

Composition Weekly



February 24, 2012

Start Talking: A Handbook for Engaging Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education

This handbook was compiled in 2008 by UAA staff members, faculty, and administrators in an attempt to address different approaches to difficult subjects within the classroom - whether it's a problematic reading, confrontational student, or an often contended theory. The handbook offers many scenarios and many potential solutions to those scenarios. The handbook begins by laying down ground rules for teachers to follow, which is by establishing classroom rules early on - no brainer, right? Well, the handbook suggests teachers establish some classroom rules (such as discussion rules) *with* their students, which can serve as an ice-breaker, trust builder, and easy reminder if behavior becomes a problem later on. I know, this is past where we are now in the semester, but it's something to keep in mind for your next class. Regardless, the handbook offers ideas to teachers needing to adopt a different form of classroom management due to problematic students mid-semester.



As some of the readings we ask our students to do sometimes express views that differ from their own (and

oftentimes, confrontation then occurs), the UAA handbook suggests ways to avoid these comments that could lead to conflicts in the classroom. Although the example given in the handbook that I am referring to focuses specifically on "using a book to explore cultural difference," their suggested approaches can just as easily be used to explore "difference" within a text. Some of their methods include:

Modified debate: "Students pick a perspective from the book and debate a question from the point-of-view of the character or perspective."

Role Playing: "Cast students in the book and have them play out a key scenario. Repeat the scene, changing roles and practicing alternate endings."

Small Group Discussion: The handbook specifically suggests to introduce the concept of privilege, since it is focusing on cultural differences. However, any concept/direction that introduces a safe tension for students to explore together yields similar results.

Online Discussion Board: "Post your own discussion questions or assign students to post

them on different weeks. Require some kind of response."

This coming Sunday, Heather Bremicker and I will be putting on a professional development workshop called "Teaching the Conflict." As usual, the workshop will take place from 11AM-1PM in Gruening 409 on March 4th. Borrowing some ideas from UAA's *Start Talking* handbook, our own experiences (and the experiences of the attendees), and UAF resources, we hope to engage in a discussion on conflicts in the classroom and pose potential solutions to them. Rather than heavily focusing on how to avoid conflict, however, we will aim to practice problem-solving skills during the workshop.

If you're interested in accessing this handbook you can get it at: <http://www.uaa.alaska.edu/cafe/difficultdialogues/upload/Start-Talking-Handbookcomplete-version.pdf>

Don't forget about our conversation in the pub this Friday, March 2 from 3:30-4:30PM. We will be discussing Deborah Brandt's "Who's the President? Ghostwriting and Shifting Values in Literacy." You can download this from the Professional Development page on Write Alaska.