive recipients of knowledge transmitted primarily from the instructor. Students do not learn how to have meaningful, generative Dialogue, or how to appreciate the insights and contributions of one another.

Departing from the typical lecture format can enhance the overall educational experience for students and teachers. More holistic learning experiences tap into a wide range of learning modalities deepening learning for students with diverse learning styles. Material becomes more meaningful, relevant, and memorable. Flexible learning approaches more accurately represent the real world: how people learn and behave outside the classroom.

MGMT7030 Management and Organisation, taught at the ANU College of Business and Economics, is an example of a course embracing a versatile, engaging learning approach. It was redesigned to incorporate theory *and* practice. The revised course has students elect, develop, implement, and evaluate a project as a class (that is as a community). The key parameter is to *execute a project that builds university community and / or improves the overall learning experience of all stakeholders*. Central to these endeavours is Dialogue, especially when community is envisaged as the means and ends.

## Dialogue as a Strategy

In Management and Organisation—*The Community Project*, the “lecturer” facilitates Dialogue and development of associated skills of collaboration. Students learn about Dialogue by doing it, and by reflecting on their Dialogue episodes.

Dialogue is envisaged as the means to build and express community. The notion of citizenship and agency are also pervasive lenses through which theory is interpreted. Students learn that they can and must contribute to the success of the course, the project, and each other’s learning and development.

Most class sessions have at least one significant activity involving students in intense Dialogue with various numbers of others. The intent is to create conditions wherein Dialogue and, thus, community can flourish. Students learn from the experience of community and its creation *in the classroom* what they need to do in their own project(s).

## **Method**

Students are exposed to a range of Dialogue approaches, including Search Conference and Conversation Café, and methods of group problem-solving and decision-making. Group process is stressed throughout the semester. Lectures are supplanted by group work, interactive exercises, and student-led activities to build collaborative skills, reinforce values of community and shared action, and exemplify course principles, such as “brilliance resides in the group” and “everyone a leader.”

Learning Cells (study groups) and shared reflection provide continuity over the semester. A prime task for Learning Cells is to develop and facilitate a learning experience for the rest of the class (they teach a theory section). They are assessed on how creatively and engagingly they bring assigned material across. Learning Cells also develop and submit group learning journals twice during the semester. Their group reflection and the reflection periods facilitated by the instructor in class develop Dialogue and reflection as core values and competencies.

## **Outcomes**

In addition to course content per se (the topical areas covered in a survey course on management and organisation), students develop:

- ▶ A greater service ethic
- ▶ Appreciation for and commitment to community and collective activity
- ▶ Communication skills, platform and interpersonal
- ▶ Leadership (and followership)
- ▶ Initiative and self-direction
- ▶ Teamwork and collaboration skills and supporting attitudes
- ▶ A deep sense of empowerment; feelings of agency and self-efficacy
- ▶ Reverence for reflection; discipline and skills for reflection, individual and shared
- ▶ Practical understanding of citizenship and democracy, and how they relate to self and other

## **Lessons Learnt**

Dialogue can be both learnt in university classrooms and used instrumentally as a learning strategy.

Much can be learnt through the process of Dialogue. The content may be different than that intended at the outset, but probably as important if not more so.

Most undergraduate and postgraduate students have the capability for meaningful and effective Dialogue, and respond favourably to dialogic approaches in the classroom. This is remarkably the case with international students.

Dialogue is the great equaliser: it gives everyone voice. It is inextricably linked to democracy, citizenship, and community.

Few classroom “interactions” are dialogical and thus reinforce existing relations and perceptions, perpetuating the status quo. These are one-sided and safe. Neither students nor teachers learn much under these conventional conditions.

Reflection and Dialogue are companion processes. In concert, they significantly enhance individual and group learning and contribute to improved group dynamics and effectiveness.