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Implementing Campus-level Programming: Pathways for Online Civic Engagement

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Abstract: As college campuses expand co-curricular approaches to civic engagement, faculty and staff are challenged to consider how to develop and support students' online civic engagement through experimental programming. This essay focuses on the instructive component of conversing in online spaces by offering recommendations for assisting students' online civic engagement through strengthening their abilities to enact civility online, recognize and respond to polarization, and navigate today's media ecosystem. Grounded in literature, this essay suggests that by participating in these activities, students become familiar with diverse viewpoints, learn strategies for engaging in heterogeneous conversations, achieve media literacy and source criticism skills, and discover how to respond to misinformation. Faculty and staff can replicate the experimental programming ideas provided in this essay to help students prepare for meaningful participation in civic and political life.

Keywords: civic engagement, civility, pedagogy, polarization, media ecosystem.

Following the 2018 midterm elections, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement polled people aged 18-24 and found that 57% of respondents were losing faith in American democracy (CIRCLE, 2019). A rise in antidemocratic sentiment (Harris, 2021) along with polarization, isolation, and apathy (Frye, 2021) are possible reasons why Americans' faith in democracy is waning. Faculty and staff can help students embrace democratic values by offering opportunities that develop their abilities to engage in online conversations about issues that are important to them such as systematic racism, police reform, and climate resilience (CIRCLE, 2021). By undertaking the construction of this activity, faculty and staff promote civic engagement, which is described as "a multifaceted concept, consisting of political interest, political discussion, and political knowledge" (Mossberger et al., 2008, p. 48). Being civically engaged motivates civic participation because the individual's interest in politics and current events can translate into action (Klofstad, 2011). Accordingly, civic engagement activities tend to focus on political involvement that involves actions related to the efforts of systems on individuals and communities. As campuses expand co-curricular approaches to civic engagement, faculty and staff are challenged to rethink how to develop students' civic competence. Broeckelman-Post and Mazer (2021) speak to this endeavor when they observe, "A thriving and peaceful democracy requires an informed and engaged citizenry, but such citizenship must be learned" (p. 435). This reflection essay offers an overview of strategies for supporting students' online civic engagement through experimental programming.

In 2020, nearly 30 million students were enrolled in colleges and universities (Strauss, 2020). Institutions of higher learning are uniquely situated to encourage the vitality of America's democratic system by preparing students to be astute and responsible citizens (Hurtado, 2019). This essay focuses on the instructive component of conversing in online spaces by offering recommendations for supporting students' online civic engagement by strengthening their abilities to enact civility online, recognize polarization, and navigate today's media ecosystem.

Experimental Programming 1: Training Students to Enact Civility

A democratic system necessitates the construction, continuation, and resolution of disagreement (Benson, 2011). Civility makes these possible by requiring a dialogue that emboldens criticism of ideas in a productive fashion (Carter, 1998). Civility is "a set of standards for conducting public argument" (Darr, 2011, p. 604). A principle of civility is presenting oneself "as reasonable and courteous, treating even those with whom they disagree as though they and their ideas are worthy of respect" (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011, p. 20). Conversely, incivility encompasses "features of discussion that convey an unnecessarily disrespectful tone toward the discussion forum, its participants, or its topics" (Coe et al., 2014, p. 660). Incivility can be operationalized "as a matter of tone, not substance" (Rossini, 2020, p. 6). Others describe incivility "as an extreme form of polarized discussion in which discussion participants use disrespectful statements or attacks which clearly demonstrate disrespect or insult toward an opposing political party or its members" (Hwang et al., 2014, p. 622).

Lewandowsky et al. (2017) depict online political discourse as "becoming characterized by extreme incivility" (p. 259). Uncivil discourse occurs frequently in online political discussions (Coe et al., 2014; Rossini, 2020); therefore, students will undoubtedly encounter incivility at some point as they engage in online political conversations. Discussing news and politics is a critical piece of the process of political learning (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Given this fact, students must gain proficiencies in treating those with whom they disagree as possessing ideas that are worthy of consideration. A way to help students hone their abilities to maintain civility is by initiating online discussions about topics such as those that the Knight Foundation (2020) recognized as being important to college students: climate change, race relations, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Students can be taught the skill of communicating civilly in multiple ways, including the two featured in this essay: identifying incivility in online comment sections and observing someone modeling civility.

One way faculty and staff can prepare students to recognize acts of incivility is by having them explore comments posted in response to articles on news websites. Researchers have found that up to 40% of comments on news sites are uncivil or impolite (Coe et al., 2014). Such uncivil comments can potentially inhibit public expression of thoughts by polarizing readers' opinions (Anderson et al., 2014) and encouraging readers to respond using incivility themselves (Hsueh et al., 2015). Moreover, uncivil comments in online spaces can interfere with people's engagement in productive dialogue (Han et al., 2018), cause people to avoid participation in online political conversations (Han & Brazeal, 2015), lead to feelings of rage and dislike (Coe et al., 2014), and engender distrust of the political system (Mutz & Reeves, 2005). Unlike high-quality comments that increase the conditions of subsequent discussions (Friess et al., 2021), an uncivil and hostile discussion atmosphere decreases the likelihood that users will engage in comment sections (Springer et al., 2015). Different topics spark varying degrees of incivility in online discussions (Sears, 2001). Since perceptions of incivility may be subjective, Coe et al.'s (2014) operational definitions and examples of five forms of incivility–name-calling, aspersion, lying, vulgarity, and pejorative speech–can serve as a guide for determining incivility in the context of online comments.

Prior to executing an "identifying incivility" activity, faculty should locate examples of incivility by visiting online news sites and reviewing the comment section of hard news stories. Since such topics often spark incivility (Coe et al., 2014), faculty should attend particularly to comments written about current affairs that discuss thought-provoking topics such as today's post-truth world, systematic racism, and political extremism (Hunt & Meyer, 2021). Faculty should begin the activity by defining the five forms of incivility that Coe et al. (2014) summarize and providing examples of each. Afterward, faculty may distribute the examples they located, interspersed with examples of neutral or civil comments so that students can practice their abilities to recognize acts of incivility.

Faculty can conduct a similar exercise by initiating a student-led effort to identify the presence of incivility in blog comments (Anderson et al., 2014). In this case, students locate examples of incivility, present the instances to the group, and ask participants to explain how the example exemplifies one of the five forms of incivility. To emphasize that incivility is open to interpretation, faculty should remind students that it is possible for comments to contain more than one form of incivility (Coe et al., 2014) or both civil and uncivil remarks. Training students to identify incivility in public comment sections online as a form of civic engagement has the potential to support tolerance toward opposing views (Cappella et al., 2002). A civic engagement exercise such as this one can also encourage political efficacy and civic participation (Klofstad, 2011). Regardless of approach, examining current events and corresponding public comments may arouse students' interest in politics and current events.

Han et al. (2018) found that civil discourse can be modeled; thus, in addition to instilling in students an ability to recognize incivility, students can also be taught how to model civility in online discussions. Role modeling enables people to display suitable ways of acting and responding in a situation (Han & Brazeal, 2015). Since participants in civil conversations mimic the language used by civil role models (Han & Brazeal, 2015), the result is a civil and robust online discussion. Han and Brazeal's (2015) and Han et al.'s (2018) research can inform faculty's plans for modeling how to discuss contentious subjects civilly. For instance, students can be trained to model civility by acknowledging others' positions in a respectful manner and using language void of incivility (e.g., language described as dismissive, vulgar, or obscene) (Han et al., 2018). Faculty can also model how to provide well-reasoned, evidence-based points of view grounded in credible sources of information. Teaching students this argumentative approach offers a means for understanding an issue's complexity and nuances. When students model civility and redirect online conversations to a more civil approach, they may, in turn, motivate people holding diverse perspectives to join the conversation (Arnett, 2001).

As students gain abilities to identify acts of incivility and model civility during online discussions, their involvement can foster a conversational network of heterogeneity. This is an important endeavor because "civil discourse may encourage individuals to bring additional perspectives to the table" (Han & Brazeal, 2015, p. 26). Faculty and staff are discouraged from viewing civility training as a mechanism to evade conversations about polarizing political issues. Avoiding a campus conversation about race relations, for instance, would prohibit students from conversing about an issue that was a driving force for election-year engagement among young adults in 2020 (CIRCLE, 2021). Likewise, a conversation about this topic is particularly important as civic engagement literature fails to consider Black college students' sociopolitical beliefs and how their perceptions of political agency interact with their campus racial contexts (Leath & Chavous, 2017). Moreover, educational institutions often overlook opportunities to help young people develop the skills needed to be more politically considerate and engaged (Colby et al., 2007). Training students to identify communicative acts characteristic of incivility and to maintain civility are two ways to develop students' online civic engagement.

Experimental Programming 2: Training Students to Recognize and Respond to Polarization

As political polarization increases in the United States, so too does the tendency for Republicans and Democrats to view those who identify as members of the opposing party negatively and people of the same party more positively (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). In a polarized electorate, people do not hold centrist attitudes but rather push toward ideological extremes, and as polarization increases, the centrists begin to disappear (Levendusky, 2009). Levendusky and Malhotra (2016) found that participants perceived the divide between Democrats and Republicans on issues such as taxes, immigration, trade, and public financing as greater than the actual division. Evidence also indicates

that supporters of political parties loathe and distrust people from the opposing party (Druckman & Levendusky, 2019; Iyengar et al., 2019). Additionally, Moore-Berg et al. (2020) found that Democrats and Republicans exhibit a steady and persistent bias in how much prejudice and dehumanization they express toward people who hold a different party affiliation. Because perceptions of polarization influence behavior (Van Boven et al., 2012), it is essential that students comprehend the foundations of perceived polarization. Faculty can achieve this understanding by having students reflect on their experiences with the in-group/out-group dichotomy and share their perceptions of people from the opposing party along with how/why these perceptions came into existence.

Research on perceptions of polarization serves as an entry point for a conversation about why some people dislike those from a disparate political party. As the conversation unfolds, faculty should highlight the emotional components that contribute to individuals with liberal and conservative viewpoints sorting themselves into Democrats and Republicans. This analysis includes exploring the notion that, as a person becomes emotionally committed to one side, the individual bonds with others possessing similar opinions on issues and interpretations of political events (Benkler et al., 2018). Faculty should prompt students to also ponder why aligning oneself with one side may lead to hostility toward members of the contrasting party (Mason, 2015).

Discussing perceptions of polarization ignites a dialogue about how self-categorization reinforces beliefs about the distinctiveness of the in-group relative to the out-group (Turner et al., 1987). During this dialogue, faculty can prompt students to contemplate where and how perceptions of polarization come into being. This exercise begins with students visiting polarizationlab.com to learn where they fall on the ideological spectrum (Bail, 2021). Research suggests that becoming aware of how one's political views relate to others can have a depolarizing effect regardless of ideological beliefs (Van Boven et al., 2012). Next, faculty should review the role media play in perpetuating an in-group/out-group dynamic. Specifically, faculty should explain the concept of selective exposure and the consequences of only exposing oneself to consonant views (Stroud, 2010). While discussing selective exposure, participants can contemplate how people choosing their favored echo chamber can spark perceptions of polarization. During the conversation, faculty should also stress that echo chambers can cause misperceptions that distort a person's perspective (Garrett et al., 2016). To foster reflection on how selective exposure and echo chambers contribute to perceptions of polarization, students should consider their own media habits: where they do and do not go to find information, how they evaluate source credibility, and what information they readily believe or discredit. This introspection presents an opening for faculty to urge students to reflect on how their social media behavior mirrors their political views. This discussion could also include an overview of how platforms' algorithms filter content and how filtering advances the echo chamber effect and political discussions that devolve into tribalism (Bail, 2021).

Once students understand the connection between media consumption and perceptions of polarization, faculty can execute an activity that urges students to acknowledge alternative viewpoints as legitimate. Faculty should create and then distribute a packet of curated news articles that discuss contentious topics from a variety of viewpoints. After students finish reading the articles provided in the packet, they inform their peers about the different perspectives presented in the news stories and explain why the viewpoints are legitimate. During this exercise, faculty can pose questions that prompt students to consider the role that political polarization plays in their own media consumption by elaborating on how media form, preserve or change one's beliefs. A conversation about beliefs opens the door to teaching students about the influence of ideology and partisan identity on perceptions of polarization. Helping students understand the differences between liberal and conservative political beliefs and values is an important step toward comprehending the partisan divide and distinguishing how others' experiences contribute to their beliefs. During the conversation, students uncover how one's partisan identity shapes political values and discernments of political affairs (Campbell et al.,

1960). Students, in turn, learn to understand perspectives that differ from their own and strengthen their abilities to engage in heterogeneous conversations.

After they grasp the role perceptions play in polarization, faculty should create a situation that enables students to experience in-group/out-group dynamics firsthand. Faculty could use the curated packet of news articles from the earlier discussion to facilitate a heterogenous conversation. A heterogeneous discussion is marked by people talking about politics with those who deviate from their own party affiliation and ideological beliefs (Huckfeldt et al., 2004). As a result of these conversations, people gain more political tolerance (Mutz, 2002). Alternatively, when political conversations occur within a homogeneous setting, participants are exposed to information that is slanted toward the in-group (Druckman et al., 2018) and may strengthen the partisan identification that prompts greater perceived polarization (Abrams & Hogg, 1988). Throughout the discussion, faculty can teach students how to promote participation in political conversations through public listening. During a time of polarized political discourse, public listening underlies a successful democratic society (Lacey, 2011). Therefore, to offset what Dobson (2012) argues is the "new democratic deficit," faculty should teach students strategies for engaging in public listening. This includes highlighting students' responses to earlier discussions as evidence of the importance of considering multiple perspectives before rendering a decision. This instruction teaches students how to gain understanding through listening and responding to partisan discourse (Harris, 2021).

Research indicates that political discussions with those who possess different political views and support a political party that diverges from one's own have positive implications for democracy (Nir, 2017). Yet there are instances when points of view are not equally valid (e.g., xenophobic, homophobic, or racist attacks; hate speech; misinformation; white supremacist and alt-right trolling). Serving to divert attention, these communicative acts do not warrant a response. At other times, students may encounter misinformation packaged as a conspiracy theory that necessitates refutation. During the in-group/out-group exercise detailed above, faculty can present false information as a means of teaching students how to recognize a deceitful counterargument and helping students learn how to refute the counterargument. Returning to the curated packet of news stories, faculty can identify the coverage of conspiratorial discourse or myths found on the fringes of the Internet that are made to look like legitimate hard news stories. Since correcting misinformation is most successful when the act is accompanied by an alternative explanation (Lewandowsky, 2021), students should be taught how to challenge a myth by beginning with a statement that is true, briefly articulating the myth, using logic to explain how the myth misleads and reinforcing facts (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). If, however, the conspiracy theory does not have an alternative explanation, faculty should tell students to follow Lewandowsky's (2021) advice and question the credibility of the source of the information.

Experimental Programming 3: Training Students to Navigate Today's Media Ecosystem

While assisting efforts to improve democracy, the Internet enables people to "do" politics, enhances learning, and encourages forms of engagement (Koc-Michalska et al., 2016). The Internet can develop users' understanding of political affairs (Rojas & Puig-i-Abril, 2009). For instance, the Internet stimulates civic engagement by generating political discussion and offering interactive opportunities that may lead to higher levels of political discussion (Mossberger et al., 2008). Researchers point to the Internet as a critical resource for political information (Delli Carpini, 2000). A defining characteristic of Web 2.0, in particular, is its ability to connect citizens who share interests in political issues and enable them to create their own content (Jackson & Lilleker, 2009). For example, Web 2.0 users can build online networks in which information is disseminated, modified, and updated by people participating in an online community (O'Reilly, 2005). Social networks, a Web 2.0 tool, serve as channels through which people gain information (Eveland & Hively, 2009).

Americans exist in a media ecosystem dominated by communication channels that confirm perceptions and promote distrust of sources that counter one's beliefs (Newman et al., 2017). For example, the emergence of a post-truth era has been met by a populace "that has abandoned conventional criteria of evidence, internal consistency, and fact-seeking" (Lewandowsky et al., 2017, p. 360). Post-truth refers to "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Oxford Languages, 2021). In today's post-truth era, civic engagement skills serve to equip students to demonstrate concern for others and respect democracy (Hunt & Meyer, 2021).

To teach students about today's media ecosystem and post-truth era, faculty should have students return to the exercise on perceptions of polarization. Faculty should then ask students to (a) remind the group where they fall on the ideological spectrum, (b) identify the outlets and influencers that form their online networks, and (c) and determine the roles played by various online platforms in shaping their understanding of current events. In order to help students see that hyper-partisan news often circulates misinformation (Benkler et al., 2017), faculty can use students' disclosures to curate a new packet of news articles that incorporates both nonpartisan and partisan/identity-confirming news that is false. When identifying stories online to include in the packet, faculty should keep in mind that misinformation transpires when someone shares false information either by mistake or with the intent to mislead (Benkler et al., 2018; Lewandowsky et al., 2020). Additionally, faculty should identify hyper-partisan news stories that are "steeped in emotional language and designed to be attention-grabbing and have persuasive appeal" (Lewandowsky et al., 2020, p. 5), such as a headline asking a question relating to a conspiracy theory.

Then, before distributing the bundle of news articles, faculty should provide students with a toolkit that aims to help them understand and avoid spreading misinformation. This can include resources provided by First Draft[1]. After discussing ways to identify misinformation, students should read the stories on their own to see if they can ascertain instances of misinformation. This "misinformation" activity empowers students "with the knowledge, understanding, and tools needed to outsmart false and misleading information" (First Draft, 2021, para. 2). As students read samples of hyper-partisan news, they become proficient in recognizing misinformation and how to determine and disseminate true information.

In addition to instilling in students the tools they need to recognize misinformation, faculty can use the new curated packet of news stories to help students obtain media literacy and source criticism skills (Walton & Hepworth, 2011). Media literacy education helps students discern the accuracy of the news they consume (Benkler et al., 2018). As they read the stories, faculty can teach students how to critically evaluate information, take time to consider the information that those in their network are sharing, and evaluate the information's plausibility (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). This includes helping students learn how to assess the source of the information such as the author's history, expertise, and motive (Wineburg et al., 2016). A technique known as lateral reading encourages readers to check other sources to evaluate the credibility of the author or website (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). Faculty can visit Stony Brook University's Center for New Literacy website[2] and the News Literacy Project[3] for resources. While gaining media literacy skills, students are trained to slow down so they consider information and evaluate its believability while verifying claims. These efforts position students to comprehend why some information is thought to be true despite being false and why an alternative piece of information is correct (Lewandowsky et al., 2020).

[1] First Draft website: https://firstdraftnews.org/

[2] Stony Brook University's Center for New Literacy website: https://www.centerfornewsliteracy.org/

[3] News Literacy Project website: https://newslit.org/

The subsequent step in having students learn how to navigate the media ecosystem is teaching them how to debunk misinformation. Halting the spread of misinformation is an important endeavor because misinformation sticks in a person's memory even if the person knows the information is false, and those associations can make people averse to believing facts (Lewandowsky, 2021). Given this implication, students should be reminded to verify the information before sharing it (Donovan & Rapp, 2020). This exercise begins by having students identify an example of misinformation in the curated news packet. Then, students create a social media post that leads with a fact, mentions the myth once, explains the fallacy behind the myth, and finishes the statement by reinforcing the fact (Lewandowsky et al., 2020). By taking these steps, students initiate conversations that warn people about consuming misinformation. This, in turn, can reduce later reliance on misinformation (Ecker et al., 2011), make people receptive to correcting misinformation, and lessen the chance that people will share misinformation online (Mena, 2020). Demonstrating techniques for correcting misinformation is an important step toward helping students rectify self-perpetuating post-truth rhetoric.

As people stop believing in facts altogether (van der Liden et al., 2017), they need to protect themselves against being shaped by misinformation and disinformation. Unlike misinformation, disinformation, a subset of propaganda, refers to the "dissemination of explicitly false or misleading information" (Benkler et al., 2018, p. 32). One way to inoculate, or prebunk, students against misinformation and disinformation campaigns is to teach them how to identify logical flaws in argumentation and spot fake news campaigns (Cook et al., 2017). The SIFT method[4] is a useful resource for helping students identify false information (Caulfield, 2019). The SIFT method consists of four steps: stop, investigate the source, find better coverage, and trace the claims (Caulfield, 2019). By teaching students how to distinguish between credible information sources and disinformation and how to avoid erroneous information or correct it quickly once the content is shared with their online network, faculty can help students navigate today's media ecosystem and the post-truth environment.

Conclusion

Institutions of higher education play an important "role in preparing generations of engaged and enlightened citizens who learn the skills necessary to identify, articulate, and pursue the common good" (Alger & Goldberg, 2019, p. 106). Given this opportunity, educators need access to programs that train students to enact civility, recognize and respond to polarization, and navigate today's media ecosystem. This endeavor includes helping students gain competence in affirming the value of interlocutors with whom one disagrees (Han et al., 2018). Teaching students these skills can have a positive impact on political conversations. Exposing students to diverse political views has the potential to stimulate respect for contrasting opinions (Mutz, 2006), political knowledge (Eveland & Hively, 2009), and reception of political differences (Moy & Gastil, 2006). The experimental programming options outlined in this reflection essay provide guidance for how to support the productive engagement of heterogeneous viewpoints among students engaged in online discussion.

Faculty experimentation with virtual programming and Web 2.0 tools can help students prepare for their roles as citizens in today's diverse democracy and develop their civic competence. This essay focused on the instructive component of conversing in online spaces by offering recommendations for supporting students' online civic engagement by strengthening their abilities to enact civility online, recognize polarization, and navigate today's media ecosystem. As students participate in the campus programming efforts discussed in this essay, they gain a shared understanding of norms, responsibilities, and rights that shape online activity. For instance, by modeling civility, examining their experiences with the in-group/out-group dichotomy, and acquiring

[4] To learn about SIFT in more detail visit https://hapgood.us/2019/06/19/sift-the-four-moves/

the ability to discern truth while also debunking misinformation, students perform communicative actions that position them to consider multiple perspectives before responding and making political decisions.

In closing, students' civic participation and conversations positively influence the likelihood of their future participation in politics (Kwak et al., 2005). Thoughtful participation in virtual political discussions requires active listening, critical thinking, information literacy, openness to diverse perspectives, and intellectual curiosity. The abilities needed for this enterprise, thus, are based on both interpersonal and intellectual means. Using the experimental programming ideas provided in this essay, faculty and staff can replicate the activities in order to produce these outcomes in students. Participating in digital civic engagement activities has the potential to encourage political participation online and prepare students to be politically engaged in today's digital world. As such, students become equipped with tools that support meaningful participation in civic and political life. This occurs as they engage in conduct that advances constructive heterogenous conversations and cultivates an online environment that emphasizes open discussions of political issues and debunks misinformation.

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