Philosophical Dialogue and the Civic Virtues: Modeling Democracy in the Classroom

Zachary Odermatt, and Robert Weston Siscoe

Abstract: Political polarization is on the rise, undermining the shared space of public reason necessary for a thriving democracy and making voters more willing than ever to dismiss the perspectives of their political opponents. This destructive tendency is especially problematic when it comes to issues of race and gender, as informed views on these topics necessarily require engaging with those whose experiences may differ from our own. In order to help our students combat further polarization, we created a course on "The Philosophy of Race, Class, and Gender" that incorporated intergroup dialogues—small, diverse, semester-long discussion groups—that focused on building the civic virtues of toleration, egalitarianism, and solidarity. In this article, we describe our approach, including the evidence that intergroup dialogue can act as a catalyst for democratic dialogue. We hope that the practice of intergroup dialogue can help other instructors cultivate the civic virtues in their philosophy classrooms as well.[1]
Keywords: Democratic Dialogue, Political Polarization, Intergroup Dialogue, Philosophy of Race, Philosophy of Gender

Introduction

Voters in the United States are becoming increasingly polarized along political lines. Americans strongly distrust those who vote for the other party (Pew Research, 2019a), a crisis which shows no sign of abating, as younger generations are even more likely to harbor attitudes of distrust towards their fellow citizens (Pew Research, 2019b). This lack of trust is reflected in sharply divided opinions on a number of important issues. Two areas where this increasing polarization is particularly evident are attitudes concerning race and gender. In 2016, 57% of Hilary Clinton supporters said that it is a lot more difficult to be a Black person in the United States than it is to be a white person, with that number increasing to 74% of Joe Biden supporters in 2020. The number of Donald Trump supporters, however, who thought that it was a lot more difficult to be Black, actually shrank from 11% in 2016 to 9% in 2020. A similar dynamic has occurred with gender issues as well. Only 26% of Clinton supporters agreed that the obstacles that once made it harder for women than men to get ahead are now largely gone, a figure that then decreased to just 20% of Biden supporters. For Trump supporters though, the percentage that agreed such barriers were largely gone increased from 72% in 2016 to 79% in 2020, making the issues of race and gender marked illustrations of the increasing divide between liberals and conservatives (Pew Research, 2020b).

[1] All study questions and methods used in this paper were approved by the Institutional Resource Board at Florida State University.

Extreme polarization can have a number of deleterious effects on a political culture. One of the most worrisome effects is polarization's impact on how citizens form their political opinions. Citizens of sharply divided polities are less likely to engage with those on the other side of the aisle, looking instead to partisan endorsement to form their political views. This, then, has the effect of simultaneously making voters more ignorant of the evidence that might support their favored policies while increasing their confidence that those policies are correct (Druckman, Petersen, and Slothuus, 2013). This is especially concerning when it comes to the topics of race and gender, two areas where there are already significant barriers to understanding the personal experiences of those who claim a different social identity. Nestled within the larger crisis of political polarization is thus a crisis of dialogue and empathy on issues surrounding race and gender, a crisis that presents even more serious challenges than the polarization surrounding other political issues.

In order to combat this crisis of political polarization, we designed a course on "The Philosophy of Race, Class, and Gender" that incorporated intergroup dialogues to help students develop civic virtues. Intergroup dialogues—small, diverse, semester-long discussion groups—have been shown to help students develop a number of skills crucial to democratic dialogue,[2] but they have rarely, if ever, been used in the philosophy classroom. With an Innovation in Teaching Grant from the *American Association of Philosophy Teachers*, we designed dialogue groups meant to bring these benefits to the philosophical context, helping students to develop the civic virtues of toleration, egalitarianism, and solidarity. In §1, we discuss the civic virtues that can serve as an antidote to polarization, showing the link between these virtues and intergroup dialogue in §2. We then provide an overview of our course, a lower-division elective with no prerequisites, and the results for our students in §3 and §4, considering some potential concerns in §5. We hope that our approach can help other instructors provide students the opportunity to cultivate the virtues necessary for healthy democratic dialogue.

§1: Civic Virtues as an Antidote to Polarization

Without the continued support of its citizens, it is difficult, if not impossible, for a government to rule effectively. One important way that citizens can support their governing bodies is by developing the civic virtues, the habits and dispositions that underwrite a healthy, well-functioning political community. These virtues are especially critical for liberal democracies, as democratic nations depend most strongly on the political engagement of their citizens. In this section, we will outline three civic virtues that play a role in overcoming political polarization—toleration, egalitarianism, and solidarity—setting the stage for showing that intergroup dialogues help citizens cultivate the virtues necessary for a thriving democracy.

At its worst, political polarization alienates people from their civic rivals, encouraging them to view the other side as ignorant, evil, and not to be associated with. The virtues that combat polarization, then, attempt to broker a gradual rapprochement between so-called political enemies, helping them to connect over their similarities rather than disengage due to their differences. The first virtue that helps initiate this process is toleration. A tolerant person accepts the beliefs or practices of others even though they view those beliefs and practices as objectionable (Forst, 2001 and 2018). This

[2] See, for example, Nagda, Gurin, and Lopez (2003), Biren, Gurin, Sorensen, and Zúñiga (2009), Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga (2013), and Schoem and Hurtado (2001).

acceptance does not require that the tolerant person takes on these beliefs and practices as their own, but only that they permit others to continue with their ways of life.

Such toleration includes, of course, not attempting to use political power to punish others for their beliefs and practices. With political polarization, there is often an increased willingness to circumvent democratic processes, whether that be through intimidation, excessive gerrymandering, or other forms of voter suppression. After all, if the other side is not to be trusted, then why allow them to take part in the political process? The virtue of toleration prevents the subversion of the political process, allowing others the full practice of their civil rights even in the midst of differing views. Even though citizens might disagree with one another, toleration encourages them to live and let live when it comes to their political differences.

The next step in the process of curbing political polarization is cultivating the virtue of civic egalitarianism. Toleration merely requires refraining from coercing and controlling others, but egalitarianism calls people to a deeper respect and appreciation of their fellow citizens. Civic egalitarianism is the disposition to regard others as political equals, to see them as "deserving of all the rights and privileges of a citizen of one's polity, such as political expression, political participation, having one's voice heard and taken seriously in appropriate civic venues, the right not to be discriminated against in education, housing, and other basic domains of social existence, and so on" (Blum, 2007, p. 239). While this is similar in some ways to toleration, it also requires more than avoiding violating the rights of others. A person does not possess the virtue of egalitarianism simply by not holding negative attitudes towards other citizens. Rather, they must also have positive attitudes, like seeing others as important members of the political community.

Because egalitarianism emphasizes mutual respect and appreciation for one another as citizens, it can go a long way towards combating the negative feelings and perceptions that arise from political polarization. As polarization becomes more entrenched, political opponents increasingly see one another as not worthy of respect, either because they question their intelligence or their intentions (Hartman et al., 2022). Egalitarianism undercuts this tendency to see the other side as either ignorant or evil, encouraging instead a desire to understand why other citizens might disagree about the best political policies. Because egalitarians view all citizens as having something valuable to contribute to political discourse, they not only tolerate their political opponents, but see them as valuable and worthy of respect.

The final virtue that can help fight political polarization is solidarity. With toleration, we considered the importance of citizens not interfering with one another, while with egalitarianism, we emphasized the importance of viewing other citizens as political equals. The civic virtue of solidarity takes us one step further, calling citizens to stand with those who are struggling and oppressed. A commitment to political solidarity builds on the virtue of civic egalitarianism, making one "disposed to protest against injustices committed against one's civic equals, to sympathize with their plight, to feel indignation and anger toward the perpetrators of discrimination, and the like" (Blum, 2007, p. 239). Political solidarity calls us to confront abuses of political power and advocate for the disadvantaged, putting our own political rights and freedoms on the line for the sake of others.

Solidarity also undercuts the tendency to polarization because it emphasizes what citizens have in common. As Rippe (1998) points out, solidarity takes us beyond standing with others just for their

sake, which might be better described as charity, but standing with them because we are part of a shared community, in this case a shared political community. Our solidarity with others is based, not on our differences, but on our common identity as citizens and as opponents of political oppression. This then completes the turn from polarization, making what were once political enemies into allies and friends.

§2: Intergroup Dialogues and the Civic Virtues

One promising method for combating political polarization is the practice of intergroup dialogue. In 2008, a group of nine universities set out to explore whether intergroup dialogue could help students have conversations about controversial issues across different social identities, a project known as the Multi-University Intergroup Dialogue Research Project.[3] In particular, the project focused on differences in social identity, including differences of race and gender, which have often led to conflict. The dialogue groups used in the study were diverse (made up of men and women of varied ethnicities), small (including between twelve to sixteen students), and sustained (meeting for a period of ten to twelve weeks), allowing participants to interact with those of different social identities over the length of an entire semester (Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga, 2008).

Because they bring together diverse citizens from all parts of the political spectrum to discuss controversial issues, Schoem and Hurtado (2001) compare intergroup dialogues to "mini democracies," arguing that they give participants the chance to engage in democratic practice. And through the multi-university project, as well as through trials of intergroup dialogues at a number of other universities, several democratic benefits of intergroup dialogue have become apparent. By confronting challenging topics like race and gender, such groups have been shown to help students develop skills that are relevant to the civic virtues of toleration, egalitarianism, and solidarity:

- **Toleration** – Intergroup dialogues help students manage conflict more effectively. Nagda et al. (2003) and Nagda (2006) have shown that intergroup dialogues provide students with the opportunity to learn strategies for conflict management and resolution, and dialogue participants have more positive views of conflict (Gurin et al., 1999, and Nagda and Zúñiga, 2003) and show an increased willingness to hear other's views, share their own views, and respectfully disagree (Wayne, 2008).

- **Egalitarianism** – Intergroup dialogues allow students to build respect for those with differing political views. Dialogue participants show measurable increases in empathy (Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga, 2013, Ch. 5), a rise in positive intergroup relationships (Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga, 2013), increased awareness of social identities (Alimo, Kelly, and Clark, 2002, and Nagda and Zúñiga, 2003), and a greater openness to learning about those from different social groups (Gurin, Nagda, and Sorensen, 2011, and Nagda, Kim, and Truelove, 2004). Dialogue groups support this growth in intergroup understanding particularly because hearing stories

[3] Participating institutions included Arizona State University, Occidental College, Syracuse University, the University of California, San Diego, the University of Maryland, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, the University of Texas, Austin, and the University of Washington, Seattle, enrolling approximately 1,500 students in intergroup dialogues during the course of their respective academic years (Sorensen et al., 2009).

from students of other social identities is an effective way to teach about potentially divisive issues (Keehn, 2015, and Nagda et al., 2009).

- **Solidarity** – Intergroup dialogues provide students opportunities to become allies. Dialogue participants are more likely to become advocates against racism (Alimo, 2012), demonstrating an increased willingness to raise issues of race and gender outside the classroom (Gurin-Sands et al., 2012, and Nagda et al., 2009), to defend others against inappropriate remarks (Nagda, Kim, and Truelove, 2004), and to be civically engaged after graduating (Gurin, Nagda, and Sorensen, 2011, and Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga, 2013). These effects are not just limited to dialogue participants, as dialogue facilitators are also more likely to engage with issues related to social identity in both their personal and professional lives (Clark, 2005; Ford, 2017; Ford and Lipkin, 2019; and Maxwell et al., 2011).

All of these potential benefits of intergroup dialogue are enough to independently recommend the practice, but these student outcomes are especially encouraging in the face of increasing political polarization. As students form close relationships in their intergroup dialogues, they not only learn to have a good relationship with those who have different political views, but they also come to respect and empathize with them. This lays the groundwork for productive political dialogue, allowing students to practice the virtues in the midst of their "mini democracies." For this reason, intergroup dialogues are apt for confronting the challenges raised by political polarization.

§3: Designing a Course to Build the Civic Virtues

In the Spring of 2021, we taught a course called "The Philosophy of Race, Class, and Gender" that focused on cultivating civic virtues. The course was an elective with no required prerequisites, so many of our students came to the class with a strong desire to learn more about these issues, and because many of them had never taken a philosophy class before, our course was an exploration of how an emphasis on philosophical dialogue impacts students who have not encountered philosophy before. This came through in our pre-course survey, as students overwhelmingly thought that it was important to be able to discuss issues related to race, class, and gender:

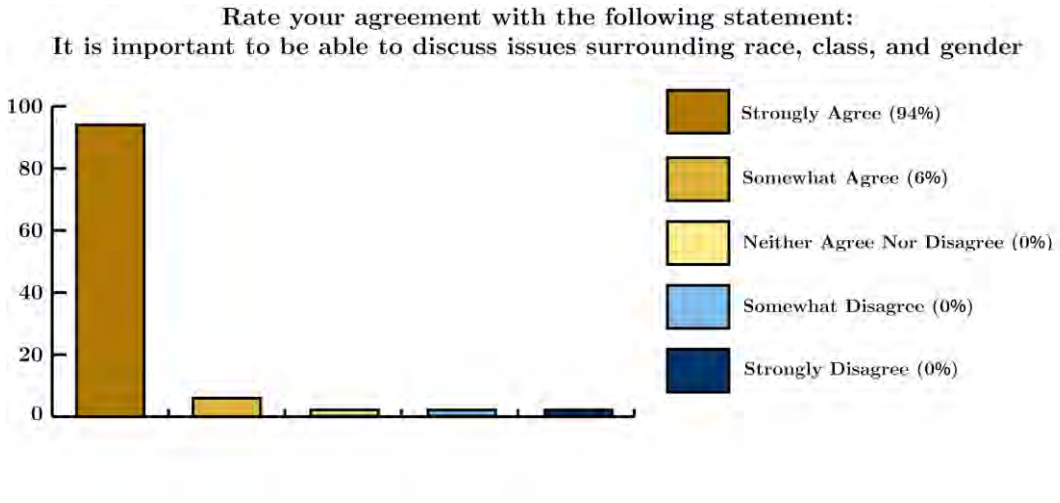

Figure 1: Importance of Discussing Race, Class, and Gender

To help our students combat the polarization surrounding these issues, we created a course that incorporated intergroup dialogues to help them build the civic virtues of toleration, egalitarianism, and solidarity. In this section, we will describe how we constructed these dialogue groups, paying special attention to the design elements that were intended to create an environment conducive to building civic virtue.

Small, Diverse Groups:

Lectures for our course were held on Mondays and Wednesdays, with dialogue groups held on Fridays. Our total course enrollment was 120 undergraduates, so we divided students into six dialogue groups of 20 students each. Dialogue sessions were led each week by two students from the group, with each student in the group serving as a discussion leader once during the semester. These leaders held the "co-facilitator" role displayed in Figure 2.

Because we could not attend all of the dialogue group sessions, we appointed four experienced primary dialogue facilitators to supervise the groups—two graduate students and two advanced undergraduate students, with the undergraduate students funded through an Innovation in Teaching Grant from the *American Association of Philosophy Teachers*. These four primary dialogue facilitators did not lead the dialogue conversations themselves, but instead supported the co-facilitators (more on this shortly). For those who have smaller classes, it may be possible to supervise all of the dialogue groups without any extra help from primary dialogue facilitators.

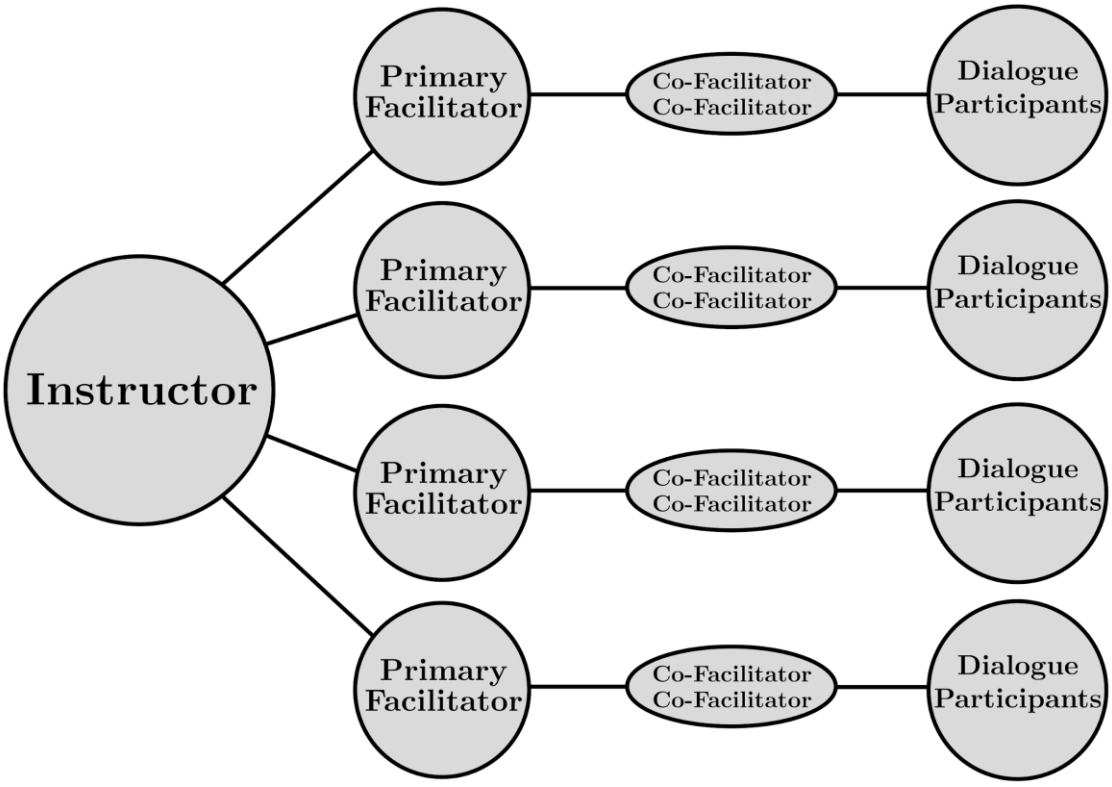

Figure 2: Course Structure

Practicing civic virtues requires interacting with others who hold a wide range of political views. Intergroup dialogues are also typically diverse, as many of the original intergroup dialogues with the multi-university project had four women of color, four men of color, four white women, and four white men (Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga, 2008). One challenge we faced was that we did not have access to demographic information about our students, preventing us from explicitly sorting them according to race or gender. In our case though, we were still able to create a suitable distribution through random assignments, as our university is already fairly diverse. According to demographic data collected in 2020 about the entire student body, approximately 42% of students identified as male and 58% of students identified as female, while approximately 58% of students identified as white and 42% did not identify as white.[4] Due to our course being an elective, the students interested in the course were already interested in the subject matter and representative of our campus diversity. For other instructors that do not have access to demographic information, another strategy for sorting students would be offering a brief survey of political views and arranging students into diverse groups based on their responses. This method ensures ideological diversity, which by itself can help students confront political polarization, but it might also, indirectly, create groups of diverse social identities.

PWOL Dialogue Practices:

The Philosophy as a Way of Life Project (PWOL) at the University of Notre Dame has mounted an ongoing effort to develop the practice of dialogue in the philosophy classroom, producing a number of guides meant to train dialogue leaders.[5] Instead of leaving philosophy as a bunch of abstract conceptual puzzles, the PWOL approach is meant to help students think about and apply philosophical theories to their lives. Though the PWOL project has not explicitly attempted to support the practice of intergroup dialogue, their approach allowed us to create diverse dialogue groups that were distinctly philosophical. Along with being intergroup dialogues, they also incorporated many aspects of PWOL dialogues as well.

Peer Leadership:

One aspect of PWOL dialogues, and a practice that helped our groups model "mini democracies," is giving students the opportunity to take an active role in leading the dialogue conversations. Each week, the two student co-facilitators prepared a lesson plan on how they would conduct the dialogue, preparing icebreakers, discussion questions, and group activities. In this role, it was their responsibility to help their peers develop toleration, egalitarianism, and solidarity. One of the tasks of dialogue leaders was enforcing the group norms, creating an open space of toleration for discussion. Dialogue leaders were also assigned to make sure everyone's contributions were seen as valuable, planning activities that solicited feedback from all members of the group. Finally, co-facilitators were responsible for advocating for positions that were not represented, raising questions and concerns from other points of view that were not considered in the discussion. Students were thus encouraged both to grow in civic virtues and help others do so as well.

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[4] Of the students who did not identify as white, approximately 19.9% identified as Hispanic, 9.3% identified as Black, 2.9% identified as Asian, 0.2% identified as American Indian, 0.1% identified as Native Hawaiian, 4% identified as multi-race, 4.6% simply reported that they were non-resident aliens, and a final 1.3% did not respond. For full demographic data, see https://ir.fsu.edu/.

[5] All the dialogue resources produced by the PWOL project, including the Dialogue Facilitator Training Manual and Workbook, can be found at https://bit.ly/3rVMAcH.

There was a degree of freedom in the topics discussed in the small groups. As long as the co-facilitators could make a good case that their chosen topic was inspired by the reading for the week, the primary facilitators would work with them to bring it in line with the material. This helped broaden the nature of questions addressed, improve co-facilitator engagement, and decentralize the authority structure of the classroom. If the co-facilitators were not sure what they wanted to discuss, the primary facilitators would be prepared to help them brainstorm which aspects of the class that week they wanted to address. The resulting dialogues included conversations on gender norms, the relationship between culture and race, and the impact of political polarization, amongst a number of other topics. In general, the topics became more challenging as the semester progressed and students became more comfortable with one another.

Conversational Norms:

Another way students took an active role in leading the conversation, and a practice inspired by the PWOL approach, was by creating their own conversational norms. These norms served as a kind of constitution that unified and set expectations for members of the group (Gurin, Nagda, and Zúñiga, 2013). At the first dialogue meeting, the primary dialogue facilitator led students through the norm creation process, with the group deciding on everything from the hand-raising procedure to how to make sure everyone is comfortable sharing. Developing their own conversational norms both increased student buy-in and ensured that participants were able to create an environment where they are willing to contribute. Possible group norms include the following:

- **Names Stay, Ideas Leave** - Continue discussing interesting ideas outside of the classroom but do so without attaching participants' names.
- **Charitable Listening** - Always assume that group members mean well when sharing and allow them to clarify if misconstrued.
- **Open-Mindedness** - Try to empathize with and understand the viewpoint of the person speaking, especially if you disagree.
- **No Spokesperson** - Everyone should be treated as an individual with their own unique perspective and not as a spokesperson for their particular social identity.
- **See the Other Side** - Think of how advocates of a particular position might respond, even if you disagree with their position.
- **Who is Missing?** - Consider and advocate for perspectives that might not be represented in the group

Each of these norms can be seen as directed towards particular civic virtues. The first two norms promote a basic form of toleration, allowing students to clearly state their views without the potential threat of being chastised outside the group, while the third and fourth norms encourage students to make an effort to understand and empathize with the reasons that other students have for their beliefs. The final two norms then push for an initial form of solidarity, urging students to not only defend their own views, but also to speak up on behalf of others.

Strong Questions:

Dialogue co-facilitators were also trained to ask *strong questions*. Strong questions invite reflection and promote deeper conversation and understanding, while weak questions have obvious answers, stalling the conversation and, in the worst-case scenario, requiring just a "yes-or-no" answer. Consider a few examples.

Weak Questions

1. Have you ever considered how your gender affects your life?
2. Should we stereotype others because of their race?

Strong Questions

1. How have traditional gender norms affected how you live your life? Do you feel like you typically accept or challenge gender norms?
2. Has anyone ever made any assumptions about you because of your race? How has this impacted the ways you treat others?

This first group of questions is relatively weak. Even though they might help get a discussion started, they all have "yes" or "no" answers that might halt the discussion. The strong questions, on the other hand, are open ended and are far more likely to spark conversation and help students engage more deeply. Co-facilitators were responsible for preparing a number of strong questions before leading their respective dialogue sessions. Their dialogue lesson plans included at least four strong questions, and once co-facilitators had planned their strong questions, they then received feedback from their primary facilitator before their dialogue session.

To help students create strong questions, the PWOL dialogue materials offer a number of suggestions. To begin with, co-facilitators should start with what dialogue participants know. What subjects have recently been discussed in class, and what topics are students likely ready to discuss? Questions might also try to draw connections between a philosophical topic and an everyday experience. For instance, if the dialogue session is considering the metaphysics of gender, then the dialogue facilitator can initiate the conversation by asking whether participants have ever been uncertain about their gender and how that uncertainty affected their everyday lives. Another key factor in asking strong questions is by asking from a place of genuine curiosity. If the dialogue leader thinks that a question is interesting, there are likely others in the group that will find the question interesting as well.

Engaging Activities:

Alongside their strong questions, dialogue leaders also created a number of engaging activities that were integrated into their lesson plans. Dialogue facilitators should feel free to be innovative, designing activities that they think will spark a productive conversation. Because it is not always easy to plan engaging activities, though, the Dialogue Facilitator Trainee Manual contains over twenty-five activities that can be adapted for many different conversation topics. Here, for example, is an activity from the Trainee Manual that our dialogue co-facilitators adapted for their dialogue group:

Take a Stand Activity – One wall of the room represents "Strongly Agree," the opposite wall represents "Strongly Disagree," and the room is a spectrum between the two. The dialogue co-facilitator reads a statement, and the dialogue members stand in at the location in the room that best represents their perspective. The co-facilitator can then direct questions to group members, asking them how they chose their position. The co-facilitator can also ask strong questions at this point, like "How do you think your friends and family would respond to this statement? Would their perspective be the same as yours?" or "Are there any particular experiences that have influenced your reaction to this statement?" After allowing time for discussion, the facilitator can then allow group members the chance to adjust their positions in the room if their opinion has changed.

How did we adapt this activity for our course? After a class session on the metaphysics of race, the dialogue co-facilitators used the Take a Stand Activity to explore whether group beliefs have an impact on a person's race. The co-facilitators described a number of scenarios, followed by the question, "In this instance, society's view about their race has an impact on what their race actually is," and after students chose a spot in the room, the co-facilitators gave group members the opportunity to defend their position. This activity served as an opportunity to discuss the metaphysics of race, including strong questions like "Did anyone change their opinion about what race is based on the discussion?" Thus, not only did the dialogue co-facilitators adapt the Take a Stand Activity for a conversation about race, but they also incorporated a number of strong questions into the activity as well.

§4: Student Growth in the Civic Virtues

By the end of the course, students reported being excited for their dialogue groups and were able to discuss exceedingly difficult issues in a civil and composed manner. In this section, we will consider how successful the dialogue groups were in building toleration, egalitarianism, and solidarity, drawing from quantitative student responses from pre- and post-course surveys and qualitative reports of their experience of the course.

4.1 Toleration

Coming into the course, our students already recognized that the highly politicized nature of the course topics made it more difficult to have productive conversations. In order to gauge where our students were at the beginning of the class, we asked students in our pre-course survey what they thought was the most challenging aspect of discussing race, class, and gender, and many of them cited political polarization:

- "I believe the politicization of these ideas makes it tough to discuss them because they can be so polarized."
- "The political aspect. I think that when people come into discussion with politics as the forefront of their argument, they are less likely to hear an opposing view."
- "Probably when politics is involved, many people are not open to views that are not their own and it makes it difficult to talk about."

The first step in overcoming this polarization is using the dialogue structure to build the virtue of toleration. In their dialogue groups, students have the opportunity to build camaraderie with one another. They hear, through sustained, sympathetic engagement, that their peers have thoughtful and insightful things to say. Once they realize this, they are more willing to hear the reasons and experiences that lead their peers to hold opposing views, recognizing that other students do not easily fit the caricatures they have of their political opponents. They may not be convinced, of course. Indeed, they need not be, as the point of toleration is simply to recognize that those with opposing views should be included in the conversation.

In order to gauge how successful our course was at building toleration, we asked students at the end of the course whether they are more or less likely to hear someone out who holds opposing views on race, class, or gender. The majority of our respondents (73%) reported that they were more likely to do so, while 23% reported no change and 4% reported that they were less likely. Full survey data can be found in Figure 3:

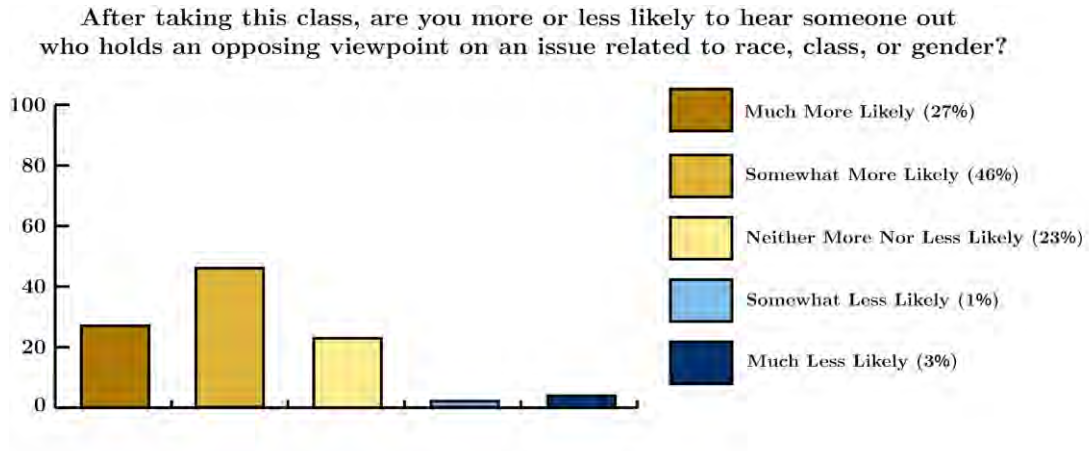

Figure 3: Listening to Political Opponents

Many of our students attributed their newfound willingness to listen to their ideological opponents directly to the dialogue groups. When asked how the course affected their willingness to discuss these hot-button issues, students said that the dialogue conversations helped them to realize that there are a variety of opinions, making it easier to discuss even highly politicized topics:

- "I think it has pushed me to discuss issues surrounding race, class, and gender more with my peers. It can be difficult to discuss issues about these topics with your peers due to the polarization in our country at the moment, but this class has shown it is not as difficult as it seems."

- "I would say that I am much more open to have these conversations, in part to it being necessary for positive change, but also in learning (through this class) that there are multiple viewpoints on certain social issue and that that is OK."

- "By understanding how to hear an opposing opinion and disagree with dignity. Also learning to not make generalizations or assumptions about someone's character depending on one opinion that they make but instead understanding that people are made up of multiple complex layers that make us act the way we do."

- "Before I took this class, I never wanted to express the way I felt about these topics. However now, I feel confident to share them. I have learned that we are all gonna have different views and that's okay. I have also learned to respect the views of others."

This final response hints at our next civic virtue, which learning about the views of others not only promotes toleration, but also the respect that is integral to egalitarianism as well.

4.2 Egalitarianism

One worry that many of our students had at the beginning of the course was that their views would not be respected. This concern went beyond mere toleration—students from underrepresented social identities were concerned, not that they would not be listened to, but that they would not be taken seriously or treated with equal respect and consideration. In the pre-course survey, one student said they feared that others would "disregard [...] my personal experiences as a member of a marginalized community and form opinions without listening to people who are hurt and face real consequences," while another student was worried that their opinions would be "considered moot due to my race, sex, and perceived class standing." There were thus a number of students from underrepresented groups who came into our course with concerns about how they would be treated when covering topics related to race and gender. This comes as no surprise, as many of these students may have already been subject to microaggressions (Sue and Constantine, 2007, and Sue et al., 2011) or other negative instances of conflict over social identity on campus (Hurtado, 1992). For this reason, our course attempted to build the virtue of egalitarianism alongside toleration, making our classroom a place where underrepresented students were assured, not only that they would be heard, but that their voices, experiences, and concerns were taken seriously.

After taking the course, students overwhelmingly reported being more comfortable discussing race, class, and gender with their peers. In the post-course survey, over 80% of students said that they were more comfortable having conversations about these topics, while only 5% said that they were less comfortable. Full survey results can be found in Figure 4:

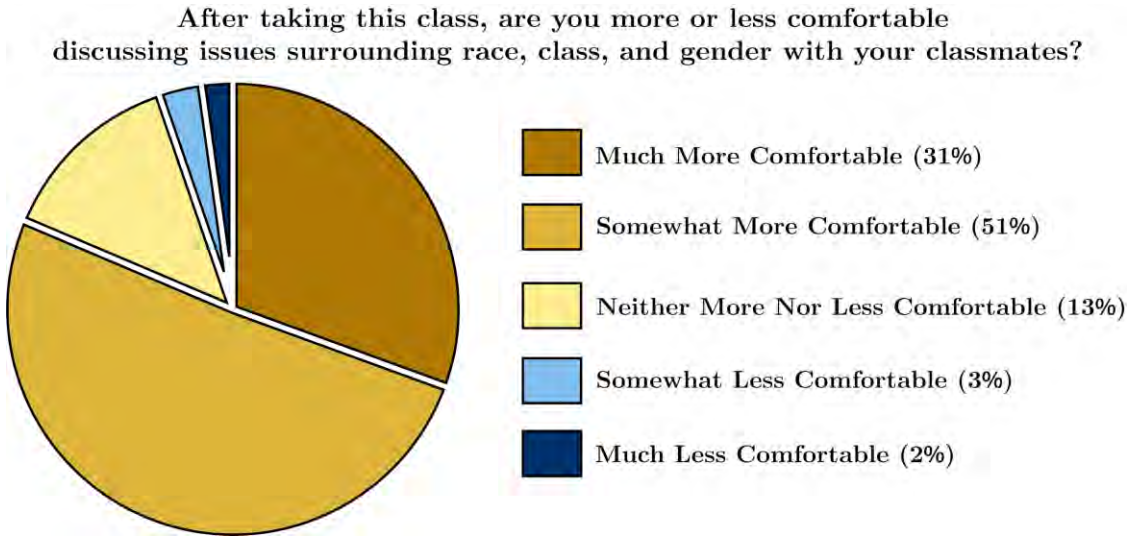

Figure 4: Listening to Political Opponents

Students became more comfortable having conversations about these controversial subjects because they felt respected by their peers, with one student describing the dialogue groups as providing "a safe space to talk about these issues." Another student said that they were "not afraid to state my opinion because of the norms we have to go over. I feel like the class being emphasized as an open safe place for opinion has been very helpful."

Along with helping students feel that their perspectives were welcome, the dialogue groups also helped students come to value the input of their peers. When asked how the course impacted their willingness to discuss race, class, and gender, students said that they realized that the views of others were not only tolerable, but also potentially insightful as well:

- "I think by hearing so many different opinions on topics I not only learned more about other people's perspectives, I was also able to adjust my own. This class allowed me to see other people's struggles and their reasoning for thinking the way they do."

- "I think that, for a while, I have been pretty outspoken on my beliefs surrounding race, class, and gender, particularly in high school when I was president of the feminism club. What I struggled with most throughout this time was understanding other viewpoints and having the maturity to discuss them without being insulting or dismissive. After taking this class, my appreciation for other viewpoints does not come from a place of agreeing with them by any stretch; in fact, I feel even more strongly about my opinions. However, I am more intrigued by the possibility of other viewpoints–their validity, morality, basis, and most importantly, why they aren't sound to me and the potential flaws they present in my own arguments. Overall, this class has encouraged me to think deeper about why people believe what they do and why opinions can differ so greatly."

- "This class has impacted my ability and willingness to discuss the issues surrounding race, class and gender by opening up my eyes to different viewpoints and seeing the reasoning behind them. I am able to see multiple views on situations which allows for better dialogue."

A willingness to learn from others is one of the most important marks of egalitarianism. Instead of merely tolerating others' beliefs, being open to their contributions demonstrates that students view their peers as important members of the political community. Sustained conversations can not only help students become more comfortable participating, but can reveal the reasoning underlying different positions, helping students to see that others might hold views for reasons that they had not previously considered.

4.3 Solidarity

Not only do intergroup dialogues increase the amount of respect that participants have for each other, but they also make students more likely to engage in these issues and advocate for one another outside of the classroom. Research shows that intergroup dialogue participants are more likely to engage with issues of race and gender once they leave the academic context, and we saw this same tendency in our students. Over 70% percent of students said that they are now more likely to initiate conversations regarding race and gender outside of the classroom:

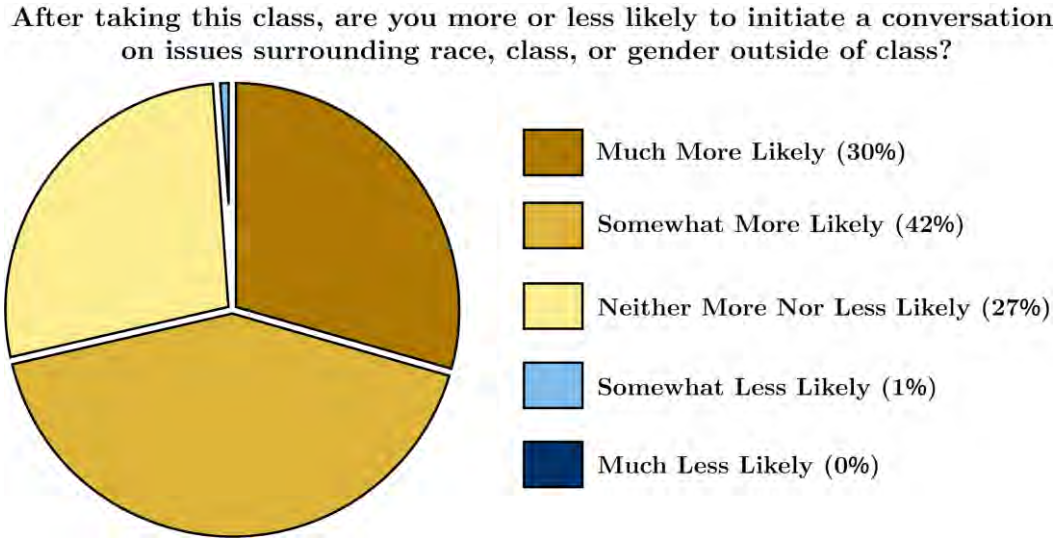

Figure 5: Beyond the Classroom

This increased willingness was also accompanied by a desire to advocate for others. When reflecting on the class, one student said that "this course has allowed me to view society from a different perspective [...] I feel as though society has undermined transgenders and Black individuals, and we should be able to take actions to benefit these individuals instead of suppressing them." Some of our students even reported that their dialogue groups continued to meet even after the semester concluded, demonstrating their continued willingness to have conversations that they might not have sought out previous to taking our course. Thus, as the research on intergroup dialogue has shown, our students were more willing to engage with issues of race and gender once our course concluded, continuing the conversation and advocating for those whose voices are neglected.

Not only were students more likely to initiate conversations on race and gender, but they also overwhelmingly thought they were better prepared to do so. After taking the course, 90% of students reported being better prepared to have constructive conversations about race, class, and gender:

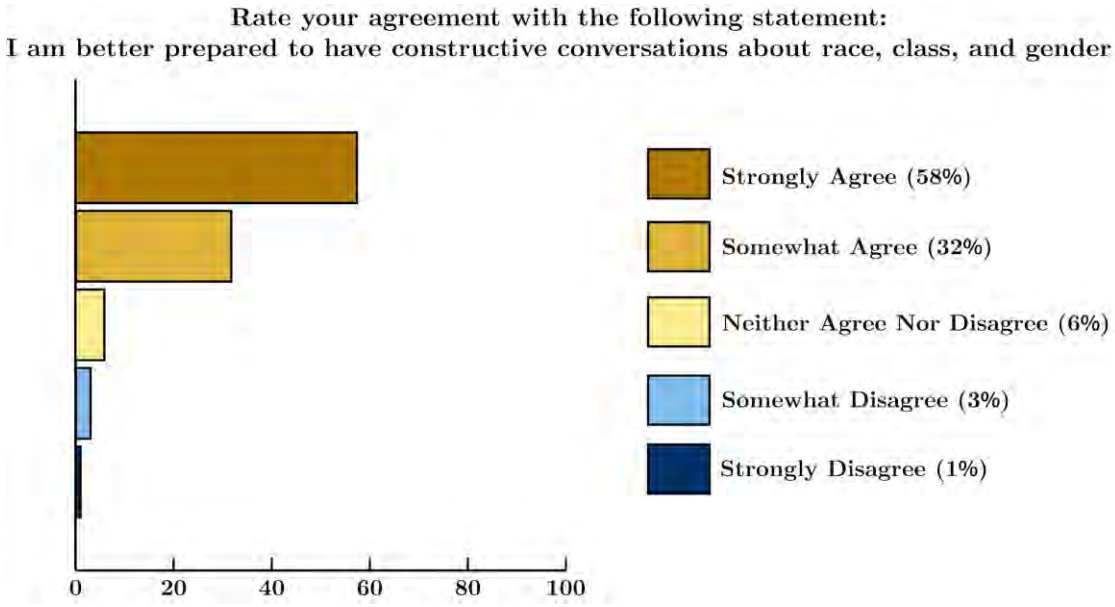

Figure 6: Beyond the Classroom

When asked to explain the impact that the course had on them, many students emphasized how much better prepared they were because of what they had learned from other participants:

- "I believe that diving deep into the issues [...] has made me feel more confident in my knowledge of them. I believe I can have a very educated and mature conversation now that I know so much more than I did prior to taking this course. If anything, it makes me want to discuss these issues even more than before."
- "I feel more confident and comfortable having an educated, productive conversation."
- "I feel as though I am much more educated and prepared to have these type of conversations. I have found it enlightening to hear other people's opinions, and I believe it opened me up to be more willing to understand and hear others."

§5: Potential Concerns

Even though including intergroup dialogues in our course gave students the opportunity to develop civic virtues, instructors might still have some reservations. To begin with, our class focused on the topics of race, class, and gender, so it might be asked whether this methodology is useful outside of classes centered on these issues. Fortunately, there is good reason to think that dialogue groups can be used to combat polarization when discussing a range of other topics as well. As we saw in our introduction, views on race and gender are some of the most polarized, providing reason to think that, if intergroup dialogues can help build the civic virtues when discussing these issues, then they can have this effect when discussing other controversial topics as well. Fitting topics occur frequently in political philosophy and applied ethics courses, including classes that discuss injustice, free speech, capitalism, Marxism, sexuality, feminism, abortion, affirmative action, euthanasia, or the death penalty, amongst other issues.

Another concern might be that, given the relative freedom that dialogue participants have in structuring and setting group standards, individual dialogue groups could undermine rather than promote the civic virtues. What is to stop a particular group from choosing norms that increase polarization instead of ameliorating it? It is first helpful to note that this sort of issue is relatively rare, as many students desire to have healthy conversations about important topics. If this kind of problem does arise, however, it makes the value of having a primary dialogue facilitator clear, as they can help lead dialogue groups through their norm-setting conversations. They are in a position to notice if such sectarian issues arise, gently guiding the group away from such developments. In the event that they cannot promote healthy dialogue, they can then report to the instructor if a greater intervention is necessary.

How should dialogue facilitators handle conflict and disagreement when they do arise all the while making it clear that everyone's contribution is valued? This is a question that is addressed in detail in the PWOL dialogue training materials which we drew from in planning our course. The first thing that dialogue facilitators should do is remain calm. Disagreement is unavoidable, and dialogue members will take their cues for how to react from their facilitator. If the facilitator treats the conversation like any other, then students know that they are allowed to explore potential disagreements.

The second thing that the PWOL approach emphasizes is reiterating the goals of the dialogue group. The group's purpose is to learn about the perspectives and viewpoints of others, not to convince anyone that one position is correct. Articulating that it is okay to disagree will help students have less apprehension about potential conflicts. It may also help facilitators to revisit the group norms. Having a list of conversational rules, agreed on in advance by all participants, can go a long way towards lessening any conflict that might arise. While participants might not agree at the end of the day, they have already agreed to treat one another in a way that embodies civic virtues.

Thirdly, the facilitator should ask clarifying questions to better understand what speakers are saying. In some cases, students may believe that they are disagreeing even though they may ultimately share the same common ground. Asking further questions to determine whether the disagreement is genuine or illusory is an important step for discovering where the disagreement ultimately lies. In the midst of clarifying what speakers are saying, the dialogue leader should then look to diversify the voices that are sharing about the question at hand. Instead of allowing one or two people to dominate the conversation, the facilitator should call on a number of participants to have them weigh in on the topic.

And finally, the PWOL training materials encourage facilitators to not feel the need to spend an inordinate amount of time on themes that bring up disagreements. After they have concluded their planned questions or activities, they should feel free to move on to the next discussion topic. This will reinforce that differences of opinion are normal, not out of place, and should be expected in the course of the dialogue group.

Even though the above suggestions will resolve most potential conflicts, if tensions linger after a particular dialogue session, it may help to briefly revisit the topic at the next dialogue meeting. Referring to the previous session, the facilitator can ask if there is anything that anyone would like to clarify about what they said at the previous meeting, or whether they had any thoughts that came to

mind after the conversation had concluded. Again, the dialogue facilitator need not spend too much time on this, but giving participants a chance to clear the air or clarify some misunderstandings may be helpful for the group moving forward. Finally, if there are still issues that cannot be resolved within the dialogue group time, facilitators should have those involved in the conflict stick around after the group to give them a chance to resolve their differences. Any issues that remain should then be reported to the course instructor.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen reason to think that intergroup dialogues can help students to build the civic virtues necessary for navigating politically divisive topics. Dialogue participants showed marked improvements in their willingness to listen to their ideological opponents, engaging in practices related to the civic virtues of toleration, egalitarianism, and solidarity. Alongside these virtues, Nancy Snow (2018) has argued that hope is also a civic virtue. It is easy to become discouraged in the face of extreme political polarization. Polarized citizens are more distrustful of, and less likely to engage with, those from the opposing ideological camp, making political discourse frustrating and unproductive. If citizens allow political polarization to drive them to despair, however, this can prevent them from engaging with others. Hope, on the other hand, can inspire citizens to take part in long-term projects like intergroup dialogue that heal and strengthen their political communities and institutions.

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Address Correspondences to:
Zachary Odermatt
PhD Student, University of Wisconsin -Madison
email: ztodermatt@gmail.com

Robert Weston Siscoe
Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Notre Dame
email: rwsiscoe@gmail.com