

A Workshop on Social Class Differences

This workshop was designed and facilitated by Richard Chasin of Essential Partners (then known as the Public Conversations Project) at Dartmouth College in 1997.

I. BACKGROUND

The Dialogue Evening

On July 9, 1997, fifty members of the Dartmouth College community participated in an evening dialogue on the subject of “social class.”

This experiment in discussing an oft-avoided subject was supported by the coordinated efforts of the Tucker Foundation (Dean, Scott Brown), a group of administrators and teachers at Dartmouth College (notably Dean of Student Life, Holly Sateia), Essential Partners (led by Richard Chasin), and the participants, most of them undergraduates in their summer term prior to Junior year.

General Background

The Tucker Foundation and Dartmouth College have long been interested in fostering a stronger sense of community within the student body by promoting the development of student skills and sensitivities in addressing matters of diversity.

There are many “identity” groups on campus, reflecting the importance of diversity to students. Recently, there has been a growing effort to train student mediators to provide mediation services for people involved in campus conflicts, many of which involve tensions related to social and economic difference.

II. PREPARATION

Scott Brown hired Essential Partners to design and facilitate a social class workshop and to collaborate with College administrators in organizing the event. Early in the discussions among Brown, Chasin, and Sateia, an image of the event emerged. It would involve no more than fifty students working principally in discussion groups of eight, each group having two facilitators: one, a College administrator or teacher; the other, a member of Essential Partners.

We set a limit of fifty student participants because we felt that our goals would be best served in carefully facilitated small groups which could all meet in one building.

Potentially interested administrators would be invited to co-facilitate, even though we all knew that the short lead time might make it hard for them to commit to participation.

The Dean of Student Life issued invitations through e-mail to reach a diverse population who might be especially interested. In order to avoid excluding anyone, an invitation was posted throughout the College, indicating that all would be welcome.

III. WORKSHOP EVENING

Everyone Gathers

Between 6:30-7:00pm about forty students, all twelve facilitators (six from Essential Partners and six from the college), Dartmouth volunteers, and staff gathered at the Collis Center. The plan for the evening was outlined and there were a few orienting comments by Dick Chasin.

Holly Sateia announced who would be in each of the small groups. She had composed groups to achieve balance and diversity; however, it proved impossible for her to accommodate unexpected no-shows and early departures.

The Small Group Sessions

Each small group experienced three phases of interaction. In the half-hour introductory period, they met each other and the facilitators; they established ground rules (agreements) for the group session; and they each mentioned why they came to the workshop and what they hoped would take place.

In the second phase, participants were asked to pair up with someone in the group that they knew less well. To get acquainted, pairs told each other about one interest or skill they'd developed or expanded during the past year at school. We began the pairs' discussion of social class with these directions:

Think of an early experience (possible one from your childhood) that you connect with social class. If you think of a full stream of repeating experiences, select any example. If you can't possibly think of a specific example, then select a general circumstance. Think about what happened, how it affected you, and what it is about it that makes you think that it was, at least in part, connected with social class.

The handout Thinking About Strains Related to Class Difference may help to expand your thinking here. Use it if it helps. Do not use it if it seems to block you or get in your way. [It is fine to make a few notes here, to help you to be able to stay with your own recollections and not be drawn into something else by what others say.] If you are

drawing a blank think of the first time you were aware that others were different from you.

We advised participants to listen very attentively to each other and to speak only to ask for their partners to clarify or expand upon what they had said. Once both partners had taken turns speaking and listening, we gave directions for the next step:

Think about your partner's story and identify for yourself something that you especially appreciated about it. After that, think about both of your childhood experiences, and see if they remind you of any social class tensions you have experienced recently, at Dartmouth or elsewhere.

Again, participants took turns—fully speaking when they were speaking and fully listening when they were listening. When this exercise was completed, the pairs concluded their time together by "closing the conversation in a satisfying way," confirming confidentiality agreements, etc.

After a short break, the small groups reconvened, and participants had an opportunity to share what they had learned in their pairs, and to ask information-seeking questions of one another. Lastly, participants made closing statements to the group and again reviewed issues of confidentiality.

IV. THE SMALL GROUP DIALOGUES: SELECTED QUOTES

The topic of class

"The issue of social class, it does seem very taboo. I don't know if [people] don't want to hurt feelings or it's just not something people talk about..."

"I was thinking about social class. It's not something that I've thought about a lot, but it seems to me [it is part of] almost every significant issue in America. It might just be something that's embedded underneath the surface of everything. And it's an invisible issue that no one likes to talk about, but perhaps it really is the hidden controversy. And maybe if we dug a little deeper [we'd find] that would be where the tensions really came from."

"Personally, I sometimes have a hard time talking about issues like this ... sometimes it's so scary to think about it that you just don't think, you know. And this seemed like a really non-threatening way to do it."

Reactions to pair exercises

“[My partner] and I both felt as though we had bridged a variety of social classes. We thought [it] was a very interesting fact that there was that similarity. It was very interesting that we had both experienced ... the feeling of not fitting in, in the social class where we found ourselves at any given moment.”

“I don’t think that I fit into what people think I should fit into. But what I found most interesting is the different facets that we talked about as being included in social class, education and economics and geography and race and whatever, religion in my case.”

“One of the things that [my partner] and I were speaking about was [at] times in our lives we were always denying our class, whether we were trying to fit in with a higher class or fit in with a lower class; but there was always this necessary kind of need to fit in with your friends. So if you had a friend that was different from you, I always felt that I had to change myself to be the same, rather than ever acknowledging the difference. Why is it that we think that we have to deny our class and fit in? Is that the kind of social structure that Americans are built into [one that makes you] think that what you are is not good enough, or is not right enough? Why do you think that I went through my whole life trying to fit in to be more upper class than I actually was, or maybe sometimes more lower-class than I actually was? Maybe that’s a very American thing, that class is so important. And it seems like “they” teach you that you have to be something different than who you are. Is that an American thing?”

“When we were talking, we weren’t denying where we came from.”

“If someone makes someone feel uncomfortable, it’s probably something that they don’t really even think that they’re doing. But you’re just not sensitized to certain issues.”

“We wound up talking about how social class is related to and affects people’s perceptions of things like race, and even like gender and sexuality, things like that.”

“People who we think are different and come from very different backgrounds [seem to] have the same perceptions of things like social class.”

“I was talking about how there was a student in my elementary school who was visibly not as well off as the other students. She came from a different background. She had a different religion. She had a single mother who was in a wheelchair. All those things added up... made for total rejection by all the kids. And everyone just explained it by saying, ‘Well, she’s a jerk. She’s a mean girl. That’s why we don’t want to hang out [with her].’”

“In my case, I had met a woman when I was younger. We spent the whole summer together. [We both were] grimy hungry, and we looked the same. When we came back to Montreal, we both were worried that we didn’t make enough money to survive for the school year. I was going to have to get a job [and] one-day she said, ‘Well, it looks like I’m going to have to cash in some of my investments after all.’ And I was shocked. So her view of what it was like to be poor was very different from where I came from.”

“What was interesting in our dialogue was, although very different people, a lot of our beliefs, ways of communicating, ways of thinking, were very, very similar. And the more we talked, the more we could trace it back to similar parent situations.”

Responses to specific inquiries

“This is what I really like about college—we all live in the same dorms. There’s no hierarchy of housing. You have mandatory computers, so you can’t get a fancier computer than everyone else. In the summer I came back from school and I said, ‘You know, the class differences [that are] embedded in so many things, they’re so much more invisible.’”

“I guess I’ve grown up on the more privileged end of the scale. Friends described my parents as living like the Cleaver family. I’ve never really felt anything was wrong in my family’s social class. I’ve only known that kind of guilty feeling when I was in high school: ‘Maybe I really don’t deserve all this, and maybe if someone else had it, they would do more with it.’ I’m just wondering what it feels like to be on the other end of the spectrum.”

“I understand that I don’t really have a sense of money. And I don’t know what it’s like to feel anything but that if I really want it and if I need it, it’s there.”

“I [was brought up] around a lot of wealth. So my experiences would just be with people who are ridiculously wealthy, watching their kind of flippant use [of money], which I do find pretty intolerable. But my father grew up on the reservations in New Mexico, Arizona, and moved every year. Had absolutely no money, and a pretty horrendous family life. And he doesn’t talk about it a lot because he doesn’t want to expose us to it. But when he does, there’s a lot of anger about that, and he gets very sad.”

“I’m from a single-parent family. Actually, my mom’s been married a number of times, but for the past three or four years she’s been single. She’s a teacher, and so she doesn’t make very much money. And then going here [costs] quite a lot. The Financial Aid Office does what they can, but she always stressed how important it was that I work. Because when you work, you realize how much you’re actually spending and how long it actually takes to make that back. Like when you go out and spend \$50 on a pair of shoes, that

actually takes 12 hours to make back. Having to work very summer, every Christmas break, and all the time, has really taught me a lot about how much money is worth.”

Class differentiating symbols at Dartmouth

(cars) “I notice that in the summer. Just people drive around in some very, very nice cars, and people not having cars. Another thing is Work Study.”

(housing) “You have no choice but to live on campus, because financial aid will cover on-campus housing and it won’t cover off-campus housing.”

“I’m supporting a child. And everybody says to me, ‘Oh, you get to go here for free. You’re an Indian.’ Anybody that believes that can very cheerfully take over my \$27,000 loan.”

“I think the problem is trying to come to some kind of understanding. [You said] “Oh, I can’t just call my mom and say, ‘Can I have \$2000?’” Some people can. But does that mean [I] should be mad at that?”

“I’m a strange case because I was upper middle class till I was in third or fourth grade, so I remember what it was like. Then I remember having a job, and [in] high school, having to fight all the time. So, I know it from both ends.”

“Whether you’re poor or wealthy, you have to realize, it’s hard to get into Dartmouth. So it’s a privilege. As we were saying before, some people are more appreciative of that than others.”

“A lot of times people do make assumptions. But if you meet people one on one, they usually don’t fit those stereotypes. They break down when it’s a one-on-one kind of thing.”

“You have a feeling of guilt for having this certain amount of wealth. Yes, my sister went to Yale, and my sister worked every single day in the projects of New Haven, and stayed there in the summer. So she kind of got this combination of, ‘I’m going to get an Ivy League education, but I’m going to give back.’ That’s what she wants to do with her life. I have always had a feeling of, ‘I’m going to go out into the mountains and seclude myself from all sources of diversity.’”

“But the conflict is, are you going to move out, give up your house and home, because of the guilt? Why are you guilty?”

“I’m very aware of the fact that I’m secluded and that there’s another world, and that there is diversity, and that there are social classes, and that I am in the elite, and that there is an issue. I think it’s probably a step for a lot of people just to realize that.”

“I think a lot of people don’t realize what a weird segment of society we are compared to the rest of the world. If you take a step back, how did we get here and why are we so lucky?”

Being sensitive to differences

“Even when you’re with people of a different social class, if you’re in a higher class, [don’t] be condescending—just be who you are. And even if you’re in a lower class, just be who you are. And I think people respect that.”

“I think you’re being sensitive to the difference when you don’t try to pretend that it’s not there.”

[to the single mother] “I know I’ve never been through what you’ve been through, but I respect that you’re working really hard to pay your way through Dartmouth or feed your children or whatever. I think that’s really admirable, but I’m not going to pretend that that’s my experience.”

Closing thoughts

“I just want to thank you for stopping me while I was saying, ‘Everybody at Dartmouth does this, this, and this.’ I wasn’t speaking about individuals that I know, because the individuals that I know aren’t like that. But my concept of Dartmouth is like this mass of people that I don’t know. It’s wrong. I have a misplaced concept of Dartmouth. But I can’t seem to get rid of it. I know a lot of people who break the mold, and still there’s this majority in my mind that is not like all the individuals that I know. So I need to work on that.”

“I’m going to walk away from here and feel like I’m a better person because of having this deep conversation, which you don’t get all the time.”

“When you were talking about parting words, it’s like ‘I shall return.’ (laughter) But the truth of that statement is, if this happens again, I’ll be back. I really think it was great.”

“I also can’t really bring it to a satisfying close because I don’t really feel all that satisfied. It’s a good thing that we’re talking about this but I came out feeling like we’re still like this little slice of society.”

“It’s good just to get a broader perspective, and to open yourself up to more knowledge about other social classes.”

“Someone just said that they felt that we didn’t get a lot of representation of the huge extremes of diversity here, so we’re feeling kind of small. [But] this for me is pretty

diverse. There are eight more people here who I can sit down with randomly and just talk about social class. So I just thank you all for that.”

“I really thought I would do the whole ‘save the world’ thing, and that was my big goal. And now it’s changed to more of a goal where I want to find out what’s inside myself and just share it with one or two people. And I think basically that social class is a huge thing but I think it comes down to that [people are] individuals.”

V. SUMMARY OF EVALUATION FORMS

Of the forty students who participated, more than half filled out evaluation forms.

What surprised you, or especially interested or touched you?

A majority of people cited tolerance, “honesty,” non-judgmentalness, feeling of comfort generated by the setting, the “personal” quality of the sharing, and experiencing the diversity of participants’ ideas about the same topic.

“I learned a lot about myself from others’ perspectives—it was comforting to hear similar values and ideas expressed, yet really eye-opening and intriguing to hear very different philosophies.”

“The comfort that we all found in talking to one another. The way we all found a common bond around our opinions. We kept trying to get to the root of things and see how that affected us in our individual experiences.”

What worked particularly well during the evening, or what did you particularly like?

Almost everyone was positive about the small groups, especially the one-on-one conversations within them and the questions prepared by the facilitators for the small group discussion. The structure and guidelines were mentioned as helpful by some.

“I think that the two-people conversations really helped open up the group conversation in that it got people ‘warmed up’ and excited to continue discussing.”

“Asking questions instead of sharing experiences first. That’s a nice way to draw people into conversation.”

What could be improved, or what did you particularly dislike?

Most participants found the introduction talk too long. Other complaints seemed mainly to focus on the tight timing constraints and excessive structure in the small group meetings, especially during the one-on-one conversations.

“Too much explanation in the beginning. I’d rather just get to the issue.”

What are your overall impressions of the evening?

Positive feelings about the evening were unanimous.

“Very informative, made me hopeful that there are people who are willing to talk about serious issues.”

“Fulfilling. It’s nice to talk about things that we encounter all the time but rarely get talked about.”

“Very good because conversation was so honest and well received.”

What aspects of the discussion would you like to pursue further? Are there other topics about which you believe this kind of discussion would be useful?

Among the topics listed as potential future subjects for such a discussion were: approaches to education, stereotypes, gender issues, assimilation vs. diversity, and how the media influences public opinion about class.

On a more individual level, one participant mentioned, “How we hide our own class from others—what judgments we are afraid of.” Another said, “I think everyone has a ‘story’ and I’d have loved to hear everyone’s stories.”

VI. CONCLUSION

Despite numerous challenges and difficulties, the Social Class Dialogue Workshop was successful from the viewpoint of virtually all the students who attended.

From the point of view of Essential Partners, it represented an extraordinary opportunity for us to work in a college setting on the issue of social class.

It confirmed our assumption that this subject is very important—but is generally underdiscussed even though it is deeply intertwined with other hot social issues.