Conflict as a Source of Learning

Aziza Ellozy, Founding Director, Center for Learning and Teaching

At the start of this semester, a particular issue was on the mind of many faculty members because of the inevitable (and potentially disruptive) consequence of the country's political scene: how would we deal with possible conflicts and disagreements that may arise in the classroom over differing political viewpoints following the June 30th 2013 uprising?

President Anderson alerted us in her email of August 21st 2013, that "it is important that we remember that there are as many viewpoints about contemporary issues in Egypt as there are individuals in our community" and that "we have a rich tradition of sharing ideas, expressing opinions and debating positions."

As many have argued before me, I contend that conflict and disagreement in the classroom are important catalysts in preparing our students to become "critical citizens" and constructive participants in the democratic process, an important learning outcome which we have endorsed in several of our recent newsletters (Bali, 2013; Glavanis, 2013).

Last year, *Tomorrow's Professor,* a Stanford University publication, reprinted a chapter entitled "Conflict as a Constructive Curricular Strategy" from David Donahue's (2011) book *Democratic Dilemmas of Teaching Service-Learning: Curricular Strategies for Success*[1]. In it he argues that conflict can

> …be framed as an opportunity to engage with others, examine new ideas and perspectives, and challenge one's own assumptions, even if that is not always the approach taken by politicians, organizers, bloggers, and opinion writers where winning and shouting louder than others can take precedence over consideration and open-mindedness.

Donahue argues that conflict in the classroom is inevitable and even contends that the lack of it (intentional or not) may reflect a lack of interaction and, more importantly, of learning.

He actually sees "disagreement and disequilibrium and contention and conflict in the classroom" as valuable because they give us a chance to expose our students to the dynamics of the democratic process and to model how best to deal with it.

So, in a nutshell, not only should we not shy away from conflict, we should intentionally introduce it within any academic field, and not restrict it to those that deal with political issues. For example, disagreements may result over the findings of particular experimental studies in scientific or medical research. Opposing interpretations of a historical or current event (conspiracy theories being my favorite) can lead to strong differences of opinion as would conflicting analyses of social issues or literary pieces.

Using controversial issues as a strategy is nothing new. Most faculty (especially those who teach first and second year students) know that to get their students to engage in face to face (or online) discussions or debates, they should choose examples that are provocative or at least that deal with conflicting points of view.

In previous New Chalk Talk articles (2007) I have argued that most students entering AUC come from a culture where working hard, memorizing information and relying on "authority" to guide them through their education is expected to be rewarded with success. They know the rules of the game and what to

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[1] This chapter can also be partially found in the online version of the book preview at
http://books.google.com/books?isbn=1579226000

expect if they stick to them. They then come to a place where (if we do it properly) they are suddenly confronted with rules that have shifted considerably and where the emphasis on thinking "critically" and "independently" may catch them unprepared.

We should therefore not be surprised when these students feel uncomfortable when confronted with ideas or perspectives that challenge their cherished beliefs and/or their sense of identity. When prodded to search for different perspectives, the realization that several "authorities" are in conflict adds to the uneasiness.

In addition to developing critical thinking skills and the acquisition of knowledge relevant to their studies and careers, how can we develop attitudes and values such as tolerance and respect of diversity, peaceful conflict management, promotion and respect of Human Rights, gender equality, social justice and inclusiveness?

This is a long and challenging list, but if we accept Donahue's premise that "conflict is not only inevitable" but "can be a prime opportunity for learning", how can we use it as an opportunity for growth and transformation for our students, and what strategies could we use that would help? How can we model how to respond to conflict?

Kloss (1994), who has found Perry's scheme of intellectual development very helpful, has devised pedagogical strategies (which include using conflict and disagreement) to help university students become critical thinkers. For students who think in dualistic ways his recommendations include the following:

- Provide examples that deal with conflicting points of view
- Create an environment that encourages different viewpoints and that accepts them as legitimate
- Reinforce the unlikelihood of one potential solution, approach, or viewpoint to complex problems
- Support the legitimacy of students' point of view while
- Ask for reasonable and substantive justification for assumptions and value judgments
- Challenge overgeneralizations and appeal to authority
- All the while provide for a safe environment where students feel they can take risks.

References:

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