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Paper citation: "Improving Classroom Discussion: A Rhetorical Approach." Journal of General Education 58 (2009): 28-46.

Text of paper:

Running Head: IMPROVING CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

Improving Classroom Discussion: A Rhetorical Approach

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I would like to acknowledge Sewanee's 2006 Humanities 101 faculty—Mishoe Brennecke, Jon Bruss, Don Huber, Gayle McKeen, and Jim Peters—for their contributions to the Responsible Intellectual Discussion project, as well as Sewanee's Center for Teaching for its support.

Improving Classroom Discussion: A Rhetorical Approach

Classroom discussion, with its focus on active learning, critical thinking, and cooperative inquiry, is attractive in theory but often disappointing in practice. The following scenario, described by professor Mark Edmundson (1997), may sound familiar:

Teaching Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," you ask for comments. No one responds. So you call on Stephen. Stephen: "The sound, this poem really flows." You: "Stephen seems interested in the music of the poem. We might extend his comment to ask if the poem's music coheres with its argument. Are they consistent? Or is there an emotional pain submerged here that's contrary to the poem's appealing melody? (p. 43)

Edmundson suggests that this scenario might be a bit of an exaggeration, but it's not far off the mark. Despite our high hopes, discussions often flounder, marked by awkward silences, blank stares, and superficial comments. Is it any wonder that this pedagogical approach has earned the moniker "The Dreaded Discussion" (Frederick, 1981)?

In this article, I describe a project designed to take the dread out of discussion in a first-year interdisciplinary humanities course at Sewanee: The University of the South, a private

liberal arts college in Tennessee. The Responsible Intellectual Discussion project, known as RID, was created in conjunction with the University's Eloquence Initiative, a speaking-across-the-curriculum effort in which I served as a consultant.¹ By virtue of its association with the speaking initiative, RID was informed not only by familiar literature on discussion methods (e.g., Brookfield & Preskill, 1999; Neff and Weimer, 1989; Rosmarin, 1987) but also by rhetorical theory and pedagogy, which gave the project a distinctive character. Although discussion is acknowledged to be one of many communication activities that might be part of speaking-intensive courses (Cronin, Grice, and Palmerton, 2000, p. 67), detailed research on discussion projects is lacking. And while discussion has long been of interest to communication scholars (see, e.g., Keith, 2007), that interest has centered largely on democratic processes and small-group dynamics rather than on the rhetorical skills of individual participants. As Barnlund and Haiman (1959) explain, "the 'orator' is out of place on a committee" (p. 270).

The orator may perhaps be out of place in a discussion, but the orator's training is not, particularly if improved communication skills are among the desirable outcomes of discussion classes. Although the assumption may be that the experience of discussing is sufficient for improvement, research has yet to confirm that outcome, as noted by Gall & Gall (1990); they recommend that "rather than relying on experience alone [. . .], teachers should also consider providing systematic training in the communication skills needed for discussion" (41). Morello (2000), writing about speaking-across-the-curriculum (SAC) efforts, agrees, noting a widely held assumption in the speech communication field that students need to "be taught oral communication rather than just required to perform it" (p. 108). These contemporary

observations echo ancient rhetorical precepts on the development of the skilled speaker. In the words of Isocrates, a fourth-century teacher of rhetoric, those who excel at speaking "must first have a natural talent for what they have chosen to do; then, they must be educated and gain knowledge of that particular subject; and third, they must practice" (*Antidosis*, Mirhady & Too trans. 2000, sec. 186).

Informed by this principle, Sewanee's RID project placed a particular emphasis on instruction, thereby shifting the perspective beyond "discussing to learn" to include, as well, "learning to discuss." In what follows, I first describe the main components of the project, all of which are characteristic of rhetorical pedagogy: 1) clearly communicated criteria for evaluation, 2) instruction (with a particular focus on the rhetorical concepts of invention and imitation), and 3) practice and feedback. After describing these elements, I present informal assessment results from the project, which include anecdotal comments from the professors teaching the seminar as well as survey data from students. As the assessment results reveal, RID was a clear success, confirming the promise of a rhetorical approach to discussion.

Elements of the RID Project

As noted previously, RID was created in response to Sewanee's Eloquence Initiative, which was coordinated by the college's Center for Teaching Excellence. As a consultant for the initiative, I worked with faculty on proposal ideas for speaking-intensive projects, assisted them in establishing criteria for evaluating speaking, offered rhetoric workshops for students, and provided coaching and feedback on speeches when requested by students or faculty. Although the initiative initially focused almost exclusively on presentational speaking, the faculty eventually targeted classroom discussion in their proposals. The Humanities 101 project, as an interdisciplinary effort involving five professors (representing the fields of art history, classics,

philosophy, and political science) and seventy-two first-year students, was the most complex and comprehensive of these proposals. In their proposal, the Humanities faculty emphasized the importance of discussion to the success of their endeavor, noting that "the whole Humanities program [a four-semester sequence] relies on the ability of students to engage purposefully, meaningfully, and helpfully in the shared intellectual project of Humanities, which is most on display and which relies most heavily for its success on seminar discussions." The team thus aimed to provide students with strategies, knowledge, and tools that would improve their discussion abilities.

Strategies and tools for effective discussion are readily available from books on teaching (Davis, 1993; McKeachie & Svinicki, 2006) as well as articles and edited books on discussion (e.g., Christensen, Garvin, & Sweet, 1991; Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2004; Frederick, 1991; Smith & Connolly, 2005). Although works like these foster good practice in areas such as questioning and managing classroom interaction, they typically do not offer a general framework within which to situate a semester-long discussion project. We created such a framework out of rhetorical pedagogy and principles. By utilizing the same elements that characterize instruction in basic public speaking classes—criteria, instruction, and guided practice—we were able to create a comprehensive, coherent, semester-long approach (which, ultimately, was extended into subsequent semesters) that focused on discussion not only as a pedagogical means but also a communication end.

Element 1: Criteria for Evaluation

In discussion classes, it is not uncommon for students to be told that participation is expected and will contribute to the course grade. It is also not uncommon (IS THERE research on this???) to find that criteria for evaluation are either nonexistent or vague, which leaves

students guessing about what constitutes achievement at various levels. What, exactly, does an "A" level discussant look like? In what specific ways does an "A" participant differ from participants at other levels?

Answering these questions was the first task of the Humanities 101 team. To get the process started, I provided an example of a criterion-referenced grading form that I have used in my public speaking classes. Criterion-based grading, in which student performance is evaluated against an established set of criteria rather than on a curve, is commonplace in such classes. (For a helpful discussion of criterion-referenced assessment methods, see Walvoord & Anderson, 1998, 65-92). The form I shared with the team, based on one of many sample forms available in public speaking instructors' manuals, differentiates C, B, and A speeches in several key areas including subject matter, organization, style, delivery, purpose, and audience analysis and adaptation. The form describes speeches of varying quality, specifying the ways in those speeches meet and exceed achievement at the previous level. For example, with respect to delivery, the "C" speech is basically competent (no major distractions), the "B" speech is competent, extemporaneous, and fluent, and the "A" speech is, additionally, polished, animated, and engaging. As Stitt, Simonds, and Hunt (2003) point out, criterion-based distinctions such as these promote shared understanding between teachers and students and reduce student uncertainty about grading.

With this example in mind, the Humanities team worked on an evaluation form for discussion. The task was twofold: first, to identify key areas of performance important to effective discussion participation in the Humanities seminar, and second, to describe achievement at various levels with respect to those areas of performance. The task was simplified considerably by the discovery of discussion guidelines on the Web, credited to John

Tyler at Brown University.ⁱⁱ Tyler's guidelines describe the discussion contributions of five types of contributors: outstanding, good, adequate, non-participant, and unsatisfactory. From these guidelines, the Humanities team identified four key areas of performance: mastery of material, quality of ideas, effectiveness of argumentation, and general impression. The group considered these categories in light of their experience with discussion classes and concluded that they adequately represented key elements of discussion performance.

Having identified key areas of performance, the team next considered the descriptions of various levels of achievement. While they retained most of Tyler's descriptions, they elaborated in some instances in an effort to clarify expectations. For example, to distinguish between exceptional preparation and thorough preparation, the team added the words "as evidenced by" and completed those statements. Thus, "A" contributions "reflect exceptional preparation as evidenced by frequent authoritative and/or creative use of textual/material evidence," while "B" contributions "reflect thorough preparation as evidenced by competent and occasionally authoritative and/or creative reference to textual/material evidence." (For a copy of Sewanee's version of the discussion guidelines, see appendix A.)

As the final step of the criteria phase, the team appended a copy of the discussion guidelines to the course syllabus, thereby drawing explicit attention to the importance of discussion and expectations for performance. As stated in the syllabus, discussion counted for 20% of the course grade. 75% of the discussion grade was to be based on regular class participation as well as three formally evaluated discussions; students were thus encouraged to familiarize themselves with the appended discussion guidelines. The remaining 25% of the discussion grade was to come from attendance at two out-of-class rhetoric workshops intended to

foster the skills identified in the discussion guidelines. In addition to the rhetoric workshops, the syllabus identified several other elements of instruction, including in-class activities, use of Paul and Elder's (2005) *Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking* (as a guide to assessing oral expression), and analysis of a model discussion featuring the Humanities faculty as participants.

Element 2: Instruction

As indicated by the syllabus description, the instruction element of RID was multi-faceted, offering students various opportunities to gain insights about discussion effectiveness. Although the activities varied, they all reflected in some way a common emphasis on rhetorical invention, which is the process of discovering or creating the substance of one's remarks. For students to participate in a discussion (a responsible intellectual discussion, no less), they need something to say. The anecdote at the beginning of this essay aptly illustrates what might be called an invention deficit. Recall that when asked to comment on "Tintern Abbey," the student, Stephen, responds, "The poem, it really flows"—not exactly meaningful subject matter. The teacher, in contrast, readily extends Stephen's remark, commenting on form and argument, coherence and inconsistency. He has a "ready tongue," in the words of Cicero. (Need citation from the Brutus). Much of our instructional effort in the RID project aimed at helping students develop this sort of capacity, as illustrated by the following three activities.

Rhetoric workshops: Commonplaces. To complement the in-class efforts of the Humanities faculty, I offered a series of out-of-class rhetoric workshops adapted to the needs of discussion classes. The workshops addressed typical discussion topics such as group dynamics and confidence (the lack of which often manifests itself as reticence in the classroom), but they also included more unusual offerings, namely, workshops on commonplaces and the Aristotelian means of persuasion (character, logic, and emotion). The workshop on commonplaces, my focus

here, was one of the more heavily promoted and well attended of the sessions. Offered just two weeks into the semester, the session was intended to provide a large number of students with early exposure to helpful tools for invention.

The session on commonplaces took its inspiration from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, which identifies sources, or topics, from which to create the subject matter of speeches. Aristotle distinguishes between material topics (*idia*), which furnish ideas on the particulars of a subject (e.g., war and peace, national defense; see Rhet. 1.5), and formal topics (*topoi*), which are general lines of argument (e.g., definition, division; see Rhet. 2.23). As described by Jost (1991), "topics are 'places' the rhetor turns to—or less metaphorically—are ideas, terms, formulas, phrases, propositions, argument-forms, and so on that the rhetor turns to in order to discover what to say on a given matter" (p. 3). Put differently by Leff (1983), "the rhetor is a hunter, the argument his quarry, and the topic a locale in which the argument may be found" (p. 24). Topics provide clues about where to look for subject matter. Although originally applicable to formal speaking situations, the idea of topics is easily adaptable to the requirements of discussion.

For the workshop on discussion commonplaces, I created a list of discussion topics (see appendix B), which I provided to the Humanities team for feedback before presenting it to students. The list, by no means exhaustive, identifies a variety of interpretive moves one might make while reading a text and discussing it in class. Category 1 topics provide prompts for generating perceptive commentary about the reading (e.g., compare/contrast; identify inconsistencies). Category 2 topics, which incorporate thinking guidelines from Paul and Elder's *Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking*, provide ways of assessing discussion comments (e.g., relevance; significance). Category 3 topics provide types of responses to comments (e.g., argue, expand), while Category 4 topics speak to the discussion process (e.g., refocus, suggest a new

direction). In the workshop, I first addressed the concept of topics as an aid to invention, then walked students through the handout of topics, leaving time at the end of the session for practice in generating perceptive commentary.

In-class exercises: Best prompts. The rhetoric workshops took a necessarily general approach to instruction, primarily because they served students in a variety of courses throughout the Eloquence Initiative (as opposed to Humanities students only). To complement the general lessons from the workshops and make them more meaningful, the Humanities faculty conducted a number of in-class exercises in their small, 15-person sections. The "best prompt" exercise, described by one professor in his journal of RID activities, is one example. In this exercise, students were first asked individually to identify three important points or profound insights from the text, in this case Homer's *Illiad*. Students exchanged those ideas with a partner, and the partner circled the idea that would make the best discussion prompt. Students then gathered in groups of four and identified the four best discussion prompts. In the large group, students presented the prompts, and the whole class identified properties of the prompts that would likely be helpful for generating discussion. According to the group, good prompts might 1) move from specific text to universal observation or the reverse, 2) balance breadth with necessary narrowness, 3) refer to specific text as a comment on the whole reading, 4) stake out an arguable position, 5) reflect depth and perceptiveness, or 6) address significance (as opposed to focusing on minutiae). An example of a promising prompt: "In the embassy to Achilles in book 9, Phoenix, Odysseus, Ajax each ask Achilles to return to the fight, though he refuses in each case. To what do the speakers appeal and to what does Achilles appeal when he refuses their requests? How do their appeals and Achilles' refusal meet or fall short of the 'heroic code'?"

As this example illustrates, strong prompts, in contrast to weaker possibilities (e.g., “Achilles is a big baby”), function similarly to discussion commonplaces, pointing discussants to promising sources of substantive commentary.

Model discussion of Antigone. After students had been familiarized with the criteria for effective discussion and introduced to some basic principles, they had an opportunity to observe a model discussion. Since ancient times, imitation has been a standard component of rhetorical instruction. Quintilian, writing in first-century Rome, observes that “a great part of art consists in imitation—for even though to invent was first in order of time and holds first place in merit, it is nevertheless advantageous to copy what has been invented with success” (*Institutes of Oratory*, Murphy trans. 1987, 11.2.1). For the ancients, sources of models included exemplary texts (e.g., Homer, Plato, Demosthenes, Lysias) as well as the teacher himself. In the words of Isocrates, “the teacher must go through [forms of speeches and practice] as precisely as possible, so that nothing teachable is left out, but as for the rest, he must offer himself as a model” (*Against the Sophists*, sec. 17).

Given the importance of imitation, the Humanities team elected to give up one large-group lecture day for a model discussion in order to *show* students what responsible intellectual discussion looks like. In the interests of authenticity, the team prepared for the discussion just as students would; they simply read the assignment, Sophocles’ *Antigone*, and came to class ready to discuss. No important themes or prompts were shared in advance. To help students focus their listening and prepare for post-discussion analysis, I created four guiding questions, each of which corresponded roughly to a key area of discussion performance noted on the evaluation rubric: preparedness, quality of ideas, quality of argumentation, and discussion dynamics. When the students arrived to class, I gave each of them a question, introduced the

activity and its rationale, and turned the program over to the faculty for thirty minutes. During that thirty minutes, the faculty offered insightful perspectives, got stumped by unexpected questions, debated arguable points, and responded thoughtfully to their colleagues. Perhaps most importantly, they used the text, and they used it often and well, citing specific passages and reading expressively.

After the discussion, the professors retreated to the back of the room, and the students offered their observations on the process. On the question of preparedness and knowledge, students asserted that all of the participants seemed well-prepared, as evidenced by their facility with textual evidence. When pressed to consider the difference between average, good, and outstanding preparation, students suggested that an ability to bring extratextual evidence into the discussion might be one distinguishing feature. With respect to insightful statements, the students focused primarily on the opening prompt, which asked discussants to speculate in a rather unexpected way on one scene in the play (Antigone's visit to the grave—"Was this her first visit?"). Students, echoing the faculty discussants, debated the significance of the question and its contribution to the discussion as a whole; while some maintained that the significance of the prompt eventually emerged, others thought that it bogged the discussion down. On the matter of argumentation, students gave the faculty high marks, noting that they always backed up their claims with evidence. One student observed that the discussion seemed particularly engaging when discussants debated arguable points. Regarding group dynamics, the final question, students commented on the polite, respectful tone maintained by all the discussants. As suggested by these comments, the model discussion provided students with a clear example of what an engaging, thoughtful discussion looks like and highlighted the strategies needed to create that sort of experience.

Element 3: Practice and Feedback

The third major component of the RID program, practice and feedback, afforded students numerous opportunities to put into practice what they were learning and to gain valuable commentary on their performance. Because Humanities 101 is a seminar course, approximately two-thirds of the class meetings are devoted to small group discussion, which made practice an easy element to incorporate. What changed with the RID project was the approach to discussion; students not only practiced, but they practiced in a reflective manner. Furthermore, they received specific feedback on their performance that identified strengths and weaknesses and provided suggestions for improvement. Determining how to evaluate students most effectively and fairly was no small challenge for the Humanities faculty, primarily due to limited experience with evaluation in this context as well as the novelty of the newly adopted discussion rubric. The team thus proceeded in trial and error fashion, fine-tuning the process throughout the semester.

As noted on the Humanities syllabus, students were informed that they would be formally evaluated on three, randomly chosen occasions during the semester. The team conducted the first evaluation approximately five weeks into the semester; at that point, most students had attended a rhetoric workshop or two, observed and critiqued the model discussion, and participated in a variety of in-class exercises. Just prior to the first formal evaluation, some faculty elected to turn discussions over to students entirely to get them used to piloting and sustaining a discussion as a group. In one class, students carried on a discussion of Thucydides while the professor removed himself from the group and observed silently from the edge of the classroom. In the last few minutes of class, the professor guided students through a reflection on the process, asking them to identify what they did well and what needed improvement. Students identified several strengths, including use of the text, listening well (as opposed to interrupting and speaking over

people, which had occurred in previous classes), resuming old discussion points smoothly, and moving the discussion to new points when necessary. Weaknesses included too much throat-clearing at the beginning of the discussion, insufficient coverage of the text, somewhat superficial analysis, and too much emphasis on what students thought as opposed to what Thucydides thought. The professor confirmed these observations, adding that, in addition, the class could work on strategies for drawing out the students who remained silent throughout the discussion.

The next time the class met, the professor conducted the first formal evaluation, once again assuming a place outside of the group. As the class discussed the relationship of might and right in Thucydides, the professor tallied comments using a crib sheet developed for this purpose. The crib sheet, which focused largely on quantifying comments (e.g., number of comments supported by text, number of clear comments), did not work well, as the comment counts did not clearly correspond with the evaluation rubric. Consequently, the professor modified the sheet to conform more closely to the rubric, thereby simplifying the work of evaluation and feedback in subsequent evaluations.

The faculty made additional discoveries after the first round of evaluation. First, the faculty remarked that, despite students making numerous contributions to the discussion, few of the individual comments met the evaluation criteria in a significant way. This finding underscored a need to continue working with students on matters such as textual evidence and perceptiveness of commentary, but it also raised a question about the fairness of evaluating students just three times during the semester. One professor, who gave no As in his first round of discussion, elected to modify his approach to allow for the inclusion of several snap-shots of student participation at various times during the semester. A second discovery, also sparked by

the distribution of individual grades, was that, in some cases, the overall quality of the discussion exceeded the individual contributions of discussants; the sum was greater than the parts. The team reflected on whether and how to take the overall quality of the discussion into account; one approach to the conundrum was to give the overall discussion a grade, then to average the overall and individual marks.

Letter grades, of course, represent just one element of feedback; students also received commentary from their professors. Each professor adopted whatever method of feedback was easiest for him or her; some checked off criteria on the evaluation form and added notes on the side, while others sent students a summary via-e-mail. While the criteria speak in a general way about performance, the written feedback allowed professors to address in detail specific areas of strength and weakness. Students then had very concrete ideas about how to improve their performance. For example, on one student's evaluation, the professor noted that she could strengthen her contributions by supporting her observations with textual evidence more frequently. The student earned a higher grade in the next discussion, thanks to more capable use of the text. When asked about specific activities that led to this improvement, the student stated, "I think it was a combination of more active reading style (asking more questions and taking more notes while reading texts), talking with members of the discussion group before class, and being careful to think through a comment before throwing it out into discussion" (Dickerson, 2007).

Assessment

Assessment data on the RID project emerged from a number of sources. The weekly meetings of the Humanities faculty, for example, provided a forum for exchanging general impressions (e.g., "This is the best discussion class I've had in years") as well as comments

about the effectiveness of RID activities (e.g., "The tally sheet needs to be retooled"). E-mail exchanges and journal reflections provided additional data. Near the end of the semester in which RID was implemented, the Humanities team synthesized their findings in a presentation to the general faculty community. In what follows, I summarize these findings, then present the results of a student survey on RID.

Faculty Perspectives

As the semester progressed, it became increasingly clear, based on anecdotal evidence, that the RID project was making a difference in the Humanities seminars. Other Sewanee faculty, including those who would be teaching the Humanities 101 students in subsequent semesters of the program, expressed an interest in learning more, which prompted a group presentation at a Center for Teaching Excellence luncheon. After describing the project and sharing instructional ideas, the Humanities team addressed positive outcomes as well as caveats. With respect to positive outcomes, three themes emerged. First, the team confirmed that their discussion classes were some of the best they'd had, based on the level of engagement students displayed. One professor, who was not completely sold on the RID project when it began, commented, "I'm a real RID fan now that I've tried it out," adding that she had adapted the techniques to her other classes with considerable success. Another professor added, "It's depressing to think about how irresponsible I've been in the past in helping students move from utter discussional stupidity to something more responsible."

In citing evidence of more responsible discussion, the Humanities team unanimously pointed to one indicator: effective use of the text. All of the team members reported a marked improvement in students' use of the text, including their preparedness, their likelihood to refer to specific passages in discussion, and their ability to make relevant, perceptive comments on the

reading. Interestingly, one professor observed a related improvement in students' writing, speculating that RID activities may have contributed to this outcome: "Stressing oral proficiency has helped our students more readily and rapidly learn how to develop interesting ideas, provide evidence to substantiate those ideas, and express those ideas effectively. By providing guidance in oral expression, we've given them the tools to be better writers." These results are very encouraging, particularly in light of the difficulties students often encounter when communicating about a text, whether verbally or in writing. At the same time, the results are not altogether surprising; effective use of the text was a focal point of many of the instructional activities of the RID program, and its importance was clearly communicated to students in the evaluation guidelines.

The final positive outcome noted by the team was the fresh perspective the project gave them for approaching discussion teaching, particularly with respect to the role of clearly communicated expectations, targeted instruction, and guided practice in fostering improvement. One faculty member described this insight with a comparison to writing instruction, noting,

There's an important analogy between teaching writing and fostering lively and substantial class discussion. I've realized for many years that writing is a craft and that we can't expect our students to write well unless we train them in the craft. We wouldn't throw our students into a pottery room and tell them to figure out how to throw beautiful works of clay for themselves. The various practices and exercises of RID demonstrated to me just how similar speaking and writing are, so I became more conscious of the fact that it's foolish of me to walk into class expecting that if I ask a question, my students will jump right in and excel in the art of conversation.

This analogy is particularly apt when discussion is conceptualized not as a means but as an end, namely, the capacity for communicating effectively. Situating the RID project within a framework of rhetorical pedagogy helped to facilitate this perspective, thereby drawing attention to the need to *teach* students how to be capable discussants.

In their quest to teach students well, the Humanities faculty encountered a number of challenges, such as the unforeseen problems with discussion evaluation mentioned earlier. Sometimes, individual students were the challenge—those unhappy with tough feedback, discussion dominators, and the always-frustrating reticent students, some of whom remained impervious to efforts to draw them out. Summarizing the challenges of teaching discussion, one professor remarked, "RID is no magic pill." The strategies have the potential to make a difference, but some discussions may still fall flat, and the progress of some discussants may be negligible. That being said, the faculty remained enthusiastic about the overall impact of the project.

Student Perspectives

Students provided another perspective on the RID project. About 10 weeks into the semester, 64 students (89% of the total enrollment) completed a one-page, informally designed classroom survey. The survey included five questions addressing the following topics: 1) perceived improvement, 2) helpfulness of various RID activities, 3) elaboration on the most helpful activity, 4) connections between RID activities and the Humanities experience, and 5) suggestions for change. The survey featured both closed-ended and open-ended questions, thus providing both quantitative and qualitative data on student perspectives. In what follows, I present responses to quantitative questions, then illustrate with relevant comments from the open-ended questions to make the numbers more meaningful.

The first item on the survey asked students to rate their present ability to discuss intellectual material as compared to the beginning of the course. Out of the 64 respondents, 4 reported no improvement (6%), 42 reported some improvement (66%), and 18 reported significant improvement (28%). Put differently, 94% of students reported at least some improvement, an encouraging result. While it is possible that students may have reported similar improvement without the RID approach, the faculty's observations regarding the effects of RID, along with some of the open-ended comments from students, support the idea that teaching the art of discussion made a difference. One student, who reported significant improvement, wrote, "My high school did not teach discussion or good analytical thinking. Therefore, being in discussion here was slow painful death until I got the hang of it." Students mentioned a number of specific improvements, including an ability to interact more effectively with other participants, express their opinions more clearly, distinguish between good and bad arguments, and overcome shyness. Of those who reported no improvement, one did not offer any explanation, and another cited his or her lack of participation. Curiously, the remaining two commented on helpful aspects of RID, which seems somewhat inconsistent with their "no improvement" rating.

When asked to rate the helpfulness of each element of RID program (1=not helpful; 2=somewhat helpful; 3=very helpful), students rated the in-class exercises, practice, and feedback most highly; the average for each was 2.4. Regarding the in-class exercises and practice, students stressed the idea of learning by doing: As one student said, "I think I improved a lot through constant practice in the seminar. I was able to keep my skills up, and I learned new ways to discuss from my peers." Students also highly valued the feedback they received on their practice sessions, as it pinpointed strengths and weaknesses. Students who mentioned the actual

grading of discussion were somewhat divided. Some thought the grading system was too ambiguous, while others thought it was a powerful motivator: "Making a point to enforce class discussion got me to open up more. Start messing with my grade and I'm automatically more willing."

Students gave the model discussion on *Antigone* an average rating of 2.1, indicating that it was somewhat less helpful than in-class practice, but more helpful than the rhetoric workshops, which earned an average rating of 1.6. Several students commented specifically on the model discussion, noting, for example, that it "showed how an intelligent and informed discussion *should* go." Echoing this statement, another respondent (who penciled in a rating of 4 for the model discussion) explained, "I had never seen/been in that type of discussion before in high school. I had no clue what one was supposed to be like." After watching the discussion, one student noted that "it was easier to understand how to use the text and formulate responses."

The rhetoric workshops, had limited, if any value, for most students. While an occasional student indicated that the workshops were very helpful, many thought that they were of limited value. One reason for the limited impact was logistical. Some students did not attend any of the out-of-class workshops, while others attended the wrong series of workshops (i.e., those designed for students giving formal presentations), as reflected in the following comment: "The workshops were a good idea. I went to one on giving a presentation. That was helpful, but the one more focused on discussion was more helpful." Just as Humanities students attended presentation workshops, students from other classes in the Eloquence Initiative attended the discussion workshops, thereby preventing a focus on any particular subject matter. This last point is perhaps most significant. Taking a relatively content-free approach to teaching rhetorical skills, efficient as it may seem, is simply not as effective as what Dannels (2001) describes as

situated pedagogy, a context-driven approach that takes disciplinary norms and needs into account in rhetorical instruction. One student summed up this difference well, observing, "I think that in-class practice serves as a better teacher than simply being instructed in how to discuss correctly."

One final thread of comments worth noting addresses perceived student learning in the course. When asked about how RID enhanced their experience in Humanities, numerous students identified deeper engagement with and understanding of the text as a positive outcome, as the following sample of comments suggests:

- "RID made me work hard and learn my material before discussion to be prepared."
- "The material sinks in so much more when we talk about it."
- "Being expected to be able to discuss and defend topics made me focus more on reading. It requires more thought and analysis."
- "The plethora of opinions and ideas expressed on the texts has added to a richer understanding of the works we have read."
- "I think about what I'm reading more."

These comments corroborate the views of the Humanities faculty. From both perspectives, the RID approach fostered deeper student engagement with the text.

Discussion

The informal assessment data presented in the previous section suggests that a rhetorical approach to discussion has great potential. As the Sewanee case shows, classroom discussion improves noticeably when students are provided with the knowledge and strategies necessary for effective rhetorical performance. Strengthening skills of expression, whether in writing, speaking or discussion, requires familiarity with standards (conveyed through evaluation rubrics as well as

modeling), knowledge of basic principles (such as rhetorical invention), and plenty of guided practice. By addressing these elements, Sewanee's Humanities 101 team succeeded in elevating the level of performance in their classes, and in so doing, took a step toward an important long-range goal of the project: creating a *culture* of responsible intellectual discussion at the college. As a general education program, Humanities enrolls students (roughly 20% of each incoming class) at the beginning of their college career and retains many of them throughout the four-course sequence, providing ample time to reinforce, refine, and enhance discussion skills, skills that, ideally, should transfer to other courses. If anecdotal evidence from professors inheriting RID students is any evidence, the skills are indeed transferring. One year after the initial project was conducted, the Humanities Director commented: "The Humanities 201 teachers have been raving about their students. The students can discuss better, write better, in a word, think better."

The rhetorical approach to discussion, although developed in particular circumstances, is generally applicable to any course in which discussion features prominently. The approach could be implemented as a coherent whole, or, if time and resources are limited, professors might adopt only a few of the strategies, such as the invention-oriented in-class exercises, the discussion evaluation criteria, and the commonplaces. Whatever the approach, it should focus providing students with the rhetorical abilities—including both thought and expression—necessary for participating effectively in critical group inquiry.

To that end, I would like to offer several recommendations for implementation, based on the strengths and weaknesses of the RID project. First, establishing and communicating criteria for performance is essential, especially if discussion is going to be graded. With clearly communicated criteria, students know what is expected of them, and they have a clear target at which to aim. In the process of creating the criteria, professors, too, gain a clearer idea of what

they are expecting from students, and they can use that vocabulary to reinforce their learning objectives. Discussion criteria, like those included here in the appendix, are readily available and can be modified easily to fit different disciplinary contexts or particular learning goals. The challenge, as was evident in the Sewanee project, is using those criteria for grading purposes. In a public speaking class, student speakers stand alone, articulating their ideas uninterrupted for 5-10 minutes. The discussion classroom, in contrast, demands that professors attend to all discussants at once; in addition, they must pay attention to the discussion as a whole, which involves an assessment of both the group dynamic as well as content coverage. This is no easy task, yet, as the student survey results suggest, evaluative feedback is essential.

To make the evaluation process more manageable, two strategies are worth considering. First, individuals or teams might give the evaluation form a trial run before actually using it in their classes. This practice has worked well in the public speaking context; in my communication department, for example, new teaching assistants are shown videotapes of students speeches and asked to provide ratings and commentary in an effort to promote shared understanding of the criteria. The task would be a bit trickier with discussion teachers, primarily because videotapes of classroom discussions are not as readily available as student speech tapes. Once a recording is located or made, however, pilot testing the form would be fairly simple (and may, in fact, be a fine focus for a faculty development session). A second strategy for improving the evaluation process would be to simplify the grading system, perhaps using a three-level system of pluses, checks, and minuses rather than letter grades. As an alternative, one might eliminate grades entirely and focus solely on written feedback, but that may reduce student motivation. Clearly, more research is needed in this area.

Another area to consider in implementation is instruction, which, like evaluation, is critical. As the RID project showed, the more closely instructional activities were tied to the subject matter of the course, the more helpful those activities were perceived to be. One important question to consider with respect to instruction is personnel and expertise: must a college have access to a rhetoric specialist, as Sewanee did, to execute a rhetorical approach to discussion? Although it would be possible to implement some parts of the program using nothing more than this article and perhaps some research on concepts such as invention, consulting with a rhetorician or involving him or her in a team approach (as in an interdisciplinary seminar) would be highly advantageous. As a resource for students, the rhetoric teacher might develop context-specific sessions that directly address the needs of a particular class. (In the semester following RID, in fact, the generic rhetoric workshops were dropped in favor of tailored sessions for individual classes, with better results.) As a resource for faculty, the rhetoric teacher could assist with the development of evaluation procedures and training, provide resources on important rhetorical precepts, assist in developing in-class exercises, and offer advice on facilitating those activities. In the Sewanee case, the mere presence of a rhetoric teacher in the project underscored the idea of discussion as a teachable communication skill, much like writing or presentational speaking. Admittedly, creating that presence is easier for colleges that have communication studies departments and teach public speaking courses. For campuses that lack such resources, an outside consultant, perhaps from an area college, would be a good alternative.

A final issue to consider with this approach is assessment. In Sewanee's RID project, assessment was rather informal. Although the anecdotal and survey data strongly suggest that RID enhanced student learning, that conclusion would be stronger if it were based on more rigorous assessment procedures, such as a pre-test, post-test evaluation. In a four-course

sequence such as Humanities program, it might be interesting to videotape students in the first few weeks of their first course, then in the last few weeks, and again in each subsequent term to chart their development. Whatever the method, establishing a baseline is important, for it would show more precisely the degree and nature of improvement. Even if scientific rigor is not an aim, it would be worthwhile to devise a systematic way to gather faculty and student input, which will provide a good indication of the effectiveness of the approach. In the Sewanee case, the testimony of Humanities 101 professors alone was reason enough to declare the project a success (and to continue it in subsequent semesters), their tales of transformed discussion providing compelling evidence that the effort was well worth trying.

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Appendix A

Discussion Participation: An Evaluation Guide

Minimal preparation for classroom discussion requires students to read, think about, and bring to class the text, be prepared to discuss the text, and show respect for other participants. The following guidelines differentiate contributors in the following areas: mastery of material, quality of ideas, effectiveness of argumentation, and general impression.

"A" Contributor

- Contributions in class reflect exceptional preparation as evidenced by frequent authoritative and/or creative use of textual/material evidence.
- Ideas offered are always substantive (i.e., unusually perceptive, original, and/or synthetic), provide one or more major insights as well as direction for the class.
- Agreements and/or disagreements are well substantiated and persuasively presented.
- *If this person were not a member of the class, the quality of discussion would be diminished markedly.*

"B" Contributor

- Contributions in class reflect thorough preparation as evidenced by competent and occasionally authoritative and/or creative reference to textual/material evidence.
- Ideas offered are usually substantive, provide good insights and sometimes direction for the class.
- Agreements and/or disagreements are fairly well substantiated and/or sometimes persuasive.
- *If this person were not a member of the class, the quality of discussion would be diminished.*

"C" Contributor

- Contributions in this class reflect satisfactory preparation as evidenced by at least some acquaintance with textual/material evidence.
- Ideas offered are sometimes substantive, provide generally useful insights, but seldom offer a new direction for discussion.
- Sometimes insightful disagreements and agreements are voiced with little to no substantiation.

- *If this person were not a member of the class, the quality of discussion would be diminished somewhat.*

"D-F" Contributor

- Contributions in class reflect inadequate preparation.
- Ideas are seldom substantive, provide few if any insights, and never a constructive direction for the class.
- Integrative comments and effective challenges are absent. ⁱⁱⁱ
- *If this person were not a member of the class, valuable air-time would be saved.*

Non-participant

- Little or nothing contributed in class; hence, there is not an adequate basis for evaluation.
- If this person were not a member of the class, the quality of discussion would not be changed.
- *Said persons need to leave this category and move into a contributor category.*

Discussion Commonplaces (*Topoi*)

CATEGORY 1: Insightful Statements/Claims

Interpret

Speculate

Point out significance

Analyze

Evaluate

Compare/contrast

Synthesize

Identify inconsistencies or puzzles

Relate the text (or topic) to

itself

a theory

another text

context

assumptions

taken-for-granted

CATEGORY 2: Challenges or Questions

Comment on or question remarks in light of the following intellectual standards:

Clarity

Accuracy

Precision

Relevance

Depth

Breadth

Logic

Significance

Fairness

Pose a new question requiring a Category 1 or Category 3 response

CATEGORY 3: Responses to Statements, Challenges, or Questions

Argue a position (claim + reasons/evidence)

Acknowledge points of agreement

Affirm the importance of an insight

Clarify

Provide additional evidence

Expand

Explore complexities

Acknowledge a change in perspective

Offer a different perspective

Reframe

Point out emerging themes

Summarize

CATEGORY 4: Comments on the Process

Refocus a wandering discussion

Suggest a new direction

Point out inappropriate comments

Express interest in the opinions of quiet discussants

ⁱ Like many small institutions (Friedland, 2004), Sewanee offers no basic public speaking courses and employs no communication faculty. Although Sewanee students routinely speak in their classes, the curriculum does not provide for systematic instruction in oral communication, with the result being a growing concern on campus that students are not being adequately prepared in this area. To address this need, Sewanee's Center for Teaching Excellence adopted a modified version of the "consulting/training model" (see Cronin & Grice, 1993) of speaking across the curriculum, which features ongoing instructional support and consulting from a qualified communication specialist.

ⁱⁱ Although attributed most directly to Tyler, the guidelines are also credited to Richard J. Murnane of Harvard and others, with the comment that "the original attribution of the guidelines has been lost."