IDHE REPORT

Readiness for Discussing Democracy in Supercharged Political Times

BY NANCY THOMAS

THIS BOOK CHALLENGES COLLEGE AND university educators to teach students their responsibilities for the health and future of democracy by practicing democracy. The aim is a more ideal version of democracy, referring to both a system of governance and a culture, a way that people interact and work together to improve society. Currently, Americans rely heavily on voting to make public decisions. Although our representative system and the electoral process cry for public oversight, this book concerns a different approach.

This ideal is perhaps best articulated by a framing paper for the Democracy Imperative, a national network of scholars and civic leaders committed to strengthening democracy through higher education.[1] That statement described the work this way:

> Modern deliberative democratic initiatives include study circles, intergroup dialogues, issue forums, public conversations, e-democracy, and more. This movement toward greater deliberation reflects a convergence of two forces in our aspirational democracy—cyclical efforts to engage citizens in public life and ongoing efforts to promote equity and justice. Together, these projects aim to make our social and political systems inclusive, fair, accessible, and effective, and we believe they can be powerful antidotes to exclusion, inequality, disengagement, polarization, and incivility. (Thomas, 2010, p. 2)

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1 I served as the founding director of the Democracy Imperative (TDI) from its launch in 2007 at the University of New Hampshire. Members continue to convene at Tufts University's Frontiers of Democracy conference annually. Some of TDI's work continues through the work of the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education, which I direct, also at Tufts University. Tim Shaffer, coeditor of this book, also served as codirector of TDI, and many of the authors in this book were members of TDI.

College and university students should graduate with the knowledge and skills they need to discuss issues across differences of identity and ideology, affirm democratic principles and responsibilities, manage conflict, compromise, and engage in collaborative action for the common good. These desired outcomes sound easy enough, but they are not. The current political context for deliberative democracy makes the task even more difficult—and more urgent. There is too much at stake to improvise.

THIS CHAPTER CONCERNS READINESS—WHAT IT takes for higher educators to be ready to engage students in discussions about the state of and controversial issues in democracy. At a minimum, discussion leaders and teachers need the skills to frame, organize, and manage discussions. Beyond basic facilitation skills, however, readiness also calls for reflection and conscious decisions about anticipated pedagogical choices in a discussion process, decision points best considered before a discussion begins. Should all perspectives get a fair hearing, even if they reflect ideas antithetical to learning goals or institutional values? Should beliefs that contradict established science or evidence get a full hearing? Do feelings belong in a deliberation? Should discussion leaders and teachers aspire to be "neutral," and if so, what does that mean? Answers to these and similar questions are particularly hard in today's hyperpartisan and divisive political climate.

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT the political climate and deep partisan divides in American society. Partisanship often falls along fault lines of gender, race and ethnicity, geography, educational attainment, wealth and class, and religion. Each identity brings unique experiential knowledge, vocabularies, values, frameworks, and political perspectives, making controversial issues discussions difficult. Americans also face greater social isolation because they increasingly live alone, lack social support and a network of friends, and do not belong to community organizations (Atwell, Bridgeland, & Levine, 2017, p. 25).

According to the Pew Research Center, Republicans and Democrats have held "mostly negative" (as opposed to "very unfavorable") opinions of the other party for decades, but mutual animosity has increased significantly. In 1994, 17% of Republicans (and "Republican leaners") viewed the Democratic Party "very unfavorably." That number increased to 45% in 2017. Similarly, very unfavorable views of Democrats toward Republicans jumped from 16% in 1994 to 57% in 2017 (Doherty, Kiley, & Johnson, 2017, pp. 65–66). Reciprocal partisan contempt is so strong that it affects who people choose to marry, how they raise their children, and attitudes toward their children's choices in a partner (Iyengar, Konitzer, & Tedin, 2018).

Perhaps most disconcerting is the fact that Republicans and Democrats disagree about which public issues deserve legislative attention. According to the Pew Research Center, Republicans view illegal immigration as the most significant problem facing the nation, followed by drug addiction and the federal budget deficit. For Democrats, the nation's most significant problems are the affordability of health care, gun violence, ethics in government, and the gap between rich and poor. The widest disparities concern criminal justice reform, climate change, and gun violence. Most Democrats (71%) view

the way racial and ethnic minorities are treated by the criminal justice system as a serious problem, compared with only 10% of Republicans. There are similar gaps over climate change and gun violence (Pew Research Center, 2018). When partisans do not even agree about the seriousness of issues plaguing the United States, it's difficult to get them to the table to talk. This dynamic can affect student interactions, with fewer students than ever before (42.3%) characterizing their political views as "middle of the road" (Eagan et al., 2017).

EXTERNAL INFLUENCES AFFECTING STUDENT LEARNING AND DISCOURSE ON CAMPUS

PARTISANSHIP IS ALSO DRIVING EFFORTS to police speech on campus. On March 21, 2019, President Trump signed an executive order holding institutional administrators accountable for ensuring "free inquiry" (Exec. Order, 2019). This follows several years of state legislation to "restore" free speech at public colleges and universities. The laws vary, but most of them nullify speech codes and prohibit institutions from withdrawing invitations to controversial speakers. Some allow disinvited speakers to seek money damages from institutions where they are unable to speak. Some mandate that students who interrupt speakers and prevent them from speaking face disciplinary action. Other laws eliminate "free speech zones." A few even require institutions to remain "neutral" on public issues. In North Carolina, for example, the law requires boards of trustees to document "a description of substantial difficulties, controversies, or successes in maintaining a posture of administrative and institutional neutrality with regard to political or social issues" (Act to Restore and Preserve Free Speech, 2017). Similar provisions have been enacted or proposed in Arizona, California, Georgia, Missouri, South Carolina, West Virginia, and Wisconsin.

At the same time, many students and others question the application of the First Amendment to the university setting. In a 2018 survey, the Knight Foundation and Gallup found that most students (56%) want to protect free speech and most students (52%) want to protect diversity and inclusion, but when asked which is more important, students chose inclusion over speech, 53% to 46% (Gill, 2018). Women, Blacks, and Democrats were more likely than their counterparts to choose inclusion over speech ("8 Ways," 2018). The decline in unfettered support for expressive freedoms alarms many who view free expression as inviolable.

Should educators draw the line, however, at speakers who traffic hate or speech that is antithetical to institutional values? Organizations like the Anti-Defamation League and Facing History track the exponential rise of hate groups in the United States. In March 2019, Amy Sherman reported in a thoroughly cited article in Politifact that although documenting incidents of White nationalism can be challenging, "data from multiple sources suggest extremist attacks associated with white nationalism and far-right ideology is [sic] on the rise" (Sherman, 2019). The number of hate groups in the United States has reached a record high number—totaling 1,020, in the fourth straight year of hate group growth following three consecutive years of decline near the end of the Obama administration. These hate groups include neo-Nazis, the Ku Klux Klan, racist skinheads, and White nationalists who adhere to some form of White supremacy or separatist views, but the list also includes Black nationalist groups (Beirich, 2019).

THE DECLINE IN UNFETTERED SUPPORT FOR EXPRESSIVE FREEDOMS ALARMS MANY WHO VIEW FREE EXPRESSION AS INVIOLABLE.

Unfortunately, many of these groups or individuals target colleges and universities. In February 2019, a Leadership, Equity, Access, and Diversity (LEAD) Fund report indicated that a majority of surveyed educators reported incidents over the past two years of bias—symbols, leafleting, social media, speakers (68%); hate speech—offensive speech based on race, religion, and other traits (54%); or incivility—bullying, offensive conduct not motivated by bias (54%). Nearly 20% of the respondents reported incidents of hate crimes (Jones & Baker, 2019). When discrimination and exclusion become more mainstream, people become emboldened to say things they may not have said before. The challenge for the discussion leader and teacher is to know whether and when to draw a line. Yes, the free exchange of ideas is critical to student learning, but so is a commitment to standards and integrity and to providing equal learning environments for all students.

These political forces have implications for learning. Extreme polarization can foster distrust of someone with a different perspective, party affiliation, or lived experience. Polarization can erode trust, making it even harder for discussion organizers and teachers to design a process or build relationships. Professors might avoid controversial issue discussions for the sake of harmony in the classroom. Students might decline invitations to engage in political discussions out of fear of saying the wrong thing or the belief that their perspectives will be met with hostility. Ironically, partisan efforts to promote free speech may be resulting in chilled speech and learning.

Misunderstandings about whether higher educators teach versus indoctrinate may be less about disinviting controversial speakers and more about seemingly small pedagogical decisions educators make daily. Educators can prepare by anticipating the challenges and developing strategies in advance for managing them. Not all challenges can (or even should) be avoided, and on a campus, conflicts can become opportunities for learning with some creative thinking and planning.

PREPARATION

READINESS APPROACHES MIGHT INCLUDE PURSUING facilitation training, finding colleagues and creating a community of practice for sharing teaching or facilitation tips, and practicing. Strong facilitation skills include community and trust-building; sharing responsibility for the success of the discussion; establishing group agreements; inquiry and asking "good" questions; using silence and listening strategically; drawing out perspectives; and being proactive about decision points in a discussion.

COMMUNITY, TRUST-BUILDING, AND SHARING RESPONSIBILITY

DISCUSSION GROUPS AND CLASSES OFTEN consist of people who do not know each other well, if at all. In classroom settings, they may view each other as competitors for grades or attention from the professor or each other. In any discussion, students may engage in ways that reinforce rather than break down barriers sometimes based on social identity, political ideology, or lived experiences, particularly if the group dynamic is disrespectful, dismissive, or antagonistic. It's important to establish expectations of cooperation and shared responsibility.

A good place to start is with finding common experiences or traits. Class or group participants probably have an automatic connection to each other because of their interest in the course or topic. It's still important, however, to carve out time in the group or outside of class, perhaps through an assignment, for students to explore what they have in common. Students can work in pairs or small groups to find out why each chose to take this course or participate in this issue forum. For class group projects, ask the students to complete the assignment (a paper, a presentation) and write a short reflection paper on how the group worked together.

In graduate school, I took a course in which the professor asked each student to send him a letter before the semester started, telling him our "itches and ouches," with no guidance beyond that vague request. Throughout the semester, he would then refer to our letters, pointing to our common experiences, interests, or connections. Through his masterful facilitation, we learned things about each other that then served as a foundation for cooperation.

If planned well, the classroom or discussion group can come to view themselves as members of a learning community of students who collaborate and share responsibility for each other's learning and success. Students in learning communities develop a sense of common purpose and group identity. A successful learning community helps student overcome feelings of isolation from each other and builds relationships.

Trust is not automatic; it's earned. The sections that follow about establishing group agreements, framing questions, perspective-taking, and anticipating political and facilitation challenges should help.

ESTABLISHING GROUP AGREEMENTS

GOOD DISCUSSION LEADERS ESTABLISH RECIPROCAL "agreements" or "ground rules" with students before a class or discussion begins. These are critical to the success of a group, yet in my experience, not enough professors take the time to cocreate and discuss them with a class. Agreements are "reciprocal" because discussion leaders and teachers should model the kinds of behaviors they expect.

Agreements are important. They shape the climate for a discussion by setting limits about behavior, encouraging some forms of participation and discouraging others, and even identifying speech that is appropriate and inappropriate. The idea behind agreements is that they will prevent personal attacks or intimidation. They are also supposed to encourage behaviors such as preparing, risk-taking, listening, and open-mindedness.

Sometimes agreements clash; for example, an agreement that "all viewpoints matter equally" can contradict an expectation of "respect." For this reason, it is important for groups to propose agreements and discuss their pros and cons in advance. The goal of establishing agreements is not consensus but rather exploration and reasoning. Setting agreements is one way to exchange perspectives and explore why a particular agreement might work for one person and not another. Setting agreements can also be a relatively low-stakes way of encouraging active participation.

If not clarified or thought through carefully, agreements can become tools for shutting down discussions. I was once asked to facilitate a session with a group that had already established a set of agreements, including one that read, "This is a safe space."

Unfortunately, some members of the group used this agreement to shut down discussions. At one point, a student expressed a controversial but not intimidating viewpoint about a policy matter, and another student stood up and walked out, stating loudly, "This is not a safe space for me," not because the viewpoint was demeaning but because the exiting student simply disagreed.

TYPICAL AGREEMENTS INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING:

- Listen for understanding.
- Assume goodwill.
- If you are offended, say so and say why.
- You can disagree, but don't personalize.
- Speak for yourself, not others.
- Step up, step back, or share "air time."
- Silence is okay (discussed more in a following section).
- Share responsibility for the quality of the discussion.
- Confidentiality: It's okay to share ideas and themes, but not what individuals say.
- Prepare.
- Be present. Turn off cell phones.

I VIEW TWO AGREEMENTS AS critical: "Assume good will" and "Share responsibility for the quality of the discussion." Consider the previous example involving the student who stormed out, proclaiming the discussion "unsafe." In that case, the student would have violated an agreement about assuming goodwill. The student could have stated why she or he was offended, the group could have talked it through, and the discussion could have continued. As facilitator, I also could have asked the group for advice on keeping the discussion going and working through conflict as a group, per a "share responsibility" agreement. Because neither agreement was in place, I could not draw on them to correct the malfunction.

Should "civility" be a ground rule for discussions? To many, it means "courtesy" or "politeness." A civil society, if based on principles of a diverse democracy, can make it possible for people with opposing viewpoints to express and talk through their differences. But excessive politeness can mask power dynamics and oppression. Activists, for example, may protest in ways viewed as "uncivil" by those who do not want to change the status quo. When setting group agreements, it is important to consider whose definition of civility would be supported, who makes the rules about what is civil. In my view, students should learn about different perspectives on civility, not how to be civil.

It is also important for groups to revisit and, if necessary, amend group agreements periodically. By doing this, discussion participants may feel more responsibility for the success of the group, and behavioral challenges can be exposed and addressed.

INQUIRY AND "GOOD" QUESTIONS

QUESTIONS CAN BE USED BY the discussion teacher or leader to maintain or share power and authority. They can be asked in ways that foster or shut down curiosity and learning. They can encourage or discourage rigor. They can build a climate of cooperation or competition. Because, ideally, discussions are lively and fast-paced, good questions might be more intuitive than planned. Recall my previously mentioned professor who requested a letter from each class member about their "itches and ouches." That same professor told us that for every hour of discussion/teaching, he prepared for three hours. Although he undoubtedly revisited the content goals for the class and opportunities to connect student experiences, he also spent time preparing his questions. Inquiry is at the heart of a robust discussion.

GOOD QUESTIONS ADD CLARITY ABOUT DEFINITIONS AND TERMS. (What language do you use to describe this situation? How do you interpret that language? What do you mean by that term?) The goal is not consensus about a term or language choice but an exploration and shared understanding of different terms.

GOOD QUESTIONS HELP PEOPLE THINK CRITICALLY AND ANALYTICALLY. (What do we know about this topic? What are the facts? What evidence do you have to support your statement? What are the consequences of this approach?) In Institute for Democracy & Higher Education (IDHE) research[2] on politically engaged campuses, we found that professors anticipated their responses to beliefs or viewpoints and were transparent in the course syllabus about standards of evidence. Beliefs had to be factually verifiable. In our focus groups with students, some would complain that professors would "pick on them" by forcing them to back up their opinions with evidence, but most felt that standards and a commitment to accuracy preserved the integrity of the process. In 2017, the U.S. Tenth Circuit affirmed the right of professors to insist that viewpoints be factually supported, even partisan preferences (Thomas, 2017).

GOOD QUESTIONS HELP PEOPLE REASON TOGETHER. (How did you reach that conclusion? How does your idea overlap with those of others in the group? Can we combine these perspectives in creative, new ways?) Good questions can build relationships that, in turn, empower groups to take ownership of solutions.

GOOD QUESTIONS CAN FOSTER OPEN-MINDEDNESS, A WILLINGNESS TO UNDERSTAND AND EVEN CHANGE POSITIONS. (Do you think that a different approach might work? What information do you need to accept a different perspective?) The aim is to challenge assumptions and encourage new thinking.

The goal, of course, is never to indoctrinate. In 2017, 58% of Republicans responded to a Pew Research Center survey that colleges and universities have a negative effect on "the way things are going in this country" (Fingerhut, 2017). Also in 2017, Gallup found that 67% of Republicans have "some" or "very little" confidence in colleges and universities because they view them as "too liberal" and that professors "push their own agendas" and "don't allow students to think for themselves" (Gallup, 2019). Although important to know, these partisan attitudes are not supported by evidence. It is simply inaccurate to suggest that college students can be easily indoctrinated. Studies repeatedly demonstrate that students do not change their political leanings while in college (Mariani & Hewitt, 2008; Woessner & Kelly-Woessner, 2009). In a national study of

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2 Throughout this paper, I refer to "our research." IDHE studies political learning and campus climates, and findings are reported in the book chapters, journals, and magazines listed under "Politics 365 Resources" at the end of the chapter.

more than 7,000 undergraduates at 120 colleges, Mayhew, Rockenbach, Selznick, and Zagorsky (2018) concluded that after the first year of college, 48% of students viewed liberals more favorably than when they arrived on campus and 50% of students viewed conservatives more favorably. The most deeply entrenched students demonstrated the most open-mindedness. The researchers concluded that "college attendance is associated, on average, with gains in appreciating political viewpoints across the spectrum, not just favoring liberals" (Mayhew et al., 2018). These findings were consistent with IDHE's research that skilled facilitation in classroom discussions created the conditions for increased understanding across political viewpoints.

GOOD QUESTIONS DO NOT NECESSARILY LEAD TO ONE CORRECT ANSWER. For example, in a discussion about the right size of government, the correct answer is most likely "It depends." In this case, the goals are to understand the facts, examine the topic from multiple perspectives, explore reasons, and weigh the pros and cons of solutions.

Finally, gestures, tone, and inflection by both the discussion leaders/teachers and the participants/students can distinguish good from bad questions. Asking someone, "Why do you think that?" can be said with different emphases and body language, suggesting genuine curiosity or conversely implying disdain. Discussion leaders and teachers need to teach students how to ask questions of each other, in addition to modeling good questioning. It's okay to pause a discussion to say, "I wonder if there is a better way to ask that question?"

SILENCE, LISTENING, AND PERSPECTIVE-TAKING

TO SOME, FAST-PACED DISCUSSIONS ARE fun; to others, the experience can be uncomfortable. I often include in group agreements the statement "As a discussion leader, I am okay with silence." I often half-jokingly say, "Silence is un-American." Silence is awkward. Some people want to fill the space regardless of the quality of the comment. Giving students permission to be silent is a respectful way to acknowledge those who like to reflect and collect their thoughts before speaking. It also demonstrates respect for diversity in how people learn and communicate, particularly when learning and communication styles align with cultural or gender norms.

Silence also encourages listening, a core ingredient to learning and to understanding and integrating the perspectives of others. We've all worked with groups of students in which some are quick-witted, easy contributors and others are more reflective and measured. A fast-paced discussion is exciting, but are the ideas merely presented or are they being understood, discussed, and sharpened?

In IDHE's research on politically engaged campuses, students expressed concerns about failures in listening—professors who shut down a conversation because of a conflict, premature endings to a discussion because of time constraints, students who make their point as if it is the final word, students who roll their eyes because they have heard it all before or they don't want to hear it, and professors who approve or let all comments go without any guidance or interception. These dysfunctions derail good discussions. Teaching students the arts of discussion provides an ideal opportunity to review the pros and cons around the pace of a discussion and the need for comprehensive listening as fundamental to the learning process.

DISCUSSION LEADERS AND TEACHERS CONTROL CONTENT BY MAKING JUDGEMENTS ABOUT WHICH PERSPECTIVES ON AN ISSUE GET A FAIR HEARING.

Discussion leaders and teachers control content by making judgments about which perspectives on an issue get a fair hearing. In IDHE's research, we found that students respected professors who played devil's advocate and who probed critically into all perspectives. Many professors told us that they assign students papers requiring they advocate for a perspective they do not have. Students and faculty alike valued learning about these tensions rather than being told right and wrong answers.

That said, nearly all focus group participants in our research drew lines at giving fair hearings for perspectives that were inaccurate, hateful, discriminatory, or that promoted inequality. Clearly, if a student said, "The earth is flat" or "The Holocaust never happened," the statement should be challenged. Facts, evidence, and standards on a college campus matter and should not go unchallenged (unless they are small or silly). There are multiple ways to do that—for example, by asking the group what they think about that statement ("Does anyone want to make the case for another position?") or challenging it outright ("What evidence can you give me, because I am unaware of any credible evidence to support that position?").

Facilitating difficult discussions is an art, not a science, and there are many considerations, such as right-size grouping, drawing out reticent speakers, setting up small groups, and planning a discussion sequence.

If discussion leaders or teachers master the art of discussion among diverse groups, will the discussion achieve the goals of enhancing student learning, building relationships, and modeling an exemplary process? Unfortunately, given the political context, it is not enough to "trust the process." Readiness also includes reflection and advance thinking regarding tough choices about speech, neutrality, and educational goals.

THE NEUTRALITY CHALLENGE

DISCUSSION TEACHERS AND LEADERS INESCAPABLY face choices that can have consequences for the success of the discussion: goal-setting, reading selections, sequencing of how ideas are presented, whom to call on, how to correct false statements, and how to manage personal viewpoints. Some can be anticipated and managed through the facilitation techniques suggested previously, but many require seemingly small, in-the-moment decisions. In discussion leadership, the axiom holds: The devil is in the details. These challenges concern objectivity, fairness, and judgment, which I place in an umbrella category of the neutrality challenge.

SHARING PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES

FUNDAMENTALLY, DISCUSSION TEACHERS AND LEADERS need to decide whether they will share personal perspectives with their students. In IDHE's research, most professors chose to withhold their personal viewpoints and some even kept the students guessing throughout the semester or process. They remained steadfastly mysterious about their party affiliation, the news stations they watched, and their positions on issues. Others felt that this approach was disingenuous. Instead, they shared their perspectives and invited the students to offer alternative arguments and to check their bias in real time. Many students enjoyed the mysterious approach, but others expressed the view that they could see through it. To those students, transparency

with permission to dissent invited more candid perspectives and risk-taking. There is no consensus on this question, but it is important for discussion teachers and leaders to decide in advance which approach to take.

ADVOCACY OR OBJECTIVITY AROUND DEMOCRACY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

CURRENTLY, CAREER PREPARATION AND ECONOMIC security are viewed as one of higher education's primary purposes, and that mission has long been interpreted to include educating for social and economic mobility. Higher education's social justice or equity mission includes ensuring individuals equal opportunity in access to political, economic, and social systems; protections of civil rights; and fair and equitable outcomes. The equity mission is, in fact, part of higher education's role in democracy. Perhaps the clearest statement of higher education's purpose occurred after World War II when U.S. leaders reacted to the madness and horror of Nazi Germany. The Truman Commission on Higher Education (1947) identified education as necessary to a "fuller realization of democracy in every phase of living." The commission articulated higher education's responsibility to cultivate in students the "creative imagination and trained intelligence to the solution of social problems and to the administration of public affairs" (p. 285). Higher education's civic and equity missions are deeply connected.

Universally, educators would say that the desired outcomes of a college education include critical thinking, independent judgment, open-mindedness, curiosity, and reasoning. As mentioned previously, leaving misstatements uncorrected may damage the learning of others in the group. But that's the easy case. Arguably, the role of higher educators includes encouraging students to become advocates for a more equitable and just society. To take a neutral stance in the face of injustice can be interpreted as tacit acceptance of an inequitable status quo.

Discussion leaders need to consider whether social justice is a desired outcome of a process or course and how that might affect a discussion process. Is it enough to ensure an equitable process, or should a discussion include a critical assessment of every issue from the perspective of those most marginalized by social, political, and economic systems, with a goal of increased empathy and a commitment to equality and justice? I noted previously that partisans do not agree on the seriousness of public issues such as racial discrimination. It's tricky to facilitate a discussion involving diverse perspectives if some people do not even view the issue as being worthy of discussion.

Some viewpoints are not simply misinformed; they may be antithetical to the institution's values and goals. Should hateful, misogynistic, homophobic, xenophobic, anti-Semitic or anti-Muslim, White or Black nationalist, and similar perspectives get a fair hearing in a discussion? To some, allowing speech of this nature is a way to shine a light on it, and as Supreme Court justice Louis Brandeis famously said, sunlight is said to be the best disinfectant. To others, that kind of speech alienates people and shuts down speech, probably as it was intended to do. I do not agree with censoring or sanctioning speech, but I also disagree that speech that disrupts learning, creates toxic learning environments for students from historically marginalized groups, or perpetuates misinformation should go unchallenged. To the contrary, educators have the academic

> ARGUABLY, THE ROLE OF HIGHER EDUCATORS INCLUDES ENCOURAGING STUDENTS TO BECOME ADVOCATES FOR A MORE EQUITABLE AND JUST SOCIETY.

freedom to control the learning environment and determine on academic grounds what is taught (Sweezy v. New Hampshire, 1957). In other words, decisions about speech in a learning environment present the discussion leader and teacher with choices, and it's important to think through those choices before they become conflicts.

Such situations present neutrality challenges. Clearly educators have a responsibility to use their expertise and platform to take a stand against misinformation, falsehoods, mistakes, and flawed reasoning, but what is their obligation against undemocratic forces in society? Are there some perspectives that simply do not deserve a fair hearing? Harboring one leaning over the other will undoubtedly shape the way an issue is framed, the required readings, whose viewpoints get more consideration, and which viewpoints provoke the most critique.

What worries me the most, however, is when the desire to remain neutral, either institutionally or from the perspective of a discussion leader/teacher, is used as an excuse to avoid wrestling with controversial issues. Educators who are ready to lead discussions are less likely to avoid their obligations to educate for their field and for the health and future of democracy.

INSTITUTIONAL READINESS FOR DISCUSSION LEADERSHIP AND TEACHING

ENGAGING IN THE PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES described previously benefits from having institutional support. Institutional climate can either support or stifle political discussions. An institutional readiness checklist might include identifying an institutional leader with positional authority to catalyze change, the establishment of a coalition of diverse constituents on campus who will help with outreach and design, setting goals, identifying existing programs and assets (such as trained facilitators), finding and/or pursuing funding sources and incentives, planning kick-off and action groups, and evaluating and documenting the process. Having a supportive institutional environment can make clear to supporters or detractors the commitment a college or university has to engaging contentious topics in classrooms and other educational spaces.

In IDHE's research, we were surprised to learn that four of the seven highly politically engaged campuses embedded dialogue and discussion skills in a required course. In some cases, learning to frame, debate, discuss, and advocate for positions was embedded into for-credit courses on rhetoric or an English 101 class. In others, students spent a semester on a public issue (or multiple issues), learning the art of discussion while learning about the subject. Professors at those institutions appreciated that readiness on the part of students.

CONCLUSION

THE SIMPLE MESSAGE OF THIS chapter is to reflect and plan ahead for inevitable pedagogical choices. Quality discussions of controversial issues are inherently political and, given today's political context, partisan. The circumstances make discussions difficult to facilitate, but it does get easier. With practice, discussion leaders and teachers learn how to read faces, gauge levels of tension, and diffuse conflict. There are ways to build trust, such as recognizing and rewarding well-reasoned argu-

ments (even if they reflect unpopular or dissenting views) and balancing objectivity with the desire to advance democratic principles and practices. Most importantly, teachers and leaders can learn to share with the group responsibility for the success of the discussion. Sharing responsibility involves relinquishing some control, but if everyone around the table believes they are part of making a discussion work, they may voluntarily curb behaviors that add no value, without inhibiting the robust exchange of ideas.

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