Grinnell College
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Obstacles to Open Discussion and Critical Thinking

In January 1995, at President Ferguson's request, I began an ethnographic study of Grinnell students' views of the purpose and goals of discussion, especially the discussion of sensitive issues related to diversity. My mandate was to investigate the problem of students feeling silenced, to find out why constructive discussions of diversity do not occur as often as we would like. I found that these discussions are inhibited largely by several widely-held student assumptions about what is supposed to happen in a discussion, assumptions with implications for the teaching of critical thinking skills.

Most of the data presented here were gathered through in-depth interviews conducted by anthropology students working under my direction. All of the samples used have had good representation with respect to race, sex, and class year. I have also presented the results of this work to audiences representing a wide range of other institutions. Members of these audiences always comment that they recognize their own students in what I describe, making it clear that Grinnell students are not unique in these respects.

Discussion as Advocacy

We presented students with a list of sensitive diversity-related issues (such as "whether race is an important difference between people"), and for each issue asked them whether it was possible to have a balanced discussion of that issue (in which more than one perspective received about equal support, with people being civil to each other), and why they did or did not want to discuss the issue. The majority of students thought that discussions of these issues would not be balanced, and the dominance of a single viewpoint--together with a fear of reprisal if one spoke against that perspective--was one reason some gave for not wanting to be part of a discussion.

The main reason given for wanting to discuss a topic was that the student held strong views on the subject and wanted to convince other people. Likewise, not having a strong view, and finding an issue difficult, were often given as reasons for not wanting to discuss a subject.

- "I want to discuss the causes of sexual orientation because I have strong views on this issue."
- "I want to discuss affirmative action because I want to educate people"
- "I like discussing gender issues because I feel knowledgeable about them."
- "I'm not sure what multiculturalism is; I don't know much about it, so I don't want to discuss it."
- "I don't want to discuss race because I never know how to approach the subject."
- "In a few cases, people cry 'sexual misconduct' when it isn't, so I don't want to talk about it in those few cases."

Some are so convinced of the advocacy model that they see silence as the only way to avoid it:

- "I wouldn't want to discuss religion as I don't want to impose my views on others."

A few explicitly generalized this model beyond the treatment of diversity issues:

- "Ideally, you should talk in order to make the other person realize that what they said was wrong."
- "I don't want to talk about things I'm unsure of."

Only five of the students in our sample expressed a different, more exploratory, view of discussion:

- "I want to talk about multicultural education because I'm not sure I know enough about it."
- "I want to discuss race, as it would open my mind to things I don't experience myself."

In exploratory discussion, people who are seeking more information and other viewpoints speak in order to learn about things. This is very different from the advocacy model, in which people who have already made up their minds about an issue speak in order to express their views and convince others. One of our annual surveys of firstyear students found 54% preferring to discuss a topic on which they held strong views (over a topic about which they were undecided). Another survey found the same preference increasing over time, rising from 25% of firstyears to over 50% of juniors (the preference declined slightly among seniors, but the sample of seniors was not representative). There were no ethnic or gender differences correlating with this preference in either survey.

The Right Not to be Challenged

Not only do people participate in discussion for the purpose of advocating views they already hold, but some of them expect to do so without anyone questioning or challenging their statements. In our most representative interview study, when asked "As a member of a diverse community, what are your rights?" 15% of the sample volunteered the idea that they had the right to think or say whatever they liked without having their views challenged.

Here are some of the phrases used to express this position:

- "I have the right to present my views without being criticized."
- "to not have people judge my views"
- "to say what I believe and not have anyone tell me I'm wrong"
- "to feel and think anything and not be looked down on"
- "to hold my own beliefs and not feel attacked because of them"
- "to speak my mind and not feel inhibited"

The students who claimed the right not to be challenged were nearly all women. 25% of the women we interviewed made this claim, compared to only 6% of the men (other statements in their interviews suggest that most Grinnell men expect their views to be challenged by others). Equal proportions of whites and students of color made this claim (which was rarely made by international students). Particularly disturbing is the fact that this claim was made evenly across the four class years, suggesting that students who arrive with this assumption do not alter it as a result of what they learn.

The Search for Consensus

When we ask students why people should talk about their differences, we hear quite often about the desire to reach a consensus:

- "The best thing is when opposing views find some point of agreement."
- "Ideally, people should talk in order to mold all opinions together in a compromise."
- "People should talk in order to achieve a unified world view, the

dissolution of the idea of 'the other,' and an awareness of the oneness of all things."

Some also tell us that there's no point talking about something unless people can agree:

- "Discussing these things is futile; it wears you out. It seems you can never reach a consensus."

Despite the discouraged tone of this last comment, many interviewees express great optimism about the possibility of people with different views finding common ground.

Some students speak about issues as if a consensus already exists:

- "I don't want to discuss race because it's not an important difference between people."
- "I don't want to discuss the causes of sexual orientation because this topic is irrelevant to the nature of homosexuality."

Sometimes this assumption is combined with a preference for advocacy. This woman wants to be an advocate representing a consensus she assumes to exist:

- "I want to discuss sexism due to a personal interest in stating the female experience."

When we asked how likely people were to listen to and think about what someone else said under various conditions, most students said, predictably, that they would be likely to listen to someone with whom they already agreed. A majority also said that they would be unlikely to listen to someone with whom they disagreed:

- "I have a set opinion about the causes of sexual orientation--I wouldn't want to participate in a conversation when other people have disagreeable views, but I would talk with people who have similar opinions."
- "I have strong ideas about what constitutes a multicultural education--I would have difficulty listening to those who disagree."
- "A discussion of abortion wouldn't be balanced--I would have a hard time listening to the opposite view."

Most often, it seems, students create artificial consensus groups by only discussing difficult issues when they know it to be "safe"--that is, in carefully selected groups with homogeneous opinions.

- "People don't talk about race on this campus--carefully selected company might mean opposing views are not present."
- "It appears that people prefer to interact with others who verify their own views, instead of actively pursuing alternative points of view. This could cause individuals to believe there is widespread support for their own views, when in fact there may not be."

75% of the students we asked said that they would discuss diversity issues with people of the same views or background as themselves, but only 40% said they would discuss the same issues with people whose views were unknown to them.

Personal Experience as the (Only) Source of Legitimate Knowledge

As with cases in which they already agree with a speaker, most students we surveyed said they were very likely to listen to someone they perceived as knowledgeable. Before we interpret this as traditional academic respect for expertise, however, we must examine where students think knowledge comes from.

When we asked 47 students in interviews "How knowledgeable are you about diversity issues?", most said they were fairly to very knowledgeable. When asked where their knowledge came from, most mentioned more than one source.

43% of the responses attributed knowledge to personal experience, and another 35% said knowledge came from talking to others about their experiences. This bias in favor of personalized knowledge (as opposed to knowledge accessible to all comers, such as that contained in scholarly writings; a kind of knowledge stressed by only 6 of the 47) is also visible in the distribution of which groups claimed knowledge of which issues. Thus, students of color were more likely than whites to claim to be knowledgeable about race, women were more likely than men to claim knowledge about gender, and homosexuals more likely than heterosexuals to claim knowledge about sexual orientation. White males in their first two years were the only group likely to say that they had little knowledge of diversity generally. Their claim to know little about gender, "because I have no personal experience," shows that these claims privilege not only experience, but a particular kind of experience (that of belonging to a typically less powerful group).

This privileging of one kind of experience helps to limit what can be said in discussions. For example, the following comments on sexism came from two men and two women:

- "Guys are not able to challenge women's sexist remarks."
- "Women are unlikely to be labeled sexist no matter what they say."
- "I want to discuss gender--it's easy to say 'I'm a woman; as a woman..."
- "Not being a woman, I don't feel my comments would be seen as valid."

This bias both forces members of less powerful groups into the role of peer instructors, and supports the impression that members of more powerful groups have nothing legitimate to say.

Implications

These findings have implications for the educational mission and the institutional culture of the college. Rather than simply presenting my own views, I hope to generate widespread discussion of what these implications are. I will offer only a brief comment at this time. The student assumptions identified by this research should not simply be added to a list of "surprising things our students say." Nor should we take them in stride as things students can be expected to say. The one frequently advanced criticism of my findings has been that my description is accurate but that the problem is "developmental." This theory claims, roughly, that people acquire skills like critical thinking in a pre-determined sequence of stages, and that most people pass through these stages at a rate that makes it unlikely for 18-year-olds to be either good critical thinkers or ready to learn critical thinking skills effectively. This is not the place to debate either the evidence or the logic of developmental theory. However, we should consider alternative explanations, in particular the possibility that there may be features of our institutional culture that encourage the attitudes described above, perhaps in ways that frustrate our educational mission.

Note: A revised version of this report was published as "Obstacles to Open Discussion and Critical Thinking," 1998, Change 30(5):44-49. Subsequent research on the same issue was published in "Student Discussion Styles," 1999, General Anthropology 6(1-Fall).