How to Have Difficult Conversations, Or, How to be Civil While Being Civically Engaged

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*Graphic Language Warning: The speaker reserves the right to use ‘colorful’ and or graphic language at times, often uncontrollably, and perhaps just to make you uncomfortable.
Civic Engagement \(\text{ˈsi-vik in-ˈgāj-mənt}\)
n. individual and collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern

- Civic
- Electoral
- Political
- Attentiveness
- Social
However... In the classroom, office, or across campus, we can be caught by surprise, which leaves us feeling a bit... What?
And this can make us want to...
So how do we engage in a meaningful way?

• It begins with you
  • Understand your own inherent biases and assumptions
  • Know your opinion and worldview
  • Be prepared mentally
  • BE COMFORTABLE WITH ALL THIS
Create a Safe Environment

• It is your classroom
  • Be the authority figure – you are the expert
  • Do not back away from questions or comments
    • Provide context, meaning, perspective
  • Help students know their views are respected
    • Correct misinformation as needed
  • Be prepared to improvise

• Remember: YOU are in control
  • You can control the dialog and reactions
Promote Active Listening

- To engage in a difficult dialog, you must hear what others are saying
- By listening first, then you can respond to provide perspective
- Encourage students to share their perspective
  - Validate positions/perspectives/opinions
  - Offer context
  - Counter with alternatives
- Control your own emotional response
  - We can disagree without being disagreeable
Avoid Divisive Language

• Be empathetic and compassionate
  • Place yourself in the other persons shoes
  • Try to understand from their perspective

• Empathy/Compassion Provides Perspective
  • Respond by using positive or shared language
  • Use broad and inclusive terms
  • Avoid attacking or berating

• Find those ‘teachable’ moments
Find Balance

• Shielding
  • Trigger warnings, safe spaces, political correctness, micro-aggressions
  • How does this impact thought and flow of information?
  • Are we doing a disservice to students?

• Free Speech
  • How do we balance free speech with thoughtful dialog/discussion within the classroom setting?
Tackling Belief Systems

• Dichotomy – Lack of Knowledge vs. Preferences
  • Short-cuts and cues leave space for misinformation to fester
  • Beliefs are sticky and difficult to change

• Inform and Guide
  • Do not try to change beliefs
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<tr>
<th>DEBATE</th>
<th>DISCUSSION</th>
<th>DIALOGUE</th>
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<td>&quot;Right is right&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;The truth is the middle&quot;</td>
<td>&quot;Correctness for community&quot;</td>
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<td>Debate is oppositional: two sides oppose each other and attempt to prove each other wrong. Debate assumes there is a right answer and that someone has it. In debate, personal experience is secondary to a formal opinion.</td>
<td>Discussion tends to contribute to the formation of abstract notion of community. In discussion, personal experience and actual context are often seen as separate.</td>
<td>Dialogue is collaborative; two or more sides work together toward common understanding. In dialogue, personal experience is a key avenue for self-awareness and political understanding.</td>
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<td>Debate creates closed-minded attitudes: a determination to be right. Individuals are considered to be autonomous, and judged on individual intellectual might.</td>
<td>Discussions often assume a &quot;false playing field&quot; with little or no attention to identify, status, and power.</td>
<td>In dialogue (e.g., IIG) exploring stereotypes and differences are key elements in both the process and the content of the exchange.</td>
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<td>In debate, one admits one's best thinking and defends it against challenge to show that it is right. Debate calls for defending oneself and arguing one's side. Debate defends assumptions as truth. Debate defends one's own positions as the basal solution and excludes other scenarios. Debate offers a participant's own point of view.</td>
<td>In discussion, individual contributions often center around &quot;rightness&quot; and are valued for it. In discussion, the impact may often be identified and processed individually and outside of the group setting.</td>
<td>In dialogue, one admits one's best thinking, knowing that other people's thinking will help improve it, rather than destroy it. Dialogue calls for temporarily suspending judgments. Dialogue reveals assumptions and biases for remolding. Dialogue ensures apprehension of one's own position.</td>
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<td>In debate, one listens to the other side in order to find flaws and to correct them or arguments. Debate causes critique of the other position. In debate, one searches for giving differences. In debate, one searches for flaws and weaknesses in the other position.</td>
<td>In discussion, one listens only to try to insert one's own perspective. Discussion is often a surface monologue. Discussion needs to encourage individual sharing, sometimes at the expense of listening to and making about other's perspectives.</td>
<td>In dialogue, one listens to the other side(s) in order to understand, find meaning, and find points of connection. Dialogue involves a real concern for the other person and not to dominate but yet speak what is true for oneself. In dialogue, one searches for strengths in the other position(s). Dialogue encourages openness to learning from question and feedback.</td>
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<td>Debate involves a countering of the other position without focusing on feelings or relationships and often belittles or deprecates the other person.</td>
<td>In discussion, emotional responses may be present but are seldom named and may be unresolved. Discussion is concerned content and not related to content.</td>
<td>In dialogue, emotions help deepen understanding of personal, group, and intergroup relationship issues. Dialogue works to uncover confusion, contradictions, and paradoxes with an aim to deepen understanding.</td>
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<td>Debate implies a conclusion. Debate wins the goal. Debate makes a conclusion.</td>
<td>In discussion, the more perspectives voiced, the better. Discussion can be open and continuous.</td>
<td>Dialogue remains open-ended. In dialogue, finding common ground is the goal.</td>
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*Revised and edited by Rebekah Nealla, Patrick Gau, Jordan Bushara and Kelly Savoldi (2015), based on "Understanding Debate and Discussion" by Fred Mosher, Inc., 2005. This discussion and discussion format is based on the work of The Dialogue Group at the Boston Chapter of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Other revisions included Leslie Sull, Dick Zuger, Daggie Ewbank, and June Thompson.*