

FOREWORD:
CONTROVERSY FROM A
COUNSELING PERSPECTIVE



CASE STUDIES

by Nathalie Kees

Awareness is always heightened when we are caught in a creative tension . . . good teachers always find ways to induce this creative tension. —Parker J. Palmer (2007, 76)

Conflict to paradox to revelation: that is the divine progression.
—Robert A. Johnson (1993, 91)

Students arrive in our classrooms with their biases, beliefs, and personal histories intact. They also arrive with their individual histories, emotions, and patterns related to dealing with conflict. Diversity education and conflict resolution principles suggest that instructors need to create environments in which all students feel safe enough to express and explore their views and experiences, listen deeply to the experiences and views of others, and stay open to participation in the dialogue process (Alvarez and Miville 2003; Flick 1998). How does an instructor walk the line between facilitating discussions in which students feel safe enough to express their views, while maintaining an environment that feels respectful and welcoming for all students?

I have spent the past twenty-seven years as a counselor educator teaching theories, strategies, and skills for creating understanding and resolving interpersonal and group conflicts. I have also facilitated countless discussions on diversity topics such as systemic oppression, unearned privilege, racism, sexism, religious difference, etc. I have to be honest when I say that I have never found it easy, or perhaps even possible, to successfully create a classroom environment safe and welcoming

enough for all students to feel free to express their beliefs, biases, questions, fears, and other feelings related to these topics. In some ways it does not seem possible. As soon as one student expresses a view, the group dynamic has begun. In that moment, how many other students with differing views will decide to stay silent? How many others are waiting to see what my response will be? Others may be categorizing that student into a box from which there may be no escape, while others still are listening only long enough to find the flaws in the other's logic, formulate their counterargument, and prepare for a debate. As the discussion begins, so do the places of tension, conflict, and paradox.

One of my mentors in my career as counselor and teacher has been Parker Palmer. In his book, *The Courage to Teach*, Palmer (2007) describes some of the paradoxes that exist in learning environments and suggests that good teachers find ways to live within the tension of those paradoxes. One of Palmer's paradoxes most salient to my discussion is that the learning environment should be both "hospitable and charged" (77). By this he means that the learning environment should be "inviting as well as open, safe, and trustworthy" (77) and at the same time meaningful, significant, and both emotionally and intellectually charged. "If students are to learn at the deepest levels, they must not feel so safe that they fall asleep: they need to feel the risks inherent in pursuing the deep things of the world or of the soul" (78).

Robert A. Johnson, a noted Jungian therapist and author, describes this place of paradox as providing an opportunity to illumine our shadow, that aspect of our psyche which we wish to keep hidden or deny. He says, ". . . there can be no paradox—that sublime place of reconciliation—until one has owned one's own shadow and drawn it up to a place of dignity and worth" (1993, 90-91). Our task as teachers becomes one of first shining light on our own shadow of learned biases, emotions, and patterns of attack and avoidance, and then creating classroom environments that welcome all parts of our students, their intellectual selves as well as their emotional and often reactive shadow selves. In this environment of honest exploration, students can feel safe enough to express their questions, fears, and places of vulnerability while hearing the same from others, realizing in the end that we may have more in common than we thought.

Creating this type of learning environment requires another of Palmer's paradoxes: "the space should be bounded and open" (Palmer

2007, 77). Creating boundaries for difficult discussions can take the form of mutually agreed upon norms the group will use to guide their interactions with each other. Some of these typically include: one person speaks at a time, participants share “air time” and no one dominates the discussion, and opinions are “owned” by using “I” statements and not speaking for others or the group (Jacobs et al. 2012). Palmer suggests that the space can also be bounded by keeping the discussion focused on the topic at hand, what he calls the “great truths,” questions, or texts of the subject matter that are so “compelling that students will find it hard to wander” (Palmer 2007, 77). He also suggests that the learning environment must be “open to the many paths down which discovery may take us, to the surprises that always come with real learning” (Palmer 2007, 77). This is what the authors and editors of this book of case studies have provided. The real life, current case examples, as well as the recommended discussion questions, provide the compelling focus and boundaries for the learning environment, while the alternative learning strategies open the way for multiple paths to discovery.

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