Good Conversations

Any college class is basically a learning community in which students—including professors—share ideas and perspectives on the world. Whether or not they are discussions, classes are conversations. And they're like conversations in other areas of our lives. When you sit in the Cage with your best friends or when you have one of those great late-night conversations with your roommate, for example, you engage in talk that helps them deal with ideas or emotions or situations. You listen carefully. You ask questions that clarify things. You offer support when you can, and criticism when you must. Together, you confront the complexities of important issues in your lives—why relationships are so difficult (or so wonderful), what's "good" about "a good time," which candidates you prefer, which classes pique your curiosity, what religion means to you, why you feel called to do a certain sort of work, or what you're going to do after graduation.

These conversations are entirely spontaneous, but if we think about it, good conversations have common characteristics. When we're really learning from each other, we're inviting everybody in the conversation to contribute their own perspectives to the discussion. We listen carefully. We build on what we hear, sometimes by restating the argument for more clarity before we offer our own perspectives. We admit confusions, and ask for clarifications. We try out different explanations for things, offering opinions (sometimes personal) with evidence (both experiential and factual). With friends, we don't worry about silences, but give each other comfortable spaces for thought and reflection. We listen—we really listen. We ask more questions. We argue, not to win the argument, but to test and expand our ideas. We talk, but we let other people talk too. And near the end, often, we sum up our thoughts. When these conversations go well, they open up a "free space" where people feel free to explore what's really meaningful to them.

The same kinds of conversations can happen in classrooms. There are many ways of doing it right, and there are many ways to contribute to a good class conversation. We can ask questions to get things started. We can offer opinions or explanations (an opinion plus evidence) to each other. We can provide information, highlighting particular facts or passages in the reading (it's good to read out loud from the reading). We can make connections to earlier reading or conversations, and to things we've learned in other courses—or in our own life experience. We can review or summarize the different interpretations that are on the table. We can synthesize, interpret, or integrate, pulling together the threads of one conversation and getting ready to weave another. We can offer leadership by suggesting promising directions for discussion.

This seminar depends on the active participation of all of us. Maren and I expect members of this learning community to share ideas every day. Sometimes you'll share them in class. Other times you'll post ideas on Moodle. Either way is fine. You have a lot to teach each other, and we're anxious to listen and learn.