

May 2023

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Alan English

Bethany College - Lindsborg, englishae@bethanylb.edu

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Recommended Citation

English, Alan (2023) "Promoting Civil Discourse through Coffee and Common Ground," *The Advocate*: Vol. 28: No. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2637-4552.1177>

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Promoting Civil Discourse through Coffee and Common Ground

Abstract

Research suggests that America today is more politically polarized and less capable of conducting civil public discourse than at least the last several decades. These greater cultural factors unsurprisingly seem to have trickled into American schools, as teachers report increased divisiveness and conflict, particularly directed toward historically-marginalized groups, in class. While it seems sensible that public schools should play a role in teaching American children how to civilly speak with people different than themselves, teachers are often unprepared to do so. This paper describes a project-based learning activity conducted during the Fall 2022 semester which was designed to empower pre-service teachers with practical tools to promote civil discourse in their future classrooms.

Keywords

Project-based learning, Civil Discourse, Teacher education

Promoting Civil Discourse through Coffee and Common Ground

Alan English
Bethany College

Alan English is an associate professor and Chair of the Department of Education at Bethany College in Lindsborg, Kansas. He can be reached at Englishae@bethanylb.edu.

There is evidence to suggest that America is more politically polarized today than it has been for at least the past several decades (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018, Massaro & Stryker, 2012). While the long-term consequences of political polarization are as of yet unclear, it has also been suggested that civil public discourse has becoming increasingly rare in America (Connor, 2018; Massaro & Stryker, 2012). Teachers across the country have seen this play out in their classrooms, reporting an increase in divisiveness and conflict, particularly directed toward historically-marginalized groups (Reynolds, Silvernell, & Mercer, 2020). In turn, there have been a number of recent calls for an increase in public discourse to preserve civility and negate the worst consequences of political polarization (Massaro & Stryker, 2012; Neumann 2018; Spencer, 2011). It seems only natural that some of this discourse (or at least the training to learn how to do so) would occur in America's public schools. Teachers, however, often lack training in public discourse and handling controversial topics in their classrooms (Reynolds, 2020). To make the problem worse, there is evidence to suggest that college students today (including preservice teachers) are less equipped to civilly navigate complex settings with multiple rational viewpoints than past generations (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). In sum, there is reason to think that preservice teachers today are stepping out into increasingly diverse and divisive classrooms and yet may be less-equipped to civilly navigate them any other time in modern history. It seems, therefore, that there is a need to train pre-service teachers in how to civilly navigate public discourse of potentially controversial topics both for their own sake and in order to train their future students how to do so. This was my primary objective in ED240 – Diversity and Pluralism in Education, a required course for all Bethany College education majors.

Bethany College is a small liberal arts college located in Lindsborg, Kansas. Its total student population has hovered around 700 students over the last several years. As there are no graduate programs, all students are undergraduate, and the vast majority are residential. The Education Department is one of the largest departments on campus, with a population that wavers between 85-100. Within the Education Department, elementary education (K-6) is the largest major. Secondary majors in biology, chemistry, English, social studies, business, and math education are offered as well as P-12 degrees in music education, health/physical education, and art education. Classes in the Education Department average approximately 12 students, and ED240 is typically taken during the freshman or sophomore year. From that context, I describe below a project-based learning activity conducted at Bethany College during the Fall 2022 semester which was designed to empower pre-service teachers in my ED240 course with practical tools to promote civil discourse.

Active Listening

With this admittedly dreary view of the current political landscape and society at large in mind, I first sought to give my students a practical strategy to allow them to more effectively communicate with people with differing viewpoints. For this, I found the work of American psychologist Carl Rogers to be helpful. Rogers (1957) termed a strategy called active listening, a primary rule of which is that when two people are having a conversation, the listener is required to restate the speaker's position in their own

words and to the agreement of the speaker before the listener is able to interject or provide his/her opinion. Anecdotally, I have found this strategy to be immensely helpful in generating meaningful class discussions. It helps the speaker feel valued, as everyone is motivated to listen carefully to their argument. Conversations are often of higher rigor because students are required to constantly synthesize other students' positions. Active listening seems to promote more genuine conversation (as opposed to students taking turns stating their opinion, which may or may not be directly related to the previous speaker's statement) because listening to the previous speaker is a precondition to sharing one's opinion or position. While utilizing active listening, students tend to avoid misunderstandings that slow down the potential productivity of a conversation. At times, when a speaker hears their position restated to them, it forces them to reconsider his/her position, which is surely helpful to a nuanced perspective on any complex topic. Finally, active listening encourages conversations to be fact-based. It's much more problematic to make one's position based on a personal attack when you know that a room full of people are carefully listening to your position, that it will be restated by one of your peers, and that you will be expected to either reaffirm or reject that attack shortly. In short, adding active listening to my curriculum has been one of the most productive pedagogical decisions I have made.

Because it is a foundation to much of the rest of my coursework, I choose to teach active listening the first day of class in ED240. After spending a few minutes describing the technique, I pose a series of questions to the class. Intentionally, I begin with relatively benign topics and eventually move to more potentially divisive ones. For example, I may start with "is a hotdog a sandwich?" or "is water wet?". After each question, I ask students to move to one side of the room if their answer is "yes" and the opposite side if their answer is "no". I ask one spokesperson to give a brief summary of their position. Then, I ask a spokesperson from the other group to summarize the initial speaker's position to his/her agreement before describing why he/she disagrees. An emphasis is placed on the fact that it's acceptable to disagree, but disagreement is going to come from a rational, fact-based position of respect and understanding rather than personal attacks or blind assumptions of the opposition's position.

Once the class has grown comfortable with benign, group-based examples of active listening (usually after three or four topics), I move to more potentially divisive topics. Eventually, I also transition to students conducting active listening in pairs independent of my instruction and oversight. Students often report that the most difficult part of the active listening technique is training oneself to listen to other's arguments rather than burst out with a counterargument based on the assumed position that their partner is taking. While restating the speaker's position initially feels awkward, students find that it soon can be worked into a conversation relatively seamlessly and increases the productivity of the conversation. Students often feel comfortable with the technique in one class period. It is very typical that I have students conducting civil discourse with active listening techniques on gun control, abortion, the existence of God, transgender athletes, or a variety of other controversial political topics on the first day of class. Doing so seems to create an openness to discussing one's mind freely and without judgement for the rest of the semester.

Drawing a Bigger Circle

With the habit of active listening in place, I then draw my students to the words of Pauli Murray (1945), who said:

I intend to destroy segregation by positive and embracing methods. When my brothers try to draw a circle to exclude me, I shall draw a larger circle to include them. Where they speak out for the privileges of a puny group, I shall shout for the rights of all mankind. I shall neither supplicate, threaten, nor cajole my country or her people. With humility but with pride I shall offer one small life, whether in foxhole or in wheat field, for whatever it is worth, to fulfill the prophecy that all men are created equal. (p. 24)

Students are then organized into pairs and presented with a standard Venn diagram. I ask them to take a few minutes trying to find a controversial political topic which they have decidedly different viewpoints. Examples such as abortion, transgender athletes, raising the minimum wage, gun control, and the legalization of marijuana are provided as potential topics. Once a suitable topic is identified, utilizing active listening techniques, students are given a few minutes each to clarify their viewpoint. Their partner is allowed to ask clarifying questions but is not allowed to contradict or argue in any way. Once the first partner sufficiently makes his/her view made, the second is asked to summarize it in writing on one side of the Venn diagram to the agreement of the first partner (thus replicating the active listening technique in written form). If changes or clarification are necessary to the summary, time is given to do so. Once the first partner is satisfied that his/her viewpoint is sufficiently summarized, the exercise is repeated for the second partner with his/her views summarized on the opposite side of the diagram.

The real usefulness of the diagram is then realized. Many students expect that they are then going to be asked to come up with a statement that belongs in the center of the diagram. This section is a compromise. While compromises are essential to a functioning democracy, they have shortcomings. First, they are often very specific agreements to that topic and often represent only a small subset of the greater issue or problem. For example, if two people with opposing views needed to compromise on abortion, they may focus on cases of rape or incest, which represent a very small subset of the greater issue of abortion. Because of the narrow, specific nature of most compromises, they're not very transferable to other issues. A compromise reached on abortion is unlikely to be directly useful on a future debate on gun control. A second problem with compromises is that no one is ever satisfied. There is always a sense of sacrifice or shortcomings with the solution. While this might be necessary and for the common good, it also fosters an environment of hostility and tension in trying to get the best possible compromise on each specific issue. In that way, individuals or groups with differing viewpoints increasingly view each other as opponents, resembling the polarized political landscape that seems to be the norm in America today.

Rather than reach a compromise, I ask my students to draw a new, larger circle around the outside of the Venn diagram. Inside this circle, I ask them to try to come up with a larger, more general statement that completely encompasses both of their views. These statements tend to be value statements and are often reached when each person considers *why* they identify with a specific side of an issue. For example, when conducting this exercise on abortion, two students might eventually reach the statement of "all life has value". When doing it on gun control, two students might decide on the statement "I want to protect my loved ones.". While the two partners might disagree with the implications of those statements, they have identified a value that they hold in common.

In reaching these statements, nothing is solved. The ensuing conversation or debate that might occur over that issue hasn't been avoided. It is my experience, however, that when a debate starts with understanding the viewpoint of the other person, sharing the common respect that comes from actively listening to them, and identifying with a common value, that debate is markedly more civil and ultimately more productive.

Project-based Learning

It is my view that teaching civil discourse and a more general appreciation for diversity are essential skills in 21st century classrooms. As teacher educators prepare teachers to lead 21st century classrooms, however, it is perhaps first appropriate to consider at a philosophical level what methodology might be appropriate to instruct in (and therefore model). The traditional instructional method, where students passively and individually receive factual information in siloed subject areas seems archaic, given that most factoids can be obtained from a simple internet search and collaboration is more readily available than ever before through internet communication technologies. Instead, it has been argued that educators should be challenged to create student-centered approaches where classes collaboratively construct the

learning environment while actively solving relevant problems and conduct interdisciplinary research (Imaz, 2021).

Project-based learning (PBL) is an ideal methodology for such a purpose. In a PBL unit, students are presented a real-world problem or driving question that the PBL unit centers around. Such a problem or question should be selected specifically to spark students' interests because of its relevance to them. Learning in a PBL unit occurs as students work collaboratively (in groups or a whole class) to reach a solution. PBL units are often long-term but vary widely in scope (Birdman et al., 2022; Imaz, 2021; Ferrero et al., 2021; Juuti et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2021). Students not only learn content material but a host of other skills and attributes including classroom engagement (English, 2018), leadership (Birdman et al., 2022), self-regulation (Ferrero et al., 2021), the ability to ask thoughtful questions (Imaz, 2021). Such skills are key to 21st century classrooms specifically because they can't be obtained via an internet search and are essential in collaborative working environments. I decided to therefore construct a PBL unit where students would be asked to address the problems of political polarization and the decline of civil public discourse while utilizing our classroom techniques of active listening and "drawing a bigger circle".

Coffee and Common Ground

In the first half of our semester, I taught students the active listening and "drawing a bigger circle" techniques in addition to a variety of other coursework. With those tools in place, I then challenged my students to apply them in the community. Their assignment was a project-based learning unit where students were to plan, design, and conduct a community event titled Coffee and Common Ground. Students, staff, faculty, and community members were to be invited to learn these skills and engage in civil discourse on controversial political topics. The project was a graded application of skills taught previously in the course, and thereby mandatory. The class had a total of ten students. Students were divided into three committees, resulting in committees of three or four students. First, the funding committee was assigned to draft a budget out of grant funding from the Smoky Valley Community Foundation that was allocated to support the event. The funding committee was also tasked to work with the other committees to ensure that the budget was adhered to. Secondly, the advertising and venue committee was responsible for securing a suitable location for the event and getting as many people as possible interested in attending Coffee and Common Ground. Lastly, the event organization/facilitation committee was responsible for organizing the logistics of how the event would run, leading participants through the activity, and training any other students that would be doing so.

From that point, the event was almost entirely student led. While I provided two full class periods within the semester for work on the project, its progress was a topic of conversation during most class periods the second half of the semester. That being said, much of the work went on outside of the classroom. More often than not, class time was simply to catch me up on what they were working on. A budget was drafted based on available grant funding. Coffee and Common Ground was awarded a \$900 grant for the Fall 2022 and Spring 2023 semesters, requiring the Fall 2022 section to adhere to a \$450 budget. At times, budgetary decisions were relatively controversial. For example, there was considerable debate over the merit of paying for an off-campus location versus a free on campus one. It was eventually decided to reserve a room on campus and use available funds to buy gift cards to raffle off to participants and encourage attendance. Our on-campus catering service was contacted to work the event, and my students processed an order (again with disagreement over what items would be most likely to entice a college student to attend) based on anticipated participation. To promote the event, advertising was conducted through physical posters around campus and the community as well as digital advertisements on social media. With the support of our Provost, Coffee and Common Ground was approved to be our campus chapel event for the day, allowing it to take place during a time when no students nor faculty had class, making it much more accessible.

My students decided to organize Coffee and Common Ground as a come-and-go event. Participants registered ahead of time by completing a short survey on their political ideology. Walk-ins were simply asked to complete the same survey on a provided laptop computer. The survey results allowed my students to roughly categorize participants' political ideology. Participants were then assigned a corresponding color-coded name tag. Green nametags identified participants that generally held liberal views on political issues. Yellow nametags identified participants that generally held conservative views on political issues. These colors were chosen (as opposed to red and blue) to be less obviously identifiable to participants. Admittedly this was an imprecise system of division, but it was deemed sufficient while convenient.

When two participants of different colored nametags were available, one of my students escorted them into our reserved conference room. After introductions, my students spent a few minutes teaching the active listening techniques we learned in class. Participants were then given an opportunity to use those active listening techniques to find a political topic which they had considerably different views on. Suggested topics (which students chose) included abortion, raising of the minimum wage, forgiveness of student debt, gun control, transgender athletes in sports, and federally mandated vehicle fuel economy standards. With a topic selected, participants were then led through the "drawing a bigger circle" activity as described above. In total, groups averaged approximately 30 minutes, although they varied widely. Several groups stayed, enjoyed refreshments, and reflected on the activity long after they were finished. A few participants even requested to go through the activity a second time with a new partner. In total, approximately 65 students, staff, faculty, and community members attended. Given the small size of our campus and event budget, this was deemed relatively successful.

As participants left the event, many participants (particularly community members) were complimentary of the mission of Coffee and Common Ground and my students' job in organizing and facilitating the event. It was an excellent opportunity for our department to be visible to our community. My students also seemed to benefit from the event. While no data was explicitly collected on its results, given available research on project-based learning's potential in improving student performance (English, 2018) it seems possible that the active listening and "drawing a bigger circle" strategies left a greater impression upon them after instructing dozens of participants on it.

Conclusion

Civil public discourse is frustratingly rare in America today (Connor, 2018; Massaro & Stryker, 2012). Available data suggest that we just aren't very good at having rational, civil conversations on potentially contentious but important issues with people that view them differently than us. It seems sensible to assume that at least part of the solution to this problem is America's public-school systems. American children need to be taught how to talk to each other, express their views, appreciate that people view the world differently than them, and see common humanity in people despite their differences. Unfortunately, teachers are often unequipped to teach such skills, and college students don't appear to be much more so (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018; Reynolds, 2020). The purpose of this paper was to briefly describe the need for civil public discourse instruction in schools in general and my attempt to do so more specifically. Coffee and Common ground, "drawing a bigger circle, and active listen were the specific strategies chosen to promote civil discourse in my context, but all three strategies have potential to be utilized in other contexts. For example, any teacher who teaches social emotional learning might do well to adopt these strategies to their needs. Furthermore, any teacher or administrator who regularly engages in conflict resolution or de-escalation might find these strategies useful as well. While some teachers may see civil discourse instruction as lost instructional time, I would contend that a classroom of students that are capable of civilly engaging in their content area despite a variety of viewpoints or perspectives will be more efficient to a degree that will more than make up for "lost" instructional time.

Anecdotally, I found Coffee and Common Ground to be a success. Students utilized the active listening and “drawing a bigger circle” techniques, demonstrated high levels of engagement as they exercised autonomy in organizing their event, and demonstrated content mastery as they taught the selected strategies to students, staff, faculty, and community members. Despite that apparent success, more research clearly needs to be done on this and other attempts to increase the capacity of pre-service teachers to lead civil public discourse in their future classrooms.

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