

Five Steps To Healing Polarization in the Classroom

Insights and Examples

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Introduction

A relational response to polarization

Recent studies indicate a dramatic increase in the partisan divide on political values.¹ It is not a stretch to conclude that faculty and students alike are bringing these divisions into the college and graduate school classroom.² Some pedagogical responses to these tensions focus on creating “safe space” for students whose perspectives have been marginalized or silenced due to the subtle or not-so-subtle dynamics of privilege and power. Other educators have critiqued these efforts. We believe that teachers at all levels of education have much to learn by reflecting on these debates, both to gain awareness of their own areas of implicit or explicit bias, and to develop increasingly fine-tuned sensitivities to the challenges that their students from varying backgrounds may face.

However, these questions are not the focus of this book. Instead, we begin with a question: why are millennials—students born in the early 1980s to about 2000—generally reluctant or fearful to discuss their deep differences in a classroom setting? We posit that

the key to healing polarization in today's classroom lies in recognizing what lies at the root of this fear: this generation's heightened sensitivity to relationships with their peers. When our pedagogical practices address the frailties and build on the strengths of this heightened sensitivity, this can help to moderate these tensions, and in turn help to heal polarization in a classroom.

The characteristics of the millennial generation have been the subject of much reflection and commentary. Research indicates their focus on care and concern for others. For example, when asked to identify "one of the most important things in their lives," 52% responded being a good parent; 30%, having a successful marriage; 21%, helping others in need; and only 15%, having a high paying career.³ On the flip side, frailties emerge when this sensitivity takes the form of excessive attention to social appearances. Millennials may also fear that others' preconceptions or judgments may isolate them from their peers. The tension between concern and insecurity can make it difficult to foster robust conversation across profound difference in a variety of social, cultural and educational environments.

How might teachers in a variety of settings help students to acknowledge the source of such tension and use the energy of that realization to amplify the strengths that their height-

ened sensitivity to relationships may offer? This book details methods that have emerged from team-teaching a graduate level seminar, *Religion, Morality & Contested Claims for Justice*.⁴ After a brief explanation of our foundations, we outline five steps to help students move toward a more thoughtful reflection process that helps them to develop communication skills so as to foster attentive respect and openness to other students' ideas and identities.

Our method is based on a few basic principles. First, our class engages issues that touch upon the deepest levels of personal and communal identity. The readings and our discussions probe deeply-held assumptions, ethical aspirations, and moral norms underlying contested policy and legal issues. We invite this inquiry with the conviction that a pedagogical space should allow students to explore the values and norms often overlooked in the policy-making discussions. This helps uncover the many meanings and tensions operating within policy debates and also brings to the surface unperceived disagreements and differences over underlying premises and principles.

Second, we believe that our primary role as teachers is to help students explore their own and others' views and by reflection to tease out the underlying connections and tensions between their views and those of others

in the wider horizon of the conversations. As they approach these issues from many angles, our students manifest divergent, even irreconcilable, positions. Some have thought long and hard about what supports their policy positions; some very little. They comprise a spectrum of opinions—progressives, conservatives, deeply pious, agnostic, radicals, skeptical, and indifferent. Each student has wrestled with their upbringing and the historical, cultural, and moral influences that have shaped their views; few have entirely consistent positions across policy issues and moral norms.

Third, our goal is not to change our students' minds about their substantive positions. Rather, we seek to complicate and develop their own reflection about the issues and give respectful, patient reflection upon others' positions and views. We model for students, and encourage them to adopt what we call "a hermeneutics of goodwill." This involves seeking a fair and comprehensive interpretation and analysis of an author's or classmate's position before rushing to judge critically or dismiss the position. This hermeneutic also involves resisting the urge to impose a framework on a position because of readily-available proxies (e.g. "this is a liberal/conservative argument that I need not take seriously since I disagree with the outcome/conclusion"). Part

of developing a critical and reflective appreciation for arguments over policy in light of the underlying norms and values expressed in those policies is allowing the complexity of the positions to come into the foreground.

Finally, our method is intended to address policy positions not as isolated kernels of thought floating in the ideological ether but as positions that people have adopted and applied in real lives. A hermeneutic of goodwill requires a more comprehensive engagement with the full scope of the arguments around a policy position, its underlying premises, *and* the narrative histories and identities of those who advance the arguments. The chains of reasoning people use to draw a conclusion about a policy issue are unique to them, involving reflection (of varying degrees of sophistication), intuition, emotion, and varying degrees of acceptance or rejection of their own history, culture, and experiences. We advocate neither deference nor acquiescence. Approaching a person with whom you disagree, while seeking to recognize and understand the full complexity of how they have arrived at their position, requires solicitude and patience, even while the goal may be to discern critically where you disagree and fully articulate a judgment of the deficiencies of others' positions.

We engage this method where disagreements over reasonably held positions may

arise. We acknowledge that situations might arise where a speaker advocates for certain kinds of violence or for excluding certain persons from social discourse on the basis of their gender, race, creed, or ethnicity, among other factors. For instance, we admit reasonable disagreement and open conversation about conscientious accommodations in the realm of same-sex marriage but disallow statements that degrade or dehumanize persons who are homosexual. Societal norms and local customs will also inform what is out of bounds in a particular classroom. Our method does not specify how to set those boundaries. We have generally been fortunate that our students have not advocated positions hostile to other students' safety and well-being. Nevertheless, some readers may face the real possibility of having to affirm a boundary and rebut or disallow statements that deny the basic dignity of others. It is a challenge, however, to set boundaries for effective dialogue concerning divisive issues without exacerbating the polarization.

Five Steps to Healing Polarization in the Classroom

An initial word on the “mechanics” of our pedagogical method for a discussion-based seminar. We ask students to turn in reflection papers twenty-four hours in advance of the seminar meeting time. Based on these, we formulate an agenda that is circulated prior to the class discussion, helping students come into the class meeting with the perception of a potential conversational connection with their peers. In our experience, when students are encouraged to refine habits of reflection and are aided in perceiving potential conversational connections, the organic result frequently is the formation of a community that stretches across multiple political, ethnic, social and religious differences. In this context they can work to hone the communication and dialogue skills that will help them to respect, engage, and learn from others who think differently. This context also offers an opportunity to reflect on how their own rhetorical choices may be received and understood by people with whom they may differ in some respect.

The five steps presented in this book aim to help each student in the class to:

1. Prioritize reflective over reactive habits of mind
2. Discern the potential for conversational connections with other colleagues
3. Be fully present and engaged in the classroom discussion
4. Actively take responsibility for full participation by all members of the class
5. Learn to lean into disagreement and conflict

The sections that follow describe in more detail each pedagogical step. Our own students provide examples of how these methods have informed their thought process, growth and engagement with others who think differently.

We have worked out these methods in the context of relatively small (15-20 students) discussion-based seminars that focus on how personal and religious values intersect with questions of law, politics and public policy. We realize that larger settings and time constraints limit the practicality of implementing some of our suggestions. For this reason, the book concludes with a reflection on how the methods may be adapted for diverse educational settings.

Steps

Step 1

Prioritize Reflective Over Reactive Habits of Mind

IN THE SEMINARS THAT WE teach, assigned reading is intended first of all as a springboard for weekly written reflections. Readings from a range of political, religious, and social perspectives invite students to encounter differing intellectual positions and cultural views on contested topics. We also invite students to suggest which texts to remove, or which to add. Course topics are paced so that the most polarizing questions are addressed after the class has developed an increased level of trust.

We recognize that students are busy, often juggling the demands of several classes and other activities, as well as work and family responsibilities. For this reason, we allow

students to alternate between submitting shorter “blurbs” and longer four-page reflection papers. Within a given block of two classes, students may choose which week to write the longer submission. In our experience, if the due dates for longer reflections are not carefully structured, many students leave the papers for the end of the semester, at times delaying deeper engagement. Papers are due twenty-four hours in advance, to facilitate formulating a shared agenda, described below. So students can focus on the reflection papers throughout the semester, our seminars do not include a comprehensive final exam.

In a law school seminar setting this is unusual (most seminars require only a final paper), but students have affirmed that it is an intellectually enriching process. “I realized that I don’t even know what I think,” is a surprisingly common response to taking an extended period to reflect on controversial questions. Because they are immersed in contrastive opinions about cultural or political questions, often stated forcefully, by reflection students learn how these strong undercurrents pull them in one direction or another. For many, developing a habit of weekly reflection that culminates in a written result begins a process of de-toxification from such “reactive” habits of mind.

At the same time, we also emphasize that submissions should not become mere dia-

ries or journal entries. Although the students' submissions may provide the space to explore the intersection between personal values and public arguments, and we encourage attention to the emotional dimension of the topics we address, we expect their work to provide a springboard for public discussion. We also emphasize analytic precision, organization, and other criteria that will help them to hone their invaluable professional skill in "writing short." Writing projects that bring together personal and professional dimensions help many students learn to pose questions that require a deeper sense of integration.

We realize that current classroom technology facilitates the exchange of written submissions, among even large numbers of students. Notwithstanding the ease of sharing electronic documents among all students in class, we generally ask students to submit their papers only to us as professors. We believe this submission process prioritizes reflection in several ways.

First, students of this generation feel a pervasive sense of always being "on," as if performing before a camera. They experience this in their social expectations, motivation to succeed and even in postings on social media. Constant interaction with these forums makes finding their own reflective voice more difficult. Especially at the beginning of the se-

mester, focusing on having them critique other students' writing style or analytic approach could prevent them from scrutinizing how they themselves think and how they express their thoughts. For this reason, we do not offer "model" or "sample" essays that exhibit an "ideal" approach to the assignment when students ask for them. Furthermore, in light of their fears about appearing judgmental, especially when discussions focus on difficult issues such as abortion, death, or sexual identity, maintaining a zone of privacy allows students to express themselves without worrying about how their analysis could be perceived as a judgment of others.

A second reason for initial submission only to the professor is that students may feel isolated if they post a reflection to a large group, but cannot tell if anyone is paying attention. Most students are too busy to dedicate time to thoughtful appreciation of each other's work. As described below, when we do ask them to read each other's work in preparation for small group discussions, we ask them to focus on a manageable number (two or three) of their colleagues' papers and reduce the size of the reading assignment. Generally, we schedule such exercises later in the semester, after students have developed their writing style and a level of trust has been built among the seminar participants.

A third reason for having students submit papers only to the professor is to facilitate the reflective process for students with unpopular views or minority positions. Students with such opinions otherwise might hold back from class discussion or blunt the argument they might want to present. Submission only to the professor provides a buffer against the peer pressure and doctrinal normativity that pervades some modern university classrooms. A modicum of privacy can help to provide the intellectual space students need to develop their argument and prepare it for public discussion.

Finally, many issues that we broach in our seminars may touch deeply personal dimensions. Submission just to the professor leaves a “release valve” whereby pain or anger can emerge in a way that respects the student’s privacy and avoids, as much as possible, “oversharing.” Especially when students have experienced a particular trauma, it can be helpful to reflect in writing before entering into public discussion. Further, knowing that a supportive professor is listening to them and guarding their privacy helps students discern how to voice even painful topics in a public conversation.

What happens when every student in a discussion-based class prepares a written reflection prior to the discussion? Such writing gen-

erates an investment in the class, as evidenced in high attendance and active participation. Prior reflection and writing helps students who struggle to bring their voice to seminar discussions by increasing their confidence and helping them recollect their thoughts. For those who are naturally talkative, prior reflection helps them focus and synthesize their ideas. For all students, having one's own written contribution as a foundation for the discussion generates a conversation less bound by fears of what others are thinking, and more open to learning what others have worked out during their own reflection.

In students' words

The value of reflection

"What makes me rigid?" When my classmate first posed this question out loud in class, my first thought was what an obvious question that was. Then I realized that I had never once in my twenty-four years asked myself that question. I mulled it over for a few weeks. What makes me unable to adapt and inflexible when others open up and share their thoughts with me?

I am rigid when I am hypersensitive to people's comments and I automatically assume I know