From: Jonathan Eldridge
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Subject: Spring 2023 Faculty Information & Updates, Volume IV
Date: Wednesday, February 1, 2023 12:48:43 PM
Attachments: How to Defuse a Classroom Conflict.pdf

Dear College of Marin Faculty:

This week I have attached an article about strategies to defuse classroom conflict, focused on engaging students of different viewpoints in deeper, more collaborative thinking. I look forward to hearing your thoughts.

Also this week, the new LRC building project is about to ramp up significantly. As we heard at Convocation, sound mitigation efforts for AC classrooms will be made starting this week. This includes sound blankets and other noise dampeners along the south side of the building. The work that will commence soon involves demolition of the last remaining elements of the old LRC including retaining walls and pathways as well as grading, shoring, soil mixing and other various ground improvements. This will be extremely noisy work. You can expect to hear consistent jack hammering over the course of a week. The sound blankets noted above will help, but not eliminate the noise. The contractor will work tirelessly to try to complete this noisy work as quickly as possible, but in order to keep schedule cannot delay the completion of this scope. We understand the inconvenience and appreciate your patience as we get through this very noisy portion.

Do let me know if you have questions or need anything at any point. Here's to a good February!

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How to Defuse a Classroom Conflict: Make It More Complex

Five practices to help students break through all the binary thinking.

By Caroline Mehl and
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NOVEMBER 30, 2022

Debates on college campuses today seem to turn ugly so fast. Students, professors, and administrators use phrases like "walking on eggshells" to convey their fear of saying something that might get them in trouble — or of speaking up at all. But there's a powerful way to reduce fear and get people talking in a constructive way: Increase the complexity.

That may sound counterintuitive. But we'd like to demonstrate this technique in action by applying it to an ongoing debate — one of the most fraught in higher education — that pits free speech against the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). That debate, to a large extent, has two distinct camps:

- Free-speech advocates tend to stress the need for unfettered commentary, regardless of the potential offense.
- Meanwhile, DEI advocates typically prioritize students' mental health and well-being, even at the expense of robust dialogue.

Today's campuses are increasingly diverse and are nested within a polarized society that offers everyone 24-hour access to a megaphone through their social-media accounts. How can complexity help us break through this binary and make progress toward a learning environment that supports inclusion and robust dialogue?

The trap of binary thinking. The stark dichotomy through which inclusion and free speech are often discussed is emblematic of many debates today. Complex issues, such as immigration or climate change, have collapsed into superficial battles between good and evil, with no room for nuance or common ground. Group identities and social-media pressures guide students to the "correct" side of each issue. Then comes the zero-sum thinking: Anyone who disagrees is seen as an enemy, rather than a fellow student with whom, and from whom, you might learn.

Psychologists refer to this tendency to divide a complicated issue into two overly simplistic categories as binary bias. Debates framed as binaries are usually irreconcilable. The way to break free from those binaries: Add complexity. The key to "complexifying" an issue is identifying and highlighting details that do not fit neatly into the standard narrative. For example, while many teachers and journalists think that presenting "both sides" of an issue is an effective way to introduce complexity, that only serves to reinforce the binary.

Instead, add complexity by surfacing the debates within each side. The idea is to tease out the strengths of both positions and identify novel solutions. As John Stuart Mill noted in 1840:

" … in almost every one of the leading controversies, past or present, in social philosophy, both sides were in the right in what they affirmed, though wrong in what they denied; and … if either could have been made to take the other's views in addition to its own, little more would have been needed to make its doctrine correct."

We believe each side of the inclusion-versus-speech debate has important contributions to make to the discussion of how to build a healthy campus climate. That insight is crucial — not just for this particular debate, but for all debates taking place in academe.

Complexity on each side. Proponents of free speech point to the foundational role that the free exchange of ideas plays in the mission of the university. The clash of ideas fosters critical thinking, inquiry, and dialogue. Yes, the argument goes, such clashes may be uncomfortable but they are essential for human development and democratic citizenship. After all, if you can't learn how to speak your mind constructively and disagree with others respectfully in the safe environment of college, where can you?

How would a skillful discussion leader "complexify" that argument?

By guiding the free-speech advocates to reflect on the kinds of speech and classroom norms that would best achieve their goals. Is "free" or "unfettered" speech *really* the ideal in this context? Or would a more skillful kind of rhetorical practice be more effective — one that is bold and fearless but also cognizant of social and psychological realities? One that is aimed not just at persuading others but also at improving your own thinking?

Likewise, those who prioritize inclusion are right to highlight important caveats to guide any dialogue about sensitive topics. Psychologists believe that our deeply held values are often wrapped up with our personal identities. When those beliefs are challenged, many people feel threatened and their fight-or-flight response is activated. This neural and hormonal response makes it harder to engage in careful reasoning and it shifts people from openness to a defensive posture, reducing the odds of learning and raising the odds of a conflict that could escalate beyond the classroom.

Race, gender, politics, abortion, and immigration are not abstract academic concepts for many students but emotionally charged issues that affect their lives at the most personal level. Dialogue about such contentious issues can quickly break down if not properly scaffolded. Fostering a sense of belonging in the classroom — where students feel accepted and supported by their instructor and peers — leads to a host of positive academic outcomes and can help students feel comfortable engaging in dialogue about such challenging topics.

But an adept instructor might add complexity by guiding the inclusion advocates to reflect on the ideal level of challenge they would like to encounter in their own classes. The instructor might show a clip

from an interview with Van Jones, when he explained the concept of "antifragility" during a talk with students at the University of Chicago: "I don't want you to be safe ideologically. I don't want you to be safe emotionally. I want you to be strong. That's different. … I'm not going to take all the weights out of the gym; that's the whole point of the gym. This is the gym."

Constructive dialogue is much more rewarding than walking on eggshells. Constructive dialogue is a form of conversation in which people who have different values, beliefs, and perspectives build new ways of understanding complex issues and interacting with others, even as they retain commitments to their own principles and perspectives.

In 2017, we founded a nonprofit called the Constructive Dialogue Institute (formerly known as OpenMind), to spread these practices and equip the next generation of Americans with the mind-set and skills to engage in dialogue across differences. We distill the latest social-science research into educational resources to help faculty members and administrators build learning environments that enable students to feel comfortable engaging with challenging topics — such as inclusion and free speech — so that real learning can occur.

Through our work, we have identified five specific practices that can improve both inclusion and robust discussion in your classroom and on your campus. The following strategies can help prevent the type of blow-ups that faculty members and administrators are all eager to avoid.

No. 1: Set norms — with your students — to guide class discussions. Do this at the start of the semester. The norms should foster a sense of student belonging and inclusion, while also making clear that challenging conversations will be taking place in your classroom. Rather than simply including platitudes ("Be respectful of others' viewpoints."), establish norms that will keep discussions on track even when difficult moments arise. For example, an important norm for discussions in the world beyond the campus is that we judge people's statements by their intent, not by how they made us feel. Make clear that saying "I'm offended" is an insufficient response to a germane statement by another student; the responder must say *why* the remark is wrong or irrelevant to the discussion. (Of course, slurs and insults are never appropriate.)

Likewise, you can introduce the practice of "calling in" instead of "calling out." Calling in is a technique developed by Loretta J. Ross, an associate professor at Smith College, to deal with missteps in conversations without ostracizing the speaker. While calling out is done publicly and often shames the speaker, calling in happens in private conversation, with compassion and patience.

No. 2: Establish trust and rapport before diving into divisive topics. Wade into a challenging topic by first introducing exercises and discussions that establish social bonds between students. For example, during the first few weeks or class, you can divide students into small groups and ask them to respond to questions like "What's one thing about your upbringing that's helped shape the person you are today?" or "What's something about you that would surprise others?" Such bonds establish a foundation of trust that supports dialogue about difficult subjects, helps students give their peers the benefit of the doubt, and enables students to recall areas of commonality or moments of sympathy if contentious issues begin to introduce rifts.

No. 3: When discussing difficult topics, try different techniques to foster complexity. Here are two options:

- Pay attention to your framing. How you introduce a contentious topic plays a significant role in the level of complexity that will ensue. Rather than present two sides of the issue, introduce a broad range of perspectives, goals, and quotations from each side. Highlight the messy contradictions and the interrelated dilemmas associated with the issue.
- Explore the motivations behind people's positions. For example, if students are discussing abortion, push beyond the basic stances and ask them to explain why they hold their position. Students may argue that life begins at the moment of conception or that women have the right to control their own bodies. Lean into those ideas and push them further. You might ask: "If life doesn't begin at the moment of conception, when does it begin? At the gestational age at which a fetus is viable outside the womb? But then what happens as technology changes?" To the opposing side, you could ask, "Are there any exceptions where you think abortion would be acceptable, such as if the mother's life is at risk? If not, are there ever any situations where it's acceptable to end a life to save another? What about self defense?"

Be explicit with students about the techniques you are using to complexify the conversation, and help them develop a habit of searching for and appreciating the complexity on all sides.

No. 4: Model the behaviors you'd like to see in your students. As an instructor, you will play the role of facilitator. It is crucial that you lead by example:

- To demonstrate intellectual humility: Highlight the value of students' being willing to question their own assumptions and admit when they are wrong by doing this yourself. Share stories about when you have changed your mind or been unsure about something (e.g., "This is a question I've struggled with quite a bit myself. …")
- To show that you welcome divergent views: Be mindful of your own biases and how you react to views with which you disagree. Actively encourage different perspectives (e.g., "Does anyone have a perspective we haven't covered yet?") and respond to opposing ideas with gratitude and gusto, even if the idea offends some students, as long as it is offered in good faith and without hostility. Rather than immediately shutting down the discussion or shaming the student, respond with curiosity by asking questions to better understand the student's position.

No. 5: Ground discussions in personal stories. Stories can enhance learning in general but are particularly useful when teaching challenging subjects. Teaching through personal stories can ground an abstract policy issue in daily reality, making it more relevant to students. Furthermore, encouraging students to share life experiences that have informed their own views can be a powerful tool in opening students up to considering opposing viewpoints. (Note: Make sure your students understand that a personal story, while it can open hearts and minds, cannot be used to refute arguments or settle intellectual debates.)

All of these ideas are outlined in more detail in the online program we've developed called Perspectives. Free for faculty members to use with their students, the five-year-old program weaves together

psychological concepts with interactive scenarios and aims to teach practical skills for navigating difficult conversations. Students explore the inner workings of the mind and gain insights to better understand themselves and others. They also develop a robust tool kit of evidence-based practices to challenge cognitive biases, engage in nuanced thinking, and communicate more effectively about sensitive and divisive topics. More than 40,000 college students have used the program across more than 400 colleges and universities. And two randomized, controlled trials have shown that Perspectives improves students' attitudes toward those who disagree with them and helps them think with more nuance and recognize the limits of their knowledge.

In this politically polarized era, it's easy to feel despair about the state of dialogue in the United States and to respond by steering clear of contentious topics. But educators can't avoid what's happening; we have an obligation and an opportunity to help students engage, constructively. By establishing the right conditions in our classrooms and on our campuses, we can prepare them for democratic citizenship, and for the leadership roles they will need to play in democratic renewal.

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