

TOOLS FOR DELIBERATIVE DISCOURSE: CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

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In 2014, Dr. Nancy Klancher participated in a Teaching Interfaith Understanding faculty development seminar, run in partnership between the Council of Independent Colleges and Interfaith Youth Core, and generously funded by the Henry Luce Foundation. For information on future seminars, and to access more resources created by seminar alumni, visit <https://www.ifyc.org/content/ifyc-cic-resources>.

ACTIVITY BACKGROUND

Dr. Klancher, Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Religion, has created these tools to be used in her [Spiritual Autobiographies](#) course at Bridgewater College. This course is considered a “Critical Inquiry in the Liberal Arts,” the broad goals for which include active listening, perspective-taking, reframing or seeking clarification, and public deliberation. The more specific goals for the Spiritual Autobiographies course include the following:

- ▶ Engaging in productive civil discourse about spiritual commitments through consideration of one’s own and others’ spiritual journeys and identities;
- ▶ Gaining active listening and perspective-taking skills; and
- ▶ Engaging in public reasoning about how authentic encounters with religious Others can create a culture of peaceful pluralism.

Activity Overview and Goal

Because students should have ample opportunities—in the classroom and beyond—to learn to know themselves and be able to balance self and community effectively and constructively, Dr. Klancher has created a “Deliberative Discourse” activity that involves a few different tools (listed below). Although it is still instructor-led, these activities require introspective student reflection on classroom dynamics, including the roles students play and the impact of their words and ideas. The goal is to show students how to become more self-reflexive, and to explore their own intersectional identities, as they practice moving between story-telling, dialogue, argumentation, deliberation, and advocacy. Essential to this pedagogy is continual exploration, by students and professor alike, of the hard and fast boundary between critical reasoning and emotional, interpersonal, and spiritual reasoning.

MULTIPLE IDENTITIES EXERCISE

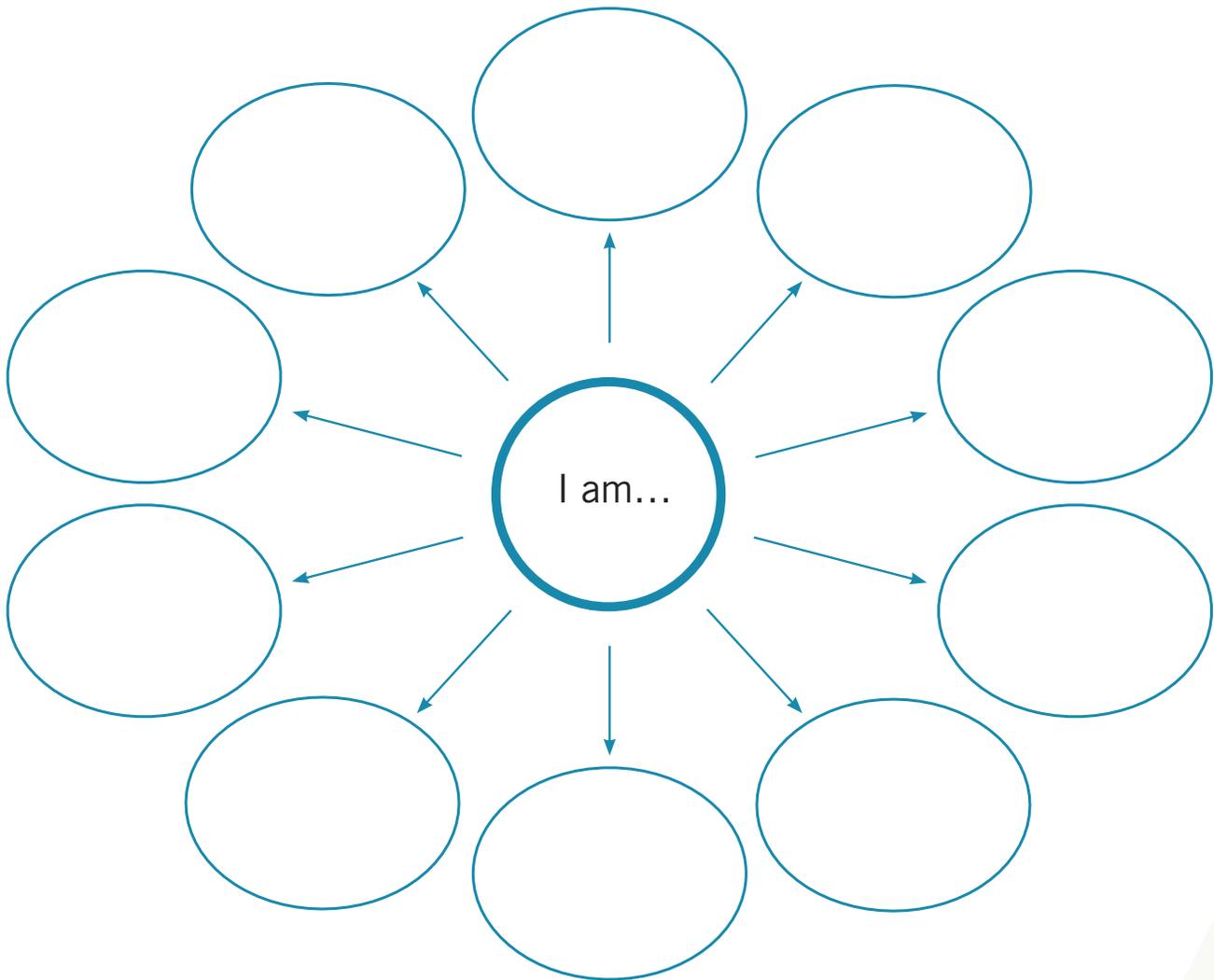
Goal of Exercise

This activity allows students to think about their multiple and intersecting identities (chosen or not), which should lead to intentional processing about how these identities may overtly or covertly influence their perspectives, as well as the perspectives of their dialogue partners.

Instructions for Students

- ▶ List and rank your “identities” (on the map below) by how definitive they are of who you see yourself to be. Please indicate which you find to be more socially constructed or more biologically inherent.
- ▶ Identities you may want to consider: race/ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, physical/mental/psychological ability, geographic origin.

Identity Map



DELIBERATIVE DIALOGUE QUESTIONS + EXERCISE

Goal of Exercise

After students have intentionally spent some time reflecting upon their own identities, worldview, and perspectives, they are asked to partake in Deliberative Dialogue sessions. In Dr. Klancher's Spiritual Autobiographies course, these dialogue sessions occur on three different "Civil Discourse Days" around the following themes:

- ▶ Religious Traditions/Intersectional Identities
- ▶ Religion and Science: Intersections
- ▶ Authentic Engagement with Religious Others

This guiding framework for Deliberative Dialogue can be incorporated into other syllabi around topics that are relevant for a specific course. Students are given instructions (below) to participate in a Deliberative Dialogue after having a shared experience, such as reading the same text or viewing the same lecture/film. Students are asked to craft questions in the following framework, and then bring them to class in order to have a more nuanced, thoughtful conversation with their peers.

Instructions for Students

A deliberative question is not a comprehension question; that is, it does not only ask about content. It does not even ask for analysis of content for the sake of understanding content better. It goes beyond these. A deliberative question requires evaluation of content and the implications of content based on stipulated values, beliefs, or criteria.

Typically, these questions will:

- ▶ Ask about "should's," whether/how a topic is of value and how "we" should deal with the topic.
- ▶ Define the potential harm or benefit of the topic, in what contexts, and for whom.
- ▶ Argue the usefulness or uselessness of something, by considering to what end it might be used and whether that "end" is valuable? In what contexts might it be valuable? For whom?
- ▶ Ask for alternatives to the topic as it stands, options for different approaches or actions.
- ▶ Ask all of the above to be answered with clearly stated assumptions and values defined and justified.

For instance:

- ▶ Is the use of religion to justify gender hierarchies morally acceptable?
- ▶ Should Hinduism and Islam (or any religion) have had as strong an impact on social and political structures as they did in the early 20th century as India fought for its independence from colonial rule?
- ▶ Or, one might stipulate that a question will assume some value or belief—for instance, that human beings are intrinsically evil and require "saving"—and then ask what the implications of such a proposition are, for whom, and to what end. Those participating in discussion can "beg" the assumption or accept it, and deliberate together about its implications in the context of a larger question.

To reframe questions, consider the following:

- ▶ Intent versus impact:
 - ▷ How does your question come across to others?
 - ▷ Can you reframe the question so that is not misleading or presumptive?
- ▶ Try your best to echo content, emotions, and tone.
- ▶ Ask short open-ended questions:
 - ▷ “What is the problem we’re solving?”
 - ▷ “Who was/is involved?”
 - ▷ “Can you explain more?”
- ▶ Try to summarize the best you can to make sure you have understood:
 - ▷ Questions are one way to do this: “so are you saying...?”
 - ▷ Attempts to use phrases like: “it sounds like you...” or “in my world/mind, that idea looks like this.”