Breaking the Rules of Discussion
Examples of Rethinking the Student-Centered Classroom

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Abstract: This essay explores teaching techniques that seem to go against discussion-based pedagogy but ultimately achieve what we believe to be more productive forms of student discussion. Egle, Navarre, and Nixon describe how experimenting with new models of discussion has led them to define discussion as storytelling, as craft, and as idea-invention. Navarre explains how and why she uses storytelling to encourage multiple levels of engagement with texts, using interspersed narrative that aims to "people" the classroom with authors. Egle explains his commitment to discussion as a form of craft, examining how taking topics "off the table" and limiting the direction of student work helps promote fuller conversations. Affirming discussion as a form of idea-invention, Nixon wants students to take responsibility for that process of invention and explains using evaluated discussion and pre-structured discussion. This essay describes specific discussion-generating techniques in order to explore how we hope to unsettle the classroom in productive ways and, in doing so, to unsettle some of our "usual" ways of thinking about discussion.

INTRODUCTION: DISRUPTING DISCUSSION IDEAS AND PRACTICES

In this essay, we explore how, when, and why teachers might want to purposely subvert conventional wisdom concerning effective discussion-based teaching. Reflective teachers embrace the student-centered classroom and the shared knowledge it creates. We can safely say that most teachers value the discussion-based classroom—and value the larger pedagogical goals of an open exchange of ideas and a shared creation of knowledge that are enacted by discussion. We want to question, however, the practices that are used to achieve meaningful class discussion. As we engage in that questioning, we'd like to introduce the

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techniques we are currently experimenting with and implementing in our classrooms as we explore how best to generate discussion; these techniques enact ideas that aren't usually associated with discussion—ideas such as "emphasizing authors," "using storytelling riffs," "creating disruptions," "taking topics off the table," "giving discussion quizzes" and "reviewing prefabricated discussion."

We posit that the best discussions will work to "level" the differences in the classroom, put all students in the same position of being knowledge-makers, and thus empower all students to feel comfortable speaking. In addition, we would like to posit that, sometimes, in order to achieve this empowerment, students must be confronted with unexpected discussion-generating techniques—techniques that create equality because they disrupt predictable discussion dynamics. At a place like UMass Boston, and especially in the English department where we teach, many students do experience the discussion-based classroom—and discussion can thus become a mode that becomes quite comfortable for some and remains uncomfortable for others. We've all had classes in which we ask what we think to be an excellent question, only to have the same few voices respond and the same quiet students remain quiet. Our attempts at open-ended conversation can, paradoxically, reaffirm classroom patterns that limit the type of conversation we seek to foster. We are interested in exploring discussion-generating techniques that disrupt the inequities that sometimes become part of and are even created by the discussion-based classroom; we want to disrupt those inequities in an attempt to locate new forms of equity that discussion could, and ideally always should, create.

Like most teachers, we have tried, with varying degrees of success, well-known types of discussion-generating techniques. These techniques can include everything from using small groups to generate conversation to calling on students by name for a discussion response. Pedagogy studies that explore the qualities of effective teaching often emphasize effective discussion, categorize forms of discussion, and then offer illustrative examples of activities that promote such discussion.

For example, Linda B. Nilson's *Teaching at Its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors* explores strategies of "improving participation through skillful discussion management" and emphasizes techniques such as "presenting a road map," "igniting the exchange," "responding to student responses," and "directing traffic" (109-112). For each strategy, Nilson offers general examples of classroom activities; for example, under "encouraging non-participants," she suggests directing questions to silent parts of the room, using icebreakers such as reading aloud, and asking non-participants to come to an office meeting for assistance (110-111). Similarly, in *What the Best College Teachers Do*, Ken Bain emphasizes the importance of discussion as a means of teaching students to "think and learn how to engage in an exchange of ideas" (126). He overviews discussion techniques by describing model teachers who create heterogeneous groups (128), pose questions and allow students to collect thoughts and then share ideas (often referred to as "think-pair-share") (130), and call directly on students for responses (131). In this essay, we engage in these same practices of categorizing and illustrating discussion, but do so in order to re-think discussion pedagogy.

Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill's *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms* offers more specific explanations of numerous strategies for starting and sustaining discussion. In a chapter titled, "Getting Discussion Started" they review the benefits of having students sit in a circle, which they call "discussion in the

round," and the multiple ways of using the circle to engage students in tasks such as active listening and sequential speaking (77-79). In their "Keeping Discussion Going" chapter, they explore techniques that the instructor can use to ask effective questions and offer generative responses (85-99). Brookfield and Preskill also overview more carefully structured discussion formats, such as "small group stations" (in which student groups rotate through a series of pre-created stations, recording comments at each station) and the "jigsaw" (in which students break up into groups, become experts in a topic, redistribute into new groups, and teach those new groups about their topic) (107-111).

Discussion as a Way of Teaching articulates the goals we hope such techniques would achieve: "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 a learners and teachers" (3). They continue, "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" (3). Of course, we agree with these goals of multiplicity, diversity, complexity, opportunity, and democratic process. But, what happens when techniques such as sitting your students in a circle and asking good questions don't quite work for your class—or simply start to seem stale and obvious?

We'd like to offer a series of ideas that attempt to "turn inside out" the techniques usually associated with discussion-based pedagogy. These ideas aim to achieve a more radical version of discussion-based pedagogy by engaging in practices that seem to go against it. In the three sections that follow, we explore our attempts to define the less typical ways in which discussion works in our classrooms: as storytelling, as craft, and as idea-invention. In each section, we define and offer specific examples of teaching techniques that seem to go against discussion-based pedagogy but work to support our own pedagogies and achieve what we believe to be more successful discussions.

In the spirit of discussion practices, each of us has explained our discussion techniques in a section that preserves our own voice, background, and experiences. In the first section, Evelyn explains how and why she uses *storytelling* to encourage multiple levels of engagement with texts. Evelyn explores the use of "interspersed" narrative that aims to "people" the classroom with authors, offering students multiple ways to connect to those authors and thus feel more comfortable voicing responses to and questions about those authors. In the second section, LaMont explains his commitment to discussion as a form of *craft* that can be seen as equivalent to the crafts of reading and writing. He describes taking discussion topics "off the table," examining how limiting the direction of student work actually helps promote fuller conversations. In the third section, Cheryl affirms discussion as a form of *idea-invention*, but questions how to make students take fuller responsibility for that process of invention. She explores the use of discussion within a large lecture and how the obstacles large lectures placed on discussion led to unexpected discussion techniques such as "discussion quizzes" and "pre-fabricated discussion."

Ultimately, we argue that a truly radical classroom can use teaching techniques that seem, at first glance, to counter the goals of discussion. However, we believe that these techniques work to ultimately achieve a deeper or richer form of multiplicity, diversity, complexity, opportunity, and democratic process than some of the

usual discussion techniques we have used. We hope to unsettle the classroom in productive ways and, in doing so, to unsettle some of our "usual" ways of thinking about discussion.

I. Discussion through Storytelling: Calling up the Elders

Evelyn Navarre

Drawing from a rich tradition of indigenous literature, I explore how an instructor's storytelling can function as a pedagogical practice that challenges the conventional wisdom about student-centered discussion in the classroom. By offering anecdotes about Henry Thoreau, and emphasizing the voices of such cultural "elders" in the American literature classroom, storytelling brings into the classroom the notion that many voices can come from and define the same person; storytelling thus encourages students to develop their own voices as they respond to, question, and interact with these authors. This method can help generate class discussions about strategies for entering into material that often seems murky and contradictory. Storytelling also generates, for the teacher, fruitful questions about what we owe the past, and how those obligations might contrast or complement the desire to bring students forward in the present.

I favor a very improvisational teaching style, but I was surprised when storytelling began to thread through my interactions with students in the classroom. It seemed counter-intuitive to all the rest of the methods I use, which place students' interactions with material, not me, at the center of class-time. Whether through breakout groups, projects, performances, or presentations, students in my classroom have a hands-on and highly interactive experience

with texts. Thus when I found myself doing more storytelling, not just at the end of class to wrap things up, but also interspersed with classroom activity, I felt that I was taking up a little more airtime than normal.

Yet, these stories, anecdotes, and asides became more necessary as I began to teach Transcendentalism. Transcendentalism was a soupy, hard-to-pin down set of idealisms, aphorisms, and long-winding circular philosophies expressed by a diverse, highly idiosyncratic crew of misfits and malcontents in the early nineteenth century. The writings of the "Concord Group," as they are often called, vex even contemporary scholars regarding basic definitions and rhetorical consistence. I decided to allow for a big, soupy range of responses, and then just keep bringing students back into the texts. Students in my sophomore-level classes seemed determined to find the "definitive" statement of Transcendentalism from Thoreau, Emerson, and Fuller, despite the writers' adamant embrace of contradiction. Students sometimes found the long-windedness of Emerson and Fuller to be pretentious, and the contradictory nature of all the authors' writings to be evidence of hypocrisy. They also responded against the didactic tone of many of Emerson's essays, and particularly of Thoreau's dictates. *"'Simplify, simplify?' But I don't wanna give up Facebooking, or my Ipod, and who is this guy to tell anyone else how to live?!'"*

It reminded me just how differently tuned is the twenty-first century ear, and just how hints of anyone "telling them what to do with their lives" would grate on the students' sensibilities. So I started with analogy: *Look, I said, the Transcendentalist commitment is to following each line of thinking not according to its linearity and sense, but rather for what that line of thinking evokes in one's imagination. Think of it like jazz: there's a band, and some one takes off on a riff, and follows that out, then circles back to the main theme.* The definitive "answer" became a

definitive question we asked of each "riff" from the writers—what had it given us in terms of experience or insight?

Like in music, other threads began to emerge in my teaching. Little analogies, the associative thinking which the Transcendentalists favored, helped bridge the gaps between the abstract idealisms propounded by the writings and concrete applications in "real life." Little analogies grew into little stories as I drew from the journals and letters of Thoreau and Emerson, and augmented Fuller's *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* with her later journalism. I also used stories to break up myths about the Transcendentalists: no, Thoreau didn't spend all his life out in the woods; it was two years and two months, with a summer off in between to live with and help Emerson's family. No, these people were not isolated renunciates; they actually practically lived in one another's back pockets. No, they were not completely economically self-made men; they relied on inheritances, living with family, gifts, and loans from one another and from family to support their endeavors.

Yet as these men and women emerged as "characters" in the classroom through my storytelling, I began to wonder just how I was "peopling" or populating our interpretative space, and what that had to do with honoring the past. My experiences as a graduate student with Dr. John Mohawk, a master storyteller and Native American scholar-activist, had led me to think about how storytelling calls up the elders from the past, "peopling" our spaces. In his storytelling there was always a sense that these elders deserved from us not only our listening ears, but also that there was a whole world of obligations that we had to them. This is a different value system to bring into the classroom, which is supposed to be all about the students: their present, their future. Yet in insisting that the worlds of Thoreau, Emerson, and Fuller were just as real and important as present-day Ipods and Facebook updates, I was, I came to hope, breaking some of the containerization of student cultural life by the media. That containerization serves to insulate us from the past to the point that we not only have no knowledge of our own intellectual and cultural histories, but no sense of obligation to those who've gone before. What do we owe the Transcendentalists, as our elders? It's a question I'm still working on.

What I did see through storytelling about Henry Thoreau was that the more Henry Thoreaus I provided students, the more Henrys that they had to engage with. So there is the truculent Henry and the Henry who is nasty about the Irish, but there is also the elated, visionary Henry of the winter and spring chapters in *Walden*. There is the Henry who can't quite square the occasional viciousness he sees in the animal world with his own Romanticism, but who still loves the sound of the animals under his cabin bumping their heads against his floor each morning.

And then there is woods-burner Henry. This is the story I'll close with, because it's the story that inspired this paper, and these riffs.

When Thoreau went out to the woods, he didn't just go to live deeply and suck out all the marrow of life. He went to woods also because he wanted to crawl under a rock. A story that doesn't get a lot of circulation is what happened actually one year before he built the cabin out at Walden Pond. He had had brief forays into teaching and surveying, and had failed. He tried to get published as a literary critic, and for the most part failed. He had watched his beloved brother John die of tetanus in front of him. He was twenty-six years old, and he fell in love with his dead brother's ex-fiancée. She rejected him. He went out camping with a friend in the woods around Concord, and while they were cooking some fish by the river, he accidently started a fire and burned down three hundred

acres of first-growth forest. After that, he was known around town as Thoreau the woods-burner, and people hated him and laughed at him.

But he went. He went back. He went back and stayed, and the rest, as they say, is history. His story.

And what a story of bravery. What a story of being lost and distraught and still showing up for yourself. What a story of going back and being there for the lessons there to learn. What a story about perseverance in the face of uncertainty.

That's the space I want for my students. That's what I want them to know about learning: that it is a space of stumbling and fumbling, uncertainty and risk, but also some interesting and surprising riffs and pathways. If I can bring it into the classroom, I've not only got Henry in there with us, I've got John Mohawk, as well, and that's some pretty good company.

How do we people our classrooms, then, through story? What characters do we want to call up, and for what reason? For all of the ideology and moralism about students as co-constructors of knowledge, neither the students nor the teachers are the only "characters" in the room. The elders that we invoke fill our classrooms as well, and they help us build that knowledge. We have to let them show up for us.

Introducing students to various "Henry's" encourages them to think about the variety of "selves" they bring to their own studies. At such points during the semester, I will often stop to ask students directly in class, "If the Henry Thoreau of 1844 could be stumbling and fumbling, frustrated and embittered and ashamed, yet still eventually find his voice, what are the stumbling blocks students themselves overcome in finding their own voices, both in the classroom and on paper?" If Thoreau kept trying to "find an angle" on his chosen subject, how might students do the same? These questions have led us into detailed discussions in which we strategize,

together, how to "enter into" material—nineteenth-century Romantic literature—that often appears murky and contradictory. Though some students have joked that they want to burn down Emerson's "Nature" collection the way Thoreau burned the Concord woods, they appreciate the tenacity and bravery of the examples left by the Transcendentalists.

For me, storytelling and calling up the elders (even those "elders" more well-known to mainstream American culture, such as Thoreau) challenge conventional wisdom about celebrating only student voices in the classroom. Yet, it is a productive stirring of the pot, because it enables me to ask questions about the assumptions that underpin the student-voice-centered classroom. If we forefront student discussion for the sake of discussion, student voices as voices, do we collude in a youth-centered American culture that, in its celebration of youth, and of the present, encourages us towards historical amnesia? How does that youth-voice-centered historical amnesia relate to continued US government oppression of indigenous people here in America, and the exportation of imperialist practices overseas? What do we owe the past? How do we engage that past meaningfully, without idealization?

Henry Thoreau, near the end of his life, explored the same questions. He had turned to a Native American guide for repeated trips through the Maine wilderness, gathering the naturalist notes that would eventually constitute his last work, *The Maine Woods*. His views of his guide are messy and murky, but also fraught with surprises, admiration, and humor. He tips back and forth between idealizing his guide and connecting with him as a human being. A little later, dying of tuberculosis, Thoreau uttered his (not-so-famous) last words: "Indian" and "moose." Whatever connections he was making in his head, he was still engaged, still trying to figure

things out: clumsy and fragmented, but still determined to find connections between the past and his own remaining present.

II. DISCUSSION AS CRAFT: MAPPING, DISRUPTING, AND LIMITING

LaMont Egle

As an undergraduate, I frequently left the discussion-based classroom either confused or unsatisfied. During these conversations I would often see my teachers checking their watches as much as I was checking mine. I was also aware of how hard they had to work to synthesize into some cohesive and meaningful summary about our object of study an array of topics that students had introduced in that hour. When I first became a teacher, I had many of these same experiences in the classroom. The only change was that my perspective on the events had shifted from one side of the desk, so to speak, to the other.

This new perspective quickly gave me insight into what conversation in the discussion-based classroom should *not* be: students simply talking, well, some of them anyway, and me being satisfied regardless of what it is they're saying; students sounding off lists of ideas without regard for the idea that had just come before theirs; students who only recite general themes or ideas they find in study guides; students looking only at me when they speak, no matter where I place myself in the room; students who don't speak because they're afraid there is a standard or "right" reading of a text, and they don't know it; and, students who are just plain afraid.

It seems that we teachers try to make discussion happen without necessarily teaching it as another form of communication in the classroom, one with its own processes and its own forms of convention.

This is not to say, of course, that discussion doesn't already include some recognizable processes and forms of convention. Many classrooms' students automatically sit in circles, and instructors and students come with prepared questions. But what go missing most often in these discussion-based classrooms are discussions about discussion.

I do, however, teach two other forms of communication rather explicitly in my classroom—reading and writing. For example, because I want to change the ways students read, and because they are often at first reluctant to mark up texts (either the process is unfamiliar to them, or they worry about a text's resale value), I make copies of a portion of the day's reading and we discuss how students can mark up the language and to write in the margins. And because I want to change the way my students write, we discuss and practice how those marks and marginal notes can grow to become charts and outlines, and how those charts and outlines grow to become paragraphs and draft pages. Along with the craft of reading and writing, I want to be more transparent about how discussion can operate as the third craft in humanities classrooms, especially those who want to teach reading and writing as social activities.

All three crafts—reading, writing, and discussing—are modes of knowledge production that rely on processes of invention, prioritization and revision, so I try to take advantage of any overlap I can find when teaching these crafts. I frequently map students' discussion on the board as it unfolds, in real time, so that they can see what it is students are saying. This strategy allows us to go back and review earlier topics introduced by the group, and to study more closely how some of these topics have developed into argumentative claims, while others have not. It also gives me opportunity to show students how these bubble-charts and lists look a lot alike

those bubble-charts and lists we generate as part of the invention process when we write. And writing textbooks work well in discussions about discussion. For example, Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein's *They Say/I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing* provides in its fourth chapter, "Three Ways to Respond," templates students use when constructing one of three critical responses ("yes," or "no," or "yes and no"). I experiment during discussion with ways students can first write out their responses, before they respond to others' claims. Students have the opportunity to better form a stance on a given topic before they speak, and they can hear, in turn, a variety of different critical positions. And my students will write questions and lead discussion themselves, eventually, which again is something many of us do in the student-centered classroom; however, my classes do it only after students have practiced building these critical conversations in the classroom, studied the criteria for crafting good discussion questions, and have revised these questions in writing workshops.

While I forge connections between the three crafts, I also force generative disruption into my classroom. I have come to believe that an essential part of teaching students the craft of discussion is disrupting their typical experiences of the discussion-based classroom. A simple way to disrupt the typical routine in the discussion-based classroom is to tell students that they can't look at me when they speak. Sometimes I have to hold a notebook over my face to remind students about the rule, but the event encourages students to direct their gazes at others as they practice discussion.

The biggest challenge to teaching in the discussion-based classroom today, I find, is that students know that there are available to them, mostly for canonical works, dominant "critical" discourses on the Internet. Wikipedia and other electronic study guides have become significant parts of many students' preparation for class, and after a bit of research online, they feel informed enough about a works' characters or themes to add something to the discussion—but, of course, as we know, these discourses all too often rely on predictable topics and general assertions.

When I was an undergrad, I took some art classes, and I remember well how a painting teacher, on the first day of a still-life class, distributed canvases, told us to set up our easels, and enthusiastically asked that we take out of our paint boxes all of our favorite colors. I lined up on the table next to my easel a large number of tubes that included saturated blues, bright greens, and vibrant reds. Then, this same teacher came around, scooped up all of my favorite paints, put them in a Ziploc bag, wrote my name on the front of it, and locked it in a filing cabinet drawer in her office. She did this for all the students in the room and told us we would get them back in time (which would actually be six weeks later), but until then, we would have to paint with those tubes left in our boxes. I looked down at what remained: a couple tubes of yellow (one of which I had not yet opened), a couple tubes of purple, and a tube of white. This moment in my education, and one I always try to remain mindful of in my own teaching, actually forced me to interpret objects around me using unfamiliar resources. The term we use today, of course, is *defamilarize*.

When I defamiliarize students in the literature classroom, I first work to discover what it is for a given text they are actually familiar with. For example, I ask students what they think are the important topics to talk about after we've read a first section of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, and they almost always say things like religion, (heterosexual) love, and social class. I then write these topics on the board and tell students that they are now "off the table." In other words, these are exactly the things

we are not going to talk about, at first anyway.

One unexpected outcome of this experiment has been that the discussion-based classroom becomes self-disciplining. Students have reasons to pay attention. In fact, some of the best discussions I've heard in the classroom are those where students are trying to decide if a claim is actually about, say, social class or not. This same restriction, at the same time, promotes contributions from quieter students, I think, because ideas of "right" and "wrong" change. The process is no longer about parroting familiar discourses. It becomes instead a challenge to articulate the unfamiliar and the unrehearsed. This means we hear unexpected arguments about the need of female friendship, the importance of self-determination, and why it might be that so many people have to die in order for Jane Eyre to live happily ever after. And when we do finally return to those familiar, or dominant, discourses—religion, (heterosexual) love, and social class—students are able to complicate these ideologies in ways that I don't think they could have done before, if this was where they were to begin.

III. Discussion as Idea-Invention: Evaluating and Pre-fabbing

Cheryl Nixon

I would like to relate a semester-long experiment of attempting to bring standard discussion techniques to a new context; this experiment was not quite successful, and resulted in a very productive questioning of my discussion techniques. Committed to the discussion-based classroom, I have used basic discussion-starting techniques in my 25-30-student-sized classes and have always thought they were fairly successful; for example, a typical technique of starting

the class with an open-ended question, asking students to jot down notes on the question, and then opening up the class for general conversation would often lead to a discussion that generated useful ideas and included many student voices. Because of these successes, when I undertook the challenge of teaching a large lecture course, I wanted to bring discussion into that lecture setting. This rather naïve goal—that I'd simply bring discussion into a 125-student class—led me to try some rather foolish discussion techniques; however, it also encouraged me to try some rather straightforward techniques that worked, but worked in unexpected ways, and thus had the result of making me think more deeply about how discussion operates in my small classrooms. Rather unexpectedly, the large lecture experience has led me to bring some of my large lecture techniques into my smaller 25-30-student classes. More importantly, this large lecture format forced me to think more carefully about why I value discussion and what the larger goals of discussion are.

Last year, I taught a large lecture entitled *The Monstrous Imagination in Literature*, which featured the study of well known "monster" texts such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, along with works that are not usually thought of as monstrous (such as *Gulliver's Travels*) and works that offer an international perspective on the theme of the monster (such as Bengali ghost stories). Held in a large lecture classroom, the class enrolled 125 students who met twice a week in a lecture setting and once a week in a 25-student discussion section led by a teaching assistant. I wanted to teach a lecture course to explore how best to structure a thematic approach to literary content, rather than a chronological survey, and how best to encourage non-English majors to see literature as an essential component of their intellectual world. What I did not expect was to use the lecture classroom to develop forms of discussion-

based teaching that increase the student's responsibility for and investment in discussion.

Ultimately, I learned that I want to encourage discussion because I feel that it reveals what makes English studies valuable: literary study encourages a process of interpretation that requires conceptual thinking. Crucially, literary study makes the interpretive process accessible to students; it does not demand extensive pre-existing knowledge (a student can create a fantastic interpretation of a literary text if he of she is willing to read closely and deeply) and does not place limits on the type of thinking the student can do (there are no "right answers" to a literary text). Literary interpretation allows students to participate in "idea-invention." Importantly, this idea-invention is put fully on display in discussion: a literary text generates multiple interpretations and those ideas must be debated to determine which are best, revealing that good ideas can come from anywhere (from a small observation or a large theory), that ideas must be flexible and take alternate ideas into account, that ideas must evolve and change as they develop, and that the best ideas are open-ended and allow themselves to be made better.

Teaching the lecture class helped me to think more concretely about how interpretation creates ideas and how discussion demonstrates this process of idea-invention. I've come to believe that four essential elements of idea-invention are highlighted by classroom discussion:

1) Ideas are iterative: ideas must be revisited and revised. Discussion allows students to experience the changeful, non-fixed, evolutionary nature of ideas.

2) Ideas are multi-faceted: ideas demand multi-perspectived analysis. Discussion shows students how one idea can be deepened and broadened by being approached from multiple perspectives—the multiple minds that exist in one class-room.

3) Ideas are question-based: ideas are developed as answers to questions and as triggers of further questioning. Ideas can be "pushed" to new levels by repeated questioning, and discussion forces that questioning to become overt.

4) Ideas are shared: Ideas are strengthened by communal thinking. Discussion shows how a group can come to conclusions that one individual might not have been able to foresee.

As I taught the lecture course, and had difficulty getting discussion to function, I was forced to question my understanding of discussion as an idea-invention process. By the end of the class, I became recommitted to discussion, even in a lecture-based class, precisely because this experience helped me to articulate how and why literature teaches interpretation-based ways of thinking—a way of thinking that I do believe is captured in discussion and a way of thinking that I believe can be brought into a lecture.

In order to give you a sense of how discussion operated in my lecture classroom, let me overview a few discussion techniques that failed. First, and most predictably, I simply asked open-ended questions, as I did in my small classrooms. Some of these questions provoked answers, but the size of the room guaranteed that only the brave students offered opinions and the large expanse of space undermined any sense of give-and-take amongst students. Very quickly, this form of discussion-generating seemed little more than a token gesture at student involvement. Second, I tried to implement a "failsafe" discussion-starting technique. A modified version of the "think-pair-share" process, I asked students to partner up with a student next to them, discuss a prompt, and then be ready to explain their ideas to the class-room. In a small classroom, I typically circulate through the room, checking in with pairs and their progress. Because I

could not circulate throughout the lecture classroom, the pair discussions quickly descended into chit-chat; few students discussed the literary text and most discussed their weekend plans. Finally, I tried what I hope would be an exciting way of, quite literally, making student discussion visible in the classroom. I broke the lecture classroom into small groups, asked them to generate ideas based on a literary passage, and then selected one group to come up to the front of the lecture class to write their ideas on the board. Unfortunately, this idea proved to be a poor use of lecture time; for example, while the students were writing on the board, the rest of the class quickly became restless and noisy; then, when the students tried to explain their ideas, the class had a hard time hearing them and the presenting students felt shy, awkward, and unprepared. Obviously, these techniques failed because I was simply trying to import small classroom discussion-starting techniques into the lecture classroom.

Faced with a sense that my efforts at lecture discussion were not going well, I experimented with variations on these techniques and developed several different discussion-starting exercises. These developments countered some of my longstanding beliefs about how discussion operates, and helped me to see how pedagogical practices that initially seem to undermine discussion can ultimately result in more meaningful discussion. I'll focus on my reinvention of two of my failed techniques, the paired discussion and the displayed group work, in order to emphasize the unexpected success that can result from breaking the rules of discussion. I'll also mention a reading aloud exercise that demonstrates the unexpected pleasure that can result from very simple discussion techniques.

One of my first discoveries centered on what I now think of as evaluated discussion. When I became frustrated that my students were not using their paired discussion time wisely, I connected that paired work to assessment. One day, without much planning, I told students they would be placed in pairs and be given a prompt to discuss—and that they should jot down notes as they discussed their ideas, which I would then collect for a quiz grade. The mere mention of a quiz grade resulted in focused conversation and furious note-taking. I asked students to tell me their "best idea" before they handed their notes in and many hands were raised and many excellent ideas were shouted out. The artificiality of a graded conversation led to a surprisingly natural, lively, and participatory discussion class.

Before this class, I never would have connected discussion to a quiz; a quiz seems punitive and seems to go against the exploratory, "no right answer," democratic spirit of discussion. However, connecting discussion to a grade made the students take it seriously and invest more time and effort into the process of idea-invention that I want discussion to embody. In addition, I learned that discussion should be more tightly connected to note-taking skills; although many students do not take notes during a free-flowing discussion, the idea of evaluated discussion asks them to record their discussion and keep track of their idea generation. The promise of the evaluation of notes guaranteed student record-keeping which, in turn guaranteed more thoughtful discussion.

As I developed this practice, I learned to purposely differ the timing and use of these discussion-recording quizzes, and they became a way to "mix it up" and re-energize the class. Often I would use them to start class to generate that lecture's ideas, but I also found that they worked well in the middle of the class, focusing students on a new idea or the process of developing an idea, and at the end of class, asking students to summarize the session's ideas or look forward to the next lecture. The

purpose of these discussion quizzes differed; for example, I would connect the discussion to the close reading of short literary quotation, questioning of a concept from the assigned reading, or generating of opinions about the "big idea" of the day. The process of breaking students into pairs and collecting their notes initially took quite a bit of class time, but as it became a common practice, the class became very efficient at it. The grading of the quizzes similarly seemed onerous at first, but by working with my TAs to grade them together immediately after lecture, we fell into an efficient practice of briefly review-ing the goals of the quiz, dividing the quiz-zes up, reading them together, sharing notable student responses, and then grad-ing them. Ultimately, this "evaluated discussion" mode served the goal that we hold for any discussion-based class: it created a sense of classroom community— even in a classroom of 125 students.

A second discovery centered on my failed attempt to have a small group display its work on the board at the front of the lecture. I wanted group work to be inte-grated into the lecture format and, although my first attempt failed, I wasn't ready to completely discard that idea. As a result, I had students use their class sections, overseen by TAs, to engage in discussion that they would then replicate in the lecture classroom. I came to think of this as pre-created or "pre-fab" discus-sion—an idea that seems to counter the very definition of discussion as spontane-ous, in the moment, and unscripted. I asked students to use their TA-led section meeting to discuss a text, track their ideas on the blackboard, and then type up the notes recorded on the blackboard (as part of this typing-up process, I learned to ask them to add additional elements, such as questions for further thought or quotations from the literary text). The typed-up notes were brought into the next lecture class meeting, and I put them up on a document

projector system without having so much as glanced at them. Although initially I had the students bring their notes directly to lecture due to time pressures and not as part of pedagogical plan, this system became a pedagogical practice; simply because I and the rest of the lecture class had not seen the notes, we could use them to interact in the spontaneous, open-ended fashion that characterizes discussion. As I put the notes onto the projector, I asked the group to recount their section discussion and then asked basic questions (such as, "what ideas need more development?" and "what listed concept words seem most important?"). Because the group had prepared the notes, they were comfortable replicating their discussion and overview-ing their idea-invention process. This scripted discussion provided a foundation for a lively exchange in which students in the lecture audience asked questions of the discussion group.

Displaying these pre-fabbed discus-sions met my goal of showing student-generated ideas, but it also had the unex-pected benefit of encouraging students to deepen their ideas. This exercise allows students to put discussion "on display," while also guaranteeing that they reflect and build on that discussion. In my small classroom conversations, I often want to move the student ideas a bit further, but am unable to get the discussion to the next level of complexity or insight. Unexpect-edly, this lecture exercise gave students the means to do that: the process of revisiting a discussion allowed them to review the strengths and weakness of their idea-inven-tion, and to then build on the strengths with the help of the class. This exercise also had the benefit of encouraging students to engage in a bit of "meta-discussion," in which the students could assess how and why their discussion evolved in the way it did.

I would like to offer one last example of an effective discussion technique that

seems to undermine traditional pedagogical philosophies. Typically, in a literature classroom, students are encouraged to read literature aloud, as we want students to experience the artistry of literary writing, sensing its formal structure (such as a poem's use of rhyme) and emotional content (such as a character's expression of despair). From a pedagogical perspective, we want students to have a voice in the classroom, and reading aloud is a "low risk" way of having students hear their own voices and the voices of others. Typically, I have students engage in sequential reading, going around the room in a circle or similar pattern to ensure that all students read aloud. However, in a 125-person classroom, sequential reading is impossible. As a result, I decided to try a "mass" reading aloud. I picked a short and dramatic literary passage and had the entire class read the passage all together, all at once. The results were impressive: 125 voices reading together is very loud and vibrant. Here was the dynamic classroom I was attempting to achieve! When engaged in this exercise, we typically read the passage aloud more than once and became more dramatic with each reading. After reading aloud, I would merely ask, "what did you hear?" or "what words did we emphasize?" and a lively discussion would ensure. This practice seemed to go against one of the tenets of discussion: it erased rather than emphasized the individual voice. However, the individuals in the classroom seemed more empowered to read loudly—and even joyfully—because they were not alone, but joined into a mass voice.

In these large lecture experiments, I used discussion-generating techniques that seemed to go against the spirit of discussion, including discussion quizzes, pre-fab discussion, and all-at-once reading aloud. When I first thought of these exercises, the quizzes seemed too putative, the pre-fab discussion seemed too scripted, and the

reading aloud seemed to erase individual voices—they thus seemed to undermine the goals of discussion. However, each of these techniques actually resulted in more serious and successful discussion; students took each other's ideas seriously, recorded and reflected on their ideas, pushed ideas to the next level, thought about how to improve discussion, and experienced a shared, communal sense of literature. As a result, I've been working to bring modified versions of the discussion quizzes, pre-fab discussion, and mass read-alouds to my small classroom. In the process of struggling with how to bring discussion to the lecture, I think I discovered some discussion-generating techniques that not only worked well in the large lecture classroom, but that would work well in the small classroom. I also discovered some techniques that helped me to question why I value discussion—and helped me to feel comfortable breaking the rules as I did so.

CONCLUSION: REAFFIRMING THE DYNAMISM OF DISCUSSION

A crucial component of the literature classroom is its dynamism. Literature is an *experience*—it is an emotional, aesthetic, ethical experience—and a lively discussion classroom captures the sense that literature is a living force. Each of our experiments with discussion techniques has, at its heart, an attempt to not only produce deeper thinking and more meaningful analysis, but to produce an energetic exchange in which ideas come alive. It is this sense of discussion—as an energizing experience— that we hoped to capture when coming together to write this paper. Evelyn uses storytelling to "people" her classroom, bringing elders alive for her students. LaMont teaches students the craft of discussion, reenergizing their thinking by defamiliarizing their classroom position. Cheryl invites students to take responsibil-

ity for discussion, even in a large lecture, asking them to become idea-inventors.

By experimenting with techniques that might disrupt our students' expectations of a "student-centered classroom," we hope to show them that the classroom can be an unpredictable space precisely because ideas are unpredictable. Surrounded by Ipods, Facebook, and Wikipedia, we know all too well that our students are shaped by a popular culture that values immediacy, social connection, experiential activity, and the unexpected or shocking; we want our students to see intellectual inquiry as enacting those same experiences, but in the service of ideas. We want our students to experience intellectual discussion that is as engaging as, if not more engaging than, the pop culture world they inhabit.

By describing the specific teaching techniques that we use to enact our notions of discussion as storytelling, craft, and idea-invention, we also hope to engage our readers in a dynamic discussion. We hope to foster a conversation about the need to engage in discussion practices that might seem to counter the larger goals of the student-centered classroom. By breaking the rules of discussion, we not only re-energized our discussion practices, but also re-energized our thinking about discussion. Ultimately, we obviously affirm the student-centered, discussion-based classroom and its valuing of multiplicity, diversity, opportunity, and democratic process, but want to encourage productive questioning about how best to achieve it. We allow our classrooms to become spaces of riffs, disruptions, limits, evaluation, and scripting in an attempt to enact this larger ideal of the equitable classroom. In thinking about discussion, we hope to put into practice the values of the discussion-based classroom itself: the ability for students and teachers alike to question and experiment—and even break some rules—in order to discover new ideas.

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