ALEXIS WIGGINS

THE BEST CLASS You Never TAUGHT
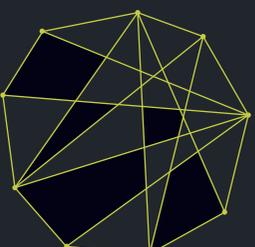
How SPIDER WEB DISCUSSION Can Turn Students into Learning Leaders

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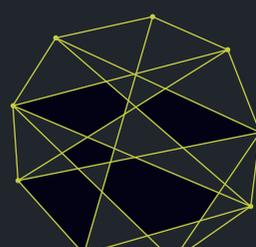
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*For my dad, who told me
to write and gave me the
confidence to teach from the heart.*

THE BEST CLASS YOU NEVER TAUGHT

FOREWORD

I had the privilege of working closely with Dr. Grant Wiggins for nearly twenty years before his untimely death in 2015. Grant dedicated his professional life to making education more thoughtful, engaging, and authentic—for learners and teachers alike. Grant was a true intellectual whose ideas influenced educators around the world. With Grant's passing, our profession lost an extraordinary thought leader . . . and I lost my best friend.

Thankfully, Grant's daughter Alexis has picked up the baton and continues the Wigginses' tradition of thoughtful professional writing. In *The Best Class You Never Taught*, she describes her process of creating a classroom culture that supports shared inquiry, encourages deep thinking, invites respectful dialogue, and strengthens student autonomy. The book includes insights gained from her many years of teaching experience, professional readings, action research, reflections on practice, and numerous professional conversations. The result is a protocol and a compendium of associated tools for initiating and implementing Spider Web Discussions in the classroom.

Wiggins makes it clear that the Spider Web Discussion is much more than another pedagogical "technique." It is grounded in firm beliefs about educational outcomes and the nature of meaningful learning. Her work is a testament to the contention that modern schooling must do more than transmit information. In a world in which we can search much of the world's knowledge

on a smartphone, educators must seek to develop in students the so-called 21st century skills of critical and creative thinking, collaboration, and communication. Teachers must transition from being mere transmitters of content to facilitators of conceptual understanding. Wiggins's recommended methodology reflects a constructivist conception of learning drawn from research in cognitive psychology and neuroscience, in which students must be actively engaged in personal and collective meaning making.

Through personal anecdotes, Wiggins describes her educational journey of exploring the Harkness method, formulating the Spider Web Discussion process, and working to develop the cultural and behavioral dimensions needed for its success in a classroom. She encourages readers to have the courage to embark on new methodologies and reassures them of the value of moving out of one's pedagogical comfort zone and gradually turning over the reins of learning to students.

The book is scholarly without being "ivory tower"; practical without being simplistic. Wiggins cites relevant research with the authority and assurance of an academic while offering no nonsense advice with the clarity and confidence of a veteran teacher. Simply put, *The Best Class You Never Taught* provides eminently practical and proven techniques for engaging respectful discussions, promoting meaning making and reflection, and building capacities for self-directed learning. Your students will thank you for reading this book and bringing its ideas to life in your classroom. And Alexis's dad would be so proud.

Jay McTighe
Coauthor of *Understanding by Design*

1 WHY WE NEED SPIDER WEBBERS

Karen graduated first in her class from Yale and went on to get her MBA from Harvard Business School. She was given the chance to publish some of her research while at Harvard, which led to an offer to head a multinational bank's institute on leadership. She packed her bags and moved halfway across the world to oversee the leadership branch of the bank's corporate offices. Part of her job was to travel the region to conduct interviews and surveys with industry leaders to learn and understand the hallmarks of leadership and to determine some of the personal and professional challenges keeping talented leaders, especially women, from top leadership tracks. In addition to this work, she was tasked with recruiting and hiring the best and brightest candidates for research and development work—keeping in mind that the best candidates on paper may not have key interpersonal skills.

Karen realized quickly that applicants' résumés were not helpful in determining who would be the best hires. She had a host of candidates from topnotch business schools to choose from, but many applicants lacked the sophisticated, nuanced communication skills needed in corporate leadership. She began to look for only two things in potential hires: excellent written and oral communication skills. Karen felt that new hires could learn the business of banking on the job, but the skills of asking good questions, listening, and communicating were invaluable to her team and she did not have the resources to teach these skills. The company needed employees who had honed their communication and social skills; the rest of their résumé was just window dressing.

Consider the following four excerpts from articles in the news media between the years 2013–2015, and see if you can spot the common thread:

> *Being able to read the room is such a crucial skill, adds Phunware sales executive Mike Snavely, that he's willing to hire people who don't know much about technology if they have a gift for relating to other people.* (Anders, 2005, p. 2)

> *What we care about is . . . do you step back and stop leading, do you let someone else? Because what's critical to be an effective leader in this environment is you have to be willing to relinquish power.* (Laszlo Bock [Google] in Friedman, 2014, p. SR11)

> *You no longer have that strict hierarchical culture in the cockpit, where the captain was king and everyone blindly followed his orders. It's team oriented nowadays.* (Brennan, 2013, p. TR3)

> *Young people have not been well prepared for adult life today unless they are comfortable and well practiced in addressing collaboratively the kinds of problems and objectives that 21st century life poses.* (Kuhn, 2015, p. 51)

These articles range in focus from hiring in the technology sector to aviation safety to education research, but they all highlight one key point: today's jobs demand effective collaboration. Today's most competitive jobs go to candidates who can both lead and listen, innovate and question, see the big picture as well as the small details.

Are we doing this? Not that well. Unfortunately, we in education are prone to thinking that simply imposing a new structure or method will produce positive results. Those of us working in K–12 settings know this story well: in an effort to improve learning, many schools or districts decide to promote a new initiative, such as Socratic seminar, the Workshop Model, or an iPad for every student, and offer some initial training and follow up with a handful of meetings. But that is usually it. We seldom perform action research to test whether our initiative is effective at improving student learning. We rarely offer tiered, multifaceted, well-designed professional development to support the teaching faculty and administrators in how best to carry out the initiative over time. And, sadly, most of us have experienced the institutional cynicism that comes with the "flavor-of-the-year" initiatives that surge at the beginning of every new school year and fizzle over time. We've also experienced the deflation that

happens when the leaders championing new initiatives move on without structures in place to ensure continued success.

Spider Web Discussion does not aim to be a quick fix. It isn't about introducing a new, trendy structure in your classroom. It's not meant to be a box that is simply ticked on a supervisor's observation checklist.

Spider Web Discussion is a classroom philosophy, not a one-off activity. It's a culture. It's about understanding that learning is a complex process that plays out over time, through allowing students to grapple with challenging questions, ideas, and people. The process of Spider Web Discussion trains students to work together collaboratively in solving problems and to self-assess that process. The result is deep, high-level inquiry led and assessed by the students themselves, whether they are in 2nd grade social studies or high school geometry. Teachers using Spider Web Discussion aim to create authentic collaborators, communicators, and self-evaluators through ongoing, sustained discussion and assessment.

I have been using or training other teachers to use Spider Web Discussion in classrooms for more than 10 years and I believe it is the single most powerful tool in my teaching toolbox. When I read the four excerpts (p. 4), I'm struck by how well Spider Web Discussion achieves each of the valued skills and abilities cited. In my experience, it goes further than those crucial skills; if done right, it instills a magical feeling in the classroom, one where students feel safe and excited to share their deepest intellectual questions and ideas, where students realize they are on the same team, working toward a common goal, no longer competing for airtime or top grades. This awareness produces a sense of community and an ethical space in which true inquiry becomes possible.

Think of the aviation example: flight safety is better now due to the collaborative process. All who fly benefit from the fact that the industry now values collaboration over traditional power structures—and the stakes are pretty high when you are talking about plane safety. Systems thinking has evolved; today's employees must be prepared to value each other's input, seek varied voices, consider multiple perspectives, and "relinquish power," as noted by Bock, a Google executive. We should be giving these practices top billing in our classroom—not merely as structures, but as cultures and practices that are taught, learned, and assessed on a regular basis.

Why do we need Spider Webbers? Precisely for the reasons cited in the news excerpts. We owe it to our students to train them in—not just superficially expose them to—how to collaborate successfully. This is *the* vital skill for the future.

And while Spider Web Discussion teaches complex skills like teamwork, empathy, citing evidence, and self-assessment, the method is simple. You only need a rubric, a pencil, and some paper to get started.

A Brief History of Spider Web Discussion

The Origins of Harkness Method

In my mid-20s, I found myself teaching high school English at The Masters School, in New York's Hudson Valley. The Masters School was different from the other schools I had taught in; it was a Harkness school, which is a school that uses Socratic seminar discussion in its classrooms. I was daunted by the new-to-me notion that students were meant to run their own discussions.

The history of the Harkness method can be traced to one of America's preeminent New England prep schools, Philips Exeter Academy. In 1930, a wealthy donor named Edward Harkness gave the school a generous gift with the stipulation that it be used to promote a new style of classroom instruction. He wrote: "What I have in mind is [a classroom] where [students] could sit around a table with a teacher who would talk with them and instruct them by a sort of tutorial or conference method, where [each student] would feel encouraged to speak up. This would be a real revolution in methods" ("The Harkness Gift"). What developed from this idea were oval tables around which all students and the teacher were seated equally, able to see each other's eyes, fostering discussion.

At the Masters School, the oval table tradition lived on; every classroom, even science and math classrooms, had large oval tables in the center of the room, around which students debated, discussed, and problem solved (science rooms were purpose-built with labs in the back and oval tables in the front).

But the table is not the point; schools do not need a specific table to foster discussion. The purpose of the Harkness method is to actively engage students in their learning process through the exchange of ideas and group problem solving. For the first time in my career, I was asked to shift my role from fount

of knowledge to facilitator. The challenge posed to me for the first time as an educator was entirely novel to me: how could I get the students *themselves* to uncover the most pertinent, key understandings in the content we studied with as little hand-holding from me as possible?

I began by using a rubric that a colleague shared with me, which flipped much of the conventional approach to class participation on its head. The rubric required students to engage in fairly standard practices during discussion, such as listening and being respectful, referring to the text to support their point, and avoiding interrupting others. One interesting element is that it asked for (more or less) equal participation during discussion, meaning the shy kids would need to make an effort to speak up and the chatty kids would need to make an effort to allow others some space to do so. The real kicker, though, was listed at the bottom of the rubric: "Because this is a team effort, there will be a team grade. **The whole class will get the SAME grade.**"

This was truly different. In all the years I spent as a student and a teacher, the participation grade was always about 10 percent of the students' overall grade, and it was always an individual grade. A group grade, the thinking went, was unfair because it meant that someone else's behavior could bring your grade down (or up).

But I quickly realized the power of the group grade, which I'll talk about more explicitly in Chapter 6. At the beginning of the year, when I introduced the rubric and the group grade, there was an immediate understanding that they were in it together, working as a team. The grade did not seem unfair because they were not being graded on their individual understanding of the text, but their ability to work together. They were being assessed on how well they approached the text critically as a team, building on each other's ideas and pushing each other to new and better understandings. **Once the goals of *collaborative inquiry and teamwork* were clear to the students, the assessment design seemed logical to them.** However, I don't recommend counting the group grade in students' overall GPAs. I think the most powerful use of the group grade is through symbolic grades that are reported and shared with students and parents through the grade book or reporting systems—but not counted. That is, the group grade is most effective when it is used formatively and weighted 0 percent in overall GPA. See Chapter 6, which is devoted to the

assessment strategy, for more information. I believe firmly that using a group grade is the secret to Spider Web Discussion's success. Why? Because we may ask students to work in groups monthly, weekly, or even daily, but unless we provide specific grading or feedback on that process, how do we know if they are learning to be effective collaborators?

I had never considered those questions until working at a Harkness school, but suddenly my mind was bursting with ideas and observations about the process. I began to let go of my instinct to control the class discussion. I listened more and spoke less. Eventually, I began to stay silent during the majority of Harkness discussion time.

I realized then that, for many years before, I had spoon-fed students with the key content, concepts, and questions. I may as well have written on the board every day in class, "Here Is What Is Important in the Text" and added my notes underneath.

Now, however, being in the environment where I was asked to take a step back and empower the students, I realized that students are adept at identifying what is important. It didn't take me long to see that they got much more out of the discussions when they were doing the heavy lifting. It was a humbling surprise and, ultimately, a pleasure to realize I wasn't as important to the process of learning as I believed I was.

From Harkness Method to Spider Web Discussion

In the years since working at The Masters School, I have honed this method into something more detailed and systematic with regard to process, assessment, and self-evaluation. To better reflect the purpose and differentiate it from Harkness discussion or Socratic seminar, I named this specific method of discussion Spider Web Discussion; think of it as Harkness 2.0.

In most high schools, Socratic seminar (or Harkness method) is still driven by the teacher. Although students are doing the discussing, the teacher is still the referee and master of knowledge, offering up the right question at the right moment, redirecting the conversation, correcting misunderstandings, ensuring that students are civil, and grading the participation.

In Spider Web Discussion, the teacher is largely silent. When Spider Web Discussion is taking place in my classroom, I sit in the back, away from the

students, and avoid eye contact with them. I have a blank notepad on which I take notes about their discussion.

Who is asking the right question at the right moment, redirecting the conversation, correcting misunderstandings, and ensuring that students are being civil to one another? The students are. That's their job, and I train them over several months to do it. By the middle of the year, they do it very well. I take great pleasure in seeing how irrelevant I become in the classroom about three months into our Spider Web Discussion routine—the students themselves are far better referees and masters of knowledge than we usually give them credit for (or even allow them to be).

The name, Spider Web Discussion, is an acronym that describes all the components of the method:

Synergetic—it's team oriented, balanced, and group graded (the whole class gets a single grade for each discussion).

Practiced—it's ongoing, rehearsed, and debriefed. It's not a one-time activity but a process, much like writing.

Independent—the teacher interferes as little as possible; students run the discussion and self-assess.

Developed—the discussion gets deep, builds on itself, goes "somewhere."

Exploration—this is the main goal; more than discussion, it is a discussion-based exploration (of a text, an Essential Question, or a topic)

with a

Rubric—this is the cornerstone to the whole process: to have a clear, concise rubric against which students can easily self-assess.

The "Web" part of the name comes from the web-like graph that a student or I draw to document the discussion in real time and then we use to debrief.

Spider Web Discussion captures the essence of what the technique aims to do: create graduates who are skilled collaborators, listeners, problem solvers, power relinquishers, and leaders.

What the Research Says

Interpersonal skills are more in demand, yet our education system has not quite caught up. We still largely design our classrooms and lessons—especially in high school and college—for acquisition of academic content instead of "soft" skills.

A 2015 study by an associate professor of education and economics at Harvard University highlights how, since 1980, jobs requiring social skills have grown more than other types of jobs. Especially booming are those occupations that require technical skills coupled with interpersonal skills, such as when doctors or computer scientists work on group projects. The job sectors with the greatest decline were those related to repetitive manual labor, like garbage collection, or individual analytical tasks, such as engineering. Jobs requiring social skills, regardless of the sector, grew 24 percent over the time period the study examined (Deming, 2015).

Our schools need more effective ways to teach social skills, so we can produce graduates truly prepared for their future careers. In 2009, Google began to examine the reasons why people left their company to work elsewhere, and found that one of the biggest factors was having a terrible boss. Google asked itself how it could crunch the numbers relating to who was a good boss and who was a bad boss at an unorthodox tech company. Project Oxygen was born, an initiative that used thousands of performance reviews, feedback surveys, and employee award nominations to distill data points to a list of eight key characteristics in the best managers at the company. Google called this list The Big Eight, and the traits are ranked in order of importance:

1. Be a good coach.
2. Empower your team and don't micromanage.
3. Express interest in team members' success and personal well-being.
4. Don't be a sissy*: be productive and results-oriented.
5. Be a good communicator and listen to your team.
6. Help your employees with career development.
7. Have a clear vision and strategy for the team.
8. Have key technical skills so you can help advise the team.

*Sissy is a term used in The Big Eight Google list.

The Project Oxygen team noted that "what employees valued most were even-keeled bosses who made time for one-on-one meetings, who helped people puzzle through problems by asking questions, not dictating answers, and who took an interest in employees' lives and careers" (Bryant, 2011, BU1). Most fascinating to note is that numbers 1, 2, 3, and 5 all relate to collaborative work or communication. Last on the list is "technical skills." The idea that knowing how to empower a group of people you are leading is more important than your content recall is counterintuitive to how most of us were taught, but it makes perfect sense. In a company like Google, collaboration is how everything is designed, created, and implemented.

Furthermore, Google identified some pitfalls of the company's worst managers, which related to having a lack of management, communication, or collaboration skills. Essentially, if you don't know how to work well within a group, it's highly unlikely you will be successful at your job. In the end, Google was able to use self-generated data on managers to improve business.

A few key lessons are found in the story of Google's Project Oxygen. First, collaborative and communicative skills are paramount, surpassing even technical skills. Second, the lack of those collaborative and communicative skills leads to real losses in human capital in the workplace, an unnecessary loss of talent. Third, feedback is key to the process of leadership; the organization needs employee feedback on the manager's performance followed by specific, goal-oriented feedback on areas for improvement. Basically, Google offers a glimpse into what the real world wants: collaborative, communicative, goal-oriented employees who are familiar with the process of giving and receiving feedback.

It sounds perfectly logically and relatively doable from an education perspective: we want to produce graduates from high schools and universities who are good collaborators, communicators, and feedback givers and receivers. But if these are the skills we want for our graduates, the key question is this one: what are we doing *daily* in our classrooms to teach, encourage, and assess these skills?

We might say that we encourage our students to work in groups all the time, but are we giving them feedback on how well they are working in those groups? Are we assessing the quality of their collaboration? The frequency with which they seek it? How well they communicate with each other?

When we examine the issue more carefully, we see that few of our classes are set up to really teach, encourage, and—most important—assess these skills. If we want students that collaborate well, isn't it logical that we need to teach and assess the skill of collaboration (the teamwork itself) and not just the product (the content or presentation)?

If you are using Common Core State Standards (CCSS), you may have noted that the standards for English-Language Arts are skills-based and not content-based. There is no required list of content, but there are skills standards for college and career readiness, such as "prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively" (CCSS, 2010). The beauty of Spider Web Discussion is that it perfectly supports students in attempting to reach that standard at the same time it supports the aims of the businesses mentioned.

The research on the importance of teaching interpersonal skills is clear: we need to design our schools backward from the goal of creating students well versed in collaboration, listening, problem solving, and empathy. I have found that Spider Web Discussion accomplishes this without investing in extensive training or technology. In Chapter 2, I'll introduce the method in detail and explain how to start your first day of Spider Web Discussion in the classroom.

Practical Considerations

Before you begin Spider Web Discussion, it's important to take into account the kind of school, district, and community you work in. Will there be support and enthusiasm from your supervisors? Parents? Students? If you find that the answer is "yes" to those questions, then it will be easy to begin Spider Web Discussion.

If you are not working in ideal conditions, study the lay of the land and make adjustments. At the Masters School in Dobbs Ferry, New York, I was working in a Harkness school, where teachers, parents, and students were all familiar and comfortable with student-led discussions and the assessment of it. When I moved to an international school in Qatar, strict policies required me to teach and assess in lockstep with my colleagues. In that case, I continued using Spider Web Discussion in my classes, but I no longer reported the grades in the

grade book. They became symbolic, unreported grades that were discussed with the students. When I moved to yet another school, there was a policy in that school's academic handbook that prohibited group grades for group work. The policy was written to avoid the perennial problem wherein one student does all the work and several other students get the grade without lifting a finger. When I explained that the premise of Spider Web Discussion is different, that it actually grades the process of working together itself, assessing the nature of collaboration and teamwork through a critical inquiry, the principal agreed it was a unique use of group grading. He allowed me to go ahead with the assessment, as long as I informed parents at the beginning of the year. I did that using the course syllabus. During these early years, I advocated for counting the group grades, even slightly. More recently, I believe that using the group grade as a "doesn't count, weighted zero" formative feedback mechanism is more in sync with practices that include grading to standards and avoiding unfair group-grading scenarios. If you explain to students, parents, and administrators that the purpose of the group grade is feedback toward specific goals related to collaboration, speaking, and listening, and that the grade doesn't affect individual GPAs because it is weighted 0 percent, you shouldn't have too much difficulty implementing the method where you work.

Doing a little research on the school policies and getting the appropriate permission from supervisors will help to ensure you don't encounter the unfortunate situation of trying and seeing success with the method, only later to discover that your district restricts it. You should also consider whether your school has a reporting mechanism or grade book that allows for 0 percent weighted grades. If it does, you can enter the group grades for students and parents to track progress, yet keep those grades from affecting individual students' grades. If your school doesn't or can't report in this manner, then you can use the grades in the classroom symbolically, talking about them openly and keeping a record on a chart or clipboard, but not reporting the grades officially.

Another key is your student population. The vast majority of students are thrilled to find they have a valued voice. They feel worthy and trusted when we educators give them the opportunity to take ownership of their learning through a method like Spider Web Discussion. It is always a joy when I observe the first Spider Web Discussion of a school year and students' faces light up

with pleasure and engagement because they are allowed to discuss freely and feel intellectually valued by their peers and the teacher.

But there can be resistance, especially with students who are more comfortable being spoon-fed the right answers by the expert teacher. Introducing the method needs to be done more deliberately in these kinds of settings. See Chapters 4 and 5 for more information on troubleshooting different students' personalities in the context of Spider Web Discussion.

The next chapter will help you introduce the method in your classes step-by-step and you'll learn exactly what to do and expect on day 1.

Voices from the Field

—PROFESSOR ERIC MAZUR, DEAN OF APPLIED PHYSICS, HARVARD UNIVERSITY—Many K–12 teachers make the mistake of thinking that colleges want students who have memorized a lot of information or internalized a lot of content, that what high school graduates most need to be prepared to do is listen to lectures, take notes, and perform well on traditional tests.

As a current professor of physics, I can tell you this is utterly false. We don't need good note takers—we need students who can hold ideas up to the light and challenge, question, test, and hypothesize about them. We need leaders who can ask deep questions and leaders who can also sit back and listen, learning from others. Science depends on this process. Physicists, chemists, and biologists work together, not individually in isolation. Scientists consult all the resources and people on hand when they are trying to problem solve; they don't rely on their memory the way we require students to in traditional test-taking. If we truly want to prepare K–12 students for college and career success, we must take the focus off content recall and assessment practices that are outdated, testing only lower-order recall or computation skills (after all, smartphones have these skills!). I used to have very traditional, lecture-based, test-based courses. Over the years, I realized the top performers could not accurately answer conceptual, application questions. There was a disconnect between their high grades and their true understanding of the material.

Now, my courses look very different. They are built around group problem solving, inquiry, and discussion. Not only is class more interesting for the students now, the research also shows that they actually learn more and better this way. Their understanding is way up, their depth of thinking far greater.

Big Takeaway

Today's jobs demand more than content acquisition. Both higher education and the professional world want high school graduates that have excellent critical thinking, communication, and people skills. Karen, the business leader described in the opening vignette, is based on the sentiments of a friend. She was open to hiring inexperienced interns who had excellent communication skills because they were more valuable to her workplace than an experienced insider with average or poor communication and social skills.

Spider Web Discussions are just one way to help students improve communication and social skills, but the method works in all kinds of classrooms. Spider Web Discussion is a philosophical approach that can change your classroom and prepare your students for the challenges of the real world.

7 BENEFITS OF SPIDER WEB DISCUSSION

Liam was the odd one out in his small, close-knit class at an artsy private school. His peers were informed and cultured, versed in the language of Broadway shows and politics; Liam had a fascination with the outdoors and Greek mythology. Liam often looked grumpy, sitting with his arms crossed in front of him, eyes cast downward. He tended to be silent during discussions until some point struck him and he responded gruffly, arguing in a way that seemed a bit too intense to his slightly baffled peers. His classmates tolerated him with a benign indifference, but to adults, Liam looked socially awkward and lonely.

Kelly was a popular student and star tennis player who had gone to school with Liam since 5th grade. Academically she was good but not great. She didn't stand out in a class full of students who would wind up at Ivy League schools. She worked hard to maintain a *B* average and often felt that despite all her efforts, she would never reach the intellectual or academic heights of her peers.

Kelly had one particular skill that was brought sharply into focus during a Spider Web Discussion. Right away a clear pattern emerged: Kelly would respond to Liam's gruff outbursts with a soothing kind of summary, somehow translating his message so that the rest of the class could digest it and agree. She'd turn her whole body toward him, look directly at him with interest and enthusiasm, and say things like, "Wow, Liam, that's so true. I had never thought of it that way. You seem to be saying that Romeo is a bit of a ladies' man, a player, and that he shouldn't be trusted. I really didn't see that until you pointed it out, but it makes sense."

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Kelly had a particular charm with the way she wielded her empathy, an ability to soften both Liam and the rest of the students with her genuine comments. She was the connection between Liam and the rest of the group, smoothing over awkward social encounters to create a much more unified discussion and group experience.

Kelly's teacher knew this was a particular talent that wasn't measured by traditional assessments. She had an innate knack for empathy, for sophisticated social maneuvers between groups of indifferent or even hostile peers. Kelly's teacher was glad that Spider Web Discussion had highlighted this skill for two reasons. The first was for Liam's benefit; he seemed to be able to find his place in the classroom after a couple of months of Kelly's consistent support. Second, the teacher was glad that she could give Kelly positive feedback on a high-level skill, especially when Kelly was feeling discouraged by her average reading and writing skills. The teacher began to highlight this skill for Kelly through her comments and feedback and encouraged her with comments like, "I think you'd make an incredible psychologist or social worker, Kelly. Have you ever thought about majoring in psychology?" Over time, Kelly began to see that she did have some valuable skills, even if she didn't have the ones that were "on the test."

When I started using Spider Web Discussion, I suspected I would see my students improve in the following areas:

- Successful group problem solving and collaboration
- Increased and better participation
- Enhanced communication and social skills
- Improved self-assessment

I did, in fact, see improvement in those areas.

The method is based on group problem solving, so I noticed that students became very adept at working collaboratively in that first year. Through the feedback process, they began to flex and build the muscle of successful group work so that they were taking turns, apologizing for cutting each other off, practicing asking questions more regularly, and valuing the whole group's

input. Nowhere to be seen is the perennial classroom problem of "group work," in which one or two students do all the work while the others sit idly by or make half-hearted attempts to help, and then the whole group winds up with the same grade. In footage of a 9th grade classroom discussing *Romeo and Juliet* available on YouTube (Wiggins, 2016), you'll see that by April the students have developed fairly sophisticated group problem-solving (and self-regulating) skills.

As a result of successful collaboration, the next two expected benefits unfold: increased and better participation and enhanced communication and social skills. Because successful group problem solving requires both components, it's only natural that they are strengthened. As you saw in the web graphs of the discussion in Chapter 4, participation evens out and becomes more equal over the first months of using the method, a direct result of enhanced communication and social skills. Students come to understand that talking over others, interruptions, and put-downs lead to poor discussions.

Although I expected improved self-assessment skills, I was still pleased to see that students did, in fact, become quite accurate at this kind of self-assessment. I find that students are quite insightful in assigning themselves a grade, often debating each other to find the perfect-fit value for their discussion. I'm secretly a little pleased when the majority of the group overrides a small minority that always wants to give themselves a top grade, regardless of merit. When this happens, the students who are more accurate will point to the rubric and say things like, "Guys, we didn't do nearly half of these things. Look at the web graph for today at all the interruptions. We can do better." I love when the students take ownership of the assessment in this way.

So I did, in fact, see all the results and benefits I expected to see when I first tried the method. I was also pleasantly surprised to find several unintended benefits that resulted from a classroom culture created around Spider Web Discussion:

- Better assessment data on individual students
- Increase in homework completion
- An ethical and safe classroom environment
- Greater student autonomy
- Opportunities for greater equity

Better Assessment Data

All that coding really pays off. As I mentioned before, when I began to code for students' behavior and contributions alongside the web graph, patterns emerged. In a matter of weeks, I saw that Priyanka had many opinions and loved to contribute but never cited the text to support her ideas; I noticed that Bob nearly always interrupted his classmates; I observed that Julie would contribute rarely but when she did her contributions were usually exceptionally sound, insightful comments or questions that benefited everyone. Having this information on every student gave me a much fuller picture of their strengths and areas of growth and made for much richer parent-teacher conferences, student-teacher conferences, and comments at the end of term. It became very easy for me to say, "Here's what you do well and here are three specific things you can do to improve in this area," and it took almost no effort because the patterns were being tracked during each discussion. I think teachers can use this kind of coding and formative assessment as they see fit. Some will want to dive in and really use it extensively as a way to assess formatively and report. Others are more comfortable with tracking a few key behaviors (such as textual references and interruptions) and focusing on individual behaviors more casually. I don't think there is a formula for how best to use the information. Rather, I think the teacher knows best how she can maximize the data from Spider Web Discussion and use it to her students' advantage. I have played around with various methods over the years depending on the students, class size, total number of students I teach, parent community, and reporting requirements in the schools. I used to track every single behavior in a grade book next to each student's name, which worked fairly easily when I had small class sizes and more autonomous students (as seen in the 9th grade classroom video). Later, I found coding on the web graph sheet enough to give me a big picture and I'd watch as the key patterns developed and make notes in my electronic grade book for me and the student. Most recently, I have focused my coding on key behaviors, such as textual citing, question asking, and depth of analysis, because those skills crossed over into other domains students needed to improve in, such as writing. In this way, I had more pointed suggestions for improvement that related not only to discussions but also to reading analysis and writing. The key takeaway

here is that, through the coding, you have more data on your students than you probably need, and it can be insightful for you, students, and parents.

Better Homework Completion

Another unexpected result that many teachers and I have discovered is that students are often perfectly fine with letting their teachers down by not completing assignments or giving their all, but those habits and attitudes can change abruptly when they are letting their peers down. Almost no student wants to be the one who looks bad and brings the group grade down because he didn't complete the reading and can't contribute—even when the grade doesn't "count."

I gave a workshop on SWD to the faculty at a school in Malaysia where I taught. A few days afterward, two of the foreign language teachers approached me, giddy, remarking, "It's amazing, even the slackers do the homework now!" Spider Web Discussion is not a panacea for unmotivated or overstressed students, but it does make class time a lot more relevant for students. They will often come in, asking excitedly, "Are we having a discussion today?" I have never seen students run into class, eyes bright with anticipation, and say, "Are we having a lecture today?" Giving students a voice helps make them autonomous and encourages buy-in. If the homework is designed not as busy work but as a piece of the puzzle that the students must put together during class, then they understand that their part is important and that they have a chance to contribute.

I have had many students over the years say to me with a sly grin, "You know, I never used to read the books until your class. Now I have to."

When I introduce Spider Web Discussion to students, I usually ask them if they have ever seen a real spider web in nature. Nearly all of them say yes. I ask them what happens when you pluck one or two of the strands off the tree or building it's attached to, and a few students reply, "The whole web falls apart."

"Exactly," I say with a smile. "Just like that real spider web in nature, our discussion must involve every single participant anchoring his or her own strand. And what your individual strand might be is going to be different. For some of you, it's speaking up more often because you are afraid to do that. For others, anchoring your strand will be learning to quiet down, listen more, and allow others to get into the conversation more. And for some of you, anchoring your strand might be doing the homework because you let the whole class down

when you come unprepared for our discussions. Together, the web is complete when we all pull our own weight and anchor strands. But if even a couple of us don't participate fully, the discussion all falls apart." I find that students understand this visual analogy and take it to heart, and it's a good metaphor to return to periodically as a reminder that all must bring their best to our discussions.

You will have students who do not find your class or the content relevant to their lives and who prefer to focus on other subjects. Some students still skip the readings or don't finish the book, but the truth is I have far fewer than I did before. If you choose texts and essential questions that are meaningful to your students, they'll enjoy having the chance to express their opinions and analysis through a shared, balanced discussion. And they really don't want to let their peers down.

An Ethical and Safe Classroom Environment

When I first started teaching, I naively thought that the best way to teach ethics was to instill in my students a strong set of moral values. I posted artwork and political posters on my classroom walls, forbade the use of derogatory terms related to race, gender, or sexual orientation, and happily schooled my Women's Literature class, especially the wary males, in feminist theory. In short, straight out of college and teaching high school seniors who weren't much younger than me, I thought it was my duty to inculcate these students with my moral beliefs.

The trouble was, it didn't work very well. I wound up alienating more students than I ever reached. Over time, I came to realize that the best way to approach the teaching of ethics is not about teaching the content of ethics but by teaching the process by which the students learn. I began to shift my perception about myself from a teacher who leads her students through the study of ethics to a coach who draws upon the innate ethical talent in her academic athletes. Ethical conduct derives from more than just analysis; the goal is to affect behavior and ultimately produce thoughtful, ethical people. Students should be encouraged not only to examine ethical issues in class but also to experience ethical and unethical conduct directly. Spider Web Discussion provides this opportunity.

When the entire group is rewarded for being engaged and digging deep, students become more aware of their peers and more empathetic. A student who might usually dominate discussion soon learns to ask another student to

express her thoughts. A student who interrupts another quickly discovers it's against his and the others' interests, excuses himself, and asks the interrupted student to continue. A student who would never speak if not called upon learns how to speak up during discussions, often surprising the rest of the class with his insights. I've found over the years that when students shift their view of themselves from superstar to a team player, the class dynamic changes radically. Students relax; they bounce ideas off each other; they help each other out; they speak up more or less and they tend to be kinder and more inclusive. Discussions become good because the group, not the individual, is rewarded for it, and nobody wants to bring the rest of the group down—even when it's weighted 0 percent.

Once the students get pretty good at discussions, I encourage *them* to ask good questions more often and remind them that one well-worded and well-timed question can be worth 50 comments. The sharper students pick up on this sooner or later; by the middle of the school year, my classes are asking and answering deep and complicated ethical questions drawn from their texts without any prodding from me. At a school I taught at in Qatar, I found that Ibsen's *Ghosts* came alive and provided hours of riveting discussion on social mores, gossip, and religious hypocrisy—as seen not only through the lens of Ibsen's twentieth-century Norway, but also through that of the students' modern-day Islamic and Arabic culture. Through Spider Web Discussions, students were able to ask the most difficult ethical questions about themselves, their religion, and their culture (a fairly taboo topic there that I would never have broached if leading the discussion myself) and to do so in a thoughtful, productive way.

I'll never forget the 9th grade class I taught in the United States (on which this chapter's vignette is based) in which there was a student, Liam, who was notoriously challenging. He was antisocial and provocative in his statements, and didn't seem to mind if everyone was angry at him or thought him odd. He struggled socially. He was isolated from the class and the dynamic at the start of the year was uncomfortable because he often disagreed with his peers in a way that made them feel less inclined to reach out to him intellectually or personally.

I watched with fascination as Kelly, a popular girl, reached out to him in nearly every discussion. She would turn to him and say kindly, "Liam, what do you think? Do you agree with Sonya or do you feel differently? I'd love to know

what your thoughts are." Liam seemed as surprised as I was the first time, but he quickly dove in to a headlong analysis of why Sonya was wrong for one reason or another. But day after day of this dynamic had a curious effect—Kelly's initiative as host paid dividends. Liam saw himself more as a part of the group and everyone softened. Liam's contributions also softened, and everyone seemed a bit captivated by Kelly's empathy. She would often comment after Liam, "That's really insightful. I never saw it that way until you pointed it out." Somehow, just her saying this lifted any clouds over the discussion and you could see others around the table nod in agreement. *It* was *insightful. Thanks, Liam*, they all seemed to think. Kelly's compassion was infectious during Spider Web Discussions and we all benefited from it, thanks to the specific ethical behavior that was able to develop because of the format and norming of the discussions.

Greater Student Autonomy

One of the biggest realizations that I had when I began using Spider Web Discussion was how capable my students were without me. I wasn't really expecting this. For the years prior, I would diligently read my texts and prepare before class, writing out notes and key points that students had to learn. I would use the board to make extensive notes about what was important in a text like *Romeo and Juliet* and expect students to copy them during class. I was the most educated person in the room by anyone's standards, so it seemed only logical that I would be the one determining what was important in a text and highlighting that for students through a combination of lecture, note taking, and discussion that I facilitated in a traditional Socratic way. (I was the Asker of Important Questions.)

When I shifted to the collaborative approach with a group grade and a clear rubric of norms, suddenly I saw that the students didn't need me to point out the key points all the time. In fact, they didn't need me to do it most of the time. I discovered that if I held my tongue for the hour that I allotted for a high school class discussion, the students almost always got to all the points that I wanted them to, and many times to places I hadn't considered. It was very humbling. It made me question what my job really was. With some trepidation, I began to see that my role as resident expert wasn't even that interesting or necessary, especially as Internet search engines and online "cheat sheet" resources were

proliferating. If an online resource could tell my students most of the key points in *Romeo and Juliet* before they came to class and heard it from me, then what, really, was my job anyway?

My job became clear as I experimented with silence. I'm by nature a super-star as defined in this book: I love to share my opinion and engage in back-and-forth conversation and, I'm embarrassed to admit, I'm an interrupter. So forcing myself to be the observer was a real learning experience for me. I realized that by being silent and not focusing on my own ideas or knowledge during class discussions allowed me to observe more deeply what students themselves really knew, understood, and could do. It's like being a coach on the sidelines—you can see so clearly how the team is crowding the ball and not spreading out, but it's difficult to see when you are on the playing field. Suddenly, I didn't have the ball. The students had it and they were tasked with passing it to each other as effectively as possible. I was just there as a coach, and viewing my role this way changed my classroom forever. I had more respect for my students and their ideas, and, in turn, I think they developed more respect for me because their voices were given priority over mine during discussion time.

This is not to say that students are running the show or that the teacher has nothing more to offer than being a note taker. A teacher plays a vital role in understanding what constitutes deep learning and transfer and what doesn't, and directing the classroom based on his assessment of those. And a teacher also plays a pivotal role in *training* the students in Spider Web Discussion so that they get good at the process and don't rely on the teacher to direct the discussion, the self-assessment, or the debrief every time. Student autonomy is the goal, and students became more autonomous learners through ethical, inclusive collaboration and self-assessment.

Opportunities for Greater Equity

Equity is a term that has been popping up everywhere in education in the last few years. At its most basic level, equity in education means that students' personal or social circumstances do not impede their opportunity for success. When we have equity in education, factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, immigrant status, language ability, disabilities, sexual orientation, and religion do not stand in the way of a student fulfilling her academic potential.

I won't discuss the policy-level research and work being done on equity in education. Rather, I'd like to focus on how Spider Web Discussion can support the movement for equity in education. I have seen it be a vehicle for students from all kinds of backgrounds to deeper learning, a step toward greater equity.

When I present on Spider Web Discussion, teachers who work with low-income student populations, large ELL populations, and special education students sometimes ask if the method is appropriate for their students. The answer is yes. I have personally witnessed student success with all kinds of English language learners over the years. Just as any language teacher would, you may need to adapt the rubric, norms, or pace according to your population's ability and needs, but I have found that the requirement for equal, balanced participation is a great boon to immigrant and ELL students who may otherwise choose to be silent for most of the year. In Spider Web Discussion, they are now asked to be part of the discussion, even if they don't see themselves yet able to discuss as fluently or as quickly as other speakers in the classroom. Whenever there are students with high anxiety or low English ability in my classroom, I make a point to touch base with them one-on-one and provide them some suggestions for how to get into the conversation once or twice in a low-risk way, such as bringing in a question or quote from the text to begin the discussion or using the text to support what others are saying. Dialectical Journals can help a great deal with these students, as their language ability may not be able to keep pace yet with their thinking ability, so having words in front of them can aid in helping get these important voices into the conversation. Getting different, varied, and multicultured voices into the discussion is an important part of equity and we can all benefit from hearing a variety of experiences.

Bettina Meyer, a middle school learning support teacher in an international school, saw SWD modeled by colleagues and was intrigued but noticed that the classes had more than 20 students. She was apprehensive about trying the discussion with her largest class—seven students. Her instructional coach encouraged and gave guidance as Bettina adapted the rubric to her students' needs and set up the first discussion, which was very successful. During that first debrief, a student asked Bettina questions about how often she had spoken and how to improve. This led to Bettina's doing some research online to help the more hesitant students. She found sentence starters (e.g., "I think what I

hear you saying is . . . ") and prepared them as a bookmark for her students. Bettina also created a feedback form for each student to use for self-reflection. She was able to copy the individual talk time data from Equity Maps, the iPad app that maps the discussion and tracks student talk time. In the reflections, Bettina asked the students to take data points from Equity Maps and self-evaluate against current and future goals. In this way, Spider Web Discussion became a powerful tool for Bettina's students to set manageable goals and track their communication progress over the course of the year.

Bettina continues to use the method and self-reflection process in her classes, reporting that "all my students love being part of Spider Web Discussion. Not only do I feel it gives each of them a voice, but I love that they can see how they are growing as communicators."

Bettina's colleague Sara Bjork, a middle school ELL teacher, has had a similar experience using Spider Web Discussion in her classes. She was apprehensive about using the method with her small population of English language learners, but when she saw Bettina's success, she wanted to give it a try. Sara liked Bettina's use of goal setting and sentence starters for speaking and listening. Sara asked her students to set some goals before the first discussion that could easily be self-assessed. For example, students picked "I will use five sentence starters" or "I'm going to ask three questions." Additionally, she decided to use Equity Maps to count how many times a student spoke, to track the number of minutes each student spoke, and to track responses based on gender.

Most students were engaged in that first discussion and felt motivated by the Equity Map data because they were able to achieve many goals and identify specific areas of improvement for the next discussion. Sara reports

> Over time, the ELL students have become more comfortable with discussion and each other, and it is very good practice for them to formulate ideas and statements. Further, they take the time to find the right vocabulary to make themselves understood and have now gained the confidence to ask each other for clarifications. They do this because of the norms and because they are patient with each other—something that might not happen in a mainstream class. In our class, they get to try out new vocabulary, sentence starters, and their own ideas while feeling comfortable and secure in the setting.

As we exemplified by the experiences and comments from Bettina and Sara, Spider Web Discussion can be a powerful tool for helping students in ELL or learning support classrooms become confident communicators. You can adapt the method to fit your specific classroom and student needs as long as you stick with the four nonnegotiables of SWD: (1) the students can see one another, face-to-face; (2) the teacher remains silent for the whole discussion time and sits outside the circle; (3) the teacher provides time for students to debrief and self-assess; and (4) the teacher approves or proposes a different grade for the discussion that is criteria-based and collective.

Giving all students a voice and an equal place at the discussion table is not the only way Spider Web Discussion provides opportunities for greater equity. SWD also allows an alternative to writing as a mode in which students can express their knowledge and understanding. Writing is a vital skill. I am not suggesting we reduce our focus on the teaching or importance of writing, but I do believe that we sell short the abilities of many students when we assess their thinking primarily in writing. Writing is a skill that students develop that doesn't necessarily align with students' ability to think. One can be a great writer technically but not a deep, critical thinker; one can be a deep, critical thinker but not a skilled writer. This became apparent to me when I first moved to the Middle East to teach and found the students' writing abilities weaker than those exhibited by my students' in the United States. But these new students had exceptional oral abilities. I was blown away by the conversations the students were having about the literature we read—both the depth and the collaboration were strong—from the very first days. I then discovered that much of Arab-Muslim culture is based on oral tradition and family gatherings involved many hours of discussing and debating. They had highly developed oral expression skills, but most had not been brought up reading or being read to at night, like many U.S. students I had taught. If I had assessed these students only on their writing, I would never have been able to see how deeply they understood the texts we were reading, but I was able to discern their high level of understanding through the use of Spider Web Discussion.

Although we may not always know or understand the social, economic, or cultural factors behind our students' apparent abilities, Spider Web Discussion can help us explore a more complete picture of our students' learning and understanding with greater equity.

What the Research Says

Author Jeremy Rifkin describes how we might develop new teaching models that encourage empathy:

> New teaching models designed to transform education from a competitive contest to a collaborative and empathic learning experience are emerging as schools and colleges try to reach a generation that has grown up on the Internet and is used to interacting in open social networks where information is shared rather than hoarded. (Rifkin, 2010)

The notion that education should be "a collaborative and empathic . . . experience" is valuable and is gaining traction. It resonates with me, as that notion is one of the core goals of Spider Web Discussions and one of the most exciting unintended benefits I have found from the practice. Empathy—and the classroom structures that foster empathy—produce enormous benefits for our students, both in their short-term lives as our students and in their long-term lives as our fellow citizens, colleagues, innovators, and lawmakers.

In addition to increased empathy, you may also find that students become more adept speakers as a result of Spider Web Discussion. In a traditional Socratic seminar that is teacher directed, with the teacher developing and asking the majority of the questions, the students don't get the opportunity to learn to be good question askers the way they do with sustained practice of Spider Web Discussion. As a result, in traditional Socratic seminar, students often spend most of their time listening rather than engaging actively.

Paul Harris, a professor of education at Harvard Graduate School, explores the implications of the frequency of student talk time. He writes that studies show that children ask many more questions at home than they do in school settings. In addition, Harris cites studies that show that teachers greatly underestimate the number of questions they themselves ask, and overestimate the number of questions their students ask in the course of a school day (Harris, 2015). This connects with my own data during teacher observations in the classroom and during Socratic seminars. I will often record teacher talk time versus student talk time during observations and report those numbers on the observation form. For some teachers, particularly those who teach English or social studies, the numbers alone have been eye-opening. Several teachers who

spoke a majority of the observation time told me they were bowled over by the data because they had specifically designed lessons in which the students were meant to do the majority of the talking. If we want more student autonomy and critical thinking, we have to shift our thinking about talk time during class. A peer observation or digital recording of your class may help you see how balanced the teacher-to-student talk time is for you and your students.

Because we teachers are usually the ones with the power and knowledge in the classroom, it can be easy to forget what it feels like to be a student. It requires a certain level of empathy to understand how hard it is for students to perform under pressure or how anxious they feel about giving a presentation. I led a workshop on Spider Web Discussion at an international school in Europe in which the participants engaged in a discussion. Afterward, one of the teachers confessed that she realized she was "that" student in her class who was terrified to speak. She noticed her own palms growing sweaty and her heart racing at the thought of having to jump into the conversation with her colleagues. Her experience was quite physical and gave her deep empathy and insight into those students who felt too shy to contribute. She vowed to try a more empathetic, warm approach with them from now on.

Steven Strogatz is a Cornell math professor and author of the book *The Joy of X.* He penned a blog post about a similar experience when he was a student for a day and how it made him feel. He found that he felt uncomfortable when others at his table picked up on things more quickly than he did. In a discussion afterward, he mentioned how embarrassed he was about being the slowest at his table. The experience made him realize how important it was to provide a safe place for his students (Strogatz, 2015).

Empathy is a powerful vehicle to deep learning and understanding. When we understand how someone else feels, we can respond and collaborate more effectively. This is true for teachers, as in Strogatz's case, and true for students in their own collaboration and discussions. Students are capable of facilitating their own insightful, effective, empathic learning environments if we give them the opportunity and guide them through the use of norms and feedback.

I would never argue that students know as much as the teacher or that they can direct the class better than the teacher, but the research supports the notion that if we want to produce graduates who are adept at empathy, inquiry,

and collaboration, then we need to give the students ample space and time to hone those skills during our classes each and every day.

Practical Considerations

As you have heard from some of the testimonials and vignettes, a shift toward more student autonomy and greater empathy both to and from the students can be a big change for many teachers. Many of us did not have the kind of relationships with our own teachers that a method like this encourages you to cultivate; it can be hard to change your habits, policies, and comfort levels with social-emotional skills in the classroom.

So the first practical consideration is to think through the relationships that you have with your students and the relationships they have with one another. What are the barriers to creating greater empathy and autonomy? What can you do in the short term to reduce the barriers? In the long term? Don't think you need to dive off the high dive on the first day if neither you nor your students feel emotionally ready. Feel free to wade in gently, testing the waters a bit with regard to how often, how long, and how experimental Spider Web Discussion is for you. You might try a brief discussion on an engaging text once this month, and, if it goes well, you can build several discussions into an upcoming unit where they will fit nicely with the planned topics. I find that in a high school English class that meets every day, two to three times a week seems to be just the right frequency. For elementary students, a brief daily discussion during reading instruction might be appropriate for a whole unit or you might prefer a weekly approach to discuss key readings, concepts, or problems in the core subjects.

The discussion frequency also depends on the type of unit we are doing. If we are working on writing and performance, there may be less room for Spider Web Discussion on a daily or weekly basis than if we were reading a book together and want to analyze and discuss it. Given your schedule, curriculum, and class time, you should find the pattern that works best for you and your students.

Another practical consideration is deciding when to redirect the discussion if students get way off topic, if they go down a path of misinformation, or if they say things that are just plain wrong. You will also have to decide when to

redirect if they (intentionally or not) say things that could be highly offensive or hurtful to others in the room, specifically related to topics that touch on race, class, religion, gender, or sexual orientation.

When the students are just going down a path of misinformed or flat-out-wrong inquiry, I tend to wait longer than I am comfortable with to see if someone in the group rights the wrong. More often than not, if I wait those first few minutes, other students will correct the students who misunderstood. I make a point to encourage that student behavior during the debriefing process. I think it's a crucial life skill to learn how to question, evaluate, and correct others in group work. When my students don't self-correct as a group after a few minutes and I see that their misunderstanding is leading to counterproductive exploration, I will briefly correct a factual error or suggest a closer look at the passage and then return to quietly observing and taking notes again. I try to be as unobtrusive as possible so that I remain the coach and not the judge or star player in these circumstances. I want them to know that the goal is autonomy; eventually, they should learn to correct their own errors in thinking and reading.

If there are potentially hurtful or offensive comments during SWD, I urge you to proceed with caution depending on your student population and curriculum. I strongly feel that all teachers should engage in equity and social justice training when possible. The one-week summer training I attended at Phillips Exeter's Diversity Institute changed my thinking about equity in the classroom forever, and I will always be grateful to their faculty for opening my eyes to ways in which I may not have understood many marginalized students' experiences. I found that it's possible to be a thoughtful, open-minded, well-intentioned teacher who values diverse perspectives and yet unconsciously create a classroom environment where some students feel uncomfortable. If we are studying or discussing a text that has the potential to trigger discomfort, pain, or past trauma, I try to pay special attention to the norming process before and during these discussions and topics. I will perhaps talk more openly in the classroom about what needs to happen in order for everyone to feel safe enough that they can learn to their highest potential. I also solicit anonymous feedback more regularly with regard to specific feelings about the topic and the challenges it poses. A discussion of a text like Mark Twain's *Huck Finn* can be a powder keg for students who don't have the language tools, intercultural experience, or

social context to handle racial discussions with adequate sensitivity; it requires careful planning, established trust, and empathy to navigate these discussions.

When you are weighing the balance between important learning on social and political topics and maintaining a trusting, productive classroom environment, I recommend a few things. First, don't start the year with the most challenging, sensitive topics, as they are best and most deeply explored later in the year when norms and trust are established. Second, you may find yourself needing to intervene more often to avoid or reduce (unintentional) hurtful comments, such as one student putting another on the spot to speak about how it feels to be the black/immigrant/gay/wealthy/ELL kid. Third, you might find that your students do not have the level of trust or maturity yet to deal with these complex issues productively, so choose more appropriate texts or guide them a bit more during discussions so they can model a more thoughtful, respectful approach.

At the end of the day, Spider Web Discussion usually leads to more ethical, empathetic approaches to any text that you might explore as a class, but *when in doubt, choose kindness*. Sometimes choosing kindness means stepping in a bit more than usual to ensure that all students are protected from potential bigotry with regard to a particularly sensitive topic. It doesn't mean the students shouldn't grapple with difficult issues on their own. It just means you might need to be more referee and team captain than coach at these times in the interest of creating safe, productive learning spaces.

Advanced Applications

One of the best and most eye-opening professional development experiences I have ever had is filming my teaching and watching it. I strongly suggest that you film yourself on a regular teaching day (prior to doing your first Spider Web Discussion) and watch it. Note everything that stands out to you. Consider student behavior, engagement, seating arrangements, and teacher/student talk time. In addition, ask a trusted colleague to come in and observe you on a regular teaching day and track the student/teacher talk time and give you feedback targeted to some specific goals you want to achieve during the class (e.g., increased student questioning).

Once you have reviewed this feedback, design backward from what you want to see happen in your first Spider Web Discussion. If you noticed with

surprise how much you talked, make it a goal to not speak during the upcoming discussion and stick to it. If you find that students lacked engagement at certain moments when you were giving instructions, aim to give only brief instructions for the first Spider Web Discussion to see if they seem more responsive. During the first discussion, track the teacher and student talk time again and note the changes later with that same colleague or even with your students. What differences did you feel between the two lessons? How about your students?

School leaders might also consider how they can use Spider Web Discussion for faculty meetings or professional development. How might using Equity Maps, an app for diagramming conversations, illuminate dynamics with regard to talk time during faculty meetings? How might faculty engaging in the method themselves through a half-hour discussion on a gripping read or short film, using the norms, offer a unique professional growth experience? How might dedicated, experienced practitioners on the faculty invite parents to try the method in an effort to educate them on the skills their children are honing in class? There are advanced applications for the use of the method with the adults in the community as well as the students.

Voices from the Field

—RAYYAN AMINE, PHD, 8TH GRADE MATH TEACHER, FORMER ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT IN CYPRESS-FAIRBANKS INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT, HOUSTON, TX—I first heard of the Spider Web Discussion method from my daughter who uses it in her 10th grade English class. I was intrigued by the concept and by her excitement. I then had the opportunity to attend a session taught by Alexis that got me more interested. I was determined to try it with my 8th grade math class. The search began for an appropriate topic to introduce SWD to my six math periods—and my middle school learning coach found the perfect one. The video was about math mindsets, a topic that I have been wanting to discuss with my 8th graders to highlight the importance of math and looking at the subject as useful and meaningful rather than something difficult some students were just

not meant for. Alexis facilitated the first two class periods while I observed; I continued with the remaining four.

My first takeaway was the rich discussion that the Spider Web Discussion process promoted. I admit that I went into this activity thinking that I was doing something meaningful for the students; however, it ended up being an enriching learning experience for me. For the first time I heard my students talk about math and what they like and dislike about it, what they fear and what they love, and the way they would like it to be taught. They articulated their ideas and drew various connections with other content areas to explain how math can become more approachable for them. Another takeaway was the one I noticed after the introductory sessions: I could sense different dynamics in my classes. My students seemed more comfortable in math class, as if this process had fostered a greater sense of safety and had given them a green light to feel more empathetic toward one another. The rubric that Alexis shared included items such as "taking risks" and "sharing opinions." Although these ideas were not new to my students, seeing them on a rubric almost walked the walk of how important they were.

After teaching the students for one full term, I found that the ones who were the least engaged in math class all of a sudden had become the most engaged in the Spider Web Discussion—a surprising but welcome phenomenon. Students were confident and assertive and had remarkably interesting comments. The discussions were rich and the engagement was exceptionally high, especially among the students who rarely participated in math class. It felt as if the Spider Web Discussion process gave them a perfect opportunity to express themselves. My students in all periods quickly understood the process, they embraced it and purposefully tried to engage others and include everyone in the conversation—something that they had not necessarily done in regular classes.

I plan to continue to look for ways to include the process more frequently in my class. I believe the inclusion of such a process is innovative and aligned with the 21st century skills that we wish for our students to develop, such as the ability to communicate clearly, collaborate, take responsibility for their learning, and set their trajectory to becoming life-long learners.

Big Takeaway

I have seen many benefits over the decade I have been using and sharing Spider Web Discussion; some are obvious and expected, and others have surprised me and other teachers using the method. Most of the research highlighted throughout this book points to a world in which we need highly skilled, empathetic, collaborative problem solvers, and Spider Web Discussion offers students and teachers a chance to develop these skills.

An administrator at an international school who had asked me to train faculty in Spider Web Discussion confessed that she had been using Spider Web Discussion for years and was amazed at the high-level discussion and well-mannered behavior of her 6th grade students during class time. But then she would walk into a faculty meeting and see her colleagues talking over one another, interrupting, using body language or making comments that might be off-putting to some—all behaviors the rubric asks students to avoid—and she would think to herself: *Wow, my 6th graders are better at this than we are!*

The goal of Spider Web Discussion is to help students—and educators—develop lifelong skills that benefit us as individuals and as a society. With sustained practice of the method in your classroom, you can create a culture in which collaboration, empathy, autonomy, and equity are within everyone's reach.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alexis Wiggins is the founder and director of the Cohort of Educators for Essential Learning (CEEL), an organization that unites like-minded educators around the globe. She has worked as a high school and middle school English teacher in six different countries, and as an instructional coach for all subject areas. She has consulted with schools around the world on curriculum design, Spider Web Discussion, and the Harkness method. Wiggins helped the International Baccalaureate (IB) design their Approaches to Teaching and Learning for the diploma program initiative. She lives with her husband and two sons in The Woodlands, Texas, and teaches at the John Cooper School, where Wiggins also hosts Spider Web Discussion workshops and the CEEL Summer Symposium. You can find more information at www.ceelcenter.org, read her blog at www.ceelcenter.org/blog/, or follow Alexis on Twitter at @alexiswiggins.

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