

# OBSTACLES TO OPEN DISCUSSION *And* CRITICAL THINKING

## *The Grinnell College Study*

BY CAROL TROSSET

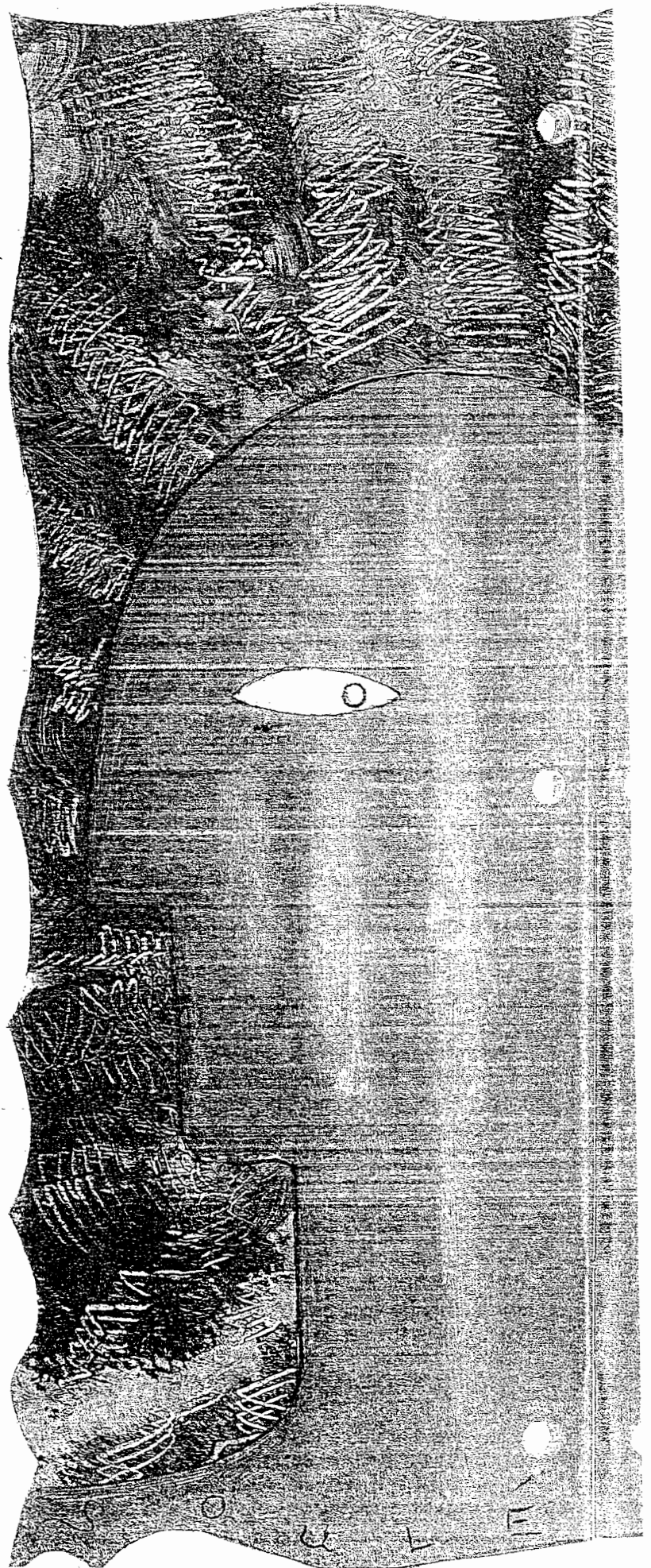


**L**ike many institutions, Grinnell College hopes that one benefit of an increasingly diverse student body will be that students talk about their differences with each other. It sees open discussion of sensitive issues as an important part of the learning process—both in and out of the classroom. Since the college has made many attempts to foster a good climate for these discussions, recent reports that a number of students feel silenced have been disturbing news.

In an attempt to understand this problem, I undertook several semesters of ethnographic research, focusing on student assumptions about the purposes of discussion. The attitudes revealed by this study have far-reaching implications, not just for the discussion of diversity issues but for our educational mission of fostering critical-thinking skills.

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## DISCUSSION AS ADVOCACY

We presented approximately 200 students with a list of sensitive diversity-related issues (such as "whether race is an important difference between people"); for each, we asked whether it was possible to have a balanced discussion of that issue (involving more than one perspective, with each perspective receiving about equal support and with people being civil to each other). We also asked them to explain why they did or did not want to discuss the issue. The majority of students not only thought that balanced discussion of these issues was impossible but feared that a single viewpoint would dominate—and feared reprisal if one spoke against that perspective.

The main reason students gave for wanting to discuss a particular topic was that they held strong views on the subject and wished to convince others. Likewise, not having a strong view—or finding an issue difficult—was often given as a reason for not wanting to discuss a subject. This conflict is reflected in the following student responses:

- "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 students are so convinced of advocacy as the point of discussion 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, saying, "Ideally, you should talk in order to make the other person realize that what they said was wrong," or, "I don't want to talk about things I'm unsure of."

Only five out of the 200 students in our sample volunteered a different, more exploratory, view of discussion, such as "I want to talk about multicultural education because I'm not sure I know enough about it," and "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 first-year students found 54 percent preferred to discuss a topic on which they held strong views (over a topic about which they were undecided).

Another survey, with a differently worded question, found the same preference increasing over time, rising from 25 percent of freshmen to over 50 percent 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 SEARCH FOR CONSENSUS

When we asked students why people should talk about their differences, we quite often heard 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 students also told 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 expressed great optimism about the possibility that people with different views can find common ground.

Some students spoke about issues as if a consensus already existed:

- "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 was combined with a preference for advocacy. One 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. Their reasons included the following:

• "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 created artificial consensus groups by only discussing difficult issues when they knew it to be "safe"—that is, in carefully selected groups with homogeneous opinions, as reflected in the following comments:

• "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."

Seventy-five percent 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 percent 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 agreed 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. Forty-three percent of the respondents attributed knowledge to personal experience, and another 35 percent 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 six of the 47) is also visible in the distribution of which groups claimed knowledge of which issues. Thus, students of color were more likely

## ABOUT THE STUDY

Grinnell is a selective, private, residential four-year college located in a small town in central Iowa. Its roughly 1,300 students come from all 50 states and some 40 countries.

This study was conducted primarily using ethnographic interviewing techniques, where individuals not only respond to questions face to face but are asked to explain their thoughts and the meaning of what they say, then to situate these things in their experiences.

Each semester for three years, I trained student interviewers through an anthropological research methods class; they then collected data from their fellow students, while I gathered additional data and guided the project design and analysis.

Several different samples, most comprising about 200 students, contributed to the data presented here. Each sample has good representation with respect to race, gender, and class

year. —CT

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 attribute expertise not only to experience, but to a particular kind of experience (that of belonging to a typically less powerful group).

This valuing 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.

### THE RIGHT NOT TO BE CHALLENGED

Not only do people participate in discussion for the purpose of advocating views they

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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 percent of the sample volunteered the idea that they had the right to think or say whatever they liked without having their views challenged.

Some of the phrases used to express this position include

- "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"; and
- "...to speak my mind and not feel inhibited."

The students who claimed the right not to be challenged were nearly all women. Twenty-five percent of the women we interviewed made this claim, compared to only 6 percent 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.

### IMPLICATIONS

We hear a great deal these days about the pedagogical benefits of discussion. But the assumptions we uncovered—such as the belief that advocacy is the purpose of discussion—illustrate why this method is often not as effective as we'd hope. Cultural attitudes of this sort have a pervasive impact on behavior. These attitudes affect not only how students discuss things among themselves, but how they hear what professors say and how they read course materials.

Many of us as academics share a number of expectations about the dispositions of educated people. These include exploring ideas from a variety of perspectives, learning about things outside one's own experience, evaluating the quality of evidence and arguments, and the capacity to be persuaded of new perspectives when presented with high-quality evidence and argument. In line with this, the fostering of critical-thinking skills appears in the mission statements of our institutions. But

our students often do not share this common faculty agenda.

Colleagues in philosophy have told me they see students who think Socrates was a bully. One student even equated Socrates with Rush Limbaugh—this on the grounds that both of them want everyone to agree with them.

A faculty member I encountered at a conference, who clearly valued both diversity and open discussion, also claimed that Socratic academic discourse was a bad model for students. One complication here is the difference between critical and empathic thinking, both of which may be educational goals but which should not be confused with each other.

Some students to whom I presented this research told me, quite articulately, that "your identity comes from what, not how, you think." One, apparently struggling with the need to change his views on certain subjects, said he resolved this by realizing that at his age his identity was still changing. These statements were strikingly different from the typical scholar's identification with how one uses evidence and argument—something that has nothing to do with one's conclusions of the moment, since these will always change in the face of new evidence and better arguments.

### RADICAL RELATIVISM

Developmental and learning-style theorists may take issue with my concerns; it's all a "stage" or just their "style," they say. Their challenges, however, beg the question of how we as teachers are going to accomplish our educational missions, which are centered around the development of critical-thinking skills and which require our students to grow analytically.

What should we do, for example, with a student who says, after reading Malinowski (whose publications were based on four years of detailed field research), we still can't say anything about the Trobrianders because "it's just his opinion"? Traditional relativism, of course, is an important part of anthropology; it is based on the idea that any statement is made from a particular perspective, which must be taken into account when considering its meaning. The radical relativism of students carries this perspective beyond its original intention and argues that, therefore, everything is "just" an opinion and that no comparisons can be made between ideas or perspectives. (Indeed, people taking this position usually argue that any perspective claiming the ability to make comparative judgments is inferior.)

This orientation among students supports their claim that there is no way to learn about

something outside one's own experience. This assertion, in effect, denies the methodological basis of most disciplines. It also supports students' idea that people have the right not to have their views challenged. Critical thinking itself is devalued here, since the assessment of evidence and logic is seen as just another way of doing things.

Given these orientations, we need to recognize that when we recommend "tolerance" to students; they may not hear the same message we're trying to send. Many of us think of tolerance in terms of civility, of behaving in well-mannered ways toward all members of the community, whether or not we approve of their views or behavior. Many students, on the other hand, think that being tolerant means approving of all ways of being, and believing that all ways are equally valid (except, of course, any position that openly makes value judgments and does not extend equal approval to all).

### BEING COMFORTABLE

Eighty-four percent of the first-year class we surveyed chose the statement "It is important for the college community to make sure all its members feel comfortable" over the statement "People have to learn to deal with being uncomfortable." Across the student body, it is a common demand that the college as a whole, as well as its individual members, must act to ensure the comfort of all students, especially those who are members of traditionally underrepresented groups. At the same time, people insist that members of traditionally powerful groups (such as heterosexuals) should get comfortable, quickly, with previously unfamiliar groups and lifestyles.

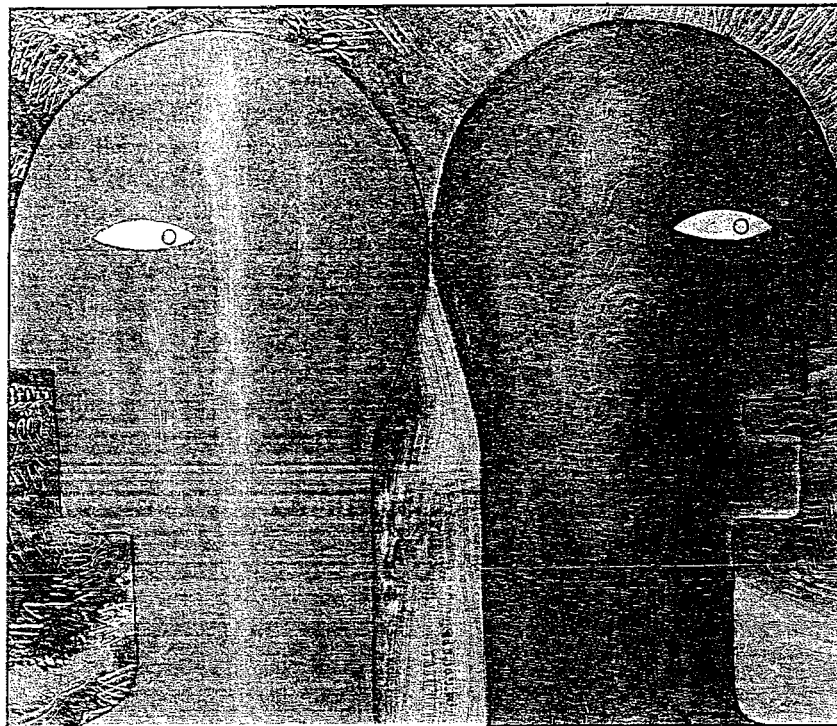
"People are not interested in the sources of discomfort. They just want everyone to get comfortable," one student said. Of course, people should not be made to feel excluded because they belong to a minority group. But the demand for comfort often reaches much farther than this, sometimes to the point of claiming that no person should have to learn new behaviors or ways of thinking, or indeed do anything that might make him or her uneasy.

These e-mail messages were sent to colleagues of mine; the students clearly expect that they will be accepted as legitimate excuses:

- "You haven't received my paper because I'm not comfortable with it yet."

- "I'm not coming to class today because I haven't done the reading, and I'm not comfortable asking any of the other students if I can borrow their books."

Exploring new ideas, encountering people with different values, learning a new disci-



pline's way of thinking, and having someone point out a flaw in one's argument—these can be uncomfortable experiences. For some people, simply finding themselves disagreeing with someone else is uncomfortable. Promising our students that we will make them comfortable may simply confirm them in their view that they have the right not to be challenged.

Ironically, typical suggestions for how to foster discussion feed into this attitude. Stressing the importance of making everyone feel "safe" often seems to result in making many people afraid to disagree with anyone, for fear of intimidating or offending them. Perhaps the teacher's solution is not ever-more safety and respect (words that can be variously interpreted), but cultivating a more careful distinction between the idea and the person.

Speakers need to remember this distinction when they issue challenges, but those on the receiving end also need to remember it, so as not to overinterpret any conceptual or factual challenge as a threat to identity. With respect to sensitive issues, it might help to encourage everyone to think less, rather than more, about identity; to focus students' attention not on their differences, but on some shared interest or problem-solving task that has the potential to bring them together.

Clearly, many students hold assumptions about discussion that present difficulties for teaching critical thinking. Deeply personal issues are, of course, among the most difficult places for anyone to apply such skills. But the ability to hold just such discussions would be an acid test of whether we have indeed fostered critical thinking in our students. □