

Crash the Discord: Creating a Learning Environment that Bolsters Value Appreciation and Respect through Civil Discourse

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Abstract: Graduates must know how to navigate social, cultural, and global issues, using civil discourse to elevate understanding, bring concerns to light, and to find solutions to business, national and international challenges. Institutions of higher education continue to struggle with the diversity of students, faculty, and administration while encouraging civil discourse internally as well as throughout the student body. Universities are in a unique position to educate and prepare adults, across the globe, to provide positive contributions to the world around them. This responsibility goes beyond simply imparting technical skills. Today's graduates must be equipped to solve complex problems and to create solutions. Transformative learning theory provides tools to support learners with engaging in civil discourse. This article proposes a model for educators to facilitate civil discourse in the classroom, teaching skills that are transferable to business and society.

Keywords: civil discourse, discussions, transformative learning, learning transformation, adult learning theory

The world has become a global marketplace. Gone are borders and barriers to commerce and communication. Cooperation between business professionals, both within the United States as well as in different countries, is required. Today's workers must be capable of comfortably interacting with a wide variety of people, from numerous countries and a myriad of social and cultural backgrounds (Riviera, 2019). Graduates must know how to navigate social, cultural, and global issues, using civil discourse to elevate understanding, bring concerns to light, and to develop solutions to national and international challenges. Universities are in a unique position to educate and prepare learners, across the globe, to provide positive contributions to the world around them. This responsibility goes beyond simply imparting technical skills. Today's graduates must be equipped to solve complex problems and to create solutions (Riviera, 2019).

Importance of Civil Discourse

Professional success requires strong people-related skills. Future leaders will work with a diverse group of individuals. If allowed, these multifarious individuals will enrich the quality of business suggestions and solutions (Windchief, 2019). However, squelching civil discourse will circumvent the benefits of this sundry population. Higher education is the ideal platform to teach students how to listen to people with controversial ideas, and to engage in difficult conversations, in the face of dissent (Gose, 2018). Today's universities must produce graduates who are prepared to take their place in business and society. They must be ready to rise to the level of managers, who will lead an ethical and diverse workforce, sharing ideas and developing best practices through civil discourse.

Students come to the classroom with a variety of backgrounds and experiences. Of all the gifts education will bring, the greatest is learning how to think and work together. Critical thinking and the ability to have open, honest, respectful dialog is necessary for each person to achieve their full potential, inside and outside of the classroom. Not only are educators responsible to the student, but they are also responsible to society because they are teaching learners how to interact and solve problems that affect communities and businesses. Professional and personal success requires critical thinking. The courage to listen carefully to others, consider the value in others' thoughts, and to speak one's truth, tactfully and clearly, bolsters value, appreciation, and respect.

Critical thinking skills, the first step in civil discourse, can be taught and practiced, within the learning community, with very low risk. Institutions of higher education have the responsibility to prepare learners to be successful in life. In turn, our students have a responsibility to society. They will take what they learn in the classroom and use those skills to create positive change. The purpose of this paper is to provide tools for teaching learners how to think critically and how to engage in the civil discourse necessary to evolve the way learners tackle problems and issues. Civil discourse involves listening, critically-thinking, and clearly expressing one's thoughts and views. The ability to engage in civil discourse is required to evolve the ability to think globally.

Civil discourse is the cornerstone of an inclusive and conducive learning environment (Alger & Piper, 2019). Academic freedom has been a foundational aspect of higher education, and it must remain a key player in the academic process. It is equally important that students learn how to have difficult and controversial conversations, from a point of professionalism and tolerance for others' views. Often activism is uncivil, employing disruptive and violent protests (Binder & Kidder, 2019). It is a prerequisite that faculty model civility and address these challenging topics in the classroom. Providing a forum for students to be heard, while maintaining civility, is a vital key to building a culture where civil discourse is the norm (Panke & Stephens, 2018). Civil discourse is necessary for both understanding differences, as well as for finding the optimal solutions for the most challenging problems. Intentionally inviting civil discourse, in a controlled environment, prepares students to tackle the adult and professional arena where they will soon be influential members, if they master the art of civil discourse.

Barriers to Civil Discourse

There are many barriers to civil discourse. Civil discourse often fails because the way information is communicated creates dissension. Effective civil discourse requires both listening and communicating. Often failing to listen with an open mind will adversely affect the sharing of thoughts and ideas because the speaker may feel they are not being heard, which causes them to stop sharing potentially valuable ideas. For others, feelings of defensiveness take over when ideas very different from one's own are expressed. Other barriers to civil discourse include being uncomfortable with conflict, having a limited worldview, poor listening skills, an unwillingness to explore differing perspectives, as well as simply following cultural norms.

To understand how to cultivate civil discourse in the classroom, it is essential to fully understand online learners. Adult learners come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences. Some have children and are single parents. Some are young and living with friends. Many have full-time or

multiple jobs. Others are unemployed. The classroom simulates the outside world, with all its diversity and challenges. Learners come into the classroom with predeveloped worldviews and lived experiences, which shape how they think, communicate, and behave. Learners have the opportunity, through course engagement, to learn critical thinking and communication strategies for engaging in civil discourse. Educators must be prepared to welcome the diverse student experiences and knowledge into the classroom, for all to share and cultivate. The richness of student diversity provides the perfect landscape for transformation. The burning question is how does one create a transformative learning culture?

Transformative Learning

A transformational learning culture is a way to support civil discourse. Transformative learning is applicable for adult learners because it encourages students to examine and compare views that are held about the world against new materials and ideas presented in class. The transformative learning community will afford learners the ability to engage in an exchange of researched content to challenge what the learner believes. The learner will have a chance to listen and reflect on the content presented. Transformative learning supports students in developing new meaning schemes, guiding future decisions and actions.

When engaging in a classroom or online learning community, the educator is presented with an opportunity to present debatable and controversial content to learners. The learners should be encouraged to reflect deeply on how the content aligns or is disparate from personal beliefs. Examining how their own views are dissimilar to the content presented to them results in cognitive dissonance or a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1997). Oftentimes, learners find it necessary to make a paradigm shift to reframe perceptions, thoughts, and personal intentions by critically assessing one's current beliefs to make positive transformations in thought. Civil discourse is instrumental in creating a learning culture where the learner reflects on his or her worldviews. Additionally, the learner must be willing to adjust personal beliefs when learning new materials that conflicts with prior knowledge. Figure 1 describes how the learner may likely experience learning transformations.

How to Support Learning Transformations

Transformative learning brings the educational experience within the learner's frame of reference, including lived experiences and worldviews (Mezirow & Associates, 2000). To facilitate transformative learning the educator asks open-ended questions that require critical thinking. Learners are expected to actively engage in discussions in the learning community. Educators should demonstrate a willingness to support learners in stretching their thinking, meaning learners will examine how the learning resources support or oppose their own understanding. This makes it possible for the learner to engage in reflective practices to impact future thinking and action (Henry, 2008; Mezirow & Associates, 2000; King, 2005).

Transformative learning is a process where the learner recognizes a change in thinking is needed. Transformative learning thrives in environments where learners are encouraged to investigate personal background knowledge and to research how the historical views held by the learner or peers are supported or refuted by new information presented (Henry, 2008). When the learner is

encouraged to reflect on differing views, the learner is positioned to revise deeply held belief systems. The learning community expectations set the tone for learning transformations to occur. (Henry, 2008; Mokhtarian; 2020)

Figure 1. *Learning Transformation*

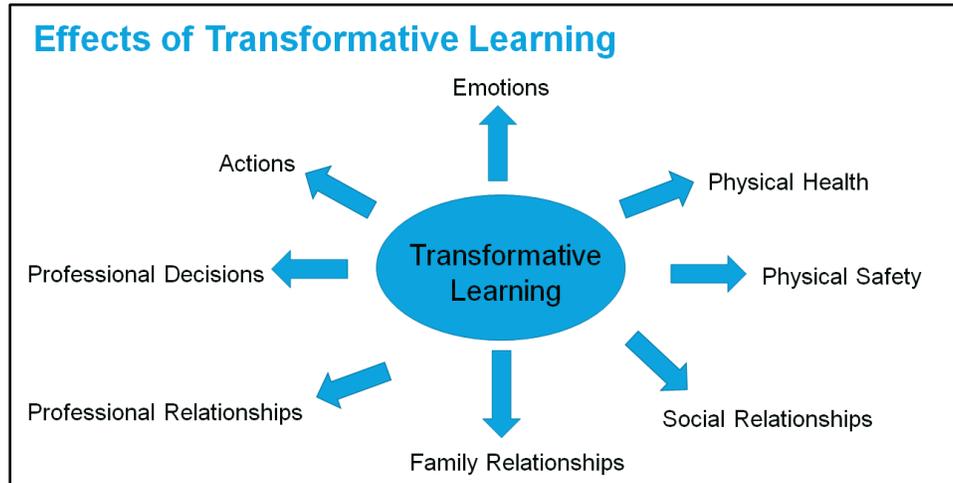


Educators must establish rules for engagement in the learning community to avoid civil discord. A guideline every learner should be expected to follow is supporting the position purported with research. Learners should both listen and research, to develop more rounded understanding, rather than automatically reacting with agreement or disagreement. The educator should model how to share opposing views, including supporting research. Learners will become comfortable with sharing the pros and cons, limiting learner bias (John, 2016). The instructor must hold learners accountable for examining the ideas presented by others. Additionally, the learner must be encouraged to support the ideas advanced by a peer or engage in research to share differing views. Ultimately, the new or revised meaning schemes that evolve when engaging in the discussions should be shared by all learners (John, 2016).

Effects of Transformational Learning

By design, adult learners are empowered to engage in self-directed learning in a transformative learning community. Learners are engaged in collaborative listening and personal reflection. Scholars are afforded the space to synthesize the content presented (Mokhtarian, 2020). The educator presents the learner with the chance to examine personal assumptions and values while providing a safe environment to share their understanding of the content. The learner will be responsible to minimize discord by determining if the viewpoint offered is a pro or a con. Peers may add to the learner's thoughts or present ideas that may oppose the viewpoint of the peer (Henry, 2008; King, 2005; Mokhtarian, 2020). Figure 2 demonstrates that learners are more likely to shift thinking when they believe the new viewpoint will enhance physical health, physical safety, social relationships, family relationships, professional relationships, professional decision making, actions and emotions (King, 2005, p.107)

Figure 2. *Impacts of Transformational Learning on Learners*



Potential Tool to Facilitate Civil Discourse

Online tools aid educators in increasing active engagement and reflective practices in the learning environment. Kialo (2020) is a free online tool. This application is conducive to supporting learners with engaging in civil discourse. Kialo (2020) provides a framework for participating in thoughtful debate. This tool supports constructive discussions by prominently displaying the topic or issue, supporting learners with remaining focused on the topic of discussion. Learners post to an organized thread that establishes discussions around the pros and cons of controversial issues. Kialo is structured to position the strongest arguments first, allowing students to sequentially follow other arguments that are for or against the topic (Leverton, n.d.). Kialo provides a platform to challenge the learners thinking and to share research ideas that support or disagree with others in a non-threatening manner. Kialo (2020) is a tool that supports civil discourse and learning transformation.

Conclusion

Civil discourse is the cornerstone of developing an inclusive learning environment that is conducive to promoting a learner to adopt new or revised practices. The time is now to teach our learners how to listen and to think critically when opposing views are presented. The educational setting provides a platform to teach learners how to approach opposing views as well as a process to grow as a learner and a professional. This research aims to provide guidelines to support learners with how to engage in civil discourse and to adopt new worldviews. Once embraced, learners may likely perceive the benefits of change.

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