Welcome to the new semester!

Many of us may find ourselves teaching small, discussion-based classes or upper-level seminars this spring, and many of you have only recently finished the fall’s First-Year Experiences. According to Carnegie Scholar and psychology professor José Alfonso Feito, such small seminars can acculturate students into intellectual communities—communities based on interaction and interdependence.

In “Reflections on the Seminar Experience” (2002), published in *The National Teaching & Learning FORUM*, Feito found several attributes that foster a communal learning experience for students, including that of *student ownership*, particularly in regard to in-class participation and discussion. According to Feito, “Many students recognized and valued their ownership of the learning process in a successful seminar. When they perceived that they, rather than the instructor, were guiding the discussions, their level of engagement in the class increased and they were more willing to participate fully” (p. 4).

Stephen Brookfield's *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms* (2005) offers a helpful checklist (copied below) for instructors who are interested in facilitating student ownership and who thus might wonder whether there is a balance between their voices and the students’ in class (p. 214):

- Is my participation preventing students who want to speak from making a contribution? Have I interrupted students in mid-sentence?
- Have I made more comments than all of the other students combined? Do I respond to every student who speaks? Do students pause before responding to each other because they expect me to make a comment after every student speaks?
- Am I sticking to my preset agenda for discussion despite alternative suggestions and even resistance from my students?
- Are my teaching practices in discussion in contradiction with my goals for the class?
- Am I discouraging student participation because I think the students lack knowledge or experience?
- Is the discussion faltering because of my own lack of participation?
- Does the discussion lack focus because I have contributed so little?
- Have I neglected to interject any comments that help students see how their ideas are related?
- In general, what am I doing to build community and a sense of collaborative engagement?
- What am I doing to assess and evaluate the degree to which my voice is in balance in discussion?

*Discussion as a Way of Teaching* includes many ideas for how to lead more democratic class discussions (especially in chapters 3-5), which can foster the sorts of intellectual and inclusive communities that Feito details. We do house a copy of this text in the Collaborative library, if you are interested.

-Emily