



the **TUTOR**



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## ON A METHOD OF DISCUSSION

by Ken Battle

*This article is based on a workshop conducted by Ronald Billingsley, Department of English, for the Graduate Teacher Program, and on a personal interview with Professor Billingsley.*

In the strictest sense of the term, Professor Billingsley's approach to the art of teaching can best be described as that of a humanist who affirms a "system or mode of thought or action in which human and secular interests predominate."\* As a teacher Billingsley is also devoted to fostering the development of his students' understanding of scholarly inquiry. It is within this context of humanism and inquiry that Professor Billingsley's approach to pedagogy in general, and the discussion method in particular must be considered.

Given a certain philosophical outlook, it is said that all human thought and action has its origins—either directly or indirectly—in "the question," however near or remote it may be. The question, insofar as we know, is peculiar to human beings, who are unique among all living species in their ability to question their situation—whether it be political, social, economic, moral, or psychological. Professor Billingsley asserts: "The energy that drives the educational process is the 'question,'" and expressing this in another way, he adds: "The heart of the educational process is the 'question'."

Professor Billingsley emphasizes not only the question as the point of departure for teaching by means of the discussion format, but also, and more important, he makes it clear from whose perspective the question must be considered if the method being used is to maximize the educational process for students. As obvious as it is, he reminds fellow instructors that teaching occurs with people, people who have questions about the material. Nevertheless, when attempting to use the discussion format, many instructors err by presenting students with a series of questions on the sub-

\* The New Webster International Dictionary.

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ject matter that are their own questions—not the students' questions. Then, when the students express a lack of interest in the material, the instructors are puzzled. According to Billingsley, this waning of interest can be avoided by deliberately addressing the students' questions instead. In his experience, what motivates students in the educational process is their internalization of the questions under investigation. That is to say, students are motivated to learn when the questions they engage are *their* questions.

There are two ways the instructor can resolve the problem of motivating students to address questions. Instructors may indeed utilize their own questions, yet present them to students in such a way that they become the students' questions, or instructors may illicit questions from their students. What is of utmost importance is that students engage the subject matter in a manner that is meaningful to them. Involving students in the question at hand will

(continued, page 2)

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## DISCUSSION *continued*

enhance the educational process, regardless of the content of the course—be it literature, history, biology, or otherwise.

Beyond the significance and perspective of “the question,” there are other important aspects of the discussion method the instructor must consider, according to Professor Billingsley. From the first day of class, the instructor must create an atmosphere in the classroom that is conducive to a discussion format. This is a critical point, as students learn best when they are comfortable. Physiologically speaking, research has shown that the higher-order brain processes of the cerebral cortex where learning occurs tend to shut down when students perceive themselves to be in a threatening or adversarial learning situation. If students are experiencing fear and trepidation, the lower-order brain processes of the subcortex will tend to dominate behavior, as they did with primitive human beings thousands of years ago.

With this research in mind, Professor Billingsley reasons that instructors should devise a number of techniques to make students comfortable in the classroom. For example, instructors should take care to learn the first and last names of all their students.

Another effective measure at the beginning of the semester is to have students introduce themselves to each other. Since it is not practical to expect students to remember everyone’s name in the class, Professor Billingsley makes sure that all students learn the first and last names of four or five other students in their immediate areas. He then does a continuous follow-up on their interpersonal knowledge by testing their recall on personal information about their fellow students throughout the semester. For instance, at the beginning of class he may ask John where Mary is from and conversely he may ask Mary what John’s major field of study is. This type of exercise, in Professor Billingsley’s experience, fosters a sense of being in a safe, familiar, and comfortable environment. In fact, when speaking of a discussion format as Professor Billingsley sees it, students, by definition, learn to offer personal opinions and to exchange ideas. They become open and willing to risk expressing themselves and to engage others, because they feel comfortable with the situation.

Another important facet in conducting an effective discussion has to do with the instructor’s attitude. According to Professor Billingsley, the issue here is “How do I as the instructor treat the student?” The instructor must deemphasize his or her role in the classroom discussion, thereby promoting student-student interaction. Parenthetically, research has shown that students learn more from guided peer discussion than from the strict lecture format.

The instructor may facilitate this interaction initially by arranging the students in a circle and by sitting down and joining the circle. In contrast, the traditional lecture format emphasizes the instructor as a focal point, or worse, as an authority figure standing opposite the students. The organizational dynamics of the lecture format imply that the “truth” or the “answer” lies with the instructor, thus establishing a hierarchy in the classroom setting that tends to be intimidating to students. When the instructor changes

the seating arrangement from a pyramid structure to a circular structure, the hierarchy is immediately dissolved. A circular arrangement communicates in both a literal and a psychological sense, that the instructor is saying “we are all equals.”

In the view of Professor Billingsley, still another significant aspect of the instructor’s attitude requires attention. Whenever a student errs in his or her discourse on a question, the instructor should never expressly tell a student “No, that’s wrong” because the consequences of negative feedback are far-reaching. If the instructor contradicts a student in such a way, he or she is in fact reestablishing the hierarchy, with himself/herself as the authority figure in the classroom. Such a display toward one student discourages all the students in the classroom from thinking independently and from responding orally. These two negative factors have been attested to by research.

To create a positive ambience in this situation, the instructor should acknowledge whatever value the student’s answer may have, ask the student to retrace the steps he or she used in coming to his or her conclusion, and then ask the student and the class to rethink the process. By assuming such a problem-solving attitude along with the students, the instructor ensures that the integrity and quality of the discussion format are preserved, while students find that it is possible to make a mistake without a loss of or threat to their self-esteem.

With regard to the art of teaching, given Professor Billingsley’s perspective, the ultimate goal of the educational process in general, and of the discussion method in particular, is to encourage the personal and intellectual growth of the student through oral participation in the process. For example, Billingsley presents his personal philosophy of the crises we now face in the political, social, and economic realms by discussing such issues as the U.S.–Soviet arms race and various environmental problems. The courses he teaches in the humanities deal with complex, universal, and difficult moral problems on global issues. Given that there are no simple answers, he believes viable responses to these crises must be based on an interdisciplinary approach. Thus, it is paramount that the educational process encourage students to develop a strong sense of personal identity and the ability to engage in effective dialogue, as well as to acquire the skills for self analysis. This can be accomplished on the college and university level by providing students with the proper intellectual apparatus, namely, analytical and critical thinking skills.

However, Professor Billingsley’s observation of the educational process leads him to say that too often aspiring instructors do not have these principles in mind. In his words, teaching is not a matter of putting out a “product,” or some

*(continued, page 4)*

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## Graduate Student Teaching Excellence Award Recipients

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Each year the Graduate School awards ten awards for Excellence in Teaching to graduate part-time instructors on the UCB campus, as well as ten awards to graduate students for research and creative work. We would like to congratulate Joan Levine, Fine Arts, and Katrina Walker, Philosophy, who received awards from the Graduate School Spring Semester 1986.

### Profiles



Joan Levine

**Name:** Joan Levine, graduate student in Fine Arts

**Home:** La Porte, Indiana

**Plans after graduation:** I hope to get a teaching job at a university. I also plan to keep up my painting.

**Teaching experience:** When I was an undergraduate, I taught at a women's prison as part of a psychology class. Since GPTs in our department teach their own classes, I've taught basic drawing and basic painting. This year I also had the privilege of teaching a 200-level painting class.

**Opinion of CU undergraduates:** On the whole I feel pretty positive about them, but I most enjoyed the students in the more advanced classes who were really involved, enthusiastic, and who had more of a background in art.

**Most memorable experience as a teacher at CU:** One student I had in basic drawing insisted on doing little tiny paintings about four to six inches in diameter with a one-hair brush. I kept encouraging her to loosen up. One morning I came in and she had done a six-foot mural on the wall! And it was good too! She was delighted and so was I.

**What do you think makes a good teacher?** Having a positive outlook and enthusiasm. Also in art it's so important to deal with each student individually—you really have to put yourself in their shoes and see what they are trying to do instead of forcing your own views on them.



Katrina Walker

**Name:** Katrina Walker, graduate student in Philosophy

**Home:** Mostly Chicago

**Plans after graduation:** I plan to teach at a university and publish my work on personal identity, the nature of persons, and ethics.

**Teaching experience:** I never taught in a classroom before coming to CU. I worked in the mental health field and used to do parent- and teacher-effectiveness training. Since I have been here, I've taught Introduction to Philosophy, Ethics, and a special topics course in personal identity, which I conceptualized and introduced into the department.

**Opinion of CU undergraduates:** They're really neat. When you compare our students to those students who come in from different areas, ours are some of the finest in the country. The students who show up in class are really creative.

**Most memorable experience as a teacher at CU:** The first month of each semester I tend to forget what beginners are like and to ask myself "Where did they get this busload?" Then it starts to crystallize, my students actually catch on and realize they can argue with me. They figure out that there isn't ONE ANSWER, that what they have to do is to take and defend a position. That's the week that I always think, "Wow, this is the best group I ever had!"

**What do you think makes a good teacher?** A good teacher needs to be someone who cares about young people. You have to love, or at least like them. A really good teacher sets it up so the students really do the work.

## DISCUSSION *continued*

notion of what the "truth" is by virtue of what an instructor says. Rather, the educational process should cultivate the personal and intellectual growth of students by encouraging them to participate, analyze, and engage in problem solving while considering a broad perspective.

Professor Billingsley believes that his variation on the discussion method best meets the challenge of such an educational process for students. Procedurally, he reasons that students achieve greater objectivity and consider a wider variety of possible solutions by looking at issues from an interdisciplinary perspective. Such an approach will enable students to appreciate the complexity of the problem. For example, the issue of air pollution embraces biological problems, political problems, economic problems, chemical problems, and moral problems. At the outset of a discussion on air pollution, Professor Billingsley asks each student for a solution to the problem, however provisional it may be. The class then considers the issue from the several perspectives concerned. As the class progresses and the various perspectives are discussed, Professor Billingsley asks each student to reevaluate and refine his or her provisional resolution. In addition to this, students must give reports and critique each perspective engaged. The course culminates in a research project that requires students to lay out in detail their approach to and their resolution of the matter at issue.

In such a classroom discussion format, the instructor's role is that of facilitator. The instructor is responsible for providing a healthy framework for discussion and keeping it within certain bounds. Professor Billingsley's experience shows that when the instructor creates the proper environment, students will then carry the discussion.

Professor Billingsley, however, recognizes a paradox in the art of teaching. On the one hand, in the process of confronting the subject matter, the instructor attempts to make students secure in their personal growth and intellectual development. On the other hand, students must respond

to the expectations set up by the instructor. The instructor's judgment concerning whether or not, or to what degree, these expectations have been met may constrict students' performance. We have only to reflect on our own experience as students to affirm this. Hence the paradox. The instructor must strive to maintain the proper tension between these elements of the educational process—the student's development and the instructor's judgment—in order to maximize student learning.

Such is Professor Billingsley's marriage of "the question" with his discussion method, concern for students' personal and intellectual development, and his commitment to the resolution of global issues. The full impact of his humanistic pedagogy stands out in relief as we recognize the need for a generation of thinkers and problem solvers who can produce creative solutions to the many crises we face in the political, social, and economic spheres.

Ken Battle is a graduate student in journalism and is a graduate assistant to the Graduate Teacher Program.

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