Overcoming Conflict in the Classroom: The Critical Conversations Model

MARK WILLIAMS, PHD, MSW, MDIV

Social Power and Inequity

- Power dynamics that perpetuate inequities across relationships and structures are persistently active, including in the classroom.

- Students and faculty have the same relationship to social inequities inside the classroom as they do to social inequities outside the classroom.

Reflecting the Structures of Social Power

Structural inequities playing out in the classroom:

- Conversations about racism in which White voices dominate

- Men speaking over women

- A straight/cisgender person discussing opinions about LGBTQ people as if they are not in the room

- Conversations framed in terms of ideological oppositions (e.g. Black Lives Matter vs. Blue Lives Matter)

Critical Conversations Model

When these dynamics are ignored, the default tends to reinforce within the classroom the same social inequities that happen throughout society.

The **Critical Conversations Model** proposes a pathway for students and faculty to interrogate how power dynamics are enacted within their immediate conversation.

Critical Conversations

Critical Conversations: "Conversations in which power dynamics in social context are illuminated, substantively examined in the moment, and subsequently reflected upon in order to produce change – personal, systemic, institutional." (Kang & O'Neill, 2018)

Goals of the Critical Conversations Model

- Encourage deeper awareness of the immediate impact of power, privilege, & structural inequities to produce change in the moment

- Develop skills to attend to privilege and social power in social context

- Practice critical consciousness & reflection within a group dialogue

- Engage ambiguity – move through conflict/tension toward greater understanding of self and others

- Engage content toward deeper understanding in context

- Enhance self-efficacy in engaging in critical conversations

Theoretical Foundations
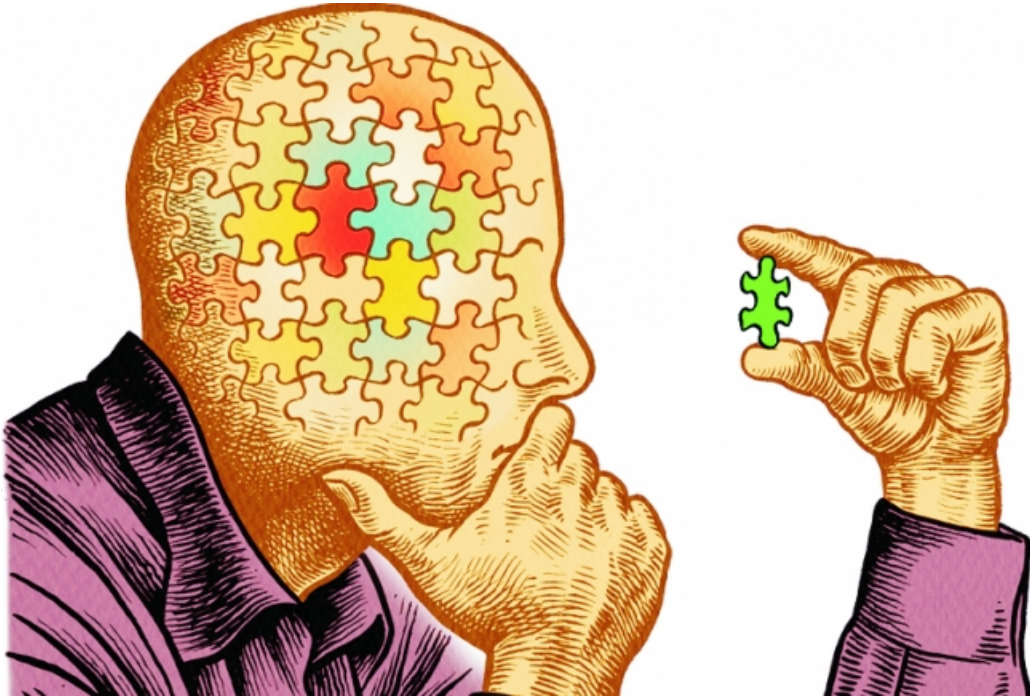
- Critical consciousness (Friere, 1970)

- Critical reflection (Fook, 2012)

- Interrogating societal power through intergroup dialogue (Zuniga, Nagda, Chelser & Cytron-Walker, 2007)

Continuum of Pedagogical Style

Dialogic

Instructor in Charge:

- More Dominant
- Disagreement Not Encouraged
- More objectifying of content, students & relationship

Instructor/Students Share Power:

- Open to change
- Multiple perspectives welcome - more vulnerability in sharing across differences
- Instructor "provides clear direction… models, invites & inspires" (Guilar, 2006)

Students More Empowered than Instructor:

- Instructor fears challenging dynamics & community patterns
- Instructor does not provide clear direction
- All voices thought to be equal, yet some dominate

Decide

- Is this a teachable moment?

- Is there sufficient time?

- Do I have the skills and stamina?

- What might be the consequences if I do or do not?
  - Student learning
  - Classroom dynamics
  - Course evaluations
  - Students' reactions beyond the classroom
  - My own growth and learning

Step One: Tune-In

- Facilator reflects internally on own social identities and positionality in relation to group membership, content, and context

- Facilitator may invite others to reflect inwardly on their social identities and positionality in relation to group membership, content, and context

Step 2: Scaffolding & Shared Language

- Acknowledge the opportunity to engage in critical conversations

- Share hopes and concerns about engaging in critical conversations, e.g. greater understanding of perspectives rather than consensus or "winners"

- Establish and commit to a time frame

- Identify guidelines for the conversation

- Name the focus of the conversation

- Develop shared language around key concepts

Step 3: Dive Into the Conversation

- How does the content and context affect interactions in this moment?

- What power dynamics do you notice in this group?

- What assumptions might be taken for granted?

- What larger societal and structural dynamics are implicated and active in the current interaction.

Step 4: Transition Forward

- Honor the contributions

- Acknowledge ongoing-nature of the conversation

- Mark the end of the conversation

Step 5: Post-Session Facilitator Reflection

- How are you feeling?

- What was learned?

- What went well, and what didn't go well?

- What might I do differently?

- Consult with colleagues, reflective writing, give it time and come back later to assess

An Example…

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"Why do black students need their own orientation? Even though I'm White, I'm Jewish, so I feel like I should have the choice of being with the students of color." – a White-identified woman

"I think having their own orientation gives them a chance to support each other and talk about experiences in a way they might not feel safe doing in front of White people." –a White-identified woman

An Example…

"**We need space exactly for this reason, because you don't get it.**" – a Multiracial-identified woman

"**What don't I get? I really want to understand. Tell me what I'm not understanding, because I don't understand what I'm not getting.**" – the White-identified Jewish woman who spoke first
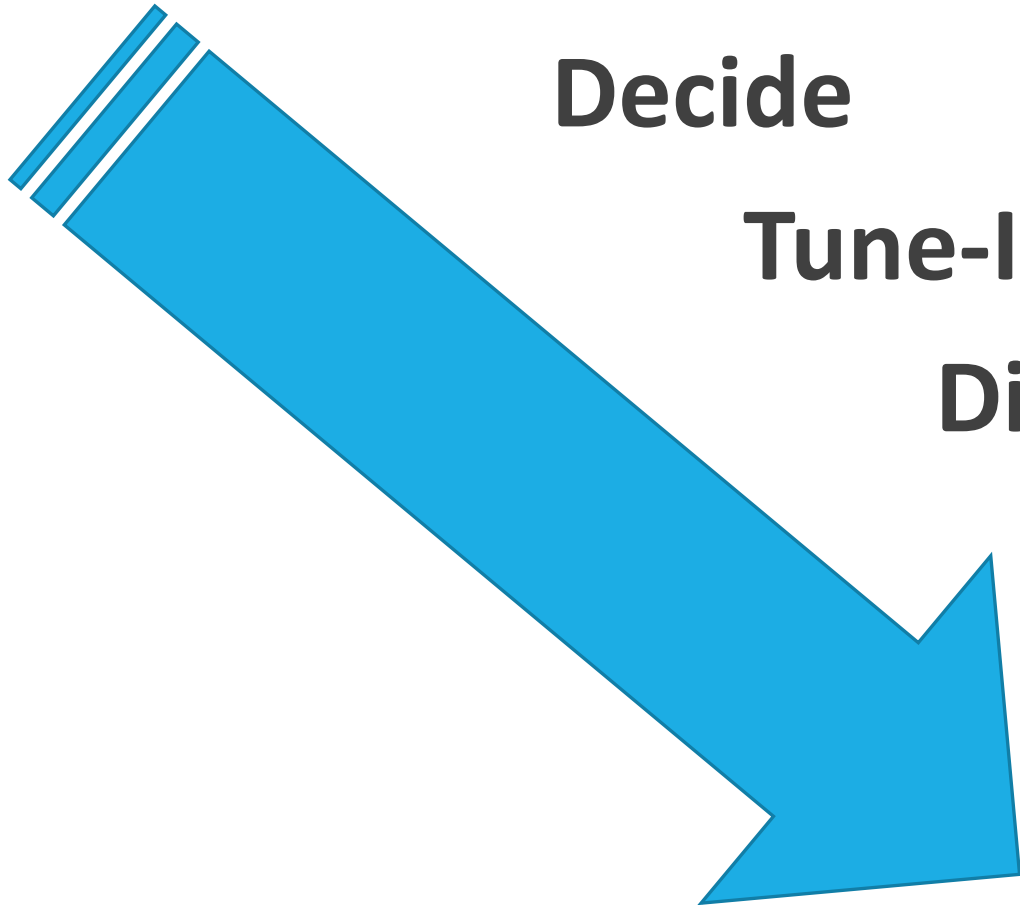
The Critical Conversations Model

Decide

Tune-In

Dive into the Conversation

Transition Forward

Reflect

Questions & Applications

- What skills would you need in order to feel confident in facilitating a critical conversation in your classroom?

- How would a critical conversation about dynamics in your classroom be a complement or a detriment to the course content you teach?

- How would your teaching style, interpersonal style, and comfort with conversations about social inequities impact your ability to facilitate a critical conversation?

References

Fook, J. (2012). Social Work: A Critical Approach to Practice (2nd Edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Friere, P. (1970). Pedagogy of the Oppressed. London: Penguin Books.

Guilar, J.D. (2006). Intersubjectivity and Dialogic Instruction, *Radical Pedagogy*.

Kang, H-K & O'Neill, P. (2018). Teaching note – Constructing critical conversations: A Model for facilitating classroom dialogue for critical learning. *Journal of Social Work Education, 54*:1, 187-193. doi: 10.1080/10437797.2017.1341857