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Inquiry-Based Civil Discourse Education

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Inquiry-Based Civil Discourse Education

Course

Civil Discourse, Argumentation, Debate, Persuasion, Political Communication

Objectives

This unit activity will help students build an understanding of civil discourse and its function in society. Students will: (1) increase their capacity to critically examine arguments, (2) enhance their own ability to critically self-reflect, and (3) improve their ability to engage in civil discourse. This activity will employ inquiry-based learning strategies to apply students' understanding of civil discourse in a dialogue with the broader campus community by partnering with campus media to develop and publish original opinion-editorial pieces.

Theoretical Rationale

Civil Discourse. According to a 2014 study by the Pew Research Center, Americans are more politically polarized now than they have been for the past 20 years, and political animosity has increased throughout this same period. To be properly prepared for the world they will be entering, students must explore and be armed to engage in meaningful civil discourse. As Gayle (2004) points out, "civil deliberations are a fundamental requirement of a democracy and are especially important given the current societal propensity of perpetuating antagonistic debates" (p. 174). While in college, students can be taught to engage with peers, consider varying viewpoints, and productively contribute to society. To achieve these goals, we suggest an activity that employs inquiry-based learning, requiring students to reflect on and challenge their own beliefs and the beliefs of their fellow students and to then engage with their broader community regarding these same beliefs.

Inquiry-Based Learning. Pedagogical developments such as the “flipped classroom” (Lage, Platt, & Treglia, 2000) as well as a general movement away from lecture-based instruction and toward more active learning styles (Bowen, 2012) has created a growth of student-centered learning. An example of this is the development of innovative pedagogical methods such as generative learning and inquiry-based learning strategies (Ifert Johnson & Mrowka, 2010; Maclean & Asher, 2009). Inquiry-based learning strategies “emphasize the users’ construction of knowledge” rather than rely on the instructor to transmit that knowledge (Maclean & Asher, 2009, p. 143). The foundation of inquiry-based learning is asking questions that do not have a clearly correct answer (Maclean & Asher, 2009). By encouraging students to critically examine subject matter, and by asking questions to which there are no a “right” answers, instructors equip students to build knowledge and understanding.

The Activity

This unit activity has three steps: first, develop among the class an understanding of civil discourse; second, discuss various contentious issues of social importance; and third, craft original opinion-editorial (op-ed) writing to submit for publication for the purpose of engaging in a broader public dialogue.

Step one: Build understanding of civil discourse. To begin this unit, we develop with the class an understanding of civil discourse, including the role discourse plays in civic institutions, the media, and the public. It is important to address reasoned argument, the validity of sources, and to discuss ways in which the students may effectively challenge opposing arguments while maintaining a high tolerance for disagreement. To build this understanding, we bring in an array of course material. We recommend addressing current data regarding public attitudes such as that provided by the Pew Research Center, reading historical texts such as

Locke's "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding," and also exploring more contemporary thoughts on the subject (e.g., Shanahan, 2016). We find it particularly useful to engage students in discussions of their own social media use and how civil discourse is displayed (or not) in that context. The amount of time allotted to broadly discuss and define civil discourse before moving on to the applied elements of this unit activity will depend on the total amount of time available, but we find it useful to take a minimum of one full class period.

It is useful to co-construct with the students a shared understanding of how civil discourse is practiced, on a day-to-day basis, in class discussion. We develop a list of principles all students agree to abide by during class discussion. Depending on the particular group of students, your list may include regulative rules for class discussion, expectations of classroom behavior, and possibly even individual consequences for violations of given principles. We guide the students in how these principles are developed, but the final list is the students'. The implementation of these principles fosters positive discussion but also helps to reinforce for the class the value of what can otherwise seem like opaque theory.

Step two: Practice civil discourse in the classroom. Moving the class from discussion of civil discourse in a theoretical and philosophical context to a practical context focused on class discussion and community engagement can serve to make class content relevant. Once a working understanding of civil discourse has been established, we explore topics that King and Kitchener (2004) refer to as *ill-structured problems*. These topics have two features, "they cannot be defined with a high degree of completeness, and that they cannot be solved with a high degree of certainty" (p. 5). Topics include issues of social importance on which many people have differing opinions. They may be issues of campus, local, or national importance, including topics such as government surveillance and privacy, transgender rights, the role of mass

incarceration in society, the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as the merits of a local campus smoking ban and whether or not college athletes should receive salaries.

To ensure that the topics are relevant to the students' interests, it is essential that the students have a role in topic selection. In our experience, class-selected topics lead to the most engagement. We brainstorm topics together with the class and then select from the students' top ten ideas several topics that work well together. The number of issues addressed in the class and the time allotted to each topic will again depend on the time available, but we find it useful to have a breadth of differing types of topics (at least four), and adequately covering differing perspectives on topics such as those listed above takes no less than a full class period (and preferably more).

It is valuable to supply readings in advance of each topic to give the class an understanding of what the breadth of opinions on a given topic may be and to inform the class regarding particular facts and statistics they may need to fully appreciate each viewpoint. We include opinion pieces, news articles, and government reports. We also require each student to write a brief statement (approximately one page) of their own beliefs regarding each topic, to be turned in prior to discussion. This belief statement has been useful in encouraging students to put consideration into topics before class and to articulate opinions that can be expressed, defended, and possibly changed throughout the course of the discussion. We have found that for many topics, students have not been able to articulate a clear perspective until required to do so, and encouraging this step before the start of discussion fosters better discourse.

Step three: Extend civil discourse to the community. The culminating product of this unit activity aims to help students take responsibility for their ideas and to understand the role they can personally play in a wider, public civil discourse. Publishing an op-ed can help students

realize that their opinions can have an impact. However, moving from class discussion to community engagement should also serve to help students realize the importance of how they form and give voice to their arguments. Thoughtfully and respectfully acknowledging the perspectives of others is central to meaningful dialogue and can actually help strengthen one's arguments. Taking topic conversation from class discussion through to a more public forum can help students understand the value of civility and put it into practice. This activity requires students to both synthesize their beliefs into a concise argument while also reflecting on them to the degree that they are willing to publically stand by those beliefs. The format of the op-ed encourages the development of writing that is simultaneously concise, clear, personal, compelling, and respectful. These are skills that are important for any writer (or citizen) to have.

Proper execution of the op-ed activity involves some preliminary work. Prior to the start of the semester, we reach out to the university student newspaper (or similar media outlet) and negotiate that group's involvement in the course. The medium needs to publish one or more student-written articles produced by the class for each topic of class discussion. In past semesters, negotiating this involvement has not been challenging; in fact, we find student-run publications are excited to work with the class. Editors have viewed the class as an opportunity to both receive consistent content and recruit student writers. On more than one occasion, this class activity has been turned into a multi-week, running column in the opinion section of our student newspaper. If media involvement is not available, the activity could also be accomplished using class-created blog posts written in the same style as op-ed submissions.

Each student is assigned to write an op-ed style written argument addressing at least one of the topics of class discussion (students should be evenly distributed among topics). While publication should be the goal, submission may not mean a piece will be published, and

publication need not be a requirement of the course. The grade assigned for each op-ed should be based entirely on the quality of the written work. Good op-eds are: (1) clearly and correctly written, (2) concise, (3) well-argued and free of logical fallacies, (4) grounded in fact, (5) personal and (6) respectful of differing opinions.

We view initial development of each op-ed piece as a whole class endeavor. As a way to summarize class discussion on each topic, students brainstorm which differing perspectives might be represented in an op-ed piece and which individual arguments might be most valuable to differing perspectives. The students assigned to write an op-ed will write the piece on their own, but they do so armed with the input of all their peers. We also try to allow students latitude in how they address the broader topic of class discussion. As an example, a class session exploring mass incarceration in the United States resulted in one thoughtful student's op-ed addressing the realities of prison and critiquing our culture's fascination with television programming fictionalizing prison life. Another class discussion exploring gender inequality resulted in a student article analyzing what feminism meant to her and how that meaning had changed through her college experience.

It is valuable to expose the class to op-ed writing prior to first undertaking this activity so that they have an understanding of what it is they are expected to produce. We typically also arrange for the partnering student publication's editor to visit the class and communicate the publication's expectations regarding style and content. Depending on the instructor's background and the role this activity will play in the course as a whole, it may additionally be worthwhile to consider inviting guest speakers to discuss effective op-ed style writing; we recommend asking local journalists, peers in departments of journalism, or university staff communication experts.

Debriefing

Student performance in this unit was assessed through evaluation of their participation in class discussion, belief statements, and the quality of their op-ed writing. Individual instructors may wish to also require a written reflection piece at the end of the course. In any case, the instructor should hold in mind that the purpose of this activity should not be to change individual students' beliefs on given topics, but rather to build an understanding and appreciation of civil discourse through its practice. This unit may build a better understanding of students' own beliefs on social issues, and some of those beliefs may even shift. Nevertheless, instructors should be wary and ensure evaluations for individual students are based on the quality of the discourse rather than the perspective taken.

Appraisal

Students have said of this activity that it forced them to “think about uncomfortable topics . . . and provided an outlet to challenge and develop opinions.” More importantly, it does this in a venue that helps build an appreciation for civil discourse and respect for opposing views. This activity also demonstrates to students that they are capable of being part of a broader public dialogue, and that their views and opinions matter. Students have commented that they developed a greater understanding of “what kind of atmosphere is necessary to develop a meaningful conversation . . . while maintaining a level of respect and open-mindedness towards others' opinions.” This has important implications for not only how students engage in the classroom, but also how they engage on social media, how they communicate interpersonally, and how they construe public figures.

The basic structure of this activity offers both scalability and flexibility to create variations that meet the needs of a particular class or context. We discussed with one class, for instance, having students craft op-eds from an opposing viewpoint from what they believe.

Previous research exploring teaching civil discourse in the classroom has suggested that many classroom assignments may be better suited for speaker transformation than for listener transformation (Gayle, 2004), and this alternative assignment may serve to help students better understand differing perspectives. The idea was tabled, however, as students reasonably felt uncomfortable putting their names on a published piece that did not reflect their personal views. You may want wish, however, to include a similar assignment in an unpublished format.

Instructors may also wish to encourage students to submit op-eds beyond the immediate campus community. While an opinion piece in the New York Times may not be a reasonable expectation, we find that, depending on the relevance of the topic and the skill of the particular writer, local and even regional newspaper editors are willing to print the views of undergraduates. Such publications serve as valuable additions to the portfolio of students interested in writing careers.

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