

Facilitating Through “Perfectly Logical Explanations”

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| <p>Overview</p> | <p>This short document from the Commission for Social Justice Educators gives a concise description of strategies of multipartiality in discussion facilitation as a way to challenge dominant narratives that students have internalized and tend to reproduce in the classroom. Unlike impartial facilitation in which the instructor aims to be neutral towards all narratives, multipartial facilitation takes into account how dominant narratives already have significant weight and power in the classroom as the students have internalized the logic and assumptions of these narratives. A multipartial facilitator’s responsibility is to address the weight and power of dominant narratives by inviting participants to analyze the assumptions and limitations of their thinking and encourage the contribution of counternarratives. This is not to be confused with a partial approach where an instructor would advocate for particular perspectives.</p> |
| <p>Goals</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) To address the prevalence of “perfectly logical explanations” that students often bring to re-establish dominant narratives. 2) To challenge the notion that equal time is a measure of curricular fairness. 3) To encourage the practice of multipartial strategies in classroom facilitation. 4) To establish a more inclusive classroom by making space for counternarratives. |
| <p>Implementation</p> | <p>Though the article is written for social justice educators, particularly in student affairs, faculty can extrapolate to interrogate dominant narratives in their classrooms. The implications are that students learn to think more deeply about their assumptions and learn from where those assumptions come from.</p> |
| <p>Challenges</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Students who are invested in the dominant narrative often interpret multipartial strategies as biased and couched in political agenda. To some extent, this has to be accepted as a normal response to encountering ideas that conflict with one’s worldview. 2) Guiding students through deconstructing their assumptions can be time-consuming, especially when the assumptions they are interrogating have cultural dominance. |

Facilitating Through 'Perfectly Logical Explanations (PLEs)' and other Challenging Participant Comments

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As student affairs practitioners, we are asked to meet people where they are. As social justice educators, this could mean meeting people in some very triggering places, and yet – this is our responsibility.

Each one of us has limited knowledge of the various effects of social injustices on people, and only slightly more knowledge of the ways these injustices affect us. Their impact is everywhere. When we examine the language we use, we don't always recognize the impact of saying 'you guys' to refer to a mixed-gender group, or describing where the stairwell is to a group of people trying to find their way up one floor. We don't always think twice when using words like 'crazy', 'insane', or even 'gay' to describe something ridiculous or stupid. For many people, these are words that are so common in our vernacular that even reading them on this page isn't alarming. Yet each of these ideas imbeds an assumption, also referred to as a dominant narrative. Whether the assumption is that everyone is able-bodied or that it's okay to use identity labels as adjectives that conjure negative associations, the impact can be very belittling, isolating and painful.

Dominant narratives are generalized assumptions that dismiss other's experiences and reference the experience of privileged groups to refer to everyone. They can be overt or very subtle when expressed; sometimes they are so subtle they surface as assumptions that underlie what is not being said. However obvious or subtle they are, in a facilitation setting, we can find them challenging to work through, if we even notice them ourselves.

There is one common way that dominant narratives are couched when voiced by participants – Perfectly Logical Explanations (PLEs). In order to not be judged, individuals who voice dominant narratives will simultaneously provide context to justify their perspectives. "I'm not racist or anything; this is just the experience I had growing up". "I hear people of ___ particular targeted group use that word, so I think I should be able to use it, too. It's not fair that only some people can use it." Imbedded in the dominant narrative itself, is the act of "PLEing", which can make it especially hard to challenge in a dialogue or other social justice education setting.

As social justice educators, we have a responsibility to address these dominant narratives when they come up in facilitation settings. More so, we have the responsibility to acknowledge the dominant narratives that we introduce, if we realize that we've done so. It is unrealistic to assume that we can address everything or that we will even be able to name every dominant narrative that exists. Recognizing that each introduction of a dominant narrative pulls the power away from any experiences that are counter to it, it is our responsibility to try. This strategy of balancing the power of the narratives in the dialogue is referred to as 'multipartiality'.

The word 'multipartial' differentiates itself from strategies of 'impartiality' and 'partiality'. To be impartial, or neutral, as a facilitator, means to aim to give equal time to every narrative that is voiced. Dominant narratives already carry more weight in society and have more power, so continuing to give them equal time maintains this dynamic. To be partial as a facilitator means advocating against these dominant narratives and pushing for the recognized validity of counter narratives. Although this lessens the relative power of the dominant narratives, it still does not balance the power in the room, allowing for an equitable exchange of perspectives and experiences. To be multipartial as a facilitator means to invite participants to dissect the nuances of

dominant narratives in order to recognize their limitations and encourage the contributions of counter narratives in order to recognize their existence.

Being multipartial in actual facilitation requires practice, patience and a willingness to take risks. Many times, multipartial facilitators ask questions that participants have never had to think about before – asking participants to unpack elements of their life they have taken for granted. This kind of introspection and collective sharing is crucial to understanding the complexities of many social issues, and learning about how we have each been affected by and perpetuated these narratives. We believe multipartiality is the key to effective social justice education, and know it to be a complicated skill to understand.

Citations

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