DISCUSSION IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

Recently one of us led a discussion that confirmed for us why we value the discussion method so highly. Steve Preskill was teaching a course on educational ethics and had found a newspaper article describing a local school board's refusal to honor a "do not resuscitate" (DNR) order. A DNR order is issued when a person is gravely ill. It is a legally binding document that is signed by the individual's next of kin and a supervising physician. They declare that the patient's medical condition is so fragile and grave that if the patient goes into cardiac arrest, no effort should be made to resuscitate. The article Steve found involved a schoolchild whose parents had signed a DNR order. The school board took the position that human life is unconditionally sacred. Because preserving life takes precedence over everything else, the board claimed, all efforts must be made to save a child's life, regardless of circumstances or DNR orders.

Steve projected a summary of the article on an overhead screen for the whole class to read. Steve describes the experience in the following vignette.

> I had brought this article into class that day to illustrate what it meant for an organization to take a principled stand on an issue. In previous classes we had been reading articles that took a highly principled view of the value of human life, so I expected that most students would support the school board's position

without much disagreement. I went into class believing that the school board's decision was courageous and morally defensible.

The first students who spoke up after reading the summary supported the school board's decision. As I heard their comments, I smiled and nodded in agreement, all the while quietly celebrating how much my students were learning from my lectures and the readings I had assigned. But as the group probed deeper and as more students spoke, more information as well as opinion emerged. A few students argued that the board showed a marked lack of respect for the parents' carefully reasoned decision. I was taken aback by this dissenting view and was even more surprised by the students' ability to defend it from the same uncompromising position on the sacredness of human life. One student who had had a lot of experience with DNR orders explained that they are written only after agonizing deliberation among parents, health care professionals, attorneys, and educators. They therefore should not be taken lightly. Others pointed out that despite the board's good intentions, the members had acted out of ignorance of the legal, medical, and even ethical issues involved.

By now I was starting to realize that things were not nearly as simple as I'd imagined. What I'd thought would be a straightforward illustration of a principled stand was turning into a deep probing of a situation in which a single, seemingly unassailable principle was being employed to defend diametrically opposing views. This was disconcerting, surprising, and gratifying in equal measure. I felt pleased that things were taking an unexpected turn but uncertain that I could stay on top of the discussion and make some good connections between what students were saying and the concept of taking a principled stand. And at the back of my mind was the contrary thought that it wasn't my duty always to make connections for students.

Despite my uncertainty, I was engaged by this exchange of views and asked someone to explain in what way the school board showed an ignorance of ethical issues. A different student explained that DNR orders are usually inspected by ethicists before they are issued. Another student noted that it wasn't up to any one person or entity to defy such an order, that what to do in such situations was the responsibility of the community as a whole. Furthermore, this student argued, the DNR order was closer to being a reflection of broad community participation than the unilateral fiat of the board was.

This last view showed a sophisticated understanding of communitarianism (a view we hadn't even covered yet!) and led to other students' expressing the opinion that the school board's decision could be defended only if certain conditions were met. The school board members needed to show that they had consulted with as many different people as the authors of the DNR order had, and they also needed to show that they had engaged in the same level of careful forethought as that displayed by the parents and physicians in arriving at their position. I rocked back and forth on the balls of my feet, a bit shaken by this collective display of knowledge and wisdom. My initial conviction that the board was in the right had been thoroughly undermined, causing me to wonder how many more of my beliefs would be thrown into doubt if I exposed them to the consideration of this group. How humbling and disconcerting! And yet how inspiring to take part in a discussion that deepened understanding by allowing many points of view to emerge and to be carefully weighed by all involved.

This vignette demonstrates why we place such store in discussion as a teaching method. As Steve's experience illustrates, discussion is a valuable and inspiring means for revealing the diversity of opinion that lies just below the surface of almost any complex issue. Although there are many ways to learn, discussion is a particularly wonderful way to explore supposedly settled questions and to develop a fuller appreciation for the multiplicity of human experience and knowledge. To see a topic come alive as diverse and complex views multiply is one of the most powerful experiences we can have as learners and teachers. In a discussion where participants feel their views are valued and welcomed, it is impossible to predict how many contrasting perspectives will emerge or how many unexpected opinions will arise.

In revealing and celebrating the multiplicity of perspectives possible, discussion at its best exemplifies the democratic process. All participants in a democratic discussion have the opportunity to voice a strongly felt view and the obligation to devote every ounce of their attention to each speaker's words. In this minidemocracy, all have the right to express themselves as well as the responsibility to create spaces that encourage even the most reluctant speaker to participate.

Discussion and democracy are inseparable because both have the same root purpose—to nurture and promote human growth. By growth we mean roughly the same thing as John Dewey (1916) did: the development of an ever-increasing capacity for learning and an appreciation of and sensitivity to learning undertaken by others. Democracy and discussion imply a process of giving and

taking, speaking and listening, describing and witnessing—all of which help expand horizons and foster mutual understanding. Discussion is one of the best ways to nurture growth because it is premised on the idea that only through collaboration and cooperation with others can we be exposed to new points of view. This exposure increases our understanding and renews our motivation to continue learning. In the process, our democratic instincts are confirmed: by giving the floor to as many different participants as possible, a collective wisdom emerges that would have been impossible for any of the participants to achieve on their own.

But we do not prize discussion solely because it helps us attain worthy democratic aims. We practice it eagerly simply because it's so enjoyable and exciting. Unpredictable and risky, it is the pedagogical and educational equivalent of scaling a mountain or shooting dangerous rapids. Never sure what we'll encounter as we push toward the top or as we career around the next bend, our level of alertness and attentiveness remains high. Indeed, there is an exhilaration that we experience in the best of discussions that is not unlike the thrill we enjoy in the most challenging of outdoor activities. This is why we like teaching democratically. In remaining open to the unexpected, we feel engaged and alive. So our commitment to discussion is not just moral and philosophical but also deeply personal and importantly self-gratifying. Even if we lacked a principled rationale for favoring discussion, we would still keep the conversation going because it gives us so much pleasure.

BLENDING DISCUSSION, DIALOGUE, AND CONVERSATION

Certain authors who agree about the potential of group talk have attempted to make distinctions among conversation, discussion, and dialogue. The philosopher Matthew Lipman (1991) argues that conversation seeks equilibrium, with each person in turn taking opportunities to speak and then listen but where little or no movement occurs. Conversation, Lipman claims, is an exchange of thoughts and feelings in which genial cooperation prevails, whereas dialogue aims at disequilibrium in which "each argument evokes a counterargument that pushes itself beyond the other and pushes the other beyond itself" (p. 232). Dialogue for Lipman is

an exploration or inquiry in which the participants view themselves as collaborators intent on expeditiously resolving the problem or issue they face. Educational philosopher Nicholas Burbules (1993), while less inclined than Lipman to distinguish sharply between conversation and dialogue, suggests that conversation is more informal and less structured than dialogue and that dialogue focuses more on inquiry and increasing understanding and tends to be more exploratory and questioning than conversation.

David Bridges (1988) claims that discussion is different from conversation and other forms of group talk by its "concern with the development of knowledge, understanding or judgement among those taking par" (p. 17). He believes that discussion is more serious than conversation in that it requires the participants to be both "mutually responsive" to the different views expressed and disposed to be "affected by opinions one way or another in so far as (on some criteria) they merit acceptance or approval" (p. 15). Similarly, James Dillon (1994) argues that whereas conversation is aimless, carefree, and effortless, discussion, in his view, is highly "disciplined and concerted talk" (p. 13) in which people come together to resolve some issue or problem that is important to them.

Other observers prefer the word conversation, meaning something a little less formal and structured than what Lipman, Burbules, Bridges, and Dillon call dialogue or discussion. The neo-pragmatist philosopher Richard Rorty (1979) thinks of philosophy itself as a stimulus to a great and continuing conversation. For Rorty, keeping the conversation going is the most important thing. As long as conversation lasts, he remarks, there is hope "for agreement, or, at least, exciting and fruitful disagreement" (p. 318). Bringing people together in conversation and challenging them to use their imaginations to create new meanings and move toward greater human inclusiveness is, for Rorty (1989), a moral endeavor. To him, conversation extends our sense of "'we' to people whom we have previously thought as 'they'" (p. 192) and provides a forum for acting on our obligation to achieve solidarity with others.

A major influence on Rorty is the English philosopher Michael Oakeshott (1962), who characterizes group talk as an "unrehearsed intellectual adventure" (p. 198) in which as many participants as

possible are invited to speak and acknowledge one another. Despite the inevitable and irreconcilable differences between them, the act of conversation allows them to emerge from the experience broadened and enriched. For Oakeshott, participation in conversation is a distinctively human activity. Becoming skillful at this involves us in discerning how each voice reflects a different set of human interests. Through the process of discernment one becomes more sensitized to neglected or discounted voices and to finding room for them to air their views. In Oakeshott's view, conversation is one of the most important ways for human beings to make meaning, to construct a worldview, and to provide a "meetingplace of various modes of imagining" (p. 206). While each person who contributes should have the serious intention of engaging others, the best conversations maintain a tension between seriousness and playfulness. "As with children, who are great conversationalists," Oakeshott offers, "the playfulness is serious and the seriousness in the end is only play" (p. 202).

Although we use the term *discussion* to explore the theory and practice of group talk, we are actually blending or synthesizing the descriptions of discussion, dialogue, and conversation put forward by Lipman, Burbules, Bridges, Dillon, Rorty, and Oakeshott. Our understanding of discussion incorporates reciprocity and movement, exchange and inquiry, cooperation and collaboration, formality and informality. We acknowledge that much can be said for a simple exchange of views that does not oblige the participants to critique one another's opinions. Simply to understand more fully the thoughts and feelings of another increases our capacity to empathize and renews our appreciation for the variety of human experience. We also know that discussion that primarily entertains has merit and is an important part of human experience and education. However, in general we define *discussion* as an alternately serious and playful effort by a group of two or more to share views and engage in mutual and reciprocal critique. The purposes of discussion are fourfold: (1) to help participants reach a more critically informed understanding about the topic or topics under consideration, (2) to enhance participants' self-awareness and their capacity for self-critique, (3) to foster an appreciation among participants for the diversity of opinion that invariably emerges when viewpoints are exchanged openly and honestly, and (4) to act as a catalyst to helping people take informed action in the world.

Discussion is an important way for people to affiliate with one another, to develop the sympathies and skills that make participatory democracy possible. It is, as James Dillon (1994) has said, "a good way for us to be together" (p. 112) so that we can share personal stories of triumph and trouble and stretch our capacity for empathizing with others. In telling our stories, we employ different forms of speech to stimulate and move others, to emote and express strong feelings, and simply to celebrate the joys of coming together.

MAKING DISCUSSION CRITICAL

Whether labeled "discussion," "dialogue," or "conversation," the liveliest interactions are critical. When participants take a critical stance, they are committed to questioning and exploring even the most widely accepted ideas and beliefs. Conversing critically implies an openness to rethinking cherished assumptions and to subjecting those assumptions to a continuous round of questioning, argument, and counterargument. One of the defining characteristics of critical discussion is that participants are willing to enter the conversation with open minds. This requires people to be flexible enough to adjust their views in the light of persuasive, well-supported arguments and confident enough to retain their original opinions when rebuttals fall short. Although agreement may sometimes be desirable, it is by no means a necessity. Indeed, continued disagreement may be a productive outcome of conversation, particularly if some explanation for those differences can be found. An airing of differences can stimulate additional discussion and offer an opportunity to clarify one's own view in relation to another's.

Henry Giroux (1987) offers a view of critical discussion in which teachers become transformative intellectuals who engage and empower their students to probe the contradictions and injustices of the larger society. Building on the tradition of ideology critique in the Frankfurt School of critical social theory, he argues that classrooms are sites where students and teachers converge to make meaning by "interrogating different languages or ideological discourses as they are developed in an assortment of texts" (p. 119). Conceived this way, discussion discloses the ways in which different linguistic, cultural, and philosophical traditions can

silence voices. A critical posture leads people to analyze these traditions to understand how they have kept entire groups out of the conversation. Teachers and students probe their own taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions to uncover the ways these serve dominant interests. This kind of critical discussion helps people see how their choices can either perpetuate injustice and continue silence or contribute to growth and even emancipation.

Autobiographically grounded critical discussion allows discussants to discern the connection between what C. Wright Mills (1959) called private troubles and public issues. By reinterpreting personal difficulties as dimensions of broader social and political trends, we realize that our problems are not always idiosyncratic and due to our personal failings. Also, we are better able to generate strategies for counteracting the most dehumanizing, alienating, and oppressive tendencies of modern society. Discussion, in this sense, not only provides people with opportunities to share their experiences and express concern for one another but can also lead to more effective and more humane action.

PRACTICING THE DISPOSITIONS OF DEMOCRATIC DISCUSSION

If discussion-based classrooms are to be crucibles for democratic processes and mutual growth, students and teachers need to practice certain dispositions. In our own classes, we encourage students to name and learn these dispositions, and we try to model them in our teaching. Our efforts at getting students to approximate these ideals have been mixed at best, but even naming them is useful in helping students become more collaborative and respectful participants in discussion. There are many such dispositions worth considering. Those that are particularly important for us are hospitality, participation, mindfulness, humility, mutuality, deliberation, appreciation, hope, and autonomy.

HOSPITALITY

Parker Palmer writes about hospitality as one of the foundations for good dialogue in his book *To Know as We Are Known* (1993). By hospitality he means an atmosphere in which people feel invited to participate. The conviviality and congeniality that prevail encourage people to take risks and to reveal strongly held opinions. We try to create a hospitable atmosphere in our classes by devoting a good part of the first class or two to giving students opportunities to talk and write autobiographically and by suggesting (while trying hard not to be too intrusive) that they share something important about themselves. It is essential, by the way, that we do everything that we ask the students to do. We therefore spend some class time relating our own personal histories. We also devote one of the initial classes to a presentation of some of our own views on key educational issues and follow this presentation with a critique of these views. We hope to show in this way that every view is subject to criticism but that this can be done with respect and dignity.

Hospitality implies a mutual receptivity to new ideas and perspectives and a willingness to question even the most widely accepted assumptions. There is nothing soft about hospitality. It does not mean that standards are lowered or that heightened concern for one another is taken as an end in itself. Hospitality does not make learning easier or less burdensome, but it does "make the painful things possible, things without which no learning can occur—things like exposing ignorance, testing tentative hypotheses, challenging false or partial information, and mutual criticism of thought" (Palmer, 1993, p. 74). Taking hospitality seriously also means balancing seriousness of purpose with lightness of tone and employing self-deprecating humor, particularly when the tension becomes too great.

PARTICIPATION

In any strong democratic community, everyone is encouraged to participate in significant ways on as wide a range of issues as possible. In other words, democratic discussions work best when a large number of students participate, when they do so on many different occasions and with respect to many different issues, and when what they contribute adds depth and subtlety to the discussion. When a wide variety of learners express themselves, other participants are challenged to consider and digest a diverse range of views. This results in a richer and more memorable learning experience for all.

We don't want to suggest that everyone has to speak during the discussion, though it is desirable if many people do so. What is essential is that everyone finds ways to contribute to others' understanding. Sometimes this happens through speech, sometimes through such alternative media as written assignments and journal entries, informal exchanges during breaks, electronic mail, and even personal communications with the instructor. This places a burden on the instructor, as well as other participants, to seek out the opinions of quiet members and to ensure that these opinions are communicated to the group as a whole in a manner that respects their privacy.

We are quite aware of the students in our classes who are consistently quiet (see Chapter Nine), and often we speak to them privately to find out what we can do to help them participate more actively. Sometimes they say that they prefer to remain silent and that they are otherwise satisfied with the class. Such students, however, often become much more animated when the class breaks up into small groups. Knowing that many students are uncomfortable speaking in a large group has led us to organize small group interactions for our students much more often than in the past. Sometimes another student's dominance is the problem, or our own intellectual zeal prevents some students from joining in. In such cases we must make a greater effort to curb our own eagerness to speak in order to leave room for others to express themselves.

Inseparable from participation is the notion of efficacy—the sense that one's participation matters, that it is having an impact on others. Political philosopher Carol Pateman (1970) has written eloquently about this with respect to industrial democracy, but it is just as important in classrooms. The incentive to participate diminishes when what one says or contributes is ignored or leaves no discernible impact. Everyone in democratic classrooms, but especially the instructor, must work at encouraging widespread participation and finding spaces during class time to receive more than just perfunctory responses from the class. For us this means that we must in some cases ask follow-up questions, at other times rephrase what has been said, and in still other situations show clearly and assertively how one person's contribution is related to other ideas already presented.

MINDFULNESS

In *The Good Society*, Robert Bellah and his colleagues (1991) argue that "democracy means paying attention" (p. 254). Paying close attention to another's words is no small feat. It calls "on all of our resources of intelligence, feeling, and moral sensitivity" (p. 254). As in Hans-Georg Gadamer's notion of dialogue (1989), paying close attention in this manner causes us to lose ourselves, to become completely absorbed in hearing out what someone else has to say. The paying of attention is what we mean by mindfulness. It involves being aware of the whole conversation—of who has spoken and who has not—and of doing what one can to ensure that the discussion doesn't get bogged down in the consideration of issues that are of concern only to a very small minority of participants.

In general, mindfulness is a crucial component of any really good discussion. Without learners who are willing to listen carefully and patiently to what others have to say, discussion cannot proceed beyond the most superficial level. Teachers must model a high level of attentiveness to convey the importance of being mindful. When the two of us lead discussions, we strain to hear and to understand, fully and correctly, what is being said. We often ask follow-up questions to make sure that we understand a comment and to affirm that all our attention and our energy are focused on what each student is expressing.

A component of mindfulness is what political theorist Mark Kingwell (1995) calls *tact*. Kingwell argues that when we share public space, we must curb our compulsion to convey our own moral vision in order to make room for others to receive a full hearing. Tact sometimes involves holding in check our desire to express ourselves fully and vociferously. It doesn't mean compromising our principles or remaining quiet at all times; a tactful person may do a fair amount of talking. But it does oblige us to pay close attention to what others have said and not said and to defer to those who have had few opportunities to speak.

We have found Kingwell's discussion of tact particularly helpful in our own teaching. Teachers, including the two of us, have a tendency to insist on saying all the things they want to say without regard for the group as a whole or the needs of individual participants. This

is partly the result of a kind of pedagogical compulsiveness to give the students their money's worth, but it is also a consequence of teachers' viewing their own ideas as superior to and more urgent than the ideas of their students. We have come to realize that group cohesiveness and the give-and-take of a good discussion are usually more important than any particular thing that we feel compelled to contribute.

HUMILITY

Related to mindfulness is humility. Humility is the willingness to admit that one's knowledge and experience are limited and incomplete and to act accordingly. It means acknowledging that others in the group have ideas to express that might teach us something new or change our mind about something significant. It is being willing to see all others in the group as potential teachers. Humility also implies an inclination to admit errors in judgment. Palmer (1993) reminds us that acknowledging our own ignorance is simply the first step in the pursuit of truth. Humility helps us remember that learning is always an uncertain, even uneasy quest. If we admit the limits of our knowledge and opinions, we are more likely to work authentically to create greater understanding among group members.

MUTUALITY

Mutuality means that it is in the interest of all to care as much about each other's self-development as one's own. We demonstrate mutuality when we muster all the resources we can to ensure that all participants benefit from the discussion. When we act with mutuality, we realize that our own flourishing depends in a vital sense on the flourishing of all others. This commitment to others not only generates a spirit of goodwill and generosity but also enhances trust. People become more willing to take risks and speak frankly because these actions are more likely to be seen as mutually beneficial. When we devote ourselves to others' learning as much as our own, the atmosphere of openness that is created encourages engagement with the material to be learned. It instills in students the confidence to be both teacher and student. Instead of being passive recipients of the instructor's wisdom, students alternate between the roles of teacher and learner, sometimes explaining and conveying information and at other times actively absorbing and interpreting what others have to share.

To allow the traditional dividing line between teacher and student to become blurred in this way requires teachers and students to view their enterprise as truly collaborative. In collaborative classrooms, the responsibility for teaching and learning is held in common. Creating such a climate, incidentally, does not absolve teachers of their responsibility to help students learn. Rather, it means that everyone in the group takes that responsibility seriously. When we acknowledge and respect others as teachers and learners, we greatly increase our chances of having those feelings reciprocated. We create a situation in which our efforts to respect and acknowledge our classmates' ideas, opinions, and needs are reflected back to us, thereby spurring our own learning, our identification with the group, and our self-respect.

DELIBERATION

Deliberation refers to the willingness of participants to discuss issues as fully as possible by offering arguments and counterarguments that are supported by evidence, data, and logic and by holding strongly to these unless there are good reasons not to do so. Put another way, democratic classrooms should be highly contentious forums where different points of view are forcibly, though civilly, advanced by as many different participants as possible and abandoned only in response to persuasive arguments or compelling evidence. Deliberative people enter discussions aware that the ensuing exchange of views may modify their original opinions. Political scientist James Fishkin (1995) points out that we often think that when equality and respect prevail, democracy has been attained. He is quick to warn, however, that unless there is a general commitment to deliberative practices that foster reflective and informed judgments, democracy is robbed of its authority and moral meaning. In Fishkin's view, deliberation implies collaboratively addressing a topic or problem as carefully and thoroughly as possible so that the full range of different views in the group is presented and defended.

What Fishkin describes is similar to Jürgen Habermas's ideal speech situation (1984, 1987). In this situation, all discussants are equally able to make and present arguments, all possible arguments are given full and equal airing, and sufficient time is equally given to all participants to question and critique each of the arguments presented so that in the end the issue is resolved in light of the force of the best argument. Michael Collins (1991) summarizes Habermas's ideal speech situation as a

> group learning experience where participants put forward their own views on the problem at hand, listen carefully and respectfully to those of others, and examine seriously all relevantly identified information introduced to the situation. It does not take the form of a debate, or the mere weighing of pros and cons. The process is more rational and democratic—a kind of ongoing, thoughtful conversation. All participants anticipate that their individual contributions will receive serious consideration from others. At the same time, they remain open to changing or to reconstructing their own stance on the problem under consideration in the light of what others have to say and on the weight of all relevantly identified information [p. 12].

Like any ideal, this is an impossible situation to achieve in practice, but it is one standard that we find useful for measuring and critiquing our efforts to conduct democratic discussions. We do not believe, as John Gastil (1993) suggests, that deliberation should result in a "rationally motivated consensus" (p. 25). This may sometimes be a worthy goal, but it may be just as desirable if deliberation results in continuing differences' being better understood and more readily tolerated. Deliberation also frequently involves an evaluation of how effectively the problem has been resolved. It entails a commitment to rethink, reexamine, or reformulate issues or problems in the light of new experiences or new lines of thought.

In our own teaching, we have found the ideal of deliberation to be especially elusive. Our desire to practice the other dispositions mentioned may get in the way of creating a truly deliberative classroom. Specifically, we find that our interest in carving out a safe and hospitable space for people to speak, a place where they can feel affirmed and acknowledged, is itself so difficult that the standard of deliberation must often wait for later. Consequently, the semester is usually more than half over before we think that students in our classes are starting to hold one another accountable for clear and well-substantiated arguments.

Our experience may be unique, but it is fairly consistent. We have been forced to conclude that the kind of teaching we are trying to do probably requires an entire academic year of regular meetings, rather than the fairly standard single semester. We concede that we must do more to hold our students to a higher deliberative standard earlier in the semester, but we know that imposing this standard too early is risky. It may prevent the emergence of the kind of trust and mutual respect that form such an important foundation for honest and engaged discussion. Margery Osborne (1992) describes this dilemma nicely: "The first few meetings of the class are, for me, filled with tension between creating a place where ideas can be safely aired and questioned and creating a place where we can push, confront, and challenge one another's ideas" (p. 108).

APPRECIATION

Burbules (1993) mentions appreciation briefly as one of a number of important "emotional" factors in dialogue (p. 39). Few of us take enough opportunities in everyday life to express appreciation to one another for a thoughtful comment, a powerful insight, or a wise observation. Because democratic classrooms stress respect, mutuality, and civility, a logical extension of these notions is finding space and time to express our appreciation to one another. When a helpful observation clarifies a key point or an intriguing comment excites further curiosity, the disposition of appreciation inclines us to express our gratitude openly and honestly. Like many of the attitudes already mentioned, appreciation brings people closer together and raises the level of trust. But even more important, openly expressing our appreciation for one another engenders a kind of joyous collaboration that is characteristic of the most productive and most democratic of communities.

One of us is especially good at finding ways to express and model appreciation for others. His enthusiasm for the possibilities allowed by dialogue is so great that when it goes well, when people openly exchange their ideas in a respectful, clear, and thoughtful manner, he usually cannot resist the impulse to let people know it. We think this builds trust and community and motivates others to

participate in a similar fashion. Of course, such expressions of appreciation can be overdone and seem sentimentalized or inauthentic. When this happens, standards for strong exchanges are lowered, and almost any comment becomes acceptable, leading to the meandering classroom conversation with which many of us are all too familiar. The best way to safeguard against this is to use a classroom evaluation device such as the critical incident questionnaire (CIQ) discussed later in this book.

HOPE

Without the hope of reaching new understanding, gaining a helpful perspective, or clarifying the roots of a conflict, there is little reason to go on talking, learning, and teaching. Hope sustains us when we encounter seemingly insurmountable problems or when the amount of time needed to work through a particularly challenging issue grows longer and longer. Hope provides us with a sense that all of the time, effort, and work will benefit us in the long run, even if only in a small way. In one of his last books, Paulo Freire (1994) goes so far as to say that he does "not understand human existence, and the struggle needed to improve it, apart from hope and dream" (p. 8).

Hope also implies what Dewey (1955, 1991) called democratic faith. Faith suggests that people have the capacity to work through their own problems and that each person has something worthwhile and important to contribute to increasing understanding or to resolving conflict. Democratic faith implies that pooling the talents and abilities of individuals increases the likelihood that new light will be cast on old difficulties and everyday common sense will be brought to bear on problems said to require technical expertise.

Hope and faith are cardinal principles underlying and supporting our pedagogy. Despite the recurring and never fully resolved contradictions of building trust and allowing everyone's voice to be heard while maintaining high deliberative standards, we cling to the possibility that together we can make our dialogical encounters incisive, meaningful, and satisfying. Our attempts to do this with our students are always incomplete, always in process; but for the most part the pluses greatly outweigh the minuses, reinforcing our faith that even the most diverse groups of students can have productive dialogues.

AUTONOMY

In a sense this final disposition brings us back full circle. If democratic classrooms seek to promote individual and collective growth, then people who retain the courage, strength, and resolve to hold to an opinion not widely shared by others should be given their due. Autonomy usually denotes a state of being separate and aloof from others and a corresponding dismissal of collaboration, cooperation, and joint deliberation. We want to understand and honor autonomy as a temporary state, a kind of "provisional resting place" (Barber, 1994) where an individual can claim that "this is what I believe in and stand for at this particular point in time." But that same individual should also be willing to subject those convictions to continuous reevaluation and possible revision, on the understanding that these new convictions may, in Barber's words, be "repossessed" again in the future.

Without individuals who are willing to take strong stands and to argue assertively for them, democracy is diminished, and the opportunities for growth and self-development, partly dependent on the clash of contending wills, are greatly weakened. In valuing autonomy, we are reminded of the tension between identifying and collaborating with the group and pursuing our own individual goals. Both are valuable and neither can be neglected, but developing the strong sense of self needed to stand alone occasionally cannot be overestimated (Barber, 1984; Hook, 1946). Our beliefs may be "tentative, fallible, open to further questioning" (Bernstein, 1992, p. 319), but the responsibility to take a stand, however temporary this may be, remains one of the foundations of democratic and moral deliberation.

STRUGGLING FOR DEMOCRACY THROUGH DISCUSSION

One way to sum up much of what has already been said is to consider what Richard Bernstein (1988) has called engaged pluralism. To see why we find this idea helpful for understanding the discussion process, consider the following quote regarding the requirements of an engaged, pluralistic stance: "One accepts the fallibility of all inquiry. One accepts the multiplicity of perspectives and interpretations. One rejects the quest for certainty, the craving for

absolutes, and the idea of a totality in which all differences are finally reconciled. But such a pluralism demands an openness to what is different and other, a willingness to risk one's pre-judgments, seeking for common ground without any guarantees that it will be found. It demands—and it is a strenuous demand—that one tries to be responsive to the claims of the other" (p. 271). In this quote Bernstein summarizes many of the fundamental assumptions of democratic discussion. These include the tentativeness of all knowledge, the infinite variety of perspectives and understandings that people bring to discussion, the endless nature of inquiry and the refusal to accept a definitive answer, a genuine receptivity to other views, a striving for agreement that may be impossible to achieve, and the patience to hear out all possible opinions.

What all of this suggests, of course, is that democratic discussion is excruciatingly difficult and that our efforts to realize its promise will always fall short of our hopes. Engaged pluralism calls on us to value and seek out multiplicity—of perspective, interpretation, and background. It spurs us to consider divergent viewpoints and sympathetically to pursue commonalities, with a clear-eyed understanding that agreement and common ground may be illusory. Engaged pluralism puts a claim on us to keep talking with others who have radically different perspectives in a continuing effort to reexamine our own commitments. We do this knowing that we risk eroding our most deeply held beliefs. Implied here is a warning to avoid the trap of complacency. There is always more to be done to make discussion open, fair, diverse, and mutually illuminating.

As Barber (1984) has pointed out, discussion is always at risk as long as hierarchies and power differentials overshadow what transpires. Only when "no voice is privileged, no position advantaged, no authority other than the process itself acknowledged" (p. 183) can a truly rich exchange of ideas occur. Yet as many critical pedagogues have warned, it is impossible to eliminate hierarchy altogether, and it would be naive to think otherwise. The undemocratic traditions and practices of the larger society will always intrude on even the most democratic classroom. Teachers and students who are committed to democratic education must acknowledge this fact and do what they can to combat it.

For social theorist Henry Giroux (1987), the teacher has an especially heavy responsibility in allowing "different student voices to be heard and legitimated" (p. 119). Social relations in the dialogical classroom must be structured to resist the injustices and denial of difference characteristic of the world outside the classroom. Difference and plurality, for critical pedagogues like Giroux, are not merely affirmed and celebrated but are rooted in a "particular form of human community that encourages and dignifies plurality" (p. 119). This process of dignifying plurality and of forming community comes about in part through an assertion of the centrality of difference, as well as through "efforts to identify and recall moments of human suffering and the need to overcome the conditions that perpetuate such suffering" (p. 120). For Giroux (1988), critical discussion depends on giving voice to participants' social, racial, and gender-situated experience and on finding spaces where they can come together freely and openly "to struggle together within social relations that strengthen rather than weaken possibilities for active citizenship" (p. 201).

Still, the problem remains: How can we dialogue with people different from ourselves, genuinely respect those differences, and yet fairly and mutually critique those differences as well? Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989) doubts that this is possible given the oppression and racism that continue to beset society. One of the lessons of Ellsworth's analysis is that educators have not sufficiently confronted the difficulty, the staggering challenge, of teaching democratically in an undemocratic society. Nor have they grappled adequately with the potential for discussion to silence some students and put them at a disadvantage. Indeed, we have too frequently nodded benignly when our classrooms seemed to be alive with the chatter of student voices while allowing to go unheard the voices that were absent or the issues that were ignored.

One of the keys, though, to Ellsworth's argument is not that we should stop talking to one another altogether but rather that we should find alternative ways to talk that force us to deal with the anger and despair that roil beneath the surface of our conventional exchanges of opinion. Even when we do this, however, we must learn to accept that our efforts to open up discussion and counteract injustice will always be partial and incomplete. Nevertheless, the progress that is made and the learning that takes place can still make a real difference in our own and our students' lives.

CONCLUSION

In the end, discussion remains an indispensable part of democratic education. It teaches us dispositions and practices, provides us with the opportunity to serve and connect with others, and tests our ability to confront the most difficult of problems and think them through collaboratively. Perhaps most important of all, it challenges us to consider the different—the other—and to ponder the fragility of our own identities and our ideals. Who we are and what we believe are necessarily imperiled when we continue to encounter others with openness, honesty, respect, and humility.

So the hazards and difficulties of discussion should not be underestimated—but neither should its delights and rewards. At its best, discussion greatly expands our horizons and exposes us to whole new worlds of thought and imagining. It improves our thinking, sharpens our awareness, increases our sensitivity, and heightens our appreciation for ambiguity and complexity. Critical discussion is an ongoing effort to make sense of the chaos of our existence while remaining "true to the natural incoherence of experience" (Elbow, 1986, p. x). Despite the struggle and the prospects of only partial success, it is one of the things that makes life worth living.

The more the two of us study and conduct democratic discussion, the more we realize that this is not a hit-or-miss affair. We want to counter the easy belief that whether or not discussions are good or bad can be put down to the magic of the leader's personal charisma or interpersonal chemistry among group members. Creating the conditions for democratic discussion and realizing them to the extent possible are deliberate, intentional teaching acts. The rest of this book shows how to make them happen.

HOW DISCUSSION HELPS LEARNING AND ENLIVENS CLASSROOMS

We are unwaveringly committed to teaching through discussion because of the benefits we have consistently enjoyed in its practice. In fact, we have found that at least fifteen arguments can be made regarding the ways in which participating in discussion helps learning.

FIFTEEN BENEFITS OF DISCUSSION

Note that we don't claim that the mere act of engaging students in group talk somehow brings these benefits automatically. The advantages we're claiming for discussion accrue only when students strive to practice the dispositional ideals outlined in Chapter One. If these dispositions are realized, even in part, discussion brings the following benefits:

1. It helps students explore a diversity of perspectives.
2. It increases students' awareness of and tolerance for ambiguity or complexity.
3. It helps students recognize and investigate their assumptions.
4. It encourages attentive, respectful listening.
5. It develops new appreciation for continuing differences.
6. It increases intellectual agility.
7. It helps students become connected to a topic.
8. It shows respect for students' voices and experiences.