

# Start TALKING

A HANDBOOK FOR ENGAGING  
**DIFFICULT DIALOGUES**  
IN HIGHER EDUCATION

KAY LANDIS, EDITOR

UNIVERSITY OF ALASKA ANCHORAGE  
ALASKA PACIFIC UNIVERSITY



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IN HIGHER EDUCATION

KAY LANDIS, EDITOR

Produced in partnership by  
The University of Alaska Anchorage  
and Alaska Pacific University

Made possible through the generous support of the  
Ford Foundation Difficult Dialogues Initiative



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Published by:

University of Alaska Anchorage  
Fran Ulmer, Chancellor  
3211 Providence Drive  
Anchorage, AK 99508

Alaska Pacific University  
Douglas North, President  
4101 University Drive  
Anchorage, AK 99508

A major source for this handbook is *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* (2nd Edition) by Stephen D. Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, copyright © 1999, 2005 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Quotations and techniques reprinted with permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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ISBN: 978-1-4276-3096-4

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# INTRODUCTION

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## “Civil Discourse Under Fire”

You probably won't see the above words as a headline in your morning newspaper any time soon, but it's happening nonetheless. Civil discourse seems to be in trouble. The art of respectful argument and the effort to find mutual solutions seem to be losing ground. Our public debates on critical issues are filled with sound bites instead of substance, and our popular culture seems motivated more by the desire to dominate and win than by the commitment to learn, understand, seek common ground, or persuade.

There's trouble in the Academy too. Faculty members are challenged for bringing gender, religion, science, or politics into their classrooms. Students find themselves marginalized or even attacked for their world views or religious beliefs. Outbursts that aren't managed effectively can leave students feeling threatened and faculty feeling out of control, turning class discussions into emotionally or spiritually destructive experiences instead of the learning experiences they are meant to be.

Civil discourse is the cornerstone of the university experience, and our classrooms and laboratories are ideal venues for teaching it. As standard practice, we challenge our assumptions, question what we know, and seek new understanding rather than rigidly defending what we have developed in the past. In this process of inquiry, we rely on critical thinking, inclusiveness, tolerance, and respect to create new knowledge and reframe old tenets to the emerging world.

Universities show students how to transcend the boundaries of their own perceptions, and engage respectfully with new ideas. Now, as ever, this may be higher education's most important role. Now is the time, and our campuses are the place, to rebuild a culture of civil discourse.

In today's violent world, the expectations that university faculty carry into the classroom may seem outlandishly ideal. Against enormous odds, we still expect the classroom to be a safe place to think, probe, and argue about ideas. This expectation has been fostered over millennia, in times no less perilous—and many times even more so—than our own. It is a part of the university tradition that our best hope for understanding each other and for resolving our differences comes from the free exchange and exploration of ideas—new and received—in the Academy. The possibility for such freedom comes paradoxically from submitting to the discipline of the liberating arts. It falls to our watch, as to every other that has preceded ours, to protect these premises for civilized exchange.

Dr. Marilyn Barry  
Academic Dean  
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## Need for Faculty Development

By and large, university professors begin their faculty careers with fresh degrees and highly refined academic and research skills. We are content experts. We know our subjects; we can write about them, talk about them, research them, defend them. But most of us have spent very little time learning how to teach and virtually none preparing ourselves to deal effectively with controversy. Ask us what to do about the biblical literalist who challenges our teaching of evolution, the insensitive student who makes a racial slur, the conservative who complains about our liberal bias, the aggressive student in the front row who dominates the conversation, or the quiet one in the back who never says a word, and suddenly the room goes silent. What should we do when these things happen in our classrooms? Many of us don't really know.

Engagement is not built on students working in soup kitchens for academic credit, nor is it built on faculty members applying their expertise in the community as the basis for an academic paper. A truly engaged society begins when two people with vastly different life experiences sit down together, share their deepest thinking about the challenges facing our world, and are transformed as a result. As engaged universities, we must re-learn the tools of civil discourse in partnership with the generations that will build the future.

Dr. Michael A. Driscoll  
Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic  
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## The Project

With these issues foremost in our minds, leaders from two Alaska universities—Alaska Pacific University (APU) and the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA)—formed a partnership and designed a project to teach ourselves some new skills. Our goal was ambitious: to improve the learning climate on our campuses, making them more inclusive of minority voices and ways of knowing and safer places for the free exchange of ideas.

Although neighbors, we came from very different academic worlds. UAA is a

multi-campus public university—the largest in the state—with a mission that includes access, excellence, engagement, and diversity. APU is a small private university—once Methodist, now independent—with a mission emphasis on active learning and on nurturing spiritual and moral values consistent with its Christian heritage while respecting the religious convictions of all. The two universities sit side by side on a forested strip of land just east of midtown Anchorage, sharing a library and a magnificent view of the Chugach Mountains. But we also share a competitive and sometimes contentious history. In fact, let's be honest here. We didn't trust each other completely. But we thought: who knows? Maybe this time we *can* all just get along.

We dreamed together. A hand-picked group of us—professors, administrators, and staff—sat around a conference table in our shared library and played the “what if” game. What if we could train ourselves to handle controversy better? What if we could change the way we teach? What if we could really make our campuses more inclusive and safer places for learning?

For several weeks, these conversations were the highlight of our days: lively, full of big ideas and easy laughter. We discovered that, for all of our differences, we shared the same basic values and the same optimism and hopes. There was a problem. We could do something about it. It could be scary, but it could also be fun. We could make a difference.

The conversations led to a proposal, and the proposal led to a funding source. Early in 2006, the Ford Foundation awarded us a two-year grant as part of its national *Difficult Dialogues* initiative. Our project was one of twenty-six throughout the U.S. to be included in the initiative, a fact we traded on shamelessly in the coming months to garner additional support. The Ford Foundation name carries a lot of weight. We were part of something big.

Our central strategy was threefold: to train ourselves via a series of faculty intensives, to go out and teach differently for a year, and then to come back together to share what we had learned. We developed a curriculum for a week-long faculty intensive, designed a competitive application process, set up stipends for participants and expectations for what they should accomplish, and selected an initial cohort of thirty faculty members. We set aside two weeks in May, in between our commencements and the start of our summer terms, to hold the first two intensives back to back. We took a deep breath and got started.

## Strategies

### Faculty Fellowship Program

We invested about half of our grant money directly in our faculties by creating a fellowship program that paid stipends for project participation. We used a selective application process, choosing participants (Fellows) based on their experience, motivation, and capacity for advancing the cause. We consciously selected an interdisciplinary cohort that included both junior and seasoned professors.



### Faculty Fellowship

*A method of bringing faculty members together into a cohort to strengthen their skills, renew their purposes, and cultivate leaders.*

#### **Make it selective.**

Use an application and interview process to select an engaged cohort with the potential to become mentors and leaders.

#### **Mix it up.**

Create as much diversity as you can. Actively recruit applicants from a variety of disciplines, ethnicities, cultures, and political persuasions.

#### **Expect a lot.**

Expect them to practice or achieve certain things and tell them clearly and often what those things are.

#### **Reward them.**

Value their time, experience, and creativity with recognition, respect, and stipends.

The thirty chosen Fellows came from two universities, three campuses, five schools, and eighteen disciplines. A few of them already knew each other well: the four English professors from UAA, for example, and all five professors from APU. Others knew each other only by reputation. Many were complete strangers who met each other for the first time around our conference table. It was the first time we knew of that APU and UAA faculty had sat down together at the same table with the same purpose.

The Fellowship required commitment. Each member would attend a week-long intensive in May. There would be two of these to choose from (similar in content, just held different weeks), with fifteen Fellows in each. Participants agreed to take what they learned from the experience into their classrooms during the following academic year (August to April), engaging their students in one or more difficult dialogues and field-testing one or more new techniques. They would meet again twice as a full group, once for a day in January, and again for a three-day evaluation retreat the following May. Optional informal gatherings were encouraged. They were expected to collaborate, engage, support each other, fail, try again, learn from experience, learn from each other, grow.

## Faculty Intensive

A faculty committee designed the basic week-long curriculum, structuring it around a few big themes such as race, class, culture, science, and religion. The idea was to approach each topic by modeling a few simple techniques: ideas we could potentially bring into our own classrooms to reach different



### Faculty Intensive

*A faculty development opportunity that focuses on critical topics and takes place over several days.*

#### **Timing**

Hold it at the beginning of the summer break, after spring grades are in but before everybody gets too far from campus.

#### **Curriculum**

Link difficult dialogues in race, gender, class, culture, science, religion, politics, and/or social justice with strategies and techniques for engaging in productive discussion. Enlist colleagues and community members to address areas of particular concern for your campus.

#### **Presentation**

Vary your presentation styles. Try a number of new techniques. Stay flexible. Check in with folks regularly. Make time to engage in the actual difficult dialogues that arise within the group.

#### **Free lunch**

Take breaks. Feed and water the group regularly. Think healthy: fruit, yogurt, light snacks, sandwiches, salads. No doughnuts. Make an effort to limit the amount of trash generated, using cutlery, cups, and plateware made from environmentally sustainable products.

kinds of learners, lead to more productive discussions, and promote deeper kinds of learning. We found many of these techniques in *Discussion as a Way of Teaching* by Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill, which we adopted as our text. But we also relied largely on the strengths of our own faculty and staff to act as colleague-to-colleague teachers, with the idea that faculty would learn best from each other. We decided to both introduce new approaches and experience them ourselves wherever possible; we wanted to have a bit of firsthand knowledge of how the techniques might be received by our students.

We held two intensives that first year. The daily agendas varied slightly but followed roughly the same progression. On the first day, we considered faculty rights and responsibilities with regard to academic freedom, shared the difficulties we've encountered in our own classrooms, and learned how to handle disruptive students. Day Two was devoted to Western traditions of civil discourse, particularly rhetoric and debate. On the third day we addressed issues of race, class, and culture, with an emphasis on the indigenous Alaska Native cultures in our midst. Day Four was reserved for science and religion. And on Friday we tried to tie it all together before setting everyone free to practice on their own.

### Faculty Intensive: Sample Agenda

- Day 1: *Academic Freedom*  
*Tales from the Trenches*  
*Codes of Conduct*  
*How to Handle Disruptive Students*
- Day 2: *Questions and Categories*  
*Rhetoric*  
*Debate*
- Day 3: *White Privilege*  
*Culturally Sensitive Teaching*  
*Circle of Objects*  
*The Five Minute Rule*
- Day 4: *Theological Arguments*  
*Science and Religion*  
*Role Playing*
- Day 5: *Difficult Dialogues*  
*Taking It Out Into the World*

Few professors receive training in best practices for teaching, and fewer still in how to tackle controversial issues or handle conflict, prior to being tossed into their own classrooms to teach. If we want our universities to remain vital training grounds for engagement in a democratic society, we must model ways to conduct civil discourse in the classroom. In order to do this, we need to offer more faculty development opportunities like this one.

Lauren Bruce  
Director

The intensives offer a rare opportunity for faculty to form a true learning community around a highly significant teaching challenge: how to address tough topics in the classroom. They question, collaborate with, and learn from one another as they encounter viewpoints, issues, personal biases, and disciplinary perspectives different from those they typically meet in their everyday academic lives.

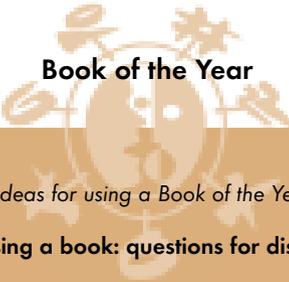
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## Book of the Year

The two universities also launched a joint Books of the Year program in the fall of 2006 to give us a shared platform for raising controversial issues that our students and campuses could address together. APU had tried something similar the previous year, using Thoreau's *Walden* and Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* to illuminate themes related to ecological sustainability. We built this new effort from their experience.

We invited the faculties of both universities to submit book nominations. We told them we were looking for controversy, that we preferred fiction, and asked them to recommend short works that would be accessible to all students, including our under-prepared, international, and English as a Second Language (ESL) populations. Our selection process resulted in two very different books that explore themes of cultural conflict, immigration, and assimilation. We promoted them as Books of the Semester that first year, with Anne Fadiman's *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* for the fall and T.C. Boyle's *The Tortilla Curtain* in the spring. We invited both authors to visit our campuses, and Boyle accepted, arriving in the spring for a public reading and discussion with several faculty and student groups.



### Book of the Year

*Some ideas for using a Book of the Year program as a platform for difficult dialogues.*

#### Choosing a book: questions for discussion

- What themes do you want to explore, and can you link them to current events or local initiatives?
- How many disciplines will be likely to participate in discussion?
- Do you prefer fiction or nonfiction?
- How much does length or reading level matter?
- How much do the author's ethnicity, gender, politics, or credentials matter?
- Is it important that the author be potentially available for a campus reading or workshop?

#### Implementation

It can take up to a year of advance planning to launch a successful Book program.

- **Fall:** Announce the theme and selection parameters for the coming year. Solicit nominations from across the campus. Appoint a review committee.
- **Winter:** Research nominations. Develop short list. Read as many as possible.
- **Spring:** Select and announce book. Develop promotional plan and reading guides. Make arrangements with bookstore.
- **Summer:** Develop promotional materials. Plan events. Purchase and distribute copies to libraries, residence halls, and other gathering places. Give copies to faculty. Announce and promote titles to new students in pre-orientation materials. Consider asking students to read books during the summer and include discussions in fall orientation activities.
- **Fall:** Hold workshops for faculty to exchange teaching ideas.

## Practice

Throughout the year, we talked about the books, tried new techniques in our classrooms, held a variety of public events, and paid attention to controversy with a heightened awareness and a shared sense of purpose. Twice we met in a formal setting as a large group to stoke the fires of that purpose and to share our successes, failures, concerns, and ideas with our new colleagues.

In many ways, the effect was revolutionary. Most of us had previously worked more or less in isolation, sharing relationships and concerns only within our own departments and disciplines, rarely if ever collaborating with faculty from other disciplines, much less other universities. Sometimes these new relationships went really well, strengthening us in welcome and unexpected ways. Other times they were a source of irritation and conflict, of cultural clash between both individuals and institutions. But always they provided us with new opportunities to learn more ourselves, and to pass on what we learned to each other and to our students.

### The Second Year

Our administrators were impressed enough to fund a third faculty intensive in 2007 and a fourth in 2008, effectively doubling faculty involvement in the *Difficult Dialogues* initiative. Book enthusiasts were committed enough to select a new theme (religion and politics) and two new Books of the Year for 2007-08: *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *The Swallows of Kabul* by Yasmina Khadra. Our institutions funded this effort as well. As this handbook goes to print, two books on Alaska Native issues have been selected for our 2008-09 Books of the Year, and a faculty/community committee has compiled a companion volume addressing frequently asked questions about Alaska Native peoples and issues, with additional recommended readings. These efforts have so far proved sustainable. And each year our ambition grows.

We use our Books of the Year program in a unique way, not to create a freshman class bonding experience as many universities do, but to provoke serious discussions at all levels throughout the curriculum. We have found that two shorter books can work well together throughout the academic year, and we no longer promote the books separately by semester. We have also used films, plays, music, and other performing arts and media to support the conversations around the themes in our books.

John Dede  
Special Assistant to the Senior Vice Provost  
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## This Handbook

This handbook is another opportunity to share what we are learning. It is organized roughly along the lines of our faculty intensives. The first five chapters follow the five-day intensive program and our first year of practice, introducing some of the themes we have explored and some of the techniques we have found useful. They are by no means the only worthy themes or useful techniques, but they have worked for us (or else failed us in interesting and instructive ways). The sixth chapter explores some of the outcomes we achieved with our original cohort. The seventh chapter invites you to consider with us where we could go from this humble but promising beginning.

Our experience is in no way comprehensive; we especially recommend the Brookfield text for a more thorough and academic exploration of discussion-based teaching. The techniques we present are in a shorthand format, and you may wish to research them more thoroughly before applying them to your particular situations. We offer them to you in the same spirit we've offered them to each other over the past two years: as suggestions and prompts, food for thought, a few things you might try if you want to improve your teaching, engage your students, stimulate learning, and create more inclusive and democratic classrooms.

We think they're a good place to start.

Our faculty are challenged by time (which they often don't have) and by distance (several of our campuses are hundreds of miles apart). We hope to set aside time and space—if only between the covers of this handbook—to begin to establish a teaching commons where faculty members can talk in earnest with their colleagues about classroom issues critical to the scholarship of teaching.

Renée Carter-Chapman  
Senior Vice Provost  
University of Alaska Anchorage

### Speaking the Language

Throughout this handbook we have used a few terms more or less interchangeably to refer to our local project, the national initiative that sponsored it, and our individual attempts to engage difficult dialogues in our classrooms and communities.

**Civil discourse:** a nonviolent, democratic approach to problem-solving, in which competing points of view may be expressed, considered, and evaluated in an environment of mutual respect.

**Difficult Dialogues:** the Ford Foundation's national initiative that supported our project.

**Difficult dialogues:** the most common shorthand for referring to the controversial and contentious issues we addressed throughout our project.

**Encountering Controversy:** the name of our project as it appeared on our original grant application.

**Engaging Controversy:** the name we ultimately adopted to signal our more active stance.

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# Handbook

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	APU	UAA
<b>Affiliation</b>	Private	Public
<b>Mission Emphasis</b>	Active learning, leadership, civic engagement	Access, excellence, engagement
<b>Enrollment</b>	719	19,674
<b>Student Diversity</b>		
African American	4.6%	3.5%
Alaska Native/ American Indian	14%	9%
Asian/Pacific Island	2.6%	6.7%
Hispanic	3.7%	4.5%
White	65.3%	70.4%
<b>Faculty</b>	51	Regular/Term: 575 Temporary: 658
<b>Campuses</b>	Anchorage	Anchorage Kenai Peninsula College Kodiak College Matanuska Susitna College Prince William Sound Community College

Sources: APU data came from the APU Registrar: Fall 2007, undergraduate and graduate students combined. UAA data came from UAA Institutional Research: Fall 2007, all campuses, undergraduate and graduate students combined.