



LEARNING THROUGH CONVERSATION

AT ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE

If you have not already read in class, please read the assigned material before class. If you have, a few thoughts and findings may be helpful.

The Conversation

The style of teaching and learning at St. John's is often described as conversational. The conversation is cooperative and respectful, not competitive. Discussion is meant to pursue questions that are of general interest to the participants. We also speak of what we do as learning together through shared inquiry. We strive to build something together that is not the exclusive property of anyone at the table. Participants both teach and learn from one another.

Classes typically begin with an opening question from the tutor (as all our faculty members are called). Often the opening question will set the direction for the entire conversation, but not always.

Participants enter the conversations freely and as the spirit moves them. The success of our classes depends almost entirely on what participants bring to the table. Contributions can be of many kinds: some will address the question directly; usually means carefully reading the material at least twice. What, precisely, we are to learn from the book is discovered by the participants and the tutor working together. Participants pursue their own questions and their own ways of reading the books. We ask only that comments, observations, and questions return to the text for support and clarification. This commitment to the centrality of the text helps give the conversation shape and keeps it from becoming diffuse or deteriorating into merely personal reflection.

The Tutor

The tutors' work is to assist with the learning of others while continuing to learn themselves. They neither lecture nor do they merely facilitate conversations. They guide the conversation, sometimes steering it in a particular direction, sometimes listening and letting it take its own course, and occasionally, steering it around an unpromising detour.

The Classes

Classes are of two basic types, seminars and tutorials. For seminars, the reading assignments are usually longer and the conversation addresses more sweeping issues. Seminars are either co-lead by two tutors or led by one tutor. Tutorials tend to treat shorter reading assignments with more attention to detail and the careful unfolding of an argument. In tutorials, the conversation tends to be more highly structured by the tutor.

Rules

Of course, there are no firm rules. A few suggestions about accepted classroom manners, however, may be in order: