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Socialization & Culture

So-called “effective” discussion participation methods are not universal, politically neutral, or objective.

People are taught—both explicitly and implicitly—behavioral norms that influence how they speak up in a group. When people who have been socialized by different norms come together in discussion, unspoken expectations can often lead to unexpected conflict or one group dominating another.

For example, in many communities in the U.S., due to dominant social constructions and expectations around (binary) gender identity, little kids are often raised differently depending on their assigned gender. Little girls are often taught that when speaking in a group to raise their hand, wait their turn, put others first, and be nice. Such behaviors center on a collective approach to ensuring fairness. Little boys, in contrast, are often taught to dive right in, claim their spot, and compete for their chance to speak. These behaviors center on individual competition in which the dominant speaker is assumed to have rightly earned the floor.

Neither of these gender-specific lessons are necessarily better than the other, but they are indeed different. When boys and girls (and men and women) get together for a discussion, the boys/men tend to dominate, even though by their rules they are playing fairly, and the girls/women tend to get left behind, as they are politely waiting their turn, which doesn't tend to come. Beyond influencing simply who talks more, gender inequities in the discussion can also therefore emerge around who sets the direction and tone of the discussion, whose ideas get considered, and whose needs get met through problem-solving and decision-making.

When we are not explicit about the expected methods for participation in our class discussions (such as shouting out answers, raising hands, going in order around the room, or some other strategy), or if we default to an anything-goes process, historically marginalized students will tend to be excluded by default. Gender is just one of many such examples of categories through which we might examine differences in how people are socialized.

Cultural differences among students, and particularly between students and the dominant culture of the academy, can also play a significant role in influencing if and how students participate in a class discussion. If the teacher's facilitation style reinforces that dominance, discussion dynamics can be all the more fraught.

Students from cultures where learners are expected to emulate authority figures may find themselves uneasy in discussions where they are now expected to express their own unique points of view. Such students may likewise be skeptical of the idea of learning from their peers through this format, preferring to soak up the expertise of the professor's lectures instead. This deference to authority may prove a particular barrier to class discussions centered around analysis and critique of certain institutions, governments, or laws.

Students from cultures that value nonlinear thinking, problem-solving, and storytelling might find more linear approaches to class discussion frustrating or impenetrable, and vice versa. If a student assumes that the purpose of a discussion is to brainstorm, make unexpected connections across ideas, and explore in a range of directions, for example, they will undoubtedly clash with those who expect a methodical, step by step reasoning process.

Differences in unspoken rules of etiquette across cultures may be a source of discomfort for some students used to indirection and subtlety who are asked to express their claims explicitly and build their arguments assertively in a class discussion. This difference could be challenging in many types of discussions, but especially in debate.

The same may be true for students from bartering cultures whose approach to persuasion may be more akin to negotiation--overstating an assertion in order to leave room for concession--in a discussion context that otherwise frowns upon exaggeration, hyperbole, or dramatics.

Further, students from cultures that expect no balance in airtime among speakers, whose rhetoricians and listeners prefer lengthy detailed stories, and who savor the experience--not just the product--of debate, may find themselves feeling stifled or shut down by expectations of brevity and concision.